

"No problems are ever resolved by violence. It only aggravates the pain and the hurt on every side."

— Pranab Mukherjee

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Pranab Mukherjee: One of a kind politician

PRANAB Mukherjee has passed into history. A class by himself, highly dignified in his style and reserved in his demeanour, Pranab Mukherjee leaves behind a legacy that is unparalleled. A political science professor-turned politician who straddled the fields of governance and parliamentary functioning for half a century, must be recognized and hailed for the impressive image he maintained.

While many politicians made huge wealth in these decades, Mukherjee did not seem to have a craze or greed for money. He was known often as Ambani's man for the way he perhaps helped the business group grow since the 1980s into a behemoth via governmental favours. His actions as minister could have likely been influenced more by party interests and dictates, as the Ambanis are known for dealing directly with the top leadership; including Indira Gandhi in those times.

Pranab Mukherjee who started in politics and parliament as a member of the Bangla Congress, joined the Congress Party in the early 1970s when the regional entity merged with the national party. Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister recognized the potential in him for being a parliamentarian with abundant substance and brought him into her ministry soon enough. Except for a brief period of alienation from the Congress, when he was famously sidelined by then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, he remained a staunch Congressman. He was, since the 1990s, the main trouble-shooter for the Congress governments as also for the party, irrespective of the position or department he held.

A well-groomed administrator who handled most of the important portfolios in his many innings in government as minister since the 1970s, he was justified in aspiring to be Prime Minister but missed the bus repeatedly. His strengths were perhaps his disadvantage. Weighing more on the intellectual side, Pranab Mukherjee was not a mass leader and largely kept to himself. He more than compensated for this aloofness by his great grasp of subjects and intellectual prowess. A consolation was that he was made President for a term and acquitted himself well in this job, going by the rule book in every decision he made or file he signed. He avoided the temptations of playing politics from the exalted office at Rashtrapati Bhavan. He judged every matter on merit. That too was his greatness.

In an age when dignity is a dying virtue in politics, Pranab Mukherjee was its epitome. The Bharat Ratna that the NDA government bestowed on him a year ago was a fitting tribute to a leader who cared for the welfare of the nation and its people all his life. It is well known that Prime Minister Narendra Modi took advice from him often on matters of governance. His exit creates a deep vacuum in the nation's top (yet informal) leadership.

TO THE EDITOR

The best PM India never had!

Editor,
The person who used to preside over Union Cabinet meetings in absence of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was unceremoniously shown the door promptly after her demise instead of elevating him to the Prime ministerial chair! He was made to miss the Prime ministerial bus in 2004 and 2009 as well. Yet through his efficient handling of high profile ministries coupled with immense personality, stature, knowledge, international recognition and acceptability it has been amply proved that Pranab Mukherjee was indeed the best Prime minister India never had!

As Indian President, far from acting as a 'rubber stamp' of the Union Government or dancing to its tune, Mukherjee had never hesitated to call a spade and sternly advised the Union Government to resist the menace of intolerance and

communalism. India was fortunate to have such an illustrious personality as a President.

Mukherjee must also be thanked for playing the role of conscience of the nation even after completion of his glorious innings in Rashtrapati Bhavan. The nation can never forget his enlightening speech regarding the idea of India right on the platform of the RSS in Nagpur. By standing erect right in the den of a unit believing in "ONE LANGUAGE, ONE RELIGION, ONE PEOPLE", Mukherjee had stressed on the importance of diversity equality and tolerance towards all beliefs and faith. Instead of denigrating the Muslim invaders as "aliens", he had invoked Rabindranath Tagore's epic poem 'Bharat Tirtha' to welcome the incoming flow to India and to be proud of our assimilated history.

Repeatedly he had pointed out that ensuring happiness and welfare of people should be the first priority of any ideal State. In a seminar in Rajasthan Assembly, Mukherjee had asked those in power and governance to re-

45 years on - the Jaintia alphabet gathers dust

By Dr Omarlin Kyndiah

The mother tongue is not only relevant but also important in today's world. Today, people across the world express great love for their respective mother tongues. A century earlier, some sections of the people might not have realized the relevance and importance of their mother tongue. Some of them had even switched over to the language of the dominant group/s. For instance, English had been the dominant language in Wales. Most Welsh people particularly in South Wales, had even adopted English as their mother tongue. But, there is a resurgence of Welsh nationalism; and the preservation and promotion of their Celtic language is one of their important political agenda.

It is pertinent to mention the Welsh experience here because when the Welsh missionaries came to the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, they realised the relevance and importance of imparting their religious teachings in the mother tongue of the local people by reducing their spoken language into a written language in Roman script. Earlier the Baptist missionaries from Serampore too had attempted to put the Khasi language into a written form, in Bengali script. This is how the Khasi language developed. Prior to that there were different Khasi dialects which were not reduced into written form. From among these dialects, the Sohra dialect was preferred by the missionaries to adopt as a Standard Khasi language. According to the H Roberts in his "A Grammar of Khasi Language" (1891), the dialects of Cherrapunjee (Sohra) was taken as the standard, because it is the purest, as universally acknowledged by the natives, besides being more amenable to the systematic arrangement. The Standard Khasi Language has reached a stage for recognition by the Sahitya Akademi and inclusion in the Eight Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

In North East India, there are many tribal dialects which have been reduced into a written language in the Roman script by the missionaries working in the hills. Not only the tribal dialects; the missionaries had also contributed in the growth and development of non-tribal languages such as the Assamese language. In North East India, preservation of the cultural and linguistic identity of any given ethnic group had gained momentum because of the emergence of forces that promote 'cultural assimilation'. Article 29 guarantees protection of interest of minorities having a distinct language with a right to conserve the same. This is yet to be fully implemented. In addition, Article 350A provides

adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minorities. But this provision also remains only a declared intention of the Indian State so far as many local languages are yet to be introduced at the primary stage of education. One classic case is that of the Jaintia language. It is because of this, the Jaintias have exerted themselves in translating their spoken language into a written language which leads to the formation of Association of Jaintia writers called Ka Sein I Ktien Wei Thoh Jaintia in 1975.

Historically, Pnar has been by far the most important language. Many describe Pnar as a dialect or variety of Khasi (Grierson, 1904 & Barih, 1977, etc). However, Karl Heinz Grussner (2004) in his article, Khasi: a minority language of NE India; from an unwritten to a written language" acknowledged that Pnar may be a language in its own right. Lexico-statistical studies show that Pnar has the highest intersection with the lexicon of the other Khasian branch of Austro-Asiatic language (War, Standard Khasi, and Lyngngam). In addition to lexico-statistical differences, Pnar, War, S. Khasi and Lyngngam (PKWL) also show differences in their phonetics, grammatical morphology, and typology. Linguist Anne Daladier argued that these differences are an indication that PKWL was probably spoken in different locations of the Assam corridor before they grouped in Meghalaya. Another young Linguist Hiram Ring in his paper, "A phonetic description and phonemic analysis of Jowai-Pnar" mentioned that, "Pnar and Khasi do share a significant portion of their culture and certain lexical items, but Pnar is distinct linguistically and it is reported that there is low mutual intelligibility between the languages."

Several research works by both national and international linguists on Pnar language have been published in both national and international journals. Few researchers are worth mentioning. These are KS Nagaraja, Hamlet Barih, C Barih, Narayan Kumar Choudhury, Mankular Gashnga, Paul Sidwell, Simon Green Hill and Anne Daladier and Hiram Ring. Sadly, very little research on Pnar language has since been carried out in our very own North Eastern Hill University (NEHU). While acknowledging the contributions of all these researchers on Pnar language, much more scope is left for our own researchers

for the development of the Pnar language.

Though orthography for Pnar is in use in some literatures, but there is a lack of standardisation. Spoken languages have dialects - from varying geographical areas and social groups. In Jaintia Hills District there exist fourteen dialect areas. These are Nartiang, Nonggingi, Nongbah, Mynso, Shilliang Myntang, Shangpung, Raliang, Jowai, Rymbai, Sutnga, Nongkhlieh, Lakadong, Narpuh and Saipung (Daladier 2011). Standardisation is a tool of language promotion and strengthening cultural integrity. In 2011, UNESCO's Atlas of the World Languages in Danger had listed Khasi as susceptible, but Jaintia is more likely to be in danger, since it is not standardised and used as language instruction in education.

At this point, it is relevant to mention here that Ka Sein I Ktien Wei Thoh Jaintia under the leadership of former Vice Chancellor of North Eastern Hill University, Professor (Late) B Pakem on August 08, 1975 adopted the Jaintia alphabets in Roman Script. However, his untimely death left the work incomplete. This year, we are celebrating the 45th year of adoption of Jaintia alphabets. Unfortunately, very few are aware of this historical background of the Jaintia alphabets. At this moment, therefore, the question arises as to what should be done to perpetuate the Jaintia script? Who should carry forward the unfinished task of its completion? Is it not a duty on our part to raise the status of our spoken language into that of a written language?

The time has come now for Jaintia scholars and intellectuals to come forward to raise the standard of our spoken language into a written language. This will help to preserve and promote our rich cultural heritage and also increase the literacy rate of Jaintia Hills. Mr. Humphrey Hadem, the then Community Development Minister, Government of Meghalaya while addressing the Annual Session of 'Ka Sein I Ktien Wei Thoh Jaintia' at Jowai pleaded for having a separate written language for Pnar in order to preserve their rich cultural heritage, customs and their identity (Shillong Times April 24, 1982).

The Jaintia Hill Autonomous District Council (JHADC) vide Notification No. JHADC/SID/6/2016/21 dated 25th January 2017 had formed the Jaintia Alphabet Committee. The report of the Sub-committee under the Chairmanship of Prof PM

Passah was submitted in July 2018. Two years since the Committee submitted its report to the JHADC, no further action has been taken. The main contention to demand a separate Autonomous Council for Jaintia Hills is the non-uniformity in the administration of the two sub-division of Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills and also to act as a custodian of the culture, language, customs, laws, and the land. The functioning and performance of the Council from its inception is not up to the expectations of the people. This has caused a feeling of mistrust and lack of confidence in the Council and its continuance as the custodian of the culture, customs and traditions and ethnicity of the Jaintias at large. Lack of understanding on the part of the Council members, who are mostly businessmen and entrepreneurs, on the need to raise the standard of our mother tongue into that of a written language could be the reason for the delay to study the report.

Language issues are the heart of quality education for all. It is essential that children entering formal education have an opportunity to use their own mother tongue. The National Policy on Education, 1968 spoke about the regional language and the Three Language Formula. This was reiterated in the Education Policy, 1986 and was adopted as a Programme of Action by the Parliament in 1992. Recently, the BJP Government had approved the New Education Policy 2020 — a vision document to guide India's education blueprint for coming years. The policy lays emphasis on learning in the mother tongue. It states, "Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language, mother tongue, local language, or the regional language."

Sadly, in the North East India context, we have not been able to achieve what has been guaranteed by the Constitution of India so far as the question of mother tongue is concerned. We have come a long way from the Resolution adopted by Ka Sein I Ktien Wei Thoh Jaintia and the initiative of the Jaintia Hill Autonomous District Council. The aspiration of the Jaintias to see that their spoken language is raised to the standard of a written language remains in the court of the JHADC. Perhaps, it is time that the Council also takes up additional responsibilities, because our language is more relevant and important than anything else in the present day world.

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Living with the pandemic Post-lockdown vigilance

By Dr S. Saraswathi

More than five months have elapsed since we started the lockdown and we are now in the phase of relaxing restrictions despite a huge surge in cases of COVID-19 in many places. India reported 79,000 fresh cases on 29 August — highest number globally for a single day — when even USA recorded about 500 less number. In global comparison, India returned the highest number of COVID cases per week in the past week, and also the highest monthly cases in August, taking the total number of the affected to over 3.6 million.

Percentage of death to total cases and time taken for doubling of cases are technical details showing the virulence of the infection. For the common man, the number of cases, its spread, its status in the neighbourhood, workplace and other places/persons in their circle of contacts matter most. These factors determine his chances of catching the deadly disease and his reaction to the lifting of the lockdown.

Since the lockdown is being relaxed amidst reports of clustered outbreak of fresh cases of COVID-19 particularly in occupational settings, we have to believe that there are compelling reasons for this decision. The challenge with asymptomatic infection is said to be intensifying with removal of travel restrictions and opening of the public transport system. State Governments are aware that the vigil against the infection has to be intensified and health machinery is to be kept fully geared to meet exigencies. Truly, a novel experience of knowingly taking health risk under economic compulsions!

Authorities and people are visibly concerned about the inevitable consequences to be faced if people do not behave. Therefore, arrangements are being made particularly in workplaces and norms and guidelines are given with instructions to strictly enforce these. Unlock is accompanied with close monitoring of people's behaviour.

Post-lockdown period is going to be tension-ridden with isolation, distancing, uncertainty, and inconvenience being thrust as normal in social life. Hereafter, following reports regarding the course of the pandemic must become a habit. Number of close face-to-face contacts has to be kept as low as possible and high risk activities as short as possible. Remote learning and work introduced during lockdown will tend to stay even after the demise of the pandemic. Under fear of the virus lurking anywhere, we have to reduce our exposure to the world around as a preventive method in the belief that the dosage makes the poison. Face-mask, gloves, and hand-washing have become common, but social distancing is often flouted even by some leaders expected to set examples. Houses may become more orderly with allotted space and time for different activity at least for those who can afford.

Social-economic conditions are such not only in India, but all over the world, that men and women have to learn to live with the pandemic around and simultaneously make every effort to fight its spread and virulence before it can be eliminated altogether. Our hope lies in finding a vaccine. Lockdown surely is an effective method of containing the spread of the disease provided it is followed. There are two sets of people — those in favour of and those against lockdown restrictions. But, all of them have to make adjustments in their daily life patterns enforced by the onslaught of the pandemic irrespective of imposition of lockdown.

First and foremost, lifting lockdown or relaxing restrictions does not mean that the virus is weakening. It means

that hereafter we have to lead a double life struggling to continue with normal activities and adhere to pandemic restrictions. Unlock 4.0 guidelines scheduled to start from 1 September cannot be read as lifting of the road block to old and familiar patterns of life like lifting of curfew after a war and surrender of the enemy. Rather, they are crucial tests to assess what we have learnt about the pandemic, and how equipped we are to re-design our life to cope with medical emergencies. Unlock does not mean that we can run in the open as people do when heavy rains stop. Such unruly behaviour will invite re-imposition of restrictions in no time. Since there can be no activity without virus threat and the world cannot forever stop activities, we are compelled to take risky decisions.

Active coronavirus cases have crossed 3.5 million in India. It is not likely to abate soon in the opinion of medical experts. Epidemiologically, India presents a picture of a continent of many countries, according to doctors. This is evident from the way it has spread in different States. Mapping of districts, and corporation zones within districts, and within zones spotting hot spots have been possible and adopted to better manage disease control and patient care. It is an administrative strategy based on actual cases as the spread of the disease in different parts of the country is bound to be different. Lockdown as well as unlock guidelines and rules have to be different also. Multiple strategies are required to contain the infection.

It is almost impossible to restore complete normalcy in human life and activities in any one country in isolation in this age of globalization and more so in any one State or district within a country. Wholesale action and remedies are required for total eradication without which lasting solution is not possible. Protecting pockets of areas or people does not lead to eradication of epidemics. Vaccines, wherever they are produced should be made available to all countries. Ideally, immunity efforts have to be global and definitely national.

Routine health services, severely affected because of COVID-19 emergencies, may cause widespread damages as bad as the pandemic. Even the essential immunisation services for children are halted in many places. Institutional deliveries that have slowly been adopted in rural India are affected by diversion of medical attendants to COVID care. Routine check-ups for non-communicable diseases are postponed thus increasing the risk of patients. It is time to restore these health services without loosening our grip over treatment and prevention of COVID-19 cases. WHO has asked member-countries in South-East Asia to maintain essential health services and accelerate resumption of disrupted services hit by the pandemic.

The pandemic has stimulated a spirit of national self-reliance and has also pointed to the need for opening of supply chains and data flows for mutual benefit of nations. Nations must have realised the importance of collective action to fight the epidemic and build the shattered economy with local resources. The gravity of the infection intensifying global search for remedies, the importance of international co-operation in medical research is acknowledged. Indigenous systems of medicine must also be encouraged and assisted to manufacture resistance-building and preventive therapies. COVID-19 has provided opportunities to learn about our immune system and seek advice on healthy lifestyle. —INFA

(The writer is former Director ICSSR, New Delhi)

A President unmatched

Editor,
Late President Pranab Mukherjee visited Shillong on October 21, 2012. The 2-day visit to Meghalaya was his first as President of India. He landed amid the 36 hour shutdown called by the HNLC, during the tenure of Governor K. K. Paul and Chief Minister Mukul Sangma. The Class X students of St George School, Shillong and some selected teachers, escorted by the police witnessed the late President's address to the August House of Meghalaya. St George School was in fact the only school to brave the bandh call. What astounded each and every one was his 45 minutes spontaneous address with all the facts and figures of Meghalaya and pre-Meghalaya's budget allocation. The Georgians still remember his extremely sharp memory which is unmatched. May his soul rest in peace.

Yours etc.,
Simon Joseph,
Via email

Need to delve into pre-colonial history

Editor,
The write-up by HH Mohrmen, "The Jaintia Kings and their Stories," (ST Aug 31, 2020) was a very enlightening piece for most of us who don't delve into history but focus on the present without any reference to the past. It is a well known fact that the Jaintia people have a strong affinity with the plains people of Jaintiapur now in Bangladesh and with parts of Assam. Although the origin myths of the Pnars or Synteng or Jaintia people are clubbed with that of the Khasi people under the Hynniewtrep-Hynniewskum umbrella, there has to be more research into history and the Jaintia burujis to find out more about the Jaintia people, their customary practices, belief systems and their connections with the people beyond the boundaries of the present

Meghalaya. Geographical boundaries which categorise the national and international spaces, often tend to bury the stories of people who are appropriated by their new "nations" and citizenship statuses. The Jaintias' and indeed many other tribes have existed much before the idea of India as a nation was born. The absence of a written script has all but buried our unique histories which have been superimposed by the history recorded by colonial rulers according to their interpretation.

What was most interesting was Mohrmen's reference to the openness of the Jaintia people on account of their intrinsic interface with the plains people. This openness to other cultures is a virtue at a time when cultural chauvinism is raising its ugly head everywhere.

Yours etc.,
C Lyngwa,
Via email

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“My religion is very simple.
My religion is kindness.”

— Dalai Lama

The Shillong Times

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Mall versus Heritage garden

IN no country of the world including our own are malls constructed within a kilometer of the State Secretariat. Malls and vehicle showrooms are usually constructed out of city limits to provide breathing space to the city. Shillong needs a green lung space and bureaucrats of earlier regimes were known to have supported this idea of turning the old PWD complex at Barik into that green space. But in Meghalaya ideas take decades to take concrete shape; even ideas that are meant to serve a public cause. One lakh square feet is equivalent to over two acres of prime property in the heart of a city. The public need pure air to breathe in and not another concrete structure.

But the decision on what is good for Shillong or for Meghalaya cannot rest on the Government alone. Citizens too have a right to express their concerns and to give ideas that are in their larger interests. After all the government is only a custodian of the public purse. The reasons behind the Government's decision to build a mall are not convincing and do not seem to have emerged out of any consensus within the Government. The Urban Affairs Department which had earlier called for expression of interests from the best architectural firms in the country for the heritage project certainly did not envisage a mall in Barik. So how did the decision change overnight? At whose coercion? And who will finally be the contractor for the mall. Ultimately it all boils down to that single motive. It would, in fact, be interesting to know who the power behind the MDA throne is that actually calls all the shots. These are shrewd politician-businessmen whose focus is more on business than politics.

There is plenty of space in the New Shillong Township and beyond if a mall is a priority for this Government. The idea of malls came up when people began to acquire vehicles and could drive out of the city into less congested spaces. Secondly the idea is to accommodate all shops under one roof to avoid the inclement weather outside. Malls include recreational spaces such as movie theatres and play spaces for children. People don't just visit a mall for shopping. Many make it a rendezvous over coffee or a meal. It's a shopping experience for some and a window shopping experience for others.

Malls need a steady flow of customers to increase profit. Building shopping centres with large parking spaces is the reason why malls were envisaged. No one enjoys a shopping experience in a crowded and congested city centre. Whether these factors have been weighed in or whether the idea is to benefit one or two contractors is the point of debate. Indeed there is need for a vociferous public debate on this and other issues.

TO THE EDITOR

We are humans too!

Editor,
I believe you have never received or published a letter from a prostitute in your paper before. And I hope that you have never seen my face, nor the face of any other prostitute of my locality for that matter. I understand the degree of repulsion that you might feel at my attempt at writing a letter to you, that too, an open letter! But what am I to do? The situation is such that I cannot stop myself. I am not writing this willingly. The stomachs of my two sons have persuaded me to do so. I beg for forgiveness from your generous heart. If you find any objectionable statements in my letter, please do forgive me, and consider it a result merely of my helplessness.

The coronavirus pandemic has already claimed over half a million lives across the world, with case numbers continuing to rise. But this pandemic is not just a public health emergency; the crisis goes far beyond that. The world is hurtling toward an unprecedented hunger crisis. But it is people like me who are the worst affected. Poverty has driven

me and many poor single mothers like me to prostitution. Although I have passed Class XI, I can't seem to get a respectable job anywhere; not even menial jobs like a peon or cleaner. How do I feed my two boys? Is anybody listening? Is the government listening? We are human beings too!

I noticed you've been publishing a lot of articles on religion these past few days; but it is sad for me to tell you that the Christian religion has lost its reverence. Today, silence prevails; each and every verse of the Bible is shamed and injured. Who can talk about humanism in front of me now? Who can tell me about the writings of Mahatma Gandhi? Who can sing in praise of the sculptor of Mother Mary? Or the helpless chewed-up lips of Mother Teresa and the shroud of your civilized society?

You may not be able to do anything for us at all. But since the Government has granted "freedom of speech" to all its citizens, perhaps even we prostitutes too have the right to ask a question or two to our respected leaders. Does the government know we exist? Will you, our chosen representatives not listen to our voices? We've also stood in line. We've also cast

our votes like everyone else. I'm sorry! I have said so many things because of my overwhelming sentiments. I shouldn't have done so. You might feel offended by it. Perhaps, until now, nobody would have told you such things. But once again, forgive me, and consider it a result merely of my helplessness.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Save Tourism !

Editor,
It has been trying times for everyone for the last five to six months because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, those in the tourism industry are the first to be affected and the last to be revived. Owing to the number of positive cases rising each day in our state and in the country as a whole, we in the tourism sector can only see a bleak future. The livelihoods of many families in most of the tourist spots, especially in the rural areas, depend directly, as well as indirectly, on tourism. The damage that this pandemic has caused is not just financial or economic but also mental. Many are suffering from varying levels of depression because their only means of income has been snapped shut.

But even in the midst of this pandemic, each day we are hoping and praying that the travel and tourism industry will get back on its feet and the stakeholders will be able to start opening up their businesses again.

Just recently, an online meeting was held, organised by the Department of Tourism, Govt. of Meghalaya called the "Tourism Stakeholders Meeting" in which the Commissioner and Secretary of the Tourism Department mentioned that around 50,000 people in the state are engaged in Tourism. 50,000 people, along with their families, have been affected since March 2020 with no income at all! To minimize the loss and to lend a helping hand to those who have suffered the most, I request responsible citizens of the state to support local businesses with a weekend getaway or mini-vacation to rural tourist spots.

The decision of the government to open three tourist spots (Wards Lake, Elephant Falls, and Nehru Park) for local tourists is a positive step towards reviving tourism in the state. We look forward to when the government will start opening up other tourist spots, as well, in rural areas for local tourists. This, of

course, should be done whilst also keeping in mind the health and safety of the staff, locals and guests. The safety of everyone involved here is the top-most priority. In reopening, business owners should strictly adhere to the guidelines or SOP issued by the health ministry.

I also request the Dorbar Shong in whose jurisdiction these tourist spots fall under to think about the survival of its people and the future of the youth. They should not focus simply on imposing restrictions on re-opening but they should also work towards creating awareness among the locals and to ensure that they strictly follow the health and safety protocols issued by the Health Department and start adapting to the New Normal instead of being paralyzed by this pandemic.

Yours etc,
Lemuel Gordon Lymba,
Via email

Does MeECL /MePDCL need to borrow 1300 crore?

Editor,
Apropos the news report (ST Aug 15, 2020), announcing that the Power Minister,

James Sangma would allow MePDCL to borrow over Rs. 1300 crore from REC/PFC to clear outstanding power purchase dues, we put forward some pertinent questions which many might be unaware of but the ramifications of which are huge.

Does MePDCL (or MeECL) really need to borrow this humungous amount? What will be the interest rate that REC/PFC will charge? (The rate of interest from the above firms is always very high). Will this borrowing further sink MePDCL or MeECL? Or is there an ulterior motive (which will be proved once it happens) behind all this?

As concerned employees and citizens of the state, we feel this is the easy way out that the present government will use as an excuse to liquidate all of the pending dues of the erstwhile MeSEB as part of its corporatisation and unbundling process initiated by the Government. This would make the MeECL start with zero balance. Now it is indeed strange that a very junior MCS officer, is being entrusted (a stop gap arrangement as the CM would make us believe) as CMD when the post was in the past held by senior most IAS officers not below the rank of Additional

‘Mood of the nation’ when GDP contracts 23.9 per cent

Clueless government tries to put all blame on Covid

By Sushil Kutty

Nothing seems to move the Buddha born in Vadnagar at Gujarat's Mehsana district. Neither the contraction of India's territorial integrity at the LAC nor the contraction of India's GDP by a massive 23.9 per cent in the last quarter. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is beyond all these events when he is engaged in feeding the peacock who has access to his residence and who cannot be a Covid-19 threat to the lone inhabitant.

Does Modi think of India's economy or does he leave it to Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to keep a lookout on the economy. There's no doubt that Sitharaman follows in the footsteps of Narendra Modi. Notice how she followed up Modi's mega \$266 billion economic stimulus package announcement on May 12 with five tranches, one after the other, of what all was in store.

Now we hear from no less a person than the Chief Economic Advisor K Subramanian that the 23.9 per cent GDP contraction was no great shakes as the country was anyway under lockdown in the April-June quarter. So, relax! Is that so? The fact remains that this was contraction after 24 years. The last time GDP contracted was in 1979-80, by 5.2 per cent.

So, while 'relax' is good health-advisory during any pandemic, to be told this devastating contraction news on Onam day couldn't have gone down well with anybody least of all King Mahabali - on whose legend Onam is celebrated in what is referred to as 'God's Own Country', especially when the putrid smell of the Covid-19 dead had made it amply clear that something was definitely rotten in the state of Denmark - India!

That apart, the state of the 'Onamsadhya' - reduced to a quarter on the platan leaf - and King Mahabali's hunger must not have lost its keen edge. The question arises: Was King Mahabali an economist? The story goes that Mahabali's people never went hungry, and that Kerala was a land of plenty then, flowing with coconut milk and honey - a pure vegetarian repast laid out in every household throughout the year and more so on Onam Day. So much so, even to this day, Keralans or Malayalis pine for the Mahabali days!

The reality is that monarchies are old hat (crown!) and

that what we have today in 'Bharata' is a democratic republic with an elected government. Of course, no communist party ruled the forbidden kingdom during Mahabali's reign. And he didn't have to contend with a coronavirus pandemic or a Xi Jinping out to paint the green planet Maoist red! The point is Covid-19 and the coronavirus can be contained, if not beaten, if India sadly didn't lack a leader who knew his economics as well as he knew his politics!

Meaning what? Meaning, it will take a change of leadership to bring in a change in fortunes for the country. Right, okay, but that's what the whole gobbledygook is all about! There cannot be a change of leadership unless there's also something like a sudden-death app. Like in a soccer match: A goal at any minute of the extra-time, by anyone of either teams, and the victor gets to hoist the cup! Gotcha?

Well, the answer to that is, not all country heads are like Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The likes of Britain's Boris Johnson and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro have stuck it through coronavirus infection and quarantine, and didn't resign. But Covid-19 afflicted Shinzo Abe has announced that he'll no longer remain Japan's Prime Minister.

Can we expect a similar deal from Prime Minister Narendra Modi? Will Modi do a Shinzo Abe? The first retort from his supporters would be 'Are you crazy?' The second would be 'No, never. It's not in Modi's nature to call it quits. He's a fighter, has been a fighter all his life.' Modi will, without an iota of doubt, choose to quarantine himself with a peacock and ride time till a vaccine arrives.

The question is, did not the mega \$266 billion economic stimulus package work its magic? The economic stimulus had also come when the lockdown was in place and should have offset the ill-effects of the lockdown. But, apparently, and now, certainly, the economic stimulus did not stop the GDP from contracting. Instead, a 'mood of the nation' survey placed Narendra Modi on 'Cloud 9' even as India was in Covid-19! (IPA Service)

mately Rs 840 crore and which would by now have accumulated to over Rs1000 crore. If the state government pays up this amount, the MePDCL/MeECL will not have to borrow Rs 1300 crore at high interest rates from REC/PFC.

To date MePDCL has to pay the pending power purchase amount of approximately Rs 600 crore to NEEPCO, Rs 100 crore to OTPC Tripura, Rs 500 crore to NHPC & NTPC, Rs 50 crore to Power Grid besides other power sectors, which would amount to over Rs 1800 crore besides the monthly power purchase of approximately Rs 30 crore.

If the state government insists on MePDCL, taking the loan of Rs 1300 crore, the question that arises is - how will MePDCL or MeECL pay the monthly salaries of the staff?

Yours etc.,
R D Lyngdoh, LM
Dkhar, Ms Nongkynrih,
Via email

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

"Innovation can only occur where you can breathe free."

-- Joe Biden

The Shillong Times

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SHILLONG, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2020

India, innovation

SLOW and steady wins the race; true; but, a problem is that India is too slow on many fronts in these days of fast-paced life. The Global Innovation Index GII 2020, the latest in a series, has put India two notches up compared to the previous year, on its innovation-linked strengths. The list prepared by World Intellectual Property Organisation and some others covered over 130 nations to make the presentation.

The West is naturally on top, and Asia lags very much behind. Switzerland tops the chart, followed by Sweden, the United States, the UK and the Netherlands among the top five. India, however is named as the top most-innovative middle-income economy; a small comfort. While China brought down its rank to 13, and rubbed shoulders with the West, the Asian nations other than India in the below-fifty rankings include the Philippines and Vietnam.

Notably, India's slight improvement in ranking is mainly due to its Information and Communications Technology sector achievements, while most other sectors put up a poor show in terms of innovation. Innovation is the key to success in business and enterprises. Innovation is the key to achieving high standards of governance. India with its bookworms in administrative apparatus and corrupt politicians in governance systems fails the nation on all fronts. Innovation is rare to find here. India remained at 64th position in the area of creative outputs on a scale of 131 nations. It's the reason why many Chinese products are sold fast here; Indian products are mostly archaic in their concepts. All big talks about super power status for a nation of this strength and clout will be nothing more than a cruel joke played on the hapless people of this nation. The more than seven decades of Independence and rule by Desi leaders, with no regard to merit, have not taken

India far. Every sector is ailing.

The Railways, for one; something which the British Raj left in excellent shape in the late 1940, has not shown significant innovation. The age of Bullet trains, or high-speed trains, arrived on the world stage decades ago. India is still struggling with its antiquated rail systems, old rakes and old tracks lacking even in proper maintenance. Even the bullet train project that PM Modi sought to bring in on the Mumbai-Ahmedabad sector is failing to progress, caught as it is in the tug of war between politicians. Good leadership and less of political cacophony in the name of democracy should help the nation think anew and in innovative ways.

TO THE EDITOR

Follow your heart

Editor,
Religion is a central part of one's identity. To belong to a religion often means more than simply sharing its beliefs and participating in its rituals; it also means being part of a community and a culture. The article "Returning Home: My Reconversion Story" by Shintihun Lyngwa (ST September 1, 2020) has sparked a much needed debate on the issue of 'mass religious conversion' in Meghalaya. Many followers of the Niam Khasi - Niam Tre have applauded the author of the article for her brave move to go against the Church and reconvert back to the indigenous faith; but there are some Christian leaders who have shamed the author.

In a country like India, there is incredible diversity within each religion in terms of how members define their connections to it. For some, a religion's theological beliefs and rituals of worship are central to their lives. Others are more drawn to a religion's community and culture than to its beliefs and rituals. Many even feel part of a religion's culture but choose not to participate in its rituals at all. Some people feel free to choose a religion for themselves, or to reject religion entirely as a part of their identity. Others, like Shintihun Lyngwa feel that they have been born and wrongly raised in a foreign religion and therefore are unwilling to follow it since Chris-

tianity as we all know, is not the religion of the Khasis, but came to this land on mere boats. Besides the concept of "ours" and "theirs", the article has also raised certain issues including the demands on social media that we should invent our own alphabet since written language is a key component of culture. If we want our Khasi community to feel like it has its own living, breathing culture, then we need to think about its written language. The Meghalaya Government as well as the KHADC should seriously consider the demand since the invention will have a profound effect on our unique society and will also help us grow and develop into a stronger community. In addition to this, the alphabet will also help us create specific power dynamics within our Khasi society, including authority and social standing.

As long as we still practice and propagate our indigenous faith, which is the core basis of our culture, the Niam Khasi - Niam Tre will still remain the foundation of our identity.

Yours etc.,
Khrwpyrkhat Khongjer,
Pynursla village,
East Khasi Hills

Restoring Shillong's glory

Editor,
"A single spark can ignite an entire revolution". Never have the words been so apt than to the spark of environmental awareness lit by The Shillong Times Group during

The shocking (?) revelation by Dr Aman War, Meghalaya's Director Health Services that at least 61 pregnant women and 877 newborns have died in Meghalaya in the four months starting from April this year for want of admission to hospitals and also due to lack of medical attention because of diversion of the health machinery to fight COVID-19 pandemic has jolted the consciousness of the nation. We should thank Dr War for bringing the focus on this crucial topic that has been the bane of Meghalaya for a long time. I am sure a number of webinars will be organised on the topic in the coming days because (a) the statistics debunk the fallacy that women in a matrilineal society are privileged (b) it gives the lie to claims that women here are far more empowered than their counterparts elsewhere.

But let's take a look at the statistics to see if indeed there are sharp differences between the maternal and infant mortalities figures of last year and this year. The statistics below do not show too large a gap between 2019 and 2020. The differences in mortality of infants of 1-12 months and 0-12 months between 2019 and 2020 are indeed very worrying. The only saving grace is that this year between April to July immunization has gone up by 18%.

After Assam, Meghalaya has always had the highest maternal mortality. And there are a combination of reasons for this, arising from socio-economic and cultural factors. Martin Luther Christian University (MLCU) in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam had conducted very intensive research into the reasons for high IMR and MMR and also organised several awareness campaigns across East Khasi Hills. Poverty in Meghalaya is a growing concern and women as single parents bear the worst brunt. Poor maternal nutrition (56% of women in child-bearing years are anemic, NFHS 4), result in poor health of the child in the mother's womb and that child has very slim chances of survival.

NESFAS has done repeated studies on malnutrition in Meghalaya and the reasons for it. The tribes here are not known to be lactose tolerant. Many don't drink milk or cannot afford milk and the alternatives to milk for the calcium needs of the body are

not easily available either. Growing up we were told that colocasia or taro (ka shriew) provided bone health but that is fast going out of our palate and is being replaced by new foods that are perhaps not quite so nutritious.

The other day I met with a young mother of a four year old girl and now pregnant with twins. Her pallor was pale yellow indicating, even to the untrained eye, a case of severe anaemia. She said she was having green vegetables and beetroot and was also having iron tablets. But perhaps it is the body that is unable to manufacture the much needed haemoglobin in the blood. We are told that haemoglobin is necessary for transporting oxygen from the lungs to other tissues and organs of the body. We are also

	New Natal Deaths	425	486
1	Infant Death (1-12 months)	265	390
2	Total Infant Death (0-12 months)	690	876
3	Maternal Death	59	63
4	Institutional Delivery	59%	57%
5	Full Immunisation	71%	58%

Source: Department of Health, Govt of Meghalaya, MCH

household and sex is just a form of entertainment. There is no need to think too much about the consequences - pregnancy). Some women said, if they make a song and dance about sex when a man wants to have sex, he might desert here and go to another woman. As it is there is a high rate of abandonment/divorce in Khasi society. We have not even begun to study the adverse consequences of having too many partners and a child or children from each partner.

The Khasi society is fairly liberal when it comes to marriage and co-habitation. There is no stigma attached to teenage pregnancies or out of wedlock pregnancies. One wonders if this is good or bad. But with the highest fertility rate in the country women in Meghalaya are dipping below the poverty line faster than they used to when the clan system and other community support systems could cushion the pangs of being abandoned with two to three children and the man not held accountable for maintenance of the abandoned wife and children.

The socio-economic caste census, 2011 found that 76% of rural Meghalaya is landless. In a society where land is supposedly held by the community or where land and property devolve through the youngest daughter, the above statistics reveal the

irony of a matrilineal society. Today research shows that women do not own economic assets. It is not even left to the imagination to understand the plight of the average Khasi woman who is seen setting up makeshift stalls along the highways and each one is either a sole contributor to the family income or is an additional income earner.

Insofar as child health and mortality are concerned much has to do with the mother's health and her ability to breastfeed the child or provide alternative nutritious food. Time was when infants a week or two old would be given mashed banana. Some mothers would give mashed rice with a little milk. Now how much nutrition there is in this kind of food given to infants is anybody's guess. No wonder there is malnutrition and as a result stunting and non-development or slow development of the cognitive faculties. The cognitive domain includes mental processes of perception, memory, judgment, and reasoning. Is it any wonder then why a good number of us find mathematics and science so challenging? I would like to be proven wrong here.

It is a fact that we have to mend our socio-cultural practices to improve both maternal and infant mortality figures in Meghalaya. Schools really need to invest in sex education than just teach the three R's. Pregnancy must be a conscious choice between husband and wife and not an accidental act. Before a child is born the parents have to be ready to take on the responsibilities. This of course requires a radical behavioural change. And that is where the role of peer educators and NGOs involved in training adolescent boys and girls comes in. Governments need to invest more in education outside the classroom and give that the importance it deserves.

And while MMR and IMR are seemingly health related matters they require interventions at several levels and by different stakeholders/departments coming together. So let's not make this a 'health only' issue and therefore miss the woods for the trees. The society itself has to take responsibility to redefine women's empowerment which should include in the main - Sexual and Reproductive Rights and Health.

project, Ramayana museum and 'Holy Cow' to mention just a few. Innumerable fellow Indians are languishing in hell-like conditions without food, clothes, shelter, education, medicines jobs with the people compelled to engage in much-hated professions out of utter helplessness like our sister fatter the worst; yet the welfare of such hapless soul is the last thing on the minds of the relevant authorities and the society in general as if this vulnerable section (forming the vast majority in India) simply "does not exist"! Shouldn't our heads hang in shame?

Unless the last person in the queue gets awarded the honour of a human being with necessary rights, privileges and dignity guaranteed; Indians can never attain the moral right to flaunt it's "success" "progress" or "modernity"!

Despite such a pathetic life, our sister (one of the billions of pandemic-affected Indians) will perhaps get some consolation on seeing that at least The Shillong Times did not take offence or get repulsed for her act of writing such an emotionally overwhelming letter! Rather the daily has published it with such importance and honour! No thanks would be enough for such a noble gesture by The Shillong Times family and respected editor. Feeling proud of Shillong Times for being human to another fellow human being!

Yours etc.,
Kajal Chatterjee,
Vaierail

A cry in the economic wilderness

Editor,

I am a serious reader of newspapers for at least 36 years, with "Letters to the Editor" column being my favourite. But hardly have I come across a more heart-rending piece than the letter written by our loving unfortunate "nameless" sister in Shillong Times ("We are humans too!" ST Sep 3, 2020). On the one hand, her pathetic saga pierces the heart of all those who still have a heart to speak of; on the other it renders a tight slap on the faces of those who try to prove India's "elitism" by invoking the attainment of Mars Orbit, flaunt India's "might" by making a public spectacle in the name of Yoga, advertise "food sufficiency" of India, proudly beat the trumpet of India's "modernity" by pointing out "IT Revolution" and the high profile software giants of Indian vintage going to the top in USA! Her philosophical cry highlighting the woes of the family, where even her two sons are starving, should compel them to hide their faces in shame (if minimum bit of conscience is still left in them) who squander billions of precious money, time and energy on gigantic statues, lofty flags, bullet trains, new capital complex, grand temples, Saraswati river "discovery"

By the end of the day, the enthusiasm of all the participants ended my worries and made me confident once again that we the citizens of Shillong can regain the glory of our city. Yours etc.,
Jiwat K Vaswani,
Team JIVA,
Vaierail

Wanted a green patch at Barik

Editor,
I was deeply impressed reading the editorial published in The Shillong Times (ST Sep 3, 2020) and fully agree with the contents. The Government of Meghalaya must seriously re-look the construction of a shopping mall at Barik Point. Not only will this add to traffic congestion, but will also end opportunities to develop a green patch of land. Let us make our best effort to see that Shillong continues to remain as The Scotland of the East.

Yours etc.,
Dr. K.K. Jhunjhunwala
Editor-in-Chief
Eastern Panorama

Modi government has no sound

programme to stem economic decline

Ruling elite reluctant to channelise funds to poor to pep up demand

By Arun Srivastava

Irrespective of the sneers and abuses being hurled by the BJP leaders and Narendra Modi on Dr Manmohan Singh, the former prime minister has proved to be prophetic in his observation that Modi would be a "disaster" as Prime Minister and the country would face the spectre of a dreary economy.

The gross domestic product or GDP contracted 23.9 per cent in the April-June period; the worst incidence of negative growth for the economy since 1996, when India began publishing quarterly figures, and also the worst among major Asian economies. An insight into this trend would reveal that India is only a couple of steps away from bankruptcy.

Of course COVID-19 played a significant role in accentuating the economic crisis, but Modi has to share the blame for dragging India to such a precarious stage. He gives the impression of being expert in every art of governance but the reality is otherwise. Indian economy is on the verge of collapse only for his wrong handling.

GDP has gone negative earlier too. But the situation has not been so alarming as it is today. The magnitude of the crisis could be realised from the passive silence of all those people who had formed the habit of barking even at the fall of a leaf. In fact the data marks the likely onset of India's deepest recession. In that backdrop India will wit-

ness further deepening of the crisis and the negative GDP acquiring a bigger dimension. Recession is defined as two consecutive quarters of decreasing GDP.

Financial services - the biggest component of the country's services sector, shrank 5.3 per cent compared to the corresponding period a year ago. Manufacturing and construction shrank 39.3 per cent and 50.3 per cent respectively. Agriculture bucked the trend, with an expansion of 3.4 per cent.

The country is not simply a victim of the havoc wrought by the pandemic. It is suffering due to the averseness of Modi to salvage the situation. It is beyond comprehension why he is unwilling to salvage the situation. He has been simply selling the assets of the public sector to get more funds to take care of government expenses. What is worse is his financial experts and economic advisers are intellectually bankrupt. Even after this harrowing development Modi's adviser with tongue in cheek said that the situation is yet to deteriorate.

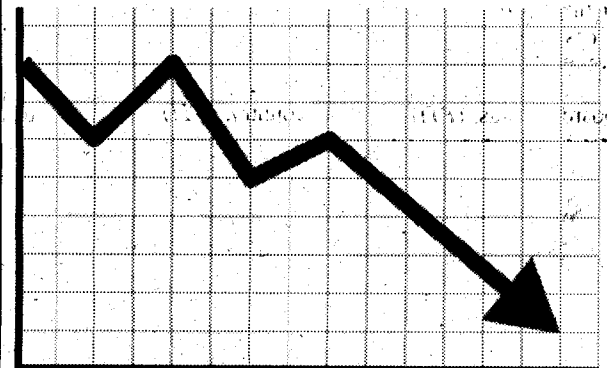
Ironically Modi's plan to raise the economic contribution of manufacturing from 15 per cent to 25 per cent of GDP is not making much progress. The flagship Make in India initiative, which aims to attract more manufacturing contracts from foreign companies, has fallen flat. He was aware of the impending danger. But he was so busy with his Hindutva agenda that he had no time to retrieve the financial situation. The IMF, World Bank and OECD all had sounded the alarm in October after the Reserve Bank of India trimmed the country's projected growth rate to 6.1 per cent for 2019-20. This was on the back of a sharp decline

in private consumption and weakening growth in industry and services. Despite numerous cuts to interest rates in 2019, the central bank again cut its forecast in December, this time to 5 per cent. Yet Modi did not try to apply his mind to find out what is going wrong, and where does India go from here?

It has been a widely known fact that India's economy is heading for a meltdown. Nearly 78 of the largest companies in the country are facing dissolution under the Indian Bankruptcy Code. Of them, 20 have already been declared insolvent and sent to the National Company Law Tribunal for dissolution. The sickness has spread to the private financial sector.

In the wake of the pandemic while other countries came forward to help the livelihood needs of their people, the central government did not bother about the workers of the unorganised sector which is most vulnerable. The present crisis owes much to the neglect of the needs to streamline the survival of the unorganised sector than the organised. If Modi had paid attention to Dr Singh's suggestion to "ensure people's livelihoods are protected and they have spending power through a significant direct cash assistance", this situation could have been avoided to a large extent.

The fact is India's economy was already in the throes of a slowdown before the beginning of the pandemic - GDP grew at 4.2 per cent in the 2019-20, its slowest pace in nearly a decade. Economists have since warned that India's GDP for the 2020-21 financial year is likely to contract sharply, leading to the worst technical recession since the 1970s. This is going to be a "deep and prolonged economic slowdown". Many countries have decided to print money to fund government spending to tide over the ongoing economic crises, and some prominent economists have suggested the same for India. But Modi also ignored it on the 'pled that excess supply of money would lead to inflation. A good ruler foresees the situation knocking at the door. The current phase of slowdown has been pinned on drastic fall in consumption, due to slowdown first followed by covid-19. The comment of the CEA to the Government of India, KV Subramanian; "Covid-19 pandemic has led to the worst global economic crisis since 1870 but power consumption, e-way bills indicate Indian economy on path to revival," lacks conviction. It is difficult to find a simple correlation of GDP's contraction of 23.9 per cent, with Covid. Even if one subscribes to his version, it is absolutely clear that the erratic and incongruous handling of the pandemic has aggravated the situation which was already looming large. Subramanian must accept that except the UK, where the contraction rate is around 22 per cent, all other countries have less than 10 per cent negative GDP. It is not clear how long he would be hiding behind Covid-19. (IPA Service)



"I believe in this concept that you learn by teaching."

-- Stephen Covey

The Shillong Times

Vol No. LXXIII No.22 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 2020

Covid-challenged teaching

SEPTEMBER 5, 2020 will be remembered as 'Teacher's Day' with a difference. There will be no celebration and students won't be able to wish their teachers in person. And yet this is the time when teachers deserve special respect and recognition for meeting the challenges posed by the Covid19 pandemic. Teachers are trying their utmost to reach out to their students via the online mode even if that meant learning new skills and reconfiguring the tried and tested methods of classroom teaching. Teachers have often suffered from the agony of being in a 'low prestige profession.' Even at this point of the pandemic they are not considered frontline workers or first responders, simply because they are not healthcare professionals. But to keep millions of students gainfully engaged in activating their cognitive skills of thinking, reading, learning, remembering, reasoning, and paying attention to what is taught, is a very demanding task.

A teacher is constantly learning because students are not homogeneously endowed with the same set of capacities/potentials. Each child learns at his/her own pace. To recognize that and to make special effort to address the needs of those that require more time to understand and learn is what real teaching is all about. More than any other profession it is teaching that demands that teachers remain motivated. Only a motivated teacher can motivate students. But are teachers getting enough motivational courses and refresher courses so that they reinvent their pedagogies?

It is unfortunate that India does not provide teachers 'visitation' which means that teachers visit other schools to see how their peers are teaching and what new methods they are adopting. This cross-fertilization of the teaching-learning process is valuable to improving the teacher's output.

Covid19 has brought parents and teachers closer to each other because parents have become supervisors for their children's education at home. In fact many parents have learnt along with their children and some parents have even contributed to enriching the teaching-learning experiences and sharing ideas with school principals and teachers with the sole aim of making learning a more experiential activity. Indeed parents and teachers have established a new equilibrium and they are trying to find a new normal for learning in the midst of the challenges posed by the pandemic.

The other challenge for teachers and educational institutions is to see that no child is left behind because of the digital divide during this pandemic. This divide is not merely because of unstable internet connectivity but because most families cannot afford modern gadgets. Covid19 has taught educators and governments that smartphones and tablets are no longer luxuries but are an integral part of education henceforth.

TO THE EDITOR

Teachers' role during Covid19

Editor,
We are passing through the most critical days of the Corona Virus pandemic. Thousands of people are infected by the disastrous epidemic, almost everyday. Physicians are struggling to battle the pandemic and save lives. Similarly, teachers are also struggling to take control of the situation and reach out to students through online teaching and counseling.

School students are the worst sufferers in this Lockdown. Since the end of March, this year, all educational institutions have been closed due the Lockdown. Initially the school children took the Lockdown as an unexpected holiday to enjoy with fun and merriment, but very soon they were bored and listless without school and started to be unruly at home. 'An idle mind is the devil's workshop,' it is said, hence it became very difficult for parents to control their children. Parents missed the immediate help of the teachers who cared for their children for 5-6 hours five days a week. While doctors fight to save lives of people, teachers fight to save the young

generation from atrophy and moral degradation.

All the educational institutions have started online teaching. Though the efficacy of online teaching has not been assessed no one can deny that it could at least hold the attention of children and provide them with mental stimulation in this ultra-critical situation. Many are adjusted to the new system of learning. Those students deprived of the facilities of online teaching also took the initiative to find out from their friends the lessons taught, and the home assignments etc. As a whole, the students remain busy with online classes which are something very new and interesting to them. Teachers have the rare capacity to draw the attention of the students, irrespective of whether they are brilliant or average. Hence students attend online classes regularly. They know well that they should not miss the academic year. As a result the student community as a whole is somehow under strict discipline through online teaching.

In the same way, teachers who are often called the builders of the nation are sacrificing a lot to save children from the dreadful situation created by the Lockdown. The majority of teachers in India are not trained or used to

The Great Shopping mall Vs high streets

By Teidor Lyngdoh

The Great Shopping malls, pillared by the mighty branded stores, where consumers meet up with friends and shop all day, was an experience of the past. The 1990's and early 2000's offered a unique shopping experience along with other activities nested in such malls. Those days are gone and shopping in today's context is no longer central to the "shopping mall" model. Today's consumer browses different websites, apps and e-commerce platforms from the comfort of their couch, receive recommendations from online services, customer reviews and price comparison

number is growing rapidly. Research also shows that that one out of every four malls in America will close by 2022. Some countries have responded by repurposing and transforming these malls to provide green spaces for public recreation. For instance, with the declining footfalls, South Korea and Japan are closing their malls to convert them into green spaces. There is an urgent need for such spaces in congested cities, to recycle the air for the sake of the citizens. An example of one of these

at Barik will not be a prudent decision.

An alternative solution to the "Great Shopping Mall Investment" is based on the concept of developing "High Streets" across Meghalaya. We highlight a few reasons, backed with evidence, why such a concept would be a great fit for the state of Meghalaya:

High Streets have been defined as retail centres/streets that serve the shopping needs of a particular locality or groups of localities. It offers a broader range of

shops.

High streets give opportunities to a greater number of youth, and play an important role in their development and ability to innovate, create brands, and sell products and services that meet the changing demands of the modern consumer.

Government can use techniques (e.g. Location analytics) for optimal High street selection based on factors, such as population density, connectivity and ease of traffic flow, accessibility by customers and different transit modes, visibility among others.



sites before making a purchase decision. Few times, they may check into a nearby store to assess an item in person. In essence, technology adoption, abundance of information, near-perfect price transparency and a parade of discounted deals, are here, and together, become a nightmarish experience for many retailers and shopping malls.

The age of retail and shopping mall apocalypse had already begun in the last decade and malls have been slowly disappearing—a cultural death now hastened by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Like many disruptions, there is a need to adapt and innovate to address the challenges these changes are introducing. Ideas of setting up shopping malls in this age of retail digital disruption need an abrupt shift from irrational exuberance to reflect economic reality.

Consumer research from leading firms and business schools have shown that globally, digital retailing is already influencing about 50% of store sales, and that

green spaces in India is Deer Park, in South Delhi.

All of this calls for conventional ideas such as shopping malls to look at an entirely new perspective—one that allows them to integrate disparate channels into a single seamless shopping experience given the impact Covid-19 has inflicted on economies. Having a Chief Minister with business degrees from Ivy league institutions such as the Wharton School of Business and Imperial College London, should have made the understanding of such paradigm shifts and the existence of alternative business models more feasible.

The COVID-19 economic crisis has already led to higher unemployment and huge revenue losses both for the state and individuals. Consumer spending is low, leaving many businesses and services in the state devastated. Not only are shopping malls out of fashion, but the current pandemic has also given more reasons as to why the proposed shopping mall

experiences and services in order to become the nerve centre of a locality or group of localities; a place where people can get together and shop.

While Shopping malls centralise the marketing effort into one building, High streets decentralise the marketing efforts and cater to a group of localities.

High streets reduce congestion of cars and people from a single area—a post COVID experience, which is necessary to address. Traffic jams and the COVID-19 pandemic in Meghalaya have accelerated the call and need for this decongestion of shopping zones.

High streets maintain the right mix of shops, while offering experiences and a convenience that cannot be replicated online. Consumer demand usually dictates the kinds of shops and services that are available, and what goes into the local high streets, from a range of branded shops, independent stores, groceries, restaurants, pubs, fashion and coffee

There are patterns that already exist in many localities in the state that need assistance from the administration in order to develop them into high streets. The government needs to enable them to evolve in response to the changing landscape, with some form of management structure and policy planning that will constructively support the development of high streets.

A healthy discussion on such alternatives would help the local community and economy. An investment in such high streets would increase direct and spill over employment and economic opportunities much more than an investment into a single shopping mall, which would benefit only a selected few.

(Dr T. Lyngdoh is a faculty of Marketing and Analytics at University of Kent, UK and a former faculty at XLRI, Jamshedpur, India. The views of the author are personal and he can be reached at teidor12@gmail.com)

Thankful to my teachers for them Online classes 2020

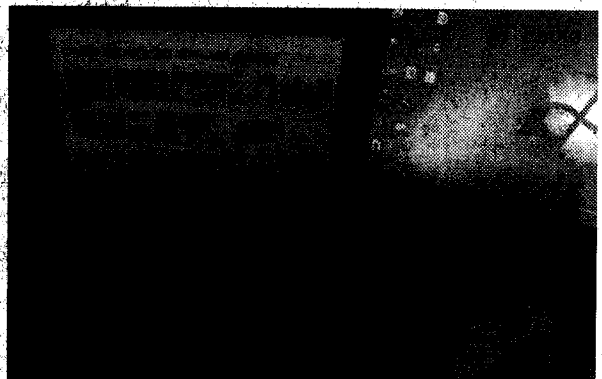
By Avneal Syiem Thounaojam

Our school was going on in full swing in March 2020 and I was in the last few weeks of class IV (Four). Everyone in the class was in a good mood as we had completed a whole lot of grades. My friends and I were enjoying the last few weeks of school and our mothers had a line of outings planned for us. My parents were ready with plans for the session break as well as the summer holidays. Little did I know what havoc Covid 19 would play in our lives. While enjoying a nice weekend we received a notice from La Martiniere that the school would be closed from Monday indefinitely. I was super happy but as the first week came to an end I began thinking more wisely and realised the lockdown meant I would not be able to meet my friends (urghhh)!! The lockdown also meant no one could travel anywhere...OH NO! I started shouting inside my head "does this mean all the plans my parents had for us to see Vietnam and also to go visit my aunt in USA would be cancelled??? YES!!!! Aaaaahhhhhrrgh.....!!!!!! Okay I cannot scream anymore.

The pandemic started to spread rapidly everywhere in

sometimes), I have been able to concentrate very well and understand what is being taught easily. In the online platform teachers can mute us so it is silent when they teachimagine how easy it would be for them if they could just press a button to stop all the screaming and shouting that happens in the actual classroom!!!! Have you ever been late for school? It is very embarrassing and irritating is it not? On ZOOM, this does not usually happen. The teacher sends the meeting ID and password 10 minutes before, we join and wait and once the teacher logs in, we ZOOOOOOM into the class! There have been times I have missed a class though, not because I did not want to join or was late and locked out but because the internet started playing the game of 'Good connection'?? Bad connection. This is one big problem with online classes. Oh! Can you imagine we get a whooping 20 minutes break after every class, this would have been really great during normal school where we had friends to play and talk with.

Online classes have been good but I do miss my friends, I miss the violin classes, the PE classes, I really miss the



the world and there was no way that school could open in all this chaos. I had a gala time at home though I really wanted to go outdoors. In April as I saw my father doing all his work from home, a thought came to my mind.....if companies like MSD, Pharmaceuticals could have online video conferences to discuss ideas, explain things etc why can't schools do the same. Online platforms would be used to send work and there would be online video conferences for school. It turned out that I was not the only one with this thought. After the session break holidays my school started classes with such video conferences.

The first platform used for these online classes was called 'Extramarks'. Extramarks was not the best for online classes, that award goes to our present platform 'ZOOOOOOOOOOOM', but I sort of liked it. On Extramarks we could not switch on our videos without permission, it must have been very boring for the teachers to teach a screen, also children might have been walking up and down while listening to the teachers!!! This is just my guess please do not take it seriously, if I did this I would have been 'NUKED' and I would have been stuck to the chair with superglue by my mother. Initially, we did not have to wear our school uniform, I felt really cool attending school in my casual wear. After the summer holidays, things changed, it was compulsory to wear school uniform. Now I wake up in the morning, get ready for school, pretend like I am picking up my school bag, say BYEEEE MUM.... open the door and enter my room!!! Bye Daddy does not come out automatically because in the normal school days I would say bye to him at the school gate.

It was a good decision by the school to break the Covid-imposed holiday and begin online classes because I was enjoying myself too much having a ball of a time while studies took a backseat far behind in my brain. Online classes are good for me (except for the eye pain and the headaches that come

time, our mothers give us to play together for a while after school. The dance class by Sir Intiaz Nehal is fun, they take away a bit of my sadness of not meeting friends, I really enjoy twirling and turning 'ziggoty', 'ziggoty', 'ziprappy' to Sir's wonderful music.

When I look back, I wonder how bored I would have been if school had not started. My daily life would have been eat, read, play, sleep..... after a while I would have run out of books to read then it would have been just eat, play, sleep. The only play I can enjoy alone is building with my Lego, I cannot imagine how long I would have been able to carry on playing continuously alone. Maybe it would have finally been EAT, SLEEP, EAT, SLEEP, EAT, SLEEP. Our online classes are very nice and there are two main groups of people who I want to thank for helping me continue my studies – the teachers for teaching us so nicely in these troubling times and my parents for providing me with the necessary gadgets, devices and other things, I need.

I know there are many children who do not even have a room of their own or a gadget to attend school online; some families do not have a TV or radio for tuning in to learning channels. I hope they will be able to somehow continue with their studies. This is also another reason why I am thankful that my classmates and I are able to attend school easily even in all this mayhem. I am sure our teachers have put in a lot of time and effort to prepare for the classes for us and some of them have had to take time out to learn the new way of teaching.

Online classes rock!!! My school rocks!!!! I wish I could shout out three cheers to my teachers HIP HIP HURRAY!! HIP HIP HURRAY!! HIP HIP HURRAY!!!

(Avneal Syiem Thounaojam is 10 years old and lives with his parents in Kolkata. Email: avneal.thounaojam@gmail.com)

Unlock Question Hour

Editor,

It is a matter of grave concern that the NDA government has postponed the Question Hour from the forthcoming monsoon session of Parliament. This decision will set a wrong trend in parliamentary democracy and also affect state legislatures. Question Hour is devoted to questions that Members of Parliament raise about any aspect of administrative activity and the lacunae therein. The concerned Minister is obliged to answer to the Parliament, either orally or in writing, depending on the type of question raised. It is not a right move to postpone the Question Hour due to COVID-19, because the government has also restarted various economic activities during Unlock 4. Hope the NDA government reconsiders this decision and allows Question Hour. It will be helpful to sustain democratic values and beliefs of common people of the country.

Yours etc.,
Amit Singh Kushwaha,
Satna (M.P.)

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

Mall at PWD complex?

Editor,
It is really bewildering that Government should moot the idea of constructing a mall at the PWD complex at Barik. I fail to understand the necessity of a mall, where Shillong is already having a number of malls. Even the existing malls are not having enough customers as there is no flow of

Of religious fundamentalism

Editor,
While thanking The Shillong Times for allowing a range of issues to be debated and that is actually the role of a newspaper, it is sad to see the intolerant stance of those calling themselves Christians and who believe that there is

no salvation outside of Christianity. They therefore look down on non-Christians as children of lesser Gods. The claim that about 76% of people in Meghalaya are Christians makes no sense because those among the 76% who are in government and administration today are not demonstrating their Christianity. There is corruption and maladministration not just in the present Government but since the time Meghalaya was born. Christianity should be demonstrable for others to follow.

What is appalling is the call for not allowing atheists or non-believers in any faith from starting educational institutions in Meghalaya. This is not what India stands for as a country. Good human behaviour, empathy and respect for the rights of others are not the attributes of Christianity alone. Other faiths also teach similar values. A follower of the Niam Khasi Niamtre knows right from wrong and understands that it is wrong to hate and to do violence to fellow humans. So those who preach the exclusivity of their religions/faiths should stop doing so. It is better to live and let live.

Yours etc.,
Elphinstone Marbanian,
Via email

Yours etc.,
Uma Purkayastha,
Shillong - 4

The life and times of Parveen babi

By Vishnu Makhijani

Parveen Babi truly lived life king-size, redefining the manner in which actresses portrayed themselves on the big screen, being cast in over 50 films with every Bollywood A-lister worth the name; appearing on the cover of TIME magazine and recovering from two mental breakdowns but in the end, dying a lonely death — sadly, just a name for the present day Hindi film industry and cine-goers alike.

"With characters like Anita from *Deewar*, Parveen changed the kind of roles our leading ladies played on screen. Anita had both sensual and economic autonomy.

Parveen was also instrumental in changing how our actresses look on screen," says her biographer, Karishma Upadhyay, of her book *Parveen — A Life* (Hachette) that should serve as a reminder for the present generation of an actress who attempted to live life on her own terms but lost out in the end.

"My biggest hope with this book is that it helps people understand that it's possible for someone to be young, successful and living a seemingly perfect life, yet suffer from mental illness. Also, that this illness doesn't always look like what Hindi films have told us. It is possible for someone to look 'perfect' and still be suffering within," Upadhyay told IANS in an interview.

"It was absolutely exhilarating to research this book. It took me three years to write this book but it was all worth it in the end because I believe I have a book that really captures her life. But it's also tinged with a streak



Parveen Babi

of sadness because one can't help but wonder, 'What if Parveen had gotten the medical help she so clearly needed?' It's sad to see that the stigma against mental illness that existed in the 70s and 80s while Parveen was in the industry continues even today," added Upadhyay, a film journalist considered an expert on Bollywood and who has led editorial teams at several prominent media houses.

Born on April 4, 1949 in the princely state of Junagarh in the present day Gujarat, where her father, Vali Mohammed Khan Babi, was

one of the Nawab's administrators, Parveen's life as presented by Upadhyay, comes across in four major phases.

The first was in Ahmedabad, where she was sent for her undergraduate studies and where she was in total control to the extent that the calling off her engagement — that her mother had insisted on to maintain "respectability" — didn't matter a whit.

The second was the shift to Bombay (now Mumbai), initially as a fashion designer and a model, her entry into the Hindi film industry and,

most importantly, her three involvements beginning with the rather platonic one with the up-and-coming Danny Denzongpa. She then goes on to disrupt two marriages — that of Kabir Bedi and Mahesh Bhatt — and almost wrecks Danny's relationship with rising starlet Kim Yashpal.

The relationship with Bedi ended after she travelled with him to Italy in the wake of his success with the TV serial *Sandokan* and realised that he was the bigger star of the two and was receiving the kind of adulation that she had never received in Bombay.

With Bhatt, it seemed more a clash of personalities and the first breakdown happened when neither of these two relationships worked out.

The second breakdown apparently happened after *Arth* — the jury is divided on this — Bhatt's semi-autobiographical film that laid bare her relationship with the filmmaker.

The third phase centred around Amitabh Bachchan — but was it a case of unrequited love as this was one marriage she couldn't disrupt? Why was she so paranoid about Bachchan?

Upadhyay explains it thus in the book: "When she began working with Amitabh Bachchan as a co-star, what had started off as a desire and then an obsession to match his 'perfection' as an actor had, at some point, evolved into something far beyond that. The few who knew Parveen well at this juncture of her life believe that the nature of her obsession began changing only when she assumed her co-actor was reciprocating her feelings and she wasn't merely imagining his overtures.

There was another thought playing at the back of her mind: being seen as 'Amitabh's woman' would, she felt, empower her in the eyes of the industry; in addition to helping her in her pursuit of perfection as an actor. The bonus, of course,

would be to bask in his love and occupy the centre of his world."

But that wasn't to happen.

The final phase of Parveen's life, was her twilight years where she accused everyone from Bachchan, to Bill Clinton, to the KGB et al of trying to kill her — and even accused Sanjay Dutt in the 1993 Mumbai blasts but refused to appear in court to substantiate the charges.

Did the dichotomy between Parveen's public and private life, as Upadhyay writes in the book, persist throughout her life and was she unable to cope up with this pressure?

"When a person is going through a breakdown, it's possible for them to believe that everyone is out to get them. This is how it was with Parveen as well. She believed that there were people conspiring to kill her," Upadhyay said.

Be that as it may, the circumstances of Parveen's death — the date's been recorded as January 20, 2005 — were tragic.

She had been found dead two days earlier after the secretary of her residential society alerted the police that she had not collected milk and newspapers from her doorstep for three days. The police suspected that she may have been dead for up to 72 hours before her body was found. An autopsy concluded that she had not consumed anything for more than three days and starved to death, ruling that she succumbed to total organ failure and the diabetes she had contracted in her later life.

"It was a quiet end to a stormy life. The one constant was her loneliness. It defined her childhood, her desperate need for companionship in her prime and her last days in virtual isolation. Parveen was alone — in life and in death," is how Upadhyay concludes the book.

(The author can be reached at vishnu.makhijani@ians.in)

SKY THIS MONTH

By Prashant Naik

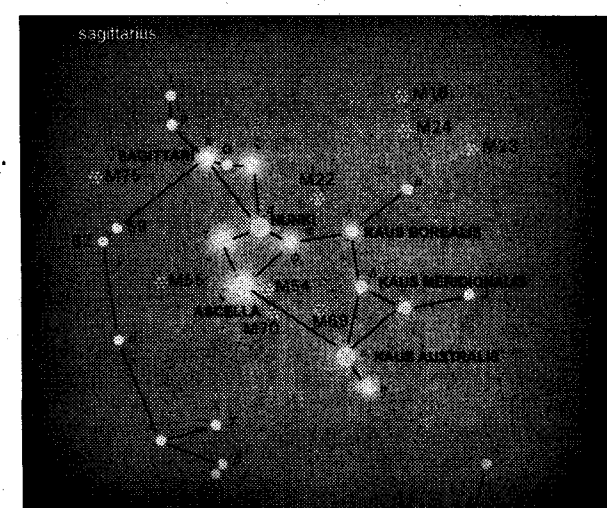
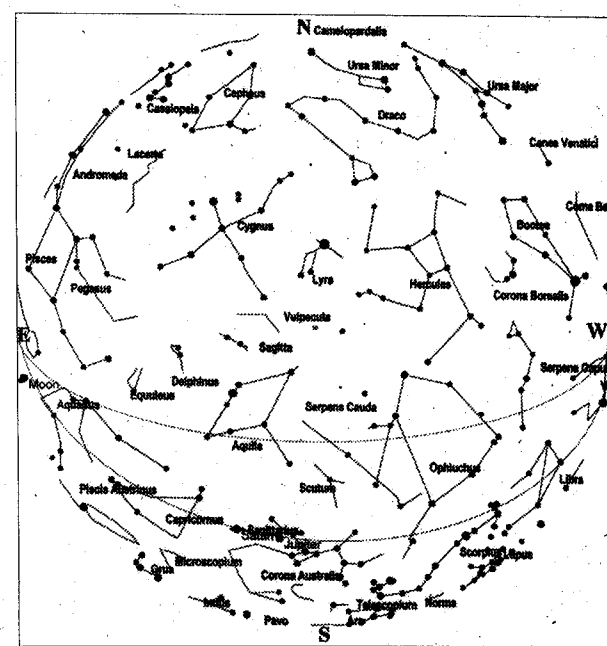
The adjacent chart shows the night sky over Shillong during the month of September 2020 at 8 pm. Shillong being at 25.5° N Latitude we see mostly northern constellations. The E-W line shows the celestial equator and the line cutting it shows the zodiac line or the sun's apparent path. The letters indicate the name of constellations. Planet Saturn and Jupiter are visible near overhead.

The prominent constellations visible are Aquila, Cygnus, Lyra (the famous summer triangle), Pegasus, Boötes, Hercules, Draco, Cassiopeia, Cepheus, Ursa Major, Ursa Minor, Libra, Aquarius, Sagittarius, Scorpius and Ophiuchus.

The constellation of the month is Sagittarius. The Babylonians, identified Sagittarius as the god Pabilsag (which had wings and a lion's head). In Greek mythology, Sagittarius is identified as a centaur, half human, half horse. In some legends, the Centaur Chiron was the son of Phillyra and Saturn, who was said to have changed himself into a horse to escape his jealous wife, Rhea. Chiron was eventually immortalised in the constellation of Centaurus, or in some version, Sagittarius. The arrow of this constellation points towards the star Antares, the 'heart of the scorpion'.

Of the 88 constellations, Sagittarius probably contains the most abundant and wide-ranging collection of objects. Within its area lie stars, the galactic nucleus, gaseous nebulae, open and galactic clusters — the list is virtually all embracing. It straddles the ecliptic and thus forms one of the zodiacal constellations.

The stars in Sagittarius receive Greek designations totally out of order with their



measured apparent magnitude. The brightest star is α Kaus Australis, a mag 1.81, B9 type at 124 light years. Next is δ , Nunki, mag 2.12, a B2 star at 300 light years, followed by ϵ Ascella, a mag 2.61 of A2 spectrum, which is actually a double with mags 3.3 and 3.5, Kaus Meridionalis, is less bright again of mag 2.71 with K2 spectrum and an absolute mag of 0.7, at a distance of 85 light years.

Stars θ , Kaus Borealis is another K2, mag 2.8 at 71 light years distance, followed by α , Al Nasl, of mag 2.97, a K0 type at 124 light years. Star ζ is actually a

double with component mags of 3.17 and 10. A triple system, seen as star δ Sagittarii, has mags of 3.7, 3.8 and 6.0. Elsewhere, the constellation displays the Trifid Nebula, M20, a faint and complex gas cloud, the Lagoon Nebula, M8, and the Horse-shoe Nebula, M17. Globular clusters M22, M28, M69, M70, M54, M55 and M75 are to be found as well as open clusters M18, M24, M25, M23 and M21.

New moon will be on 2nd September and full moon on 17th. The autumn equinox that is when the day and night are equal will be on 22nd of the month.

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, September 6, 2020

Moon square Saturn on your solar return chart and it will bring mixed results for you for the whole year. You will have to adjust yourselves according to the demands of the situation. There will be many opportunities to grow in your business/job. But you will have to take all decisions with a wise head. All that glitters is not always gold. It will be appropriate to take counsel of your friends/well-wishers. You need to invest your money wisely. Keep your eyes and ears open. Your financial condition will remain tight and you will have to work hard to earn money. Keep good equation with your bosses. Desist from entering into extra-marital relations else it may prove. Counterproductive. Don't escalate war of words with your family members. It will be appropriate to adopt a flexible attitude in family ties.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

Your career, reputation, and public life are influenced by the planetary combination. Increased public recognition and professional success characterizes this period. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. Reliability and creativity will take you places now. The more willing you are to put yourself in the limelight, the more positive the rewards. You are outgoing and your initiative is stronger than ever. Business associates bring good news and lucrative terms and opportunities.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

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

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

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

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

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

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

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

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

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

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

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

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

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

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

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

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

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

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

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

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

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

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

Sign language deserves recognition

By Souvik Ghosh

Deaf and mute entrepreneur and Engineer Vaibhav Kothari was present at a webinar - Winning Challenges - hosted by Kolkata-based social and cultural activist Sundeep Bhutoria earlier in August.

In the course of his interaction with Bhutoria, Vaibhav spoke about his journey in life, why India should have sign language as a scheduled language, and more. Souvik Ghosh brings excerpts:

What is life to you as of today?

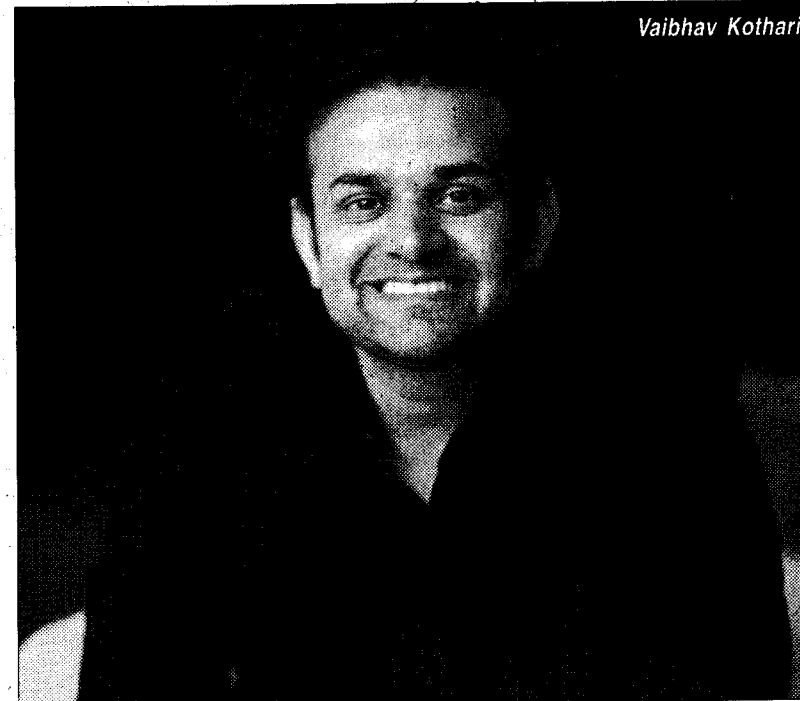
I had started in Kota. I was very fortunate that we moved to Delhi at the age of three. I met a teacher at that age who taught me speech therapy and exposed me to sign language early in life. I had access to education from the age of three. I completed my 12th standard and after that, I was exposed to many different things. My elder brother, who is also deaf, broke ground for me by going to school in the US. When he came back from India, he taught me finger-spelling. My whole family had learnt the finger-spelling in American sign language.

I had attended a New York school which had incredible support systems including interpreters, note-takers, for the university education. From there, I was open to the world of possibilities. Previous to that, I didn't realise that I had missed out on social life which people take for granted. During the four years of my university life, I came in touch with deaf folks and started to develop an identity and discovered my true self, accepting my deafness and being introduced to sign language.

When was the first time you had realised that you are different from others?

I feel like I grew up naturally. I always knew that I was different. I saw my brother, siblings and cousins were different. So I recognised the difference early by seeing people talking at the dinner table or meetings or laughing. By realising the fact that I was not laughing while others were laughing, I had recognised that I was different from others.

Have you ever realised the differ-



Vaibhav Kothari

ence between sympathy and concern of people towards you?

Oh, of course! I certainly recognised the difference in many people. I met many people who were very sympathetic. When I say I am a deaf at the airport, they offer me a wheelchair! Then there are people who are concerned and worried about my safety and make me sure of what's going on in the environment. I can do everything except hearing.

Do you realise a difference between India and other parts of the world in people's response towards deaf people?

The sympathy factor is the same worldwide. But in other countries which are more developed, there is an additional support system and concerns as you put it and it helps people to grow and develop their confidence quickly. There are laws in those countries for people to develop and thrive. Here in India, there is a deaf community which continues to fight for their rights and lives. However, India does not have the same resources which the developed countries have for their deaf community.

Do you think India should make sign language one of the 22 sched-

uled languages?

Just as India promotes and preserves our ancient Sanskrit language, which is one of the 22 scheduled languages under the Indian Constitution, there is a need to incorporate the newly-evolved Indian Sign Language (ISL) into the list of scheduled languages. This would immensely empower millions of Indians suffering from hearing impairment to achieve higher education and catch up on missed opportunities.

As we are going through a pandemic, we have certain restrictions in our lives. How do you see these restrictions in life?

I just look at restrictions as opportunities being limited. So with the things happening in Covid, people have developed more patience. I have noticed people, who have been restricted as a result of Covid, are allowing them to really understand what restrictions are. It allows them to start getting concerned about their health and people around them. So that kind of restrictions are very different from the one deaf people do experience. Restrictions for deaf people is a limitation in all participations and exclusion. But I have noticed that people have accepted the restrictions. (IBNS-TWF)

"I believe in this concept that you learn by teaching."

-- Stephen Covey

The Shillong Times

Vol No. LXIII No. 24 SHILLONG, MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2020

Row over privatisation

THE central government is on a privatisation spree. Several airports are going into private hands, generally in the private-public-partnership (PPP) mode, and some of the nationalised banks too might soon end up in private hands. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's criticism that the Modi government is selling off precious state-owned enterprises is true, but the obvious reason is also that government is unable to run these companies or business units or banks as they should be run.

Almost every public sector undertaking is turning into a white elephant, draining the national resources and failing to register profits. They unfailingly report losses year after year. Even granted that entities like the Railways have a social obligation to meet, the real story is that "business is not the government's business." A mix of bureaucrats trained only to administer and politicians deeply into corruption is proving to be the undoing of the public sector. Together, they kill enterprise.

There are arguments for and against socialist systems, and of state running businesses. The experience of Communist governments in running the nations and businesses in the erstwhile USSR has been a sad tale. China borrowed ideas from capitalism, like its adoption of a market economy, and this proved to be a great success. Most socialist and communist countries that laid emphasis on keeping the private sector at bay ended up as big losers. Indira Gandhi nationalized major private banks in the country in the 1970s, and projected this as a progressive step. Nationalised banks, it was promised, would serve the people's interests more by way of advancing loans on easier terms. The idea turned on its head in a matter of a few decades. The UPA period saw massive loot. The Modi era failed to stem the rot. Business sharks used their influence with bank managers and politicians in power to take huge loans without sufficient security cover and scooted from the scene. The scenario is worsening.

The airport sector is now up for grabs. When even tiny nations in the neighbourhood like Singapore and Malaysia came up with smart and glitzy airports in the 1990s, India still failed to wake up. Indian airports began seeing improvements only after the turn of the century; and there were reports of huge swindling of funds in the building of new airports; the CAG made a specific mention of Delhi airport. The PPP model, with a mix of private and public funds, is seen as the way forward. There will be more of accountability; and less of loot. As of now public or government property is now up for open loot.

Online classes and the future of education

By H H Mohrmen

Naturally the mother is very worried about his safety too. She further told the headmaster, that when she asked her son what he is doing on the treetop every day, he told her that he is studying.

The online class is not to teach the kids to climb a tree (of course teaching a kid to climb a tree is not a bad idea especially if one lives in a village) but the truth is the area where the family lives is in the India-Bangladesh border where even getting a phone signal to talk to the other parts of the country is still a problem. If fact, some years ago the people in the area had to rely on Bangladesh mobile phone providers or use that country's SIM card to even call the office of the Deputy Commissioner. Therefore students have to go the extra-mile to access their online classes including climbing to the top of a tree for better

online classes, he prefers to follow his maternal uncle and help him in the plantation.

A family friend from Puriang village, when asked how the family is keeping during the pandemic, had standard answer - that her children are busy with the online classes that their schools and colleges are providing. The problem with this family is that they have five school and college going kids and the problem is they can only afford one smart phone for all of five. She said that the children have to share amongst themselves the same smart phone that she had. The families in the stories are at least not doing badly if we compare them with others in the community. Think of the poor parents who can barely provide two meals a day for the family. How can they afford the extra expenditure when they also have to pay

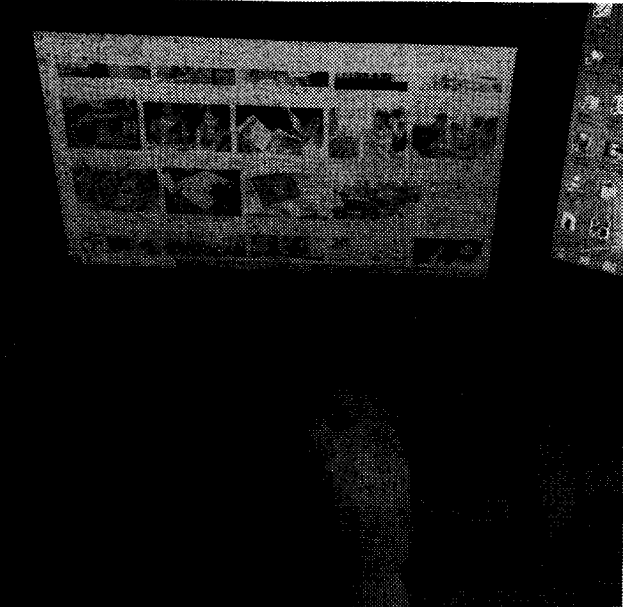
syllabus in a matter of weeks and make them interactive, then such schools have indeed achieved a great feat. The cherry on the top is that the respective schools have been able to do that without the support of the government.

The pertinent question is whether online classes can be effective without creating or converting the entire syllabus into an audio or visual format? Even online courses offered by Ivy League institutions that are available free on the internet as open courseware are a combination of video and document format. It has taken the different institutes months if not years to create these contents before they were provided online free for everybody to access. The online classes are perhaps being taught through WhatsApp platform only. The common method used by different schools and teachers to share worksheets and lessons with their students is by using the group WhatsApp. The classes are in fact WhatsApp classes and not much teaching is happening. Of course there are tech-savvy teachers who use conference calls or even online meeting platforms like zoom, skype and other apps to reach out to the students but the other question is also how many students attend the classes.

The other pertinent question is why online classes have to be syllabus-centred? Why can't teachers think out of the box and instead guide students to learn from what is happening around them? Learning about COVID-19 and its impact on their lives or how their respective communities responded to the pandemic would be an interesting case study wouldn't it? The objective of the online classes is to get the students engaged in learning. And learning does not have to be from the textbook only.

The lesson to learn from the pandemic is that the future of education is both classroom learning and online classes. The Education department will have to create video content of the syllabus and put it online for students to access from anywhere. Or perhaps multi-talented teachers can create these contents and share them online for students to learn at leisure. In this entire process the internet is becoming a great leveller.

(E m a i l : hhmohrmen67@gmail.com)



connectivity.

In Khonglah village a mother told me that the smart phone that she has is shared by her two daughters for their online classes. One can very well imagine the struggle the students have to face to share the same gadget to access their classes. The story of the son who is a high school student is much more interesting. He had the desire to learn swimming for many years but because he studies in Shillong, he did not have the opportunity to do so while his contemporaries in the village swam like fishes. Lucky for him the Lockdown has finally granted him the opportunity and he too can swim now. The young man is also more interested in farming, so instead of attending to the

the school fees of their children?

What is even more surprising is that even a 7 year old boy who studies in class I had to attend online class. What kind of online class are the schools provide to 5 to 10 year old kids? The question is also how the schools organise the so called online class? One would think that a normal online class would comprise of visual and audio format of the syllabus prescribed by the Meghalaya Board of School Education. If that is the case then the other pertinent question is how can schools create the video content of the entire MBOSE syllabus in a matter of a few weeks only? And if the schools were really able to come up with video content of the entire school

Panchayati Raj & COVID-19 Relevance must be enhanced

By Moin Qazi

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a massive toll on the economy: broken supply chains, record unemployment, failing small businesses. In much the same way it is affecting people with pre-existing health conditions more strongly. So is the pandemic-triggered economic crisis exposing vulnerable communities to greater distress? COVID-19 has magnified the existing inequality, and an effective response will require solidarity and partnership. The crisis is a stress-test of our ability to cooperate, learn and adapt in the face of deep uncertainties and rising risks.

The experience of development practitioners in handling such crisis informs them that community-driven development (CDD) programmes, which encourage people to design their own solutions, can be a critical part of the response to the COVID-19 crisis. We need an equitable, whole-of-society approach to tackle a crisis of this magnitude and scale. CDD programmes are usually driven by such approaches.

During a crisis of the Covid type, local governments are normally flooded with demands that cannot be met with their limited resources. In this context, CDD programmes can play a critical role in providing consensus-driven support to prioritise and optimise the resources.

We also need multiple interventions across sectors to address the different dimensions of the crisis. CDD programmes often complement traditional safety net systems by delivering cash and in-kind transfers as well as basic services such as water and sanitation. They do so through participation from communities, people's representatives, and local governments. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had also emphasised that the pandemic has taught us that we need to be self-sufficient. It has taught us that we should not look for solutions outside the country. This is the biggest lesson we have learnt. "Every village has to be self-sufficient enough to provide for its basic needs. Similarly, every district has to be self-sufficient at its level, every State has to be self-reliant at its level and the whole country has to be self-reliant at its level," PM Modi said while interacting with heads of gram panchayats (village councils) through video conferencing on the National Panchayati Raj Day on April 24. India has a huge social capital of empowered women belonging to self-help groups, many of whom form the backbone of the grassroots leadership of Panchayat Raj Institutions. These women are already in the forefront of relief work and are producing face masks and other protective gear for both the people and corona warriors. With a huge reverse migration of populations to villages, these women leaders can play a vital role in transitioning these communities through this extraordinary challenge.

In 1993, India introduced the Panchayati Raj (Village Government) Act, mandating a three-tiered structure of local governance at the village, block and district levels with reservation of one-third of all posts in gram panchayats - village councils at the bottom tier of India's decentralised governance system - for women. The vision was that these female-headed councils would bring greater transparency and better governance in their villages. It revitalised an age-old system of rural local government whose name "panchayat" is drawn from the Sanskrit for "council of five wise men". The introduction of the Panchayati Raj, and the strong space for women which it provides, has dramatically increased the political representation of women at the local government level and spurred one of the greatest successes globally for

women's empowerment and grass-roots democracy. The hope was that such a quota system, beyond its immediate impact on gender balance among leaders, will have long-term effects on women's status in society by changing perceptions of their leadership capabilities and shaping beliefs about what they can achieve.

Through years of exposure and several new official policies later, most elected women now don't seem to be tokens. Women, especially those from the "untouchable" community, are slowly able to use the affirmative action quotas to attain power that would once have been unthinkable. They tend to be better educated and more knowledgeable than the average woman in their districts. When these seats are coupled with new skills from public speaking to budget management, they are better prepared to negotiate within the political space that has opened for them.

The experience in the electoral office has also created a pipeline of diverse people who have gained representational experience and are able to better represent the needs of people. These women have slowly learned to climb the greasy pole of politics and are actively exploring all the options available to them as citizens of a democracy. Some of the ways in which women are changing governance are evident in the issues they choose to tackle: water, alcohol abuse, education, health and domestic violence.

At the functional level, politics aims at maintaining law and order in society, resolving conflicts, achieving justice, and providing good living conditions for all. Against this background, is there a nobler activity and profession than politics? However, we all know how murky politics has become over time. But these women are using this opportunity to make politics benign.

While several voluntary organisations and government agencies have been playing a critical role in building capacities of women to improve rural governance, there is scope for incorporating best practices gleaned through insights from some of the more successful villages. In these villages, organisations have been able to build women's perspectives in the context of development and decentralised planning, enabling women to get a sense of enhanced agency so that they can claim influential space in the political, economic, and cultural systems.

Women have become problem solvers and change-makers who are mentoring and successfully transferring learning, strategies, and replication of innovation to other contexts and across high-impact sectors. They are able to influence and change government policy from "inside the system", creating a micro-macro balance. This has made leaders and institutions accountable, thereby promoting equity and inclusion, and making the government sensitive and transparent.

In some of the progressive and so-called "smart" villages, women groups have been equipped with technological skills, training that has enabled them to design, build, operate, and maintain water and sanitation systems. Once they gain experience, women handle service contracts for building storage tanks, toilets, storm-water drains, and drainage lines. Thus several new livelihood avenues are becoming available to local women. Rural women are the human face of poverty and development. They toil on their farms but lack access to land titles and are, therefore, not recognised as farmers. This, in turn, denies them access to finance, state entitlements, training technology, and markets. This needs to change.---INFA

TO THE EDITOR

Why this arrogance?

Editor,
I chanced to watch one of the media channels where Deputy Chief Minister of Meghalaya, Mr Prestone Tynsong asserted vehemently that the proposed mall should come up at Barik Point and that anyone who wants a green space should look for it beyond Shillong. If not the entire cabinet of the MDA, it seems that Tynsong at least is hell bent on seeing this monstrous structure come up at Barik. As a mature politician, Tynsong should know that the Government functions on the will of the people because this is a democracy and in a democracy the people are the real custodians of power. The views of all the MLAs of Shillong must be taken into consideration. Moreover, a public debate on an issue such as what should come up at the Barik heritage site is imperative at this juncture. Mr Tynsong may be the Deputy CM but he does not represent the views of the people of Shillong. He can construct a mall in Pynursla if he wants to but not in Shillong at any cost!

Yours etc.,
AR Dkhar,
Via email

Transform Shillong- A city in a garden

Editor,
More than half of the world's population lives in the urban areas. By 2050 two-thirds of humanity is expected to reside in urban areas, and Shillong city, already so densely populated is no exception to this trend. Shillong is all about "un": unplanned, unhealthy and unsustainable. Already, one-third of the City has been converted into a concrete jungle, which destroys the human spirit. We are in the 21st century with innovative advancement. Can we afford to inherit the poor planning and management of our city? It is never too late to plan and transform Shillong into "a city in a garden" to restore it to its former glory. Hence, part of the agenda of the Government is to have a vision to green our city and initiate the 'Shillong Green Movement'. Instead of developing a frenzied commercial centre at the PWD premises at Barik, the urban planners in the State Government should come up with the concept of Green Shillong in this particular premise.

Yours etc.,
Dr Omarlin Kyndiah,
Via email

Thoughts on new tourism policy

Editor,
Meghalaya's new tourism policy, now under preparation, appears to be a utopian dream and a killjoy for the small time entrepreneurs in the outlying areas. Firstly, the policy, as has been reported in The Shillong Times last week, has very little short-term content for addressing the stagnation of the tourism-oriented economy which is currently at its nadir. Consequently, those who eke out a living out of tourism find themselves in a state of penury. If the tourists do not return soon, over 50,000 families will have to find alternative sources of livelihood. They cannot endure it any more. Their frustration and helplessness must be addressed by the government by some effective short-term measures. Before long, the government must come out with something positive for them to survive.

The experience of opening three destinations to local tourists may be a first cautious step, but why should local residents move in hordes to see places which they know like the back of their hand? The first few days at Wards Lake and Elephant falls have not been

able to attract too many people. The trend is unlikely to change a lot in the coming weeks. Let us face it, during pandemic nobody will be willing to risk it. Therefore, the government's top priority should be to keep all stakeholders interested in the industry. In this regard, I would like to suggest that government should urgently provide some financial succour to the worst effected lot.

Viewed in this context, the thinking of the government to target upend tourists is flawed. Nobody is going to travel unless the pandemic is contained to everybody's satisfaction. I am not sure how many, or more importantly, when the niche tourists will arrive. Given the prevailing situation, international flights are suspended. Domestic movement too is sluggish. Only those who have to travel are travelling. The critical point is: Nobody is interested in tourism when people feel vulnerable and lives are at stake. Therefore, all the big talks about resurrection of tourism will look good only on paper.

Another hard fact about tourism which the policy makers have missed is that this industry thrives mainly on the budget tourists. The middle class constitutes the bulk of the tourists, at least in India. If they are not in the scheme of things, there is very little chance of tourism

returning to its glorious best as was witnessed before the pandemic stopped it all. COVID-19 is not going to disappear in a hurry. It may take a couple of years, at least, before a semblance of normalcy returns. Do our stakeholders have the wherewithal to withstand the stagnation in the economy?

Jargons like "carrying capacity", "circuit tourism" etc are all fine. But that cannot give muscle to the industry. The upend tourists are choosy about what they buy or where they take meals. The infrastructure in the rural areas is still rustic and rudimentary. I shudder to think what might happen to the chains of small road side vendors, tea stalls and dhabas which sprang up during the past decade or so. The policy doesn't appear to have taken a realistic view. I somehow get the impression that the government has decided to keep the budget tourists out of their radar. May I know, why? Even if there is a plausible ground, perhaps, more important question will be, how? Is there any mechanism to check the economic status of a tourist? For argument's sake, even if the government introduces e-permits, why should they choose Meghalaya when they can visit so many other places without any restrictions?

I would be happy, if the government can factually

and convincingly allay my fears.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Lifeline on wheels

Editor,
The national transporter Indian Railways is now going to restart 80 more trains from September 12. The Railways had launched 15 pairs of special air-conditioned trains from May 12 and 100 pairs of timetable special trains from June 1 previously. The train service is convenient for scholars who need to attend various examinations and above all for migrant workers, employees, and other economic activities. The Railways must ensure to follow all precautionary measures which are related to COVID-19 and facilitate a pleasant journey to the passengers. We expect that the country's lifeline will be restored on wheels with full capacity in a little while

Yours etc.,
Amit Singh Kushwaha,
Satna (M.P.)

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

"Sometimes life hits you in the head with a brick. Don't lose faith."

— Steve Jobs

The Shillong Times

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Living with Covid-19

GOVERNMENTS both at the state and centre have used a slew of measures to contain the spread of coronavirus. It included a complete lockdown of 21 days beginning March 24 this year and a gradual unlocking process which has now reached the fourth stage. Despite the efforts at containment and a huge awareness campaign seeking behavioural change which includes wearing masks, hand hygiene and social distancing, India is now second only to the US in terms of active Covid 19 cases. The reality is that social distancing poses to be the most challenging step, now that public transports have started operating and distancing in a taxi or bus is near impossible. Covid19 is seen to affect some people severely while others are asymptomatic spreaders. Medical specialists have said that some people have an innate ability to clear the virus because of their strong immune system and also because they have developed defences against the coronavirus after having earlier had milder forms of attacks such as from those causing influenza. Much also depends on the viral load. Exposure to small doses of the virus provides immunity and a head start to the body to fight the virus.

Even if a vaccine were to be available early next year as stated by different agencies involved in anti-Covid vaccine production, it will be a monumental task for a country of 1.3 billion people to be effectively vaccinated. As is observed in this country the VIPs and their families will have first right to the vaccine and those without clout will have to bide their time. Meanwhile, people have realised that they have to live as normal a life as is possible. For some though life has changed drastically WFH (Work From Home) is the new normal. A recent survey of IT professionals found that at least 74% preferred to work from home. But the large majority of Indians work in the manufacturing and other sectors; they have no option but to turn up for work now or lose their jobs.

A bigger challenge now is education and what it will mean for the large number of students at various levels who have been fed on a diet of online classes. It's difficult to assess how many actually comprehend their lessons. There is a huge debate on whether examinations should or should not be conducted for undergraduate and university students. Those who braved the JEE and NEET exams did so because it was a do or die situation for them and their parents. It takes time to get back to normal from what has been an abnormal life for the past six months. Yet it is important to get back to what is commonly called the 'new normal' and to end unnecessary restrictions especially those related to inter-state travels. Life must go on. There is no knowing when the Covid19 virus will leave this land. It cannot handicap our lives endlessly.

Can Meghalaya feed itself?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh and
Chenxiang Rimchi N Marak

Supply chains have been restored and the possibility of an extended lockdown is very minimal. The threat of a covid-19 type pandemic (considering the continued intrusion into non-human ecosystem) however still looms large. During the early phases of COVID-19 lockdown, North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society (NESFAS) came across stories of food insecurity being experienced by the communities. This seems to confirm the common perception that Meghalaya is not self-sufficient in terms of food production. The question that arises here is – Is it really true? And if so, how much is the shortfall?

In 2107 - 2018 Meghalaya's total annual agricultural production (based on data provided by the Directorate of Agriculture, Government of Meghalaya) was 13,17,057 metric tonnes. The crops enumerated for arriving at this figure can be divided into starchy staples (rice, wheat, maize, millet, potato, sweet potato, tapioca), fruits (citrus - khasi mandarin, assam lemon, pomelo, others and other than citrus - pineapple, banana, papaya, strawberry, temperate fruits, misc fruits, jackfruits, sohiong) nuts and oil seeds (castor, sesamum, soyabean, linseed, sunflower, groundnut, rape and mustard), condiments (ginger, turmeric, chillies, garlic, black pepper, tez pata, coriander, onion), pulses (pea, cowpea, lentil, tur, gram), green leafy vegetables (cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, lettuce, mustard leaves), other vegetables (beet root, radish, tomato, cucumber, capsicum, brinjal, ladies finger, turnip, bottle gourd, khol-khol, teasle gourd, ridge gourd) and Vitamin-A vegetables (carrot and pumpkin excluding papaya). This division is very useful as it enables the identification of food plants that are predominantly rich in either macro nutrients (starchy staples) or micro nutrients (fruits and vegetables). A balanced diet includes both.

When the calorie availability from the various crops is combined and compared against the population of Meghalaya, annual calorie availability was found to be 1684.96 Kcal per person per day. This is lower than the minimum daily calorie requirement of 1800 Kcal (less by 115 Kcal) as specified by the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization). This is again much lower than the requirements for the Indian context

as given by National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad (NIN): the calorie requirement based on activity (ranging from sedentary to heavy work) for males vary from 2320 Kcal to 3490 Kcal while for females, it vary from 1900 Kcal to 2850 Kcal with extra calories required for pregnant and lactating mothers. The gap between calorie availability from local production and the minimum daily requirement therefore ranges from a maximum of 1805 Kcal to a minimum of 215 Kcal. But after taking into account local production of meat, egg and fish (data derived from Government of Meghalaya, Report on Integrated Sample Survey for Estimation of Production Milk, Egg and Meat, 2011-12), the total calorie availability goes up to 1739.48 Kcal and the gap reduces to 1750 Kcal and 60.52 Kcal. However, before we declare that self-sufficiency is not possible through local production, there are certain factors which have to be considered.

There is a hidden diversity within species – different varieties of the same crop contain different level of nutrients and calorific value. The paper, 'Food compositional analysis of Indigenous foods consumed by the Khasi of Meghalaya, North-east India' by Daniella Anne L. Chyne, R. Ananthan, and T. Longvah (2019) undertook a food composition analysis of six rice varieties from West Khasi Hills and found calorific value to vary from 340 Kcal to 356 Kcal per 100 grams. The participatory mapping conducted by NESFAS as part of its REC (Rural Electrification Corporation) supported project "No one shall be left behind initiative: Biodiversity for Food, Energy and Nutrition Security for 3000 households in Meghalaya and Nagaland, North East India" in Ri-Bhoi found that the number of rice varieties grown by the community varied from 20 to 41 varieties. Similarly the number of potato varieties (an important starchy staple) in the community ranged from 5 to 15 varieties in the selected villages of East Khasi Hills. Intraspecific diversity was a recurring feature observed in other crops as well. Most certainly there will be differences in calorific value as well. Can

these intra-species differences in the calorific value make up the gap? Though unlikely (differences will not be substantial) they will certainly help in getting closer to the recommended levels (at least the FAO levels).

The other important aspect which has to be considered is the omission of particular crops and farming systems from the production data. A very important starchy staple missing from production data is taro/calocasia (shriew) which has a calorific value of 89 Kcal per 100 grams (Indian Food Composition Table 2017) and can be eaten as a starchy staple, green leafy vegetable and other (non-green leafy and non Vitamin A rich) vegetable. This feature is not unique to taro with other food plants like pumpkin, squash, papaya, mustard etc., belonging to more than one food group. As for taro, the intra-species diversity in East Khasi Hills ranged from 3 to 10 varieties. In the Khatarshong area it was a very important staple crop in the past. Taro, however, is missing from the official production data.

Similarly an average of 202 food plants was recorded during the study but not all of those find mention in the official data. The most conspicuous of the exclusions are the wild edibles and wild fruits whose numbers from Laitsohpliah (a village on the way to Sohra) was found to be 33 and 39 species respectively along with the 23 species of mushrooms reported by the community. There is no production/harvesting data on these food plants. The same can be said of insects, amphibians, rodents and other mammals collected from the wild. While it cannot be stated with certainty as to whether the calorific value of the omissions will remove the gap, in the absence of a comprehensive analysis it cannot be stated otherwise as well.

Finally there is the missing farming system, homestead gardens (kper) which are located in proximity to the residence containing a wide biological diversity of plants and animal species. The participatory mapping exercise found that it was the most important farming system practised by more than 90% of the surveyed households in Meghalaya and Nagaland. Its importance to household food

security is immense. What happens if production from the individual homestead gardens is also taken into consideration? The contribution to the total calorie availability could be substantial. Without actual production data, however there is nothing that can be said with certainty. But the possibility that the recommended calorie requirement can be met from local production does become a strong possibility.

A recent paper 'Nutritional Intake and Consumption Pattern in the States of Himachal Pradesh and Meghalaya' by Daniella Anne L. Chyne, R. Ananthan, T. Longvah (2017) reported, based on National Sample Survey Organisation data, that per capita intake of calorie in Meghalaya is 1703 Kcal, below the recommended level and what is available from local production. Here it is important to understand that this figure is inclusive of food that must have come from own production and bought from the market (which includes food brought from outside the State). Apart from the issue of access, a weak storage infrastructure (leading to losses), low utilization of local agrobiodiversity, dependence on market (production of food crops for market to earn money to buy food again from the market), lack of nutritional knowledge and diversified diet among others could be important factors which explains this paradox of hunger amidst plenty.

Food self-sufficiency is a possibility provided there is a change of narrative backed by policy initiatives based on utilization and promotion of local agrobiodiversity. Even if the gap persists it may not be an insurmountable one as previously imagined. Such a movement towards localisation of food system crucially will also put more control in the hands of the local community improving their wellbeing and strengthen their resilience to threats like COVID-19 in the future.

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In attack on Rhea, a new low for India

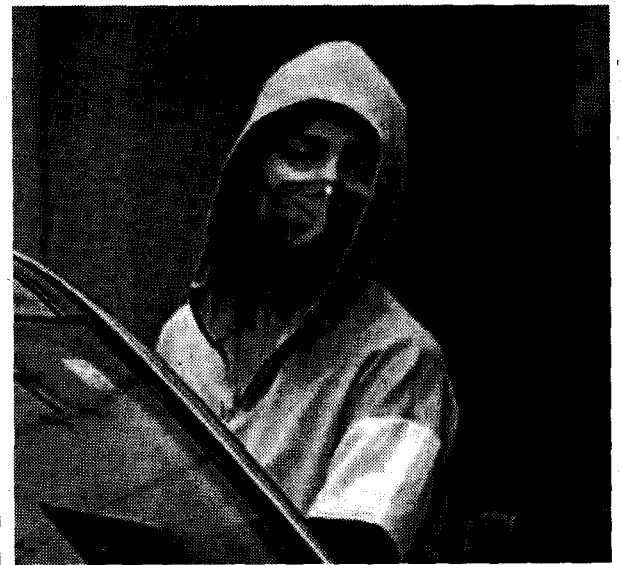
By Jagdish Rattanani

The statement by the father of Rhea Chakraborty reflects the pain and the discomfort many might feel at the manner in which the suicide of Sushant Singh Rajput is being handled by the investigating agencies. Lt. Col (Retd) Chakraborty writes, addressing the whole of India, "Congratulations India, you have arrested my son, I'm sure next on the line is my daughter and I don't know who is next thereafter. You have effectively demolished a middleclass family. But of course, for the sake of justice everything is justified. Jai hind."

While there is no doubt that the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) must be given a free hand to probe all possible leads, there is equally little doubt that the atmosphere has been so vitiated by a sharp, focused and carefully constructed campaign that has condemned, targeted and vilified Rhea mercilessly for reasons that have nothing to do with the investigation. The attack is ostensibly on

stomach the insult of having to lose to the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. It played all kinds of tricks, including an attempted early morning swearing-in almost in secret, to keep the position of Chief Minister. It failed. Since then, we have seen assault after concerted assault – first in the name of saffron-clad sadhus who were killed in an apolitical case of murder, then in the alleged negligence of the government in battling the Sars-Cov-2 pandemic and now in the case of Rhea Chakraborty with attempts to muddy the name of State minister Aadiya Thackeray.

There is the other political link-up to the upcoming Bihar elections, and the fancy that Sushant Singh Rajput being a native of Bihar will lead to its own mileage for the BJP. It is surprising that a FIR was registered in Bihar in a case that is entirely and fully within the jurisdiction of Maharashtra. Then consider the statement of the Bihar Director General of Police Gupteshwar Pandey that Sushant Singh



Rhea Chakraborty but it is actually turning out to be an attack on institutions, civility and the very idea of living in a decent society. The entire air has been poisoned such that there is almost a pre-judged line that is being followed with political motivations that are not far to seek. Consider the manner in which the Mumbai police has been targeted, leading to some of the most ludicrous statements about the functioning of the police force in this city, so much so that several former police officers have been forced to come out and take a stand.

It is not that the Mumbai police is perfect. It is also not that investigations cannot be botched. But those who understand how investigations run would know that it is almost impossible to hide evidence if this was indeed a murder or any case of abetment to suicide. If there was anything remotely suspicious, Rhea Chakraborty would already have been arrested. Those making wild statements of the kind made in Mumbai or from Bihar would also know that the Mumbai police arrested Sanjay Dutt under a tough law against terrorists called TADA in the 1993 Bombay bomb blasts case at a time Sunil Dutt, his father, was a Congress MP and the Congress government was in power at the Centre. The worry that the entire momentum is being created through the instruments of a political leadership that has an axe to grind against the current political dispensation in Maharashtra, particularly the Shiv Sena leadership that has dared to break away from the BJP, tells its own tale. If there is one party that knows how vicious the BJP has become, it is the Shiv Sena, which knows its former ally only too well and has worked with it dating back to the days of Pramod Mahajan as the lead BJP strategist in the 1990s.

It is well known that the BJP has not been able to

Rajput was Bihar "ka beta" (a son of Bihar) and that the actor's death was a matter of sentiment for the people of Bihar. Since when did the police begin investigating cases on that basis, leanings put out in so naked a fashion? Even the pretensions of being an impartial investigator are lost. Pandey has been under some cloud in other cases, and his statements now are of a politician in uniform, not of a professional policeman serving in the highest echelons of the service. The statements of Sushant Singh Rajput's father, who himself was reportedly not close to his son, stand out less for the agony of a father who has lost his son and more for their ugliness, pettiness, the claim that he is the legal heir and show no respect for a person that his son loved and lived with. To call her a "murderer" who "poisoned" Sushant, as the father has reportedly said in a video, is crude and cruel. If Rhea had been married to Sushant officially, these are the kind of statements that would make for a case of harassment of a daughter-in-law under Indian law that is meant to protect newly-wed women from harassment by their in-laws.

As a nation, we must reflect on the way motivated media houses and trolls on social media have been allowed to get away with harassment and sully the name of a family, leaving the young Rhea Chakraborty no time to mourn her loss. That this is being done through a media that is anything but independent, and working to an agenda that many in India can see, tells us of how much the nation is dragged down when prejudice is allowed to run free and even placed at a premium. There is no knowing who this kind of vicious prejudice will take down next and where it will lead this nation.

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

TO THE EDITOR

Language, script and culture

Editor,

I'm writing this open letter with the intention of pay some overdue attention to our written language since it's currently under the radar and with it, the controversy that's currently striking The Seng Khasi apropos the article "Returning Home: My Reconversion Story" by Shimithun Lyngwa (ST September 1, 2020). Sections of The Seng Khasi are demanding for a separate alphabet entirely to be made official and to be taught exclusively and strictly to the followers of the Khasi indigenous faith or the Niam Khasi - Niam Tre.

Census data shows there are around 1.6 million native speakers of our Khasi language, and these speakers can be found in Assam, other states in India, some parts of Bangladesh but mostly in Meghalaya itself — home to about 1,037,964 (2011 census) of that overall total number. But despite such numbers, our Khasi language still has no script of its own. Between 1813 and 1838, William Carey, a British Christian missionary and founder of the Serampore College and the Serampore University, wrote our language with the Bengali script but it was not widely accepted. In 1841, a Welsh missionary, Thomas Jones, wrote our Khasi language in the Latin script which is still used in this day. But what's wrong with the

previous scripts? Many argue that an alphabet's aesthetic and functional aspects must reveal the culture of its creators. Its forms should naturally spring from the traits of the home culture. The Latin script comprising mainly of sturdy, masculine shapes, have a uniformity of size and economy of form that makes them seem almost engineered, rather than merely written. They are also solid, upright and efficient. Judging by this alphabet, one could imagine that it was created by a pragmatic, rigid culture that prized order, strength and structure. And actually, that's not a half-bad description of the ancient Romans.

The Bengali script, on the other hand, lacks the frugality and symmetry of the Latin characters, and is much more complex, intricate, and floaty. One could suppose that the culture that created them was one that cherished sophistication, artanship, and nuance. But what both the previous scripts lack is a reflection of our unique Khasi culture. Neither even came close to being a reflection of our culture and therefore, it must be changed.

The Latin Script:
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
The Bengali Script:
ক খ গ ঘ ঙ চ ছ জ ট ঠ ড ঢ ঝ ঞ

People have questioned as to why there is such a demand? A straight answer to this question is "cultural discrimination". It's a fact that cultural discrimination

among the two groups of the Khasi tribe (the Khasi and the Kristan) has been a century long episode and is still running undisturbed. Khasis have been faced with a cultural crisis for more than 200 years - though this is not always recognized by the government. Members of The Seng Khasi defend their ideology as one that is tolerant, but they also insist that non-Khasis (the Kristan) respect the primacy of the wholly indigenous cultural tradition of the Khasis. As they put it, the Ri Khasi is not only the motherland of the Khasis, but also our holy land. Christian converts in the Ri Khasi have always viewed the Khasi religion and culture with disgust. This is the burden of cultural identity which followers of the Niam Khasi - Niam Tre carry on their shoulders and also the main reason why some segments of The Seng Khasi are shouting out "P for Pynkylah!"

Yours etc.,
Lariti Mawlong
Shillong - 8

Meghalaya should overcome the paranoia

Editor,

I am simply stunned by the brazen defiance by the Meghalaya Government of the Central Government's directive regarding unrestricted movement across the inter-state borders. You have reported for the past two weeks about Union Home Secre-

tary's DO letters to the state chief secretary with explicit direction to keep the borders open. The first letter of 22nd August on the subject was reiterated a week later along with announcement of Un-lock-4. The instructions are clear, precise and binding. Under the National Disaster Management Act 2005, the Centre has the law on its side to impose its mind even on a state subject like Law and Order. Meghalaya Government would do well to remember that it has no constitutional authority to challenge that legal and constitutional position. While all States have already complied with the direction, Meghalaya has chosen not to follow suit. The flimsy ground mentioned in defence is that "we have to protect our people" from COVID-19 virus. The intent of the state government may be genuine but its refusal to advance any legal ground to trump over the Central Government's directive has not been forwarded. If you ask me, regardless of what some legal experts may say, Meghalaya has no case. The obdurate stand of the State Government has no legal legs to stand on and is simply a political expediency. This may have serious repercussions, if other states were to behave in this childish manner.

I am all in agreement with the contention that the people of Meghalaya should be protected from the pandemic. All this while, since April to be precise, the State

Government has gone for strict regulation for entry of outsiders. Already 32,000 people of the state have returned home during this period. Besides, a lot of people are entering on a daily basis for maintaining all essential services. These measures have yielded a mixed results. The armed forces who are an exempted lot, initially contributed to the bulk of the active cases. But that scenario has changed. The armed forces are showing declining incidents of infections, while the infection among the civilians is growing in numbers every single day. This surely proves that somewhere something is amiss. It is not the unregulated entries, but, to my mind, it is holes in the system which have led to the fear of community spread in Shillong.

Therefore, it stands to reason that restricted entry into the state has not helped the cause. Rather, such restrictions have outlived their purpose.

The prohibition of movement of persons and goods without e-permit has brought about a negative impact on the local economy. Let us not miss the point that at this time of pandemic which is yet to peak, and the nation is reporting nearly a lakh of new cases every day, few would be interested to visit Meghalaya putting their own lives at risk. Yes, vigilance is absolutely in order. But there is a case for re-think on the Central Direc-

I, for one, would like to sug-

gest the following:

1. Lift all restrictions on movement.
2. Do away with e-permit system.
3. Strengthen the health checking system at the entry points.
4. Make every entrant, including the armed forces, get themselves checked at the entry points.
5. Undertake more rapid tests in the community.
6. Open the normal economic activities with stricter enforcement of protocols.
7. Issue an official notification that wearing mask, gloves etc are a legal requirement.
8. Resort to penal actions against all violators.
9. Empower Magistrates to take on the spot action.

Once law is enforced without let or hindrance, the public will also behave more responsibly. But let us not fool ourselves by thinking that by keeping the borders closed, the state will be able to get a grip over the virus. Time has come to realise that the world has to learn to live with the virus without having too many restrictions on the lives of the people. The pandemic is not going to make a hasty retreat. As they say, we can't change the direction of the wind, but we can change the direction of the sails. Let there be pragmatism and let's not try to be politically correct all the time. Hard times demand hard actions. This is the time for Meghalaya Government to think anew.

Yours etc.,
Ajit Prasad Singh,
Via email

"It is only the inadequacy of the criminal code that saves the hackers from very serious prosecution."

— Ken Thompson

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.26 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2020

The SSR SAGA

THE Sushant Singh Rajput death case is getting murkier with several new angles emerging after he was found hanging in his room in Mumbai on June 14 last. There were expectations that there would be some let-up in the cacophony over TV channels and beyond, after the Supreme Court directed the CBI to conduct the investigations. But that has not happened. The media trial is progressing at a frenetic pace with Rajput's former live-in partner Rhea Chakraborty being subjected to the most horrifying media haranguing each time she is summoned for questioning by the CBI and other agencies.

After the media had created the perception that Sushant Singh Rajput did not die of suicide but was murdered, the public began to doubt the original version advanced by the Mumbai police and confirmed in the post mortem report. Now there are doubts created even about the actors state of mind despite reputed psychiatrists certifying that the 34 year old actor was under treatment for depression. It is clear to the perceptive mind that there is a lot of politics in the Sushant Singh Rajput case with Bihar police stepping in on a crime that occurred outside their jurisdiction. Suspicions are rife that there are links between chief minister Uddhav Thackeray's son and cabinet minister Aaditya Thackeray and Sushant's death. The state police quarantining a team of police officials arriving in Mumbai to investigate the case on instructions from Bihar Police added to this suspicion. Bihar police that acted on a complaint from Sushant's father perhaps over-reacted. As Bihar is set for assembly polls soon, a political motive was attributed to this overzealousness.

Notably, Sushant's father raised issues about the death a month after the incident. He was possibly carried away by the media blitz. Considering Sushant's huge popularity in Bollywood and as a TV serial actor, it is right that the media should devote some time to this story but it is now close to three months after the incident and all that television channels have time for is to discuss and analyse this issue ad nauseum. And in all this, what comes to the fore is the sexism and misogyny that is barely hidden in the Indian TV media. Rhea Chakraborty has already been pronounced guilty by the media even before she is charge-sheeted and the court hearings have begun.

It is a fact that there are unholy goings-on in Bollywood in which drugs play an important part. Even the sudden death of actress Sridevi raised suspicions. That story too went through a media trial but ended there. It is time to let the CBI do its job in the Sushant death probe and wait for the court verdict. A media trial for any crime is the last thing this country needs. And politics only turns things very murky.

TO THE EDITOR

Correction

Editor,

The authors of the article "Can Meghalaya feed itself?" (Bhogtoram Mawroh & Chenxiang Rimchi N Marak) would like to inform the readers that the authors cited for the paper 'Nutritional Intake and Consumption Pattern in the States of Himachal Pradesh and Meghalaya' were not Daniella Anne L. Chyne, R. Ananthan, T. Longvah but Anika MWK Shadap and Veronica Pala. We regret the error which was our own.

Yours etc.,
Bhogtoram Mawroh & Chenxiang Rimchi N Marak
Via email

Why this double training?

Editor,

Through your esteemed daily I wish to highlight some points worth pondering related to the cadre course to be conducted by the Meghalaya Fire Service department in the 2nd week

of September, 2020 for the promotion of the rank of Leading Fireman to the rank of Sub officer. All the personnel who will be attending the said course have already successfully completed the 6 (six) months Sub Officer Course conducted by the Nagpur Fire Service College at the Regional Training Center, North Guwahati, Sila, where the entire expenditure for the course was sponsored by Department. Hence I fail to understand why the same personnel who had passed the 6 (six) months Sub Officer Course have to again attend the cadre course to be conducted by the Meghalaya Fire Service department for promotion to Sub officer course. Is the course conducted by a reputed institute like the Nagpur Fire Service College not enough? If yes, does this not amount to wastage of public money?

Secondly, the inclusion of the junior colleagues in the cadre course to be conducted by the Department and the superseding of junior personnel is a common practice in Fire service De-

A friend shared with me that whenever he makes his annual home visit to Kerala he makes it a point to visit two of his primary school teachers. Regretting that today teachers are not respected like the ones of yore he did specify the reasons for the lack of respect for teachers in the present age. I share his sentiments. My friend has the highest regards for the primary teachers in his village and has vivid memories of them. If the prestige of the teaching profession has taken a beating the views below might help explain the reasons.

In the good old days there were fewer teachers. Today teachers are aplenty. When this writer was a primary school kid there were just three teachers in the village. They were adored not just by the students but by the whole village community. They were also the leaders in the village. Naturally they were accorded the highest esteem. A head count of teachers today in the same village might take the number close to 50 (excluding those who have relocated outside the village). So obviously, these teachers can't command the same veneration as those three teachers in the late 1970s.

The small number of teachers of yesteryears did not detract from their commitment and dedication. In 1986, Class VI students had to write public examinations. It was considered a prestigious examination. I vividly remember the teachers who coached and trained me and my classmates through remedial classes in Maths, English and other subjects in the morning and evening, before and after school for more than three months. This was totally free. We were also told every day by every teacher, "If you need you can come to my house any time." Students would do so without any hesitation. No wonder the batch did exceedingly well. This might sound like bragging but I scored 80% plus. My companions did even better. Unfortunately not long after that the Class VI public examination was abolished.

Today do we have such teachers? Are teachers willing to take remedial classes for free? The answer is a resounding 'No'. My limited experience in schools tells me that remedial classes are an unwelcome suggestion. Sadly, most teachers always link additional classes to additional remuneration. If extra bucks are unavailable the proposal would be rejected, including by those in the Government's pay roll. Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma has also proposed remedial classes in schools

part which is rarely the case with other branches of the Police department like the Armed Branch (AB), Unarmed Branch (UB), etc. Since the Fire service is a disciplinary force which is under the umbrella of the Police Department this action is totally unjustified and indiscriminately meted out to the Fire service personnel. The question that arises is whether the victims of this unjustified act have to approach the Court to fight for their legal rights? Presently the Fire Service Department is in a chaos where jealousy, hatred and manipulation among staff is rampant. This in turn has demoralized the personnel. And all this, thanks to the step motherly treatment of those at the helm of power.

Finally with the pandemic scenario that the state is facing right now, is this the right time to conduct the cadre course? Since most of the personnel will be coming from different parts of the district to attend the course and considering the safety of all the personnel my humble request to the concerned authority is to do

that need them so as to improve the SSLC results. The proposal could be implemented in the form of a government scheme. On their own it is highly doubtful that these schools would volunteer to conduct free remedial classes for their own students. In such a scenario certainly the admiration for teachers is bound to decline. Self-sacrificing and selfless teachers are probably a rare breed today. The sheer multiplication of teachers in the present age does not mean we retain those much appreciated values.

This takes us to the menace of tuition. Today even students of nursery class go for tuition. It was almost non-existent in our time. Tuition was meant for the weaker students. It was quite rare to have a tutor. Today it has become a fashion and a necessity. Tutors, particularly in Mathematics and Science, make good money. They earn multiple times more than their salaries. Teachers doing full time tuition find it lucrative. One of the reasons for securing ranks is because of tuition. In cities students who excel in public examinations have their photographs with percentages displayed on billboards and hoardings across the town and at entrances of tuition centres. So who should the credit go to? The classroom teachers or the tuition centre teachers? If teachers are losing respect, they should blame it on themselves or on the commercialisation of education, if we want to find an excuse route.

In an orientation session a resource person asked these questions: (i) Who is the current Miss Universe? (ii) Which country won the last FIFA World Cup? (iii) Name one ancient civilization (iv) Which planet is no more a planet? (v) Where is the statue of Liberty located? None of the attending teachers got all the answers right. The conclusion is clear. A teacher can be a mere 'textbook' teacher. Everyone is not expected to be a wizard but in this information age, a 'textbook teacher' will find it hard to make his/her class creative and interesting.

Creativity is perhaps not a strong point in teachers. This is because our education system does not encourage originality. There is little room for innovation, novelty, and imagination. Our examination system is basically memory testing. Notes are given in class. Answers are identical. One is surprised that notes are

away with the cadre course since all of the personnel have already completed the 6 (six) month Sub Officer Course as mentioned above and to simply conduct the Viva Voce where Social Distancing as a Safety Protocol by the Health Department can be maintained.

Finally, I leave it to the wisdom of the concerned authority to decide and act accordingly.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Via email

Wanted online and offline exam centres in Tura

Editor,

After Covid19 struck the state, now everything has been made online including learning for school kids and adults who are studying in Colleges and Universities. Tura is the headquarter for all the learning activities as major schools and colleges are situated in the district. As a concerned citizen of Garo Hills it is high time that

given even at the B. Ed level. Trainees are busy making photo copies instead of spending time to create 'unique' notes through consultation in the library. Future teachers are expected to mug up these 'repeatedly' circulated notes and reproduce them in the examinations. So how do you expect them to be creative when they join a school? Dr. APJ Kalam, our late President is supposed to have said, "Creativity is the key to success in the future and primary education is where teachers can bring creativity in children at that level."

Meghalaya is believed to have a high percentage of teacher absenteeism. In the website of the Education Department, Government of Meghalaya there is a report of a study by DERT on Teachers' absenteeism but there is no data on the malpractice. However, the dereliction of duties is widespread and it shows up in the end product in the form of abysmal SSLC results. This misconduct of teachers means SSLC candidates have acquired insufficient language and arithmetic skills – so inadequate that a minimum of 30 out of 100 marks in 5 out of 6 subjects is elusive. If a teacher neglects this very basic duty how does he or she earn respect from pupils and the general public?

Absenteeism is a national problem. A Google search shows that many states have taken steps to eradicate the menace. Telengana, Punjab, Gujarat, Uttarakhand and our neighbouring states, Tripura and Assam have introduced biometric attendance. Why has Meghalaya not done the same to address this problem? The answer could be readymade – the issue of internet connection in rural areas. States like Uttarakhand gave the same excuse until in 2018 when a Public Interest Litigation in the high court forced the government to introduce biometric attendance system in all government educational institutions within 24 months. Something similar should happen here in our state.

Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the academician, philosopher-author and India's second president who 'instituted' September 5 as Teachers' Day and Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, the People's president and a teacher till the very end can be an inspiration to regain our lost ground. Both happened to be from the South; both came from humble beginnings. Both were awarded the Bharat Ratna, the high-

est civilian award in the country and both became the second and the eleventh President of India. Born in a poor Brahmin family in Madras Dr. Radhakrishnan considered one of India's best and most influential scholars in comparative religion and philosophy and climbed to the rank of a Vice-Chancellor of universities. Dr Kalam's early life is even more inspirational. Son of a boat owner, an average student in school, a newspaper distributor he obtained multiple doctorates and became 'India's missile man. For both great men, hard work was their trait.

Both led a simple life and remained humble throughout life. Dr. Radhakrishnan accepted only Rs. 2500 out of his Rs. 10,000 salary donating the rest to the PM's Relief Fund every month. Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam stayed in a single-room for 20 years while serving in the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC), Thiruvananthapuram. Even as President he led a frugal life.

Both teachers were much loved. An acclaimed teacher of Philosophy in higher institutions like the Madras Presidency College, the Maharaja's College, Mysore, the University of Calcutta, the University of Oxford and later distinguished himself as the Vice-Chancellor of Andhra University and Banaras Hindu University, President Radhakrishnan declined a formal observance of his birthday in 1962 and instead proposed celebration of teachers' day.

Dr. Kalam was not a professional teacher but he was a treasured guest lecturer in various institutes. He passed away on July 27, 2015 while delivering a lecture on "Creating a Liveable Planet Earth" at the Indian Institute of Management, Shillong and will always be remembered as a teacher. During his presidency he often visited schools and colleges. The images of him informally interacting with adoring students and children are vivid in many minds.

Dr Radhakrishnan and Dr Kalam were nation builders. Dr. Kalam often spoke of nation building. Teachers are eulogised as nation builders and builders of character. To be builders requires commitment and passion. While acknowledging teachers' need for financial security, teaching cannot be a pure profession. Perhaps many teachers have forgotten that teaching is a noble calling different from other jobs. (Email: thalbert@rediffmail.com)

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examination centre. The problem is that if they come to Shillong they have to stay back for a night, hence some had to spend the night in their private vehicles.

As a concerned citizen I feel that the examination centre should be opened in Tura in the interests of the student community of Garo Hills as it would lessen their unnecessary expenditure. The time consumed in travelling from other parts of Garo Hills to Tura will be much lesser and the journey can be completed in a day. I request the Government and concerned department to ensure that students are able to access this examination system in Garo Hills to benefit the entire student community of the entire Garo Hills. This is the need of the hour.

Yours etc.,
Sengat M Agitchak
Shillong-1

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

Why examinations are a must?

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

Whether we agree or disagree, till date examinations are still the 'gold standard' which define a student as far as further studies and/or employment is concerned. As we grapple with the 'new normal' and its explicit and implicit impacts on our lives and livelihoods, the issue of examinations has now taken centre stage. The issue is not confined only to NEHU examinations covering post-graduation and under-graduation programmes. It is high time to start factoring in school examinations as well. This is because the end of the year is nearing; in addition, board examinations are a major concern. But alas, the society is divided on the issue. On one hand, we have the pro-examination party and on the other, there is major opposition to it too. As such, the issue has purely come down to advancing arguments for or against examinations. Of course, debate and dissension on the matter is welcome and required too; however, we must not be blind to the ground realities that holding examinations is the most appropriate way forward. It is a win-win situation for all. This is clearly comprehensible as we rope in the facts of the subject-matter.

At the outset, not holding of examinations by NEHU is not an option at all. This is because when we consider the national direction of things, there are a number of universities/institutes in India which have already completed their examinations. In addition, they did it amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, when we make comparisons, the obvious challenge is 'if you can do it, then so can we'. However, the crux of the argument is not about comparing with others. It is neither about being paranoid 'of not caring for the interest of students'. In truth, it is about finding the most effective way out of this conundrum. This starts with the realization that we cannot backlog examinations into the near future as this will result in an unimaginable chaos. The burden will be too much for the teacher and student combined. As of today, procrastination is something that everyone has to guard against. Hence, the most logical thing to do is to plan, strategize and move on. For all that we know, this pandemic may continue well into the year 2021. So, what then? Do we keep on procrastinating? Well, let us nip the problem in the bud!

Similarly, apart from the unilateral argument for holding examinations; if the recent rulings of the Supreme Court are anything to go by, examinations are a must! The Court is absolutely clear on this subject-matter. A pandemic must not be allowed to derail our normal academic functions. Indeed, the function ranges from the challenges of executing online and/or blended mode classes to the holding of examinations. However, these challenges and limitations are to be managed through the resources available. It is about getting it done by any means possible. Importantly, this is true across all levels of education (from schools to higher studies). Although the observations might seem insensitive to many; the truth is that there are legitimate reasons for such. One of those reasons, being the need for life to go on while keeping into mind the importance of every academic year for a student. For any student, the prospect of losing an academic year can prove to be extremely costly. After all, careers are shaped in a year! By and by, as we register all these pointers the continuation of NEET and JEE examinations as per schedule does make total sense.

Coming back to NEHU examinations, it is a case of better late than never. The willingness and ability of the university to hold examinations (both UG and PG) has become a major talking point across many circles. That is fair enough. After all, the future of thousands of students is hanging in the balance. As of today, many are breathing a sigh of relief that finally a clear direction is visible and is laid down as far as completion of classes and examinations are concerned. On hindsight, many do believe that had the university acted a bit earlier we could have completed the examinations this September itself. Be that as it may, we have to factor that these are not normal times and any academic decision will have to take all stakeholders into confidence with the all-important final say from the state government. Now that the examinations are scheduled for October, there is a need for all colleges (be it in the urban or rural areas) to come together and hold the exercise successfully. Yes, challenges and limitations will be there; however, the offline option for holding examination (as and when conducive) will go a long way in reducing anxiety for the teacher-student combined.

As we move towards October, the loopholes and shortcomings of the online/blended mode of examinations will become more apparent. Hence, it will not be surprising to find people and pressure groups speaking up against it. However, before they do so it is urged that they factor the direction that the country is taking as far as examinations is concerned. The point to be noted here is that our students' cannot be left at a disadvantaged position. If examinations are not held, our students will be left behind in the national scheme of things. This is significant as the university grants commission (UGC) has made it ample clear that without final examinations the academic degrees' will not be recognised. Moreover, in a situation where other universities in the country are moving ahead with their academic pursuits, NEHU must not act in a manner that would be detrimental to the interest of its students. In any case, as per observations and discussions, many students are ready to move on with examinations barring a few. These few are the ones who are not willing to take their academic pursuits seriously.

In conclusion, as we harp upon students taking the online-blended mode examination, it is only natural that society is asking questions as to its authenticity. No doubt, it is a tenable discussion. Concurrently, eyebrows are being raised as to its validity and value. Many are pointing that it is not exactly an online mode examination; rather, it is an online-blended mode whereby it resembles more of an open-book examination. Yes, that is true! In fact, candidly it can be stated that it would be an 'online-blended open-book examination mode'. As frivolous as it might seem, it must be noted that something is better than nothing. At least, a mode of evaluation is there. Moreover, open-book examinations do have their own value in terms of evaluating knowledge. In addition, it is also widely used in academic circles now-a-days. After all, these are extraordinary times which call for extraordinary measures. Naturally, such measures cannot match the practices of normal times. In the end, all the options available on the table are 'bad options'. Alas, it is all about choosing the 'best bad option'!

(Email: benjamin21in@yahoo.co.in)

"I will get my education - if it is in home, school, or anyplace."

— Malala Yousafzai

The Shillong Times

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Rift in the MDA showing

THAT a coalition partner of the MDA Government – the BJP – should expose the scam in the three district councils of Meghalaya is rather unusual. The pressure of seeing a coalition government complete its full term normally sees coalition partners push all differences under the carpet and also sealing their lips about any scam. In the present case the scams seem to have crossed all norms of decency. That a person or persons should be paid a whopping 58.25 crore for documentaries by the Garo Hills District Council (GHDC) is scandalous. This is a big amount by any standards. And to think that about 2000 employees of GHDC had been going without salaries for 25 months up to April this year and had been raising their voices time and again without any redressal is a slur on the Council and its complete lack of accountability. The Council appears to be run like a private fiefdom with all family members of the ruling party the NPP enjoying the perks.

By definition a coalition government is one in which political parties cooperate, reducing the dominance of any one party within that "coalition". The usual reason for this arrangement is that no party on its own can achieve a majority in the election and this has been Meghalaya's political history where no single political party has ever won an absolute majority. In the past collations governments have been formed on the agreement that the post of chief minister would be on rotational basis. And coalition partners in Meghalaya have always respected each such agreement and even worked under a common minimum programme. This is the first time that a coalition does not even have a common minimum programme thereby giving the impression that all the coalition partners have decided to remain subservient to the senior partner the NPP which has 21 MLAs, while other parties have only single digit numbers.

Allegations that a road built on paper at a cost of Rs 84.79 crore does not exist makes it appear that all public funds meant for development have been diverted to private pockets. All these scams lend credence to the allegations that the ADCs are white elephants that benefit the ruling elite and leave the people at the same disadvantaged status. If at all there is need to conserve tribal customary practices then the ADCS seem to have lost their moorings. The permissions given to mine coal and limestone at great cost to the environment and its people is one instance of a grave failure of the ADCs to protect the interests of tribals that they claim is their mandate. There is an urgent need to unearth the scams and bring the perpetrators of such scams to book.

New education policy dismantles diversity and dissent

Higher education to be more corporatised and profit-driven

By P Sandosh Kumar

Indian higher education has witnessed tremendous progress since independence. There has been a significant increase in the number of colleges and universities across the country. The Nehruvian consensus believed in providing limitless possibilities of free liberal education that reflects the spirit of reason, tolerance, humanism, dissent and dialogue. Influenced by Gandhian ideals of self-reliance and Marxian philosophy of social justice, Nehru was instrumental in building a pluralistic and secular higher education edifice in post-colonial India. Despite the tribulations and challenges, no one can deny the incredible achievements of India's higher education sector since independence. India has the third largest higher education system after China and the USA. Our higher education institutions like IIMs, IITs and JNU have already carved their imprints in the global education landscape.

Undoubtedly, the ethos of the Indian higher education system sounds synonymous with our rich cultural and social fabric woven by threads of different identities, each blending to form a perfect amalgamation. And, at its core, we could always find creativity, innovation, and inclusion. We always hailed an education that stands for freedom and democracy. Obviously, the quest for diversity and dissent always heralded radical transformation within the system.

We cannot undermine this broader context of higher education when we look into the New Education Policy (NEP 2020) and its underlying politics. Unfortunately, NEP 2020 completely ignores the modern secular and democratic higher education system that contemporary India inherited. It deliberately dismantles our modern values and replaces it with ancient values of Brahmanical ethos, conservative principles and rigid compartmentalisation of higher education institutions.

NEP replaces inclusion with commercialisation and institutional plurality with monolithic hierarchy. It at-

tempts to replace social justice with merit and critical thinking with skill-based training. Above all, the policy tries to deconstruct the Nehruvian liberal modernity with that of a rightist and elitist model of education. This is indeed a deviation from the previous education policies, and therefore it will lead to serious repercussions in the higher education sector in our country.

Before analysing the problematic recommendations of NEP, it is interesting to look into the 'paradoxical' positions and internal inconsistencies that the NEP document contains. Although the NEP is popularly perceived as a visionary document that can transform the genes of higher education, the arguments are often flawed and contradictory. For example, in the section on higher education, NEP states that the purpose of quality higher education is more than the creation of greater opportunities for employment for individual, but the key to creating a more vibrant, socially engaged and cooperative communities and a progressive nation.

While the focus on individual employment is ignored in the above sentence, in another section, the document clearly argues that the purpose of higher education reform is to equip the student to cater to the need of the emerging 4th industrial revolution in India. Apart from that, throughout the document, the NEP raises voice for a skill-based vocational education instead of a system based on intellectual discourse. The legitimisation of 'student drop-out' from universities also aims to encourage the creation of a semi-skilled workforce that can serve the Indian capitalists. Hence, the core argument of the NEP on the purpose of higher education is an oxymoron.

Secondly, the NEP calls the contemporary higher education system as 'highly fragmented'. Although the document is silent about the rationality behind such a sweeping gen-

eralisation, critics relate it with the existence of 800 universities and 40,000 colleges across the country. Actually, the so-called 'fragmentation' represents our diverse social structure, geographical coverage and unique needs of the students from both rural and urban regions. The NEP has unethically labelled it as 'fragmented', and completely disregarded the scope, spread and decentralisation of higher education. But does the new policy reform offer a constructive alternative to this fragmentation? Interestingly, the answer is no.

The new structure that the NEP offers is extremely complex and challenging to operate in a federal system. It is unclear how the coexistence of private/ autonomous/ foreign/ government colleges and universities, the hierarchical regulatory authorities, contractual appointments of teachers, dropping out of students and different types of colleges will ensure a 'sustainable, robust and uniform' higher education. One can easily identify the lack of vision behind such rhetoric. Platitudes cannot be turned into pragmatism. Unfortunately, the NEP is full of platitudes rather than practical wisdom.

Thirdly, the document is conspicuously silent about the rights of the students, although it often hails the role of 'dharma', 'duties', 'responsibilities' and 'accountability' of students. The document envisages the establishment of a 'liberal' education. The NEP perceives the term liberal as 'privatisation' and 'commercialisation'. But the real meaning of 'liberal' in the context of education implies the centrality of 'dissent and freedom of expression' within the landscape of higher education. The NEP doesn't recognise the legitimate rights of students, their political representation and the need for including student representatives in the regulatory bodies. The concept of liberal education is narrowly defined as employability, freedom to drop out, choice of multiple disciplines, etc. In reality, liberal education

doesn't imply the development of 'disposition', but the development of a free individual who can think critically and independently. Therefore, it is sad to understand that the NEP is a travesty of the great tradition of Nehruvian modernity.

Fourthly, the document doesn't address the complex realities that our higher education system faces today. The approach is superficial. There is no pragmatic strategy to improve access to education to hitherto disadvantaged sections of society. The real challenge is our unequal social structure that breeds social injustice, oppression and the resultant lack of access to education. But instead of offering a rational strategy to ensure social inclusion and justice, the NEP promotes privatisation and commercialisation. Contrary to the expectations, the privatisation drive will only exacerbate the prevailing inequality and exclusion of the Dalits and Adivasis from higher education.

Lastly, the NEP 2020 states that the central and state governments will endeavour to increase expenditure on education sector up to six per cent of the GDP. But the Commission is silent on the source of funding. It is paradoxical to note that since May 2014, India's total spending on education to GDP ratio has been falling. During 2012-13, the total education expenditure was 3.1 per cent of the GDP. Surprisingly, it fell in 2014-15 to 2.8 per cent. There was a further decline during 2015-16 as the total spending fell into 2.4 per cent of the GDP. Hence, it is evident that the government is not committed to increasing public spending on education. So how does the NEP expect such an unrealistic target? We can assume that the gap in funds will be managed with an increase in fee. This will slowly lead to the retreat of the state from the higher education sector and the back-door entry of commercial interest into the realm, making higher education more corporatised and profit-oriented. (IPA Service)

Can we give our children a break?

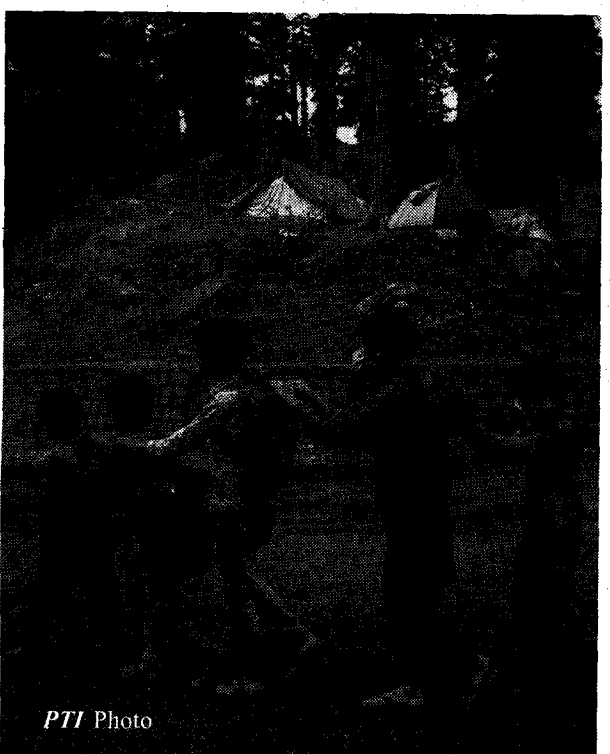
By UD Tmar

It is common knowledge now that most parents who have school going children are in a state of confusion, disgust and totally lethargic at the affairs of how 'online classes' are conducted and imposed. Parents from economically weak backgrounds are in dire straits to pay the school fees and equip their children with a smart phone and internet connectivity. I know of someone who does not have a stable job, but has to pay from his savings for a smart phone costing Rs 12,000. We also know there are schools that need the fees, to support their teachers and pay their salaries. There should be certain guidelines or policies as to what fees are needed to be paid. What about the poor who do not have proper incomes? There are certain schools that have asked for the entire school fees to be paid like in normal times. The Education Department needs to spell out the terms because parents are in confusion. Education is a public utility and welfare, not a private monopoly.

What are we doing to education and to our children? How much burden can we put on families that cannot even provide enough food on the table, due to this crisis? There is a serious misunderstanding of what education is. Education is not merely getting a degree and passing every year. Failure too is educa-

things, and mostly associated with the freedom to pursue knowledge. Ask children if they like school or are having fun learning. In most cases they will say 'NO'. Do we allow our children the freedom to pursue knowledge, experiment and learn by experience? Let us not make online learning and assessment mandatory for every child to participate in so that they don't miss their 'education'. Education should follow the principles of democracy, not authoritarianism. Democracy promotes healthy conversations, of opinions, ideas etc, which is the core of real education.

Effective online education requires the live participation and interaction between pupil and teachers. It should focus more on learning rather than on teaching. Our approach should be student-learning ability centric. Right now there are a few families who can't even afford good internet access and a laptop or desktop. So how can we judge students' performances when there is a digital divide among various income groups? If we are serious enough, this is the time to set up infrastructure for digital education system, pruning and redesigning of syllabus, rather than imposing on students to perform despite these inadequacies. We don't want school to be a factory of learning; especially rote learning. We want them to be a republic of in-



PTI Photo

TO THE EDITOR

MDA Govt's mid-term evaluation

Editor,
Your front page story "Bouquets and brickbats at halfway for Sangma ministry" (ST Sept 8, 2020) amused me a lot. Firstly, there were more plaudits, homilies and platitudes which made for the "bouquets", but where were the "brickbats"? I didn't see any criticism for the many failures and the lack of developmental activities which have come to a halt in the state.

You chose to feature a cabinet minister and chief of planning body in the state (which carries status of CM). They were expected to tom-tom the achievements of the government they are running. But we did not find any major achievements enlisted by them to shout from the roof tops. I think both of them missed the opportunity to showcase their performance. Perhaps, as your report said "to be fair" to the government, the unsettled law and order situation and COVID pandemic was their bane. But they went off tangent.

Normally, every government should take pride in lasting two and half years without any threat of political instability. That MDA government did not come out with any publicity of its own achievements, tells me that it has nothing to show to the people. Truly speaking, the ruling coalition is

barely managing to stay in power without being too assertive about governance or development. There is no push from any quarter.

What is curious is that you interviewed an opposition Congress MLA to give his take on the performance of Sangma ministry. Coming from an opposition MLA, I read through over and over again to search for any hint of critical assessment in his statement. His was full of gas but little criticism of the government. Being a retired bureaucrat, perhaps the legislator brought his diplomatic skills to play for camouflaging his mind. The statement he made in this regard does not read like it has come from the opposition. Or is it a studied response for the shape of things to come? The grapevines here are speculating about some Congress MLAs seeking greener pastures. This was accentuated by another Congress MLA's brazen eulogy for the Prime Minister for an official acknowledgement he received from the PMO regarding a complaint about floods in Garo Hills. The MLA should have known that PMO acknowledges every letter, memorandum or email sent to the Prime Minister. By heaping praise on Modi, the MLA has let the cat out of the bag!

Yours etc.,
K. S. Pariat,
Shillong-14

Rejoinder from Police Dept

Editor,

Appropos the letter captioned "Why this double training" (ST September 9, 2020), it is worth emphasising that the Cadre Course for the promotion of Leading Fireman to the rank of Sub-Officer will be conducted to check the capacity and capability of the eligible candidates who are due for promotion, as most of the F&ES personnel had undergone the specialized training at Nagpur about 9-10 years ago, hence, there is a need to conduct fresh training so as to enhance their proficiency and to refresh the subject knowledge of the personnel, which in this case are mostly related to technical knowhow. Further, the Cadre Course will also enable the Department to impart specialized trainings in connection with Search and Rescue Operations as well as handling of modern sophisticated equipment which are currently available with the Department and more so, to impart training to the personnel in accordance with the topography and in-situ surroundings of the State, so that the personnel will be well adapted to the environment during rescue operations and mitigation of disasters.

Pertaining to allegations of inclusion of junior personnel in the Cadre Course and superseding of promotion by junior personnel, it is hereby informed that the allegations are untrue and based merely

on conjecture. Till date the established procedures for promotion to the next rank is through the Cadre Course which are being conducted from time to time. On completion of the course, a Viva Voce is then conducted by the Departmental Promotion Board and thereafter, based on the number of vacancies and merit of the successful candidates, promotions are granted. It is also informed that promotions cannot be given only on the basis of Viva Voce as the F&ES is purely a Technical Organisation where technical knowledge and aptitude of the personnel is imperative in the official discharge of duties and thus, granting promotion on the basis of Viva Voce will not be justified and will also be detrimental to the functioning of the Organisation.

The allegation that the time is not conducive to conduct training due to COVID-19 pandemic, is once again based on surmise as prior to the commencement of the training, all personnel will have to undergo medical tests to ascertain their physical and health condition, and based on the opinion of the medical expert, the personnel will then be permitted to attend the Cadre Course. In addition to this, the organisation is currently having deficit manpower among the Sub-Officer rank and hence, there is an exigency for conducting the course so as to enable the Department to meet the manpower requirements.

Lastly, the allegation that the department is in chaos where jealousy, hatred and manipulation of the staff is rampant and is demoralising the personnel is devoid of facts and an insidious attempt to tarnish and malign the reputation of the Organisation and the members of the disciplined force who are working endlessly and also risking their lives towards ensuring a safe and secure environment for each and every individual.

Yours etc.,
G. K. langrai, MPS
Asstt. Inspector General of Police (A), Meghalaya

Western influence on history

Editor,

Most articles and books on International Relations written by western scholars have western points of views. Western scholars do not look at the big picture of what's happening in the eastern side, instead, they look at it from a western perspective hence, treating it like a field work that needs to be resolved, without actually understanding the inside story. Cultural divide also plays an important role in this matter as most western scholars do not completely understand the cultural aspects of the eastern countries when doing research.

There's a difference between learning and studying the culture vs. actually understanding the culture. Hypothetically, if a research paper or an article is written by an eastern scholar about the eastern issues, it would've been

more cohesive, in my opinion. You can see this in most articles and books written by scholars who are actually from the region they write about. For example, history was viewed very differently, by the west, than it is by the east. The book "From the ruins of Empire" by Pankaj Mishra is a perfect example of that. He mentions in his book how Japan defeated Russia in 1904, and how that was one of the first victory that marks the defeat of the west. While Leo Tolstoy, a Russian author, stated that it was more of a defeat of the west over the east, Japan representing the west with its modernised military and industrialisation, whereas, Russia at that time was still not modernised enough.

Mishra however mentions that, what was important and what shaped history today was the perception that for years the western world had "bullied" the east, and this victory sparked a rebellion against the west. The same perception Gandhi, Nehru and even Ataturk had on this defeat of Russia. So, in conclusion, the articles written by western scholars do have lasting impact on North – South relations. The example I have given above might have been more about history but at the end of it, it's perception that matters too, and it's perception that has always shaped history.

Yours etc.,
Evaris Pala Slong
Webster University USA,
Leiden Campus,
BA International Relations.

tion. School is not the only medium of education we cannot equate schooling with education. There are many good examples of people who have done badly in school but succeed well in life. We cannot judge children as empty vessels that need to be filled, since we think they are sitting idle at home. But we cannot judge them wrongly. They are not sitting idle; they are dreaming, imagining, playing, creating etc. Playing, imagining day dreaming, are also crucial for a real education. To add a Chinese Proverb, "Everybody knows the use of usefulness but none knows the use of uselessness" Edward de Bono a prolific author and philosopher, taught us the importance of 'Lateral thinking.' Playing helps creative and innovative thinking.

Most of our misjudgement and pre-conceived notions that children don't learn if they are not in school or taught, is a reflection of our narrow understanding of education despite having degrees. Children learn everyday and every night from dawn till dusk. Education begins with the cradle and ends with the grave. Give children the right exposure, tools and environment, and they will learn by themselves if they find certain things interesting. Children are more curious, creative and have the willingness to learn than adults. The term 'School' comes from the Greek word 'Schole' meaning leisure, and to the Greeks leisure means many

novation, creative thinking and diversity of knowledge and information. We want our children to be people, citizens with confidence in themselves, who have the ability and the creativity to adapt to changes, persons with good emotional intelligence and skill sets.

The future is more different than we thought it would be. As a matter of fact our present education system is obsolete, has no relevance to what the future has in store. The future is in the freedom of thought, expression and pursuit of knowledge individually or collectively without imposition of any deadlines or activities. In the future 'world of work', we might need more philosophers, singers, entertainers, rather than engineers, doctors etc. Most of the kind of works that we know now will be obsolete in the future.

Why don't we give our children a break? Why pressure them during this crisis? When I was in Class VI (Mawkhair Christian Sec School) in 1987, I remember our school(s) shutting down for half a year due to the Khasi-Nepali conflict and all of us got promoted without having a single class or exams. And of the friends I know, some of them have gone on to be productive members of society. Some have become doctors, engineers etc. That one year of inactivity, or idleness had done us no harm. In fact it helped us to think creatively, play, meet friends etc. We all remember those days clearly, for our mind was free.

"The paradox of education is precisely this - that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated."

— James Baldwin

The Shillong Times

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Corruption in India

INDIA, sadly, is taking a hit on most fronts and not just on the Covid front, where it is racing to be the world's top Covid-infected nation, by finally out-witting finally the US too within the next few days. India is also racing to be the world's most corrupt nation. Banks have been defrauded with rare ease and regularity in the past several years, and the government is blinking. The latest news on the corruption front, the fraudulent withdrawal of lakhs of rupees from the Ram Mandir Temple Trust with help from bank officials, comes as the icing on the cake.

It was after much tumult that the way was cleared for the building of a Ram Temple in Ayodhya, in place of the old Babri Masjid. As per Government orders, the Mandir will be built with government money, drawn from an exchequer built with taxes that people pay to the government. Cloned cheques were used by a gang to withdraw temple money. This happens just weeks after the laying of the foundation stone for the temple. In every government coffer and bank, leak or pilferage is the order of the day. Successive governments have little interest in stemming the rot.

Every institution of the establishment is sinking in the morass of corruption. Even religious and spiritual entities are no exception. Major temples in the country have billions or trillions of wealth packed in their vaults over the years, and these too could be up for grabs sooner than later; or this might already be happening. India, it is feared, is becoming ruderless even as it approaches 75 years of Independence.

Contrast the Indian scenario with neighbouring Pakistan. The news of the day is also that a court hearing the anti-corruption cases in Pakistan has indicted former President Asif Ali Zardari and ex-prime minister Yousuf Raza Gillani and declared former prime minister Nawaz Sharif an absconder and proclaimed offender in a corruption case. Such situations can even lead a PM or President up to the gallows there; not in India, where even ordinary politicians would wriggle out of any such situation with considerable ease. Sharif lost his PM post after the Panama Papers leak in 2016. He had been sentenced to 10 years in prison. He evaded punishment by going on exile abroad. In India, corrupt politicians and bureaucrats get kid-gloves treatment and are hardly ever punished, other than the rare exception - like Lalu Prasad Yadav. What the future holds for this country is a big question.

Baby steps towards education in the new normal

By Patricia Mukhim

The announcement by the Union Ministry of Health that Class 9-12 will reopen on September 21 has caused trepidation among school authorities, teachers and parents. The students of course have very little to say on the matter because no one deigns to consult them even though at the end of the day, they are the guinea pigs to be experimented on. In fact, every time there is a new education policy in this country it does not evolve from having studied student's behaviour vis-à-vis their text books and curriculum. It is expected that students will automatically fit into something designed by the wise elders who know everything about everything.

A ten year old writing an article for this paper says he is missing his school buddies. He didn't say he is missing his lessons; much less his teachers. He confessed that he was doing quite well with home classes supervised largely by his mother. This is the case with most families today. In the case of both working parents and those that cannot work from home (WFH) a new term that has gained currency, then some schools organise classes in the evening. But that is a difficult task for both parents and teachers because that's not the best time for the human brain to absorb nuggets of wisdom.

Speaking to some of the parents and school authorities one gets the feeling that institutions falling under the respective State Boards and the CBSE have to comply with the Government of India directives while the same does not seem to be binding on those under ICSE. St Edmund's School for instance has decided to only call Class 9 boys that have problems with specific subjects and will do so in batches so that social distancing is managed. This sounds like a sensible first step. The school can then take a call after seeing how it goes in the first few weeks. After all, there is no single protocol that works. Let's remember that even the much discredited World Health Organisation (WHO) did several back and forth before they could get some things right. The tentativeness on whether the use of masks is good, bad or indifferent has finally been considered to be medically appropriate because Covid 19 spreads

through aerosols let out by humans when they cough, sneeze, speak and sing. These days most people with a penchant for singing do so inside a room all by themselves. The idea of a "choir" now is passé.

But coming back to the reopening of schools, some principals have said that they will have to comply with State Government directives but if, God forbid, anything inadvertent happens and some kid or kids test positive after coming to school the parents will lay

scientific knowledge cannot always keep pace with the mysteries of biology. As someone has rightly stated, "What we need to accept, as we struggle to cope in a shattered world, is that the orthodoxies of knowledge are as bad as the boastfulness of salvation politics."

Alas! This existential crisis has tended to exacerbate the pre-existing education disparities by reducing the opportunities for the most vulnerable children, youth, and adults from poor homes or those technologically



the blame at their doorstep not at the Government's. Hence they are in a dilemma.

The pandemic had unleashed a situation of deep insecurity because there is no expert insofar as dealing with the Covid19 virus is concerned The WHO and ICMR revised their protocols several times. Then there's the politics and the pressure for the governments at the centre and the states to either "open up" or send the bulk of their population into a state of penury. In an ideal world we could have expected a happy balance between the sobriety of politics and the modesty of expertise. But as the pandemic became unstoppable, India and the world had to make difficult choices. While distancing was the preferred choice the world of work for many means bridging the distance. Today we console ourselves saying that we have to learn to live with the virus. All our medical and scientific inventions and the technology at our command have not helped us to deal with the virus. It is here that we find to our dismay that

disabled, to continue their learning. Once the virus leaves us and I am sure it will, we will have to evaluate the learning losses that threaten to extend beyond this generation and erase decades of progress. We have to be prepared to see many in our rural areas dropping out of school. On my visit to Kongthong and other nearby villages, I hear parents say, "We are taking our children to the plantations. What will they do sitting at home? Besides, there's no one to look after them at home! Let them learn some farming at least." Sure children would do well to know farming and its discontents but how do we get these students back to a life of mental discipline?

The pandemic has created an educational shock. We can see this panning out in Meghalaya with some arguing in favour of examinations and holding forth that examinations are the only tools for assessing a student's mental and behavioral prowess while others oppose the idea. I am not so sure that examinations are the only way to assess a student's capacity

to learn. But there is one thing we can all agree with; that is post Covid we have to re-imagine education and accelerate the change in teaching and learning. Already several schools have tried their best to reach out to students and to see that they are on top of things and not overwhelmed by the fact of being cooped up at home. Indeed, after the first month of the Lockdown some schools I know have made massive efforts to respond to the huge jolt caused to the education system as we have known it. No matter how small the initiatives the fact remains that students had adapted to the teaching-learning sessions. Hence change is possible and change we must.

Those in the field of education must seize the opportunity to find new ways to address the learning crisis and bring about a set of solutions previously considered difficult or impossible to implement. Perhaps the following could be the entry points for now. School administrators need to invest their energies in addressing the learning losses and preventing dropouts, particularly of marginalized groups. Another very important aspect is to offer skills for employability programmes. The teaching profession requires massive support to also get teachers back on the rails. Teachers too must be future ready and that requires some inventiveness and training.

The pandemic has forced us all to take a whole new look at the meaning of education and what Right to Education has meant and should mean henceforth. The United Nations 'Policy Brief on Education during COVID-19 and Beyond', says that the Right to Education now has to include connectivity; remove barriers to connectivity; strengthen data and monitoring of learning. One must add that along with books, educational gadgets are now a necessity. The Government must invest in these gadgets for those that cannot afford them.

Education will indeed have to take a 360 degree turn and both teachers and learners have to do this together.

From Sudha Bharadwaj to Rhea, women as 'enemy of the state' Media-driven witch-hunt goes against India's core constitutional values

By Annie Domini

The 28-year-old Rhea Chakraborty, actress-girlfriend of the late Sushant Singh Rajput, has been arrested by the Narcotics Control Bureau on charges of drugs consumption, for allegedly buying cannabis for Rajput. Cannabis, or marijuana, also known as weed in common parlance, is a mild psychoactive drug widely used for medicinal purposes, with a gigantic informal market of recreational use. While cannabis is legal in many countries, its status in India is mixed. The production and sale of cannabis resin and flowers banned under the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, a law which in itself needs considerable reworking. However, NDPS Act allows for the use of leaves and seeds for medicinal purposes, for horticulture and under traditional alternative medicine like Ayurveda, as part of the Hindu religious offering bhanga. The arrest of Rhea Chakraborty for simply procuring cannabis for private consumption, is therefore, not just a gross overreaction by the state but stinks of a political framing. With the CBI, ED and now NCB attempting to interrogate Rhea in connection with the unfortunate death by suicide of Rajput, it seems the entire might of the state is being delegated to hound the young woman. Interestingly, the current NCB chief is Rakesh Asthana, Gujarat cadre IPS officer known for his long association with none other than Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Obviously, without a nod from the top, the hounding of Rhea wouldn't have been this systemic.

Even though the flimsy charges are not expected to have much weight, an arrest under the draconian NDPS Act means expectedly, Rhea's bail plea was rejected, and she has been sent to 14-day judicial custody. The attractive young woman bears the brunt of the State and the media attempting to steer the narrative away from the many failures of the central government, and towards the collective voyeurism of a society living out its basest of prejudices against women.

While Rhea Chakraborty is no Sudha Bharadwaj, the IIT-educated civil rights activist languishing in jail for helping adivasis of Chhattisgarh get some justice in the face of massive land grab, how the State picks

its villains is a common thread. In both cases, the cunning use of media, channels led by hysterical anchors breathing fire and fury over private lives of Bollywood actors and imagined "assassination plots" while overlooking incredible economic contraction, raging Covid-19 pandemic, farmer suicides and job losses, is central the project of inventing the enemy. The private lives of young actors, or the selfless services of civil rights activists and democratic dissenters, are thus presented as potential security threats to the whole country, challenging the centres of political and cultural power.

For a Rhea and Sudha, there are also the Kanganas of the world, media and state darlings, who ride every possible bandwagon to enrich themselves politically, using the misery and legitimate grievances of some to benefit themselves. Kangana's theatrics against Bollywood biggies to her branding of Mumbai as "PoK", calling Mumbai Police "Babur's army" and using Rajput's death to pillion-ride the stock-market of Twitter trends, makes her the ideal ally of the tyrannical state. Media and Kangana have a toxic co-dependence that seems to benefit from each other via click-baits and TRPs, thus prolonging the vicious cycle.

While Rhea Chakraborty had the gumption to wear a "smash patriarchy" T-shirt on her way to the interrogation by central agencies, Bharadwaj's absolute dedication to the adivasis of Chhattisgarh and her sustained legal fight against Gautam Adani's mines in the state, a top industrialist known for his proximity to PM Modi, turned her into a problem for the state-corporate nexus. Bharadwaj's legal battle for justice earned her recognition from Harvard Law School, but she remains incarcerated under the draconian UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act), a law so vague and all-encompassing that it gives the state unlimited powers to put anyone behind bars for undefined, unsubstantiated and unproven crimes. While Rhea's victimisation seems accidental - she just happened to be Rajput's girlfriend who smoked up - Bharadwaj's framing, aided by TV channels who were "privy" to strangely written letters leaked by investigation agencies, was too well-planned. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Indigenous faith & conversion

Editor, The indigenous faiths wherever they are, have their concepts of rituals, worship and religious regimen. They remain confined to their systems and do not propagate their beliefs on others who are not adhering to their indigenous concept of religion. The fear of numbers and perhaps the spiritual supremacy of the indigenous faith overwhelms the new religions and that is why they indulge in calling the indigenous people, animist, idol worshippers and such other derogatory terms. They make their own adherents intolerant and shun them.

For the first time two articles appeared in the Shillong Times dated 4th July 2020 by Albert Thyrniang and another by HH Mohrmen on 3rd August 2020.

The answer is in the national census register. After every ten years the population of the adherents of Niamtre or even Seng Khasi in the State dwindles rapidly. This does not come as

a surprise if one considers the fact that the main goal of Christian denominations is to convert the "unbelievers" to their fold. Almost all Churches set up their missions or send missionaries/evangelists to villages where there is still a large population of people who still follow indigenous religion to convert them.

This is the story of the indigenous religion except in some places where they still have strong influence. The sad state of affairs was aptly described by Albert Thyrniang in the article in the Shillong Times titled 'is it possible to turn back the clock' (ST July 4th 2020). In reminiscences about his childhood in the village where he grew up while also giving him some idea how demography of a village changes as a result of conversion.

What is the reason for this fear psychosis when they are today in larger numbers in Meghalaya? More than 80% of the entire population are afraid because in their heart of heart they understand that they have tried to practice was basically to demean something which was noble and rich wrote Thyrniang about Columbus.

He sent thousands of

peaceful Tainos to Spain to be sold. Many perished en route. One estimate says within 60 years after Columbus landed in the New World only a few hundred may have survived of the 2,50,000 Taino natives.

Critics say the cruel invader was responsible for genocide of up to 90% of native population under his rule. Even after such a heinous record he is accorded federal holiday in October.

Colonists of the Americas subdued the natives and robbed them of their land and resources. Wealth was shipped to respective countries in Europe. We have to accept that Christianity and Colonialism are closely associated. The Church was seen as the 'religious arm' of European colonial powers. Kings and rulers of these countries were Christians and the Church clearly had no objection to the savagery committed. In fact, missionary expeditions followed Colonisation to spread Christianity to America, Africa and to a lesser extent Asia. While Christianity spread "in some area, almost all of the colony's population were removed from their traditional belief systems and were converted to Christianity which the Colonizers used

as a reason to destroy other faiths, enslave the natives, and exploit the lands and seas," summarises a popular online website.

What is significant to observe here is that the identity, the culture, social and religious expression of the slaves brought from Africa to America and Europe were completely erased. They were even stripped of their surnames. So we see Blacks bearing the names Jones, Brown, Smith, etc. the indigenous concept knowing very well that the concepts propounded by the foreign missionaries are neither offering solace, happiness nor satisfactory because it is based on fear and there is no in-depth spiritualism in what they taught. Just by going to a temple, mosque, or church one would not find satisfaction unless it offers something more than prayers only.

One can see the discrimination today between tribals and non-tribals, between this caste and that caste because what is being taught in the churches is to adhere to a particular concept of religion and not to their motherland. This alienates the new converts from the mainstream. What is not yours i.e. what is ac-

quired can never be yours. Any acquired concept can only be something borrowed but never yours.

Yours etc., Bhagwati Prasad Goenka, Via email

District Councils in the docks

Editor,

It is astonishing to read about the politics and mudslinging that is happening in the current dispensation led by the NPP and it's coalition partners against the BJP. It is also surprising that the present coalition is feigning ignorance on the non-payment of salaries to JHADC employees for close to 6 months. As they say politics makes strange bedfellows as displayed in the JHADC with the Congress and BJP in the opposition benches against the ruling EC led by NPP and UDP. How far can things be allowed to degenerate in the autonomous councils? Though the DCA portfolio is held by the PDF, which is a member of the present MDA Government, yet no attempts have been made by the ruling EC in the JHADC to seek clarification on non-release of funds etc. Governance and accountability seem to be of least

concern in all the Councils. Yours etc., Dominic Stadlin Wankhar Shillong

Umpling Bridge -A bridge too far

Editor,

After the demolition of the Umpling bridge a lot of inconvenience is caused to the residents of Umpling. One has to pay double or more, the taxi fare to Rynjah and beyond. Many residents feel that the bridge could have been widened without breaking it down. It may be mentioned that one elderly person lost his life recently while walking on an ill constructed temporary wooden bridge. The aged and the elderly fear using the bridge especially during the rains. What is shocking is that the residents were not even consulted by the local authorities before breaking down the bridge. Till date there is absolutely no activity whatsoever, in constructing a new bridge. One wonders how many years it will take before a new bridge comes up.

It is suggested that the project for constructing a new bridge be awarded to a reputed and reliable organi-

sation that can pre-fabricate several parts and components and complete the bridge in the shortest time possible.

Yours etc., Albert Andrew Nongrum & Felix Rane, Via email

MDA Govt report card unsatisfactory

Editor,

The MDA Government has nothing to show for its achievements in two and a half years. The Them Mawlong problem remains unsolved. There is no progress on the border talks as has happened with previous governments. We are forced to believe that the Government of Meghalaya is not interested in solving the border problem with Assam. This has put the residents of those border areas in extreme hardship. I wonder if we will ever elect a Government that can wrest a settlement from Assam.

The Education Minister has listed a few aspirational objectives such as opening up the Engineering College by 2021. We look forward to the fruition of this project as this and the Medical College are projects that have been

long pending. We also expect this Government to give a push to the railway project and also connect Meghalaya by air to the rest of the country.

Yours etc., Pynkhray Lyngdoh, Bangalore

Coordination between constitutional institutions

Editor,

The Governor of Rajasthan Kalraj Mishra has expressed his thoughts that coordination between the Governor and the state government ensures netter round-the-clock development of the state. The statement truly deserves applause and is the right move towards good governance. We have seen differences arising between Governors and the state governments in some states. This situation affects the progress of states. The need of the hour is that all constitutional institutions should work in coordination and ensure the prosperity of the state and nation.

Yours etc., Amit Singh Kushwaha, Satna (M.P.)

Looking at Indian masculinity through lenses

I first saw the film *Mardistan* (Macholand): Reflections on Indian Manhood as a graduate student at The University of Texas at Austin. Delving into constructions of masculinity as envisaged by men, both young and aged, what struck me was the sheer simplicity with which filmmaker and anthropologist Harjant Gill examined how ideas of manliness were imagined and viewed in the small towns of India.

In the film, ordinary people shared deeply personal and searingly honest stories of what it meant to be a man in India, in the process showing up as deeply flawed but extremely human and endearing.

"I have known these people for over 10 years," reveals Gill. "When you know someone for that long, you care about how they are represented on the screen even if you don't share their perspectives."

Examining machismo

This deep sense of empathy is a leitmotif in all of Gill's films, be it *Roots of Love* (2011), *Mardistan* (2014) or *Sent Away Boys* (2016). An associate professor of visual anthropology at Towson University in Maryland, Gill's research examines the intersections of masculinity, popular culture and transnational migration in North India.

He recently received the Fulbright-Nehru Academic and Professional Excellence Award and is affiliated with

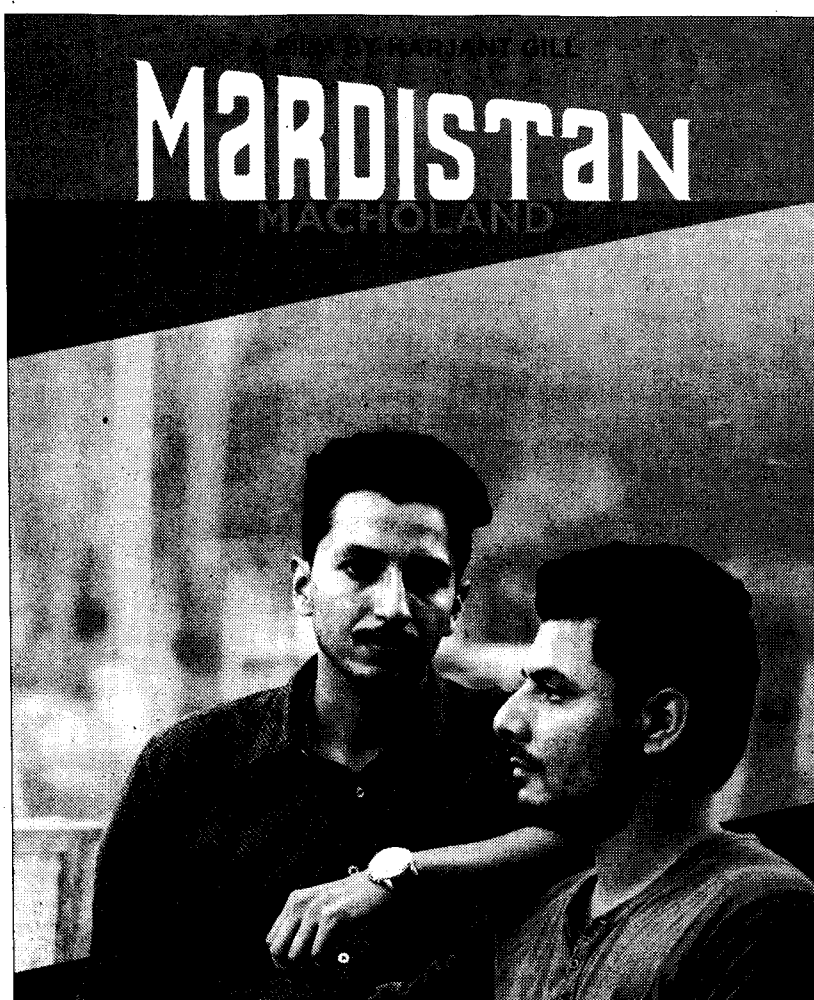
Jamia Millia Islamia University for his latest project, *Tales from Macholand*.

Filmed in New Delhi, this project is designed to be an eight-part immersive virtual reality (VR) web series that will allow audiences to step into the shoes of eight Indian men belonging to different backgrounds, and explore some of the freedoms, privileges, responsibilities and burdens of being men in India today.

This is a topic Gill is uniquely familiar with. His family moved from Chandigarh to California when he was 14 years old. Gill went on to study visual anthropology at San Francisco State University before pursuing his Ph.D. in anthropology at American University in Washington, D.C., where he now resides.

"I came out to my parents when I was 16," says Gill. "They are very accepting now, but it took a long time for them to come to terms with my sexual identity."

According to Gill, he was among the first openly gay students in his high school. "I confronted a lot of homophobia and harassment, which attuned me to men's lives and what constitutes normative masculinity," he says. With the help of a few encouraging teachers and classmates, Gill started the first gay-straight alliance in his high school, which worked to create a supportive environment for other lesbian, gay, bisexual,



transgender and queer (LGBTQ) students.

Celebrating contradictions

For Gill, films are a way to shine a spotlight on issues that are deeply uncomfortable but must be brought out into the public domain if we are to move toward becoming a more equitable society.

Gill's films have been screened at film festivals, academic conferences and on television networks worldwide, including BBC, Doordarshan and PBS. "I deliberately screened *Mardistan* through Doordarshan because I wanted audiences across India to see it and start conversations about how gender informs experiences of men, women and anyone who does not fit the gender binary," he says.

Gill is a documentary filmmaker, but his immersive training as an anthropologist means a deeply ethnographic approach to storytelling. "As anthropologists, we are trained to listen to the silences," he says.

Gill is also working on a book based on his research, titled *Coming of Age in Macholand*. He expresses an incredible sense of gratitude that as an academic, he can go to India on a sabbatical and spend a year researching and filming.

With his project, Gill hopes to reach out to younger audiences in India who consume media largely via their

mobile phones, through social media platforms like YouTube. Working with three organizations in Delhi, TARSHI (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues), MAVA (Men Against Violence and Abuse) and the YP Foundation, he is creating a series of short narratives around masculinity that can also be viewed in 360 degrees using virtual reality, as part of a curriculum around topics of gender and masculinity.

"We want to find ways to engage young Indians in conversations around masculinity and sexuality," he explains. "VR 360 is exciting, easily adaptable to mobile devices and promotes a kind of engagement and empathy that audiences might not experience by watching a documentary film."

Through *Tales From Macholand*, Gill aims to unpack the popular archetypes of men in Indian media as either protective, violent or controlling of Indian women. "I am trying to widen this narrow framework of what it means to be a man," he says. "It is important to enable men to reject these stereotypical definitions, and to show them that patriarchal supremacy does not necessarily benefit men."

All of Gill's documentaries, including *Mardistan* are available for streaming for free via his website, www.harjantgill.com (SPAN/TWF)

From 'Laal Salaam' to 'Jai Shri Ram'

An in-depth look at how Bengal went from 'Laal Salaam' to 'Jai Shri Ram' in the space of less than a decade. From being a fringe political party in 2013 to sweeping nearly half of the states 42 Lok Sabha seats in 2019, the BJP has gained ground in West Bengal, aided partly by the RSS's exponential growth during Mamata Banerjee's chief ministerial tenure (2011 onwards).

"Mission Bengal" by Snigdhendu Bhattacharya documents the BJP's extraordinary rise in the state and attempts to look at these developments in the historical context of Bengal — from the rise of Hindu nationalism and Muslim separatism in the 19th century, the Partition and its fallout, the impact of developments in Bangladesh, the influence of leftist ideals on the

TMC workers, panchayat members and municipal corporators their perception about administrative delivery and the reputation of local TMC leaders. There was synergy between the three tiers.

'Didike Bolo' helpline was used by the people to complain about anything and everything — from administrative affairs to the TMC's internal matters. The complaints were verified and acted upon. It is not that all problems were solved, but as the reach of the programme expanded with time, newspapers, TV channels and news portals were reporting an increasing number of success stories. A youth who lost a leg in an accident got a job in the education department; poor parents got their children enrolled in schools; distant villages got roads and footbridges; slums got improved sewerage and drainage systems, ambulances were booked for critical patients and pregnant women, and so on. It became the general helpline for the people.

Besides, four major policy decisions were taken based on large-scale demands: institution of a monthly pension scheme of Rs 1,000 for senior citizens from the SC and ST communities, a housing scheme for tea garden employees, relaxation of norms for obtaining caste certificates, and limiting transfer of school teachers to within their home districts.

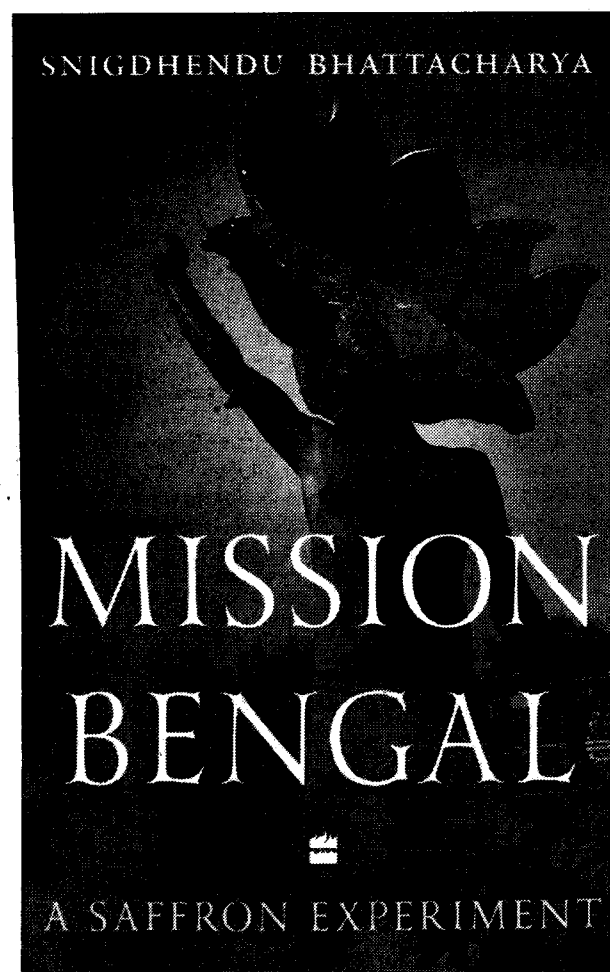
There was another significant change — the TMC had a special focus on the backward classes, who made more than one-third of Bengal's population of 9.03 crore, according to the census of 2011. Hindus formed 70.54 per cent of the population, with the share of the SCs being 23.5 per cent of the whole population and the STs being 5.8 per cent. Even though the OBC population did not feature in census data, the state had a 7 per cent reservation for OBCs in jobs and education before Muslims too were brought under the OBC category in 2013.

From a demographic perspective, Bengal was an ideal state for winning elections based on Dalit-Muslim political unity, with the two communities making up 50.5 per cent of the state's population.

'PK told us that we needed to solve the mystery of why the backward classes, especially the SCs, were in general voting against the BJP all over India but in favour for them in West Bengal,' said the TMC minister. 'PK's explanation was that corruption and highhandedness on the part of TMC leaders had hit the backward classes most, as they made the lowest strata of society and were easy prey.'

This author, however, had a feeling that Dalit votes turned towards the BJP not only because of the TMC's malpractices and highhandedness but also because of the RSS' social work. The RSS in Bengal had the state's backward regions dominated by the backward classes as their focus areas for myriad social work, penetrating the society deeper than what the TMC perceived.

(An excerpt from *Mission Bengal: A Saffron Experiment* by Snigdhendu Bhattacharya, published by HarperCollins)



psyche of the Bengali people, and the demographic changes in the state over the past few decades.

Here is an excerpt:

The Trinamool Congress was changing and Prashant Kishor was the change agent. If the BJP was gaining from the work of the RSS, the TMC was gaining from PK's I-PAC. Mamata's trust in PK's ways of working increased manifold, and PK started emerging as one of Didi's top confidantes after the party's assembly bye-election success.

So, what did PK advise Didi? According to a senior minister, who wished to remain anonymous, PK told the TMC top brass that four things were essential — administrative delivery, a vibrant party organization, ideological consistency and a clear perspective on what went wrong and how.

The first two aspects were covered under the elaborate, three-tier grievance redressal system, involving the grievances monitoring cell at the chief minister's office, the Didike Bolo helpline, and the survey teams of I-PAC that travelled the state's length and breadth, inquiring from the common people, grassroots-level

'Chance to share knowledge, experience with future generations'

By Arundhuti Banerjee

The National School Of Drama (NSD) appointed actor Paresh Rawal as Chairman on Thursday, and the veteran film and theatre actor says he is looking forward to sharing his knowledge and experience with the future generations.

"Yes, it is confirmed that I have been appointed Chairman of NSD. I am very happy! I have been doing theatre for the past 48 years. I started doing plays and stage performances since 1972. So, I know the performance part as well as the structural part of it, the training, what it requires to prepare everyone in every aspect of theatre — the performing arts," Rawal said.

Veteran actor Paresh Rawal excited to take over as NSD Chairman

"It will be a great opportunity for me to share my knowledge and experience with the future generations. I am really looking forward to it. I am ready to take responsibility and face the challenges along with it. It is a happy day for me and I want to look forward to my new role. Thank you," he added.

Rawal, also a politician affiliated with the BJP, takes a pragmatic line when asked if art has the power to unite and establish harmony in society given the current socio-cultural and political realities.

"I will tell you something.

Whether it is our mythology — our epics like 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata' — or our holy books like the 'Bhagavad Geeta', the 'Bible', the 'Quran Sharif', we are told that truth wins and human beings should live in harmony and refrain from violence. But we all know what is happening in reality, right? People still get into violence. So, why are you putting the onus on art? I am slightly skeptical about this. On one hand, we hold peace talks and on the other hand we can all see what is going on in the world!" he replied.

However, he does believe that good art is powerful enough to offer a new perspective. "A good piece of art can provoke your thought, can offer you a new perspective. Whether you want take it home and apply it in life is still your choice."

Widely respected for his versatility, Rawal was honoured with the Padma Shri in 2014, and he won the National Film Award in 1994 as Best Supporting Actor for *Woh Chokri* and *Sir*. He is also widely known for his outstanding performance in the biopic *Sardar* (1993), where he essayed the titular role of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.

Among his many popular roles are *Naam* (1986), *Shiva* (1990), *Tamanna* (1996), *Aitraaz* (2004), *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!* (2008), *OMG: Oh My God!* (2012), and *Table No. 21* (2013).

He is particularly loved for his comic roles in commercial entertainers including *Andaz Apna Apna* (1994), *Chachi 420* (1997), *Hera Pheri* (2000), *Aankhen* (2002), *Awara Paagal Deewana* (2002), *Hungama* (2003), *Hulchul* (2004), *Garam Masala* (2005), *Phir Hera Pheri* (2006), *Bhagam Bhag* (2006), *Malamaal Weekly* (2006), *Welcome* (2007) and *Aitthi Tum Kab Jaoge?* (2010).

(The author can be contacted at arundhuti.b@ians.in)

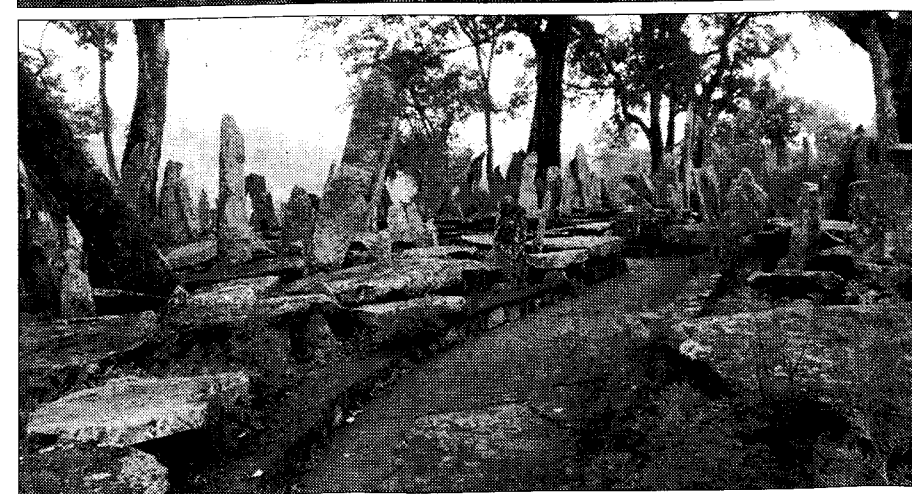
History lessons from Nartiang

By Prasanta Talukdar

Nartiang has an important place in history of Meghalaya. It is famous for two historic structures. One is a simple but important Durga temple and other is the largest collection of Khasi monoliths. The 500-year-old Nartiang Durga Temple which is locally famous as Maa Jainteshwari Shakti Peeth located on top of Jaintia Hills.

It is one of three Shakti Peeths of Maa Durga in Northeast India, out of at Guwahati in Assam and Maa Tripureshwari Shakti Peeth at Udaipur in Tripura. Huge monolith deity of Goddess Durga is the main deity at this temple. It's believed that the left thigh of Devi Sathi fell here in the Jaintia Hills. Inside the temple, brocade covers a single platform. It has three idols, among them one old stone idol of Devi and one metal idol of Durga with eight arms and crushing Mahishasur with her foot.

In the 17th century, the Khasi and neighbouring tribes came under the Jaintia kingdom. They were led by King Jaso Manik who practiced their ancient religion. However, Jaso Manik married a Hindu princess by the name of Lakshmi Narayana. She was a great Shakti devotee and she introduced Hinduism to her husband and his kingdom. One night, the king had a dream in which the goddess appeared and showed him a sacred spot in Nartiang where her temple must be established. She also explained the special significance of this spot.



(Top) The Durga temple at Nartiang and (below) the famous Monoliths.

Also, the priest at this temple is not a Brahmin like in most other temples. When the King Jaso Manik required a priest to maintain his new Durga temple, no Brahmin was willing to take the job because it involved human sacrifice. Therefore, Jaso Manik had to bring a Marathi kshatriya to be the priest. Kshatriyas were allowed to serve as priests but were also agreed with performing human and animal sacrifice.

Today, the priest who serves at the temple is a 29th generation descendant of that Marathi priest whom Jaso Manik had brought all the way from Maharashtra in the 17th century. 150 years ago, when the kingdom fell to the British Empire, they banned human sacrifice. Then, they began sacrificing goats on Maha Ashtami. They make it wear a human

mask and a dhoti before the sacrifice. This practice still continues till this date. They follow the rituals of both Hindu and ancient Khasi traditions. In 1987 Ramakrishna Mission of Cherrapunjee (Sohra) rebuilt the temple. Today, the Durga temple house which is a diverse look when compared to other temples as no other temple shows this kind of look.

Monolith is a symbol of

remembrance in the Jaintia Hills. The clusters of monoliths have been erected to mark the reigns of the erstwhile Jaintia Kings, holding a significant event in the history of Meghalaya. There are many folktales justifying the presence of monoliths and each of these is amusing enough. Meghalaya has got many way-side monoliths stretching over the Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

But the Nartiang Monoliths are considered to be the world's tallest monoliths ever found. A monolith is usually a large upright block of stone, especially one shaped into or serving as a pillar or monument. According to the records, the Nartiang Monoliths are believed to be existed from 1500 AD and 1835 AD.

Nartiang was usually considered to be the market place for the residence of the Jaintiapur kingdom at that time.

The tallest monolith in the world is 'Moo Shyndrang' placed exactly in the middle of the site, which is 8 metres tall. The monoliths are categorised as menhirs and dolmens by locals. Since the historical monument is centuries old there are several beliefs regarding its origin. Many locals here say that each monolith marks a particular event or individual, some others believe in the legend of the king and the old woman. The beauty of the place is so immeasurable. The beauty of history is highlighted in those stones.

The lives of the people, their strength and culture are also being made known to us from this site.

Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are potential abuse materials

By Dr. Chayanika Sarma

Nowadays, hand sanitizers are abundantly and easily available in the market. At this moment, when it is used so extensively, one must also be aware of its harmful effects.

The various hazards include the following:

If someone goes near fire immediately after applying hand sanitizers, there is high risk of getting burn injury.

If kept close to any fire source, sanitizers may catch fire.

Keeping it inside vehicles in hot weather exposes it to sun rays, which increases risk for spontaneous combustion.

Repeated and excessive use of hand sanitizers can destroy the microbes and protective bacteria present in skin — causing health hazards like skin problems, irritation in eyes, conjunctivitis, nausea, vomiting etc.

The most dangerous hazard is its addictive potential.

There are cases of hand sanitizer addiction all over the world, especially during this era when they are used extensively. There are cases of abuse in the form of drinking and inhaling hand sanitizers. This is more common among children, adolescents and younger age groups. Hand sanitizer abuse potential is high as these are cheap, widely available, and there is no age limit for their purchase.

This abuse is highly dangerous as it may cause Alcohol poisoning, coma

During this time of COVID-19 pandemic, alcohol-based hand sanitizers have become indispensable part of our lives. One of the health protocols to fight COVID-19 is to keep hands clean by frequently washing with soap and water or using alcohol-based hand sanitizers to disinfect the hands

and even death. Hand sanitizers should never be consumed orally. There are many instances of people addicted to alcohol drinking hand sanitizers to get high and resulting in various adverse outcomes.

Abusing by inhaling hand sanitizers is also observed. Initially people who abuses starts liking the smell of sanitizers in their hands. Gradually the purpose of use shifts from sanitizing the hands to enjoying the smell. They frequently rub the sanitizer in hands to smell it. Gradually they start feeling a high and have temptation to smell it repeatedly. More they stay away from it they develop a strong craving to smell it.

There are different ways by which abusers inhale the sanitizers including:

□ **Huffing:** The content is put in clothes, which are then pressed to the mouth

□ **Bagging:** The contents are poured into a plastic bag, and inhaled through the bag opening

□ **Sniffing or snorting:** The content is taken in hands and sniffed, or sniffed directly from the container

□ **Spraying:** Spraying the substance directly into nose or mouth

The primary constituents of hand sanitizers are

Ethyl alcohol and Isopropyl alcohol, also known as rubbing alcohol. Ethyl alcohol is more potent than the ethanol used to produce alcoholic drinks. This potency is necessary to increase the sanitizing power of this alcohol-based product. They are meant for external use only. So abusing by taking in even a small amount of this sanitizer does more harm than drinking larger quantities of alcoholic drinks.

The alcohol content along with other chemical ingredients present in the sanitizers are toxic and dangerous to the nervous system, cardio-pulmonary system and other internal organs of the body. Inhaling alcohol vapour causes a rapid and intense feeling of being high. People who inhale the vapour get drunk more quickly, because the vapours along with the other harmful chemicals enter the lungs and are immediately absorbed into bloodstream from the lungs, which then goes straight to the brain. They damage and kill brain cells and also injure lungs and other parts of respiratory system over time. Damage is observed more in teens and young adults as their brain are still in developmental stages.

If a person abuses hand sanitizers, there will be certain changes in his or her behavior - such as excess pre-occupation with the sanitizer, smells it recurrently by various ways, purchases sanitizers frequently, smell of sanitizer comes from their nose, mouth, dress, etc. Along with the above habits, repeated and long term use may cause physical symptoms like headaches, migraine, nausea, vomiting, digestion problems, allergic reactions, slurred speech, running nose, sore throat, sinusitis, drowsiness, various respiratory problems, light headedness, giddiness, mood swings, memory problems, agitation, irritability, hallucinations, seizures, impaired judgment, loss of inhibition, etc. These damages may turn permanent in some of the affected individuals over time.

Managing the problem:

► To avoid the problem, discuss with children and teenagers about the proper way of using hand sanitizer, their abuse potential and ill-effects.

► Supervise children when they are using sanitizers.

► When schools and colleges will open, children should not be encouraged to carry their own hand

sanitizers. Rather, hand washing should be encouraged. Set hand washing points at different places in the schools and colleges. Hand sanitizers should be kept at specific common places in the class, so that teachers and staffs can monitor their use safely.

► Refrain from leaving sanitizers inside the vehicles.

► Avoid hand sanitizer spray bottles as while spraying the sanitizer, fumes spread in the air which are directly inhaled by the person inadvertently.

► After working with chemicals, do not use sanitizers directly as there may be chemical reaction. Wash the hands first with soap and water.

► Do not go near any fire source (like cooking) immediately after applying hand sanitizers.

► All alcohol containing products such as hand sanitizers, wine, beer, hair tonic, face toners, etc. should be stored safely and out of reach of children.

► Awareness programs should be arranged to educate people, especially for young children.

► In labels of all hand sanitizer bottles, the manufacturer should mention the chemical composition as isopropanol instead of iso-

propyl alcohol. This will decrease the attraction of these sanitizers for potentially dangerous abuse.

► Hand sanitizers are not meant for physical hand washing as they cannot remove dirt and grime effectively.

► Encourage hand washing with soap and water.

► Seek professional help if anyone finds themselves or any close one abusing hand sanitizers. Treatment and counselling are available for all types of addictions.

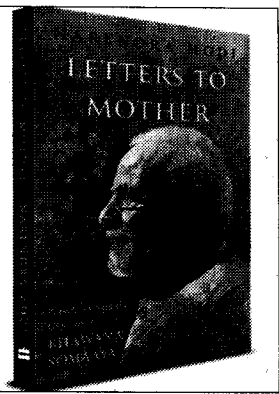
Hand sanitizers are a useful product if used in a proper way. One should be sensible and rational while using it. One should be aware of the benefits as well as the harmful aspects of it. Addiction is a disease.

A person starts any addiction by choice; but later it becomes a compulsion because he or she becomes physically and psychologically dependant on it. It is imperative to understand the harmful potential and take necessary precautions before it becomes a threat to the individual and society at large.

(The author is Consultant Psychiatrist, Supercare Hospital, Shillong)

‘Not really worried about troll armies’

Bhawana Somaaya narrates her experience of translating PM Modi's book



By Sukant Deepak

It all started when a writer friend familiar with her translation work suggested that she consider Prime Minister Narendra Modi's book in Gujarati for translation into English.

"So I looked for a copy, and it took me a while to read and work on it. I sent across some sample chapters and one thing led to another," says translator, author and film critic Bhawana Somaaya about "Letters to Mother" published by HarperCollins India.

Adding that it is an unusual book, considering that the letters are diary pages of Narendra Modi's conversations with the 'Mother Goddess', Somaaya says, "Written in 1986 and compiled as a coffee table book by Image Publisher in 2014, it is destiny that I decide to translate the writings in 2020. What is appealing about the content is his intensity, transparency of emotions, his commitment to his conviction and need for self-expression."

In fact, Modi had earlier said about the book: "This is not an attempt at literary writing; the passages featured in this book are reflections of my observations

and sometimes unprocessed thoughts, expressed without filter..."

"I am not a writer, most of us are not; but everybody seeks expression, and when the urge to unload becomes overpowering, there is no option but to take pen and paper, not necessarily to write but to introspect and unravel what is happening within the heart and the head and why."

Despite the fact that it does not take long for the troll armies to 'label' a writer in present times, it does not really worry Somaaya.

"My identity is that of a film critic, columnist and author. I am also associated with books on Lord Krishna and with translation work, and 'Letters to Mother' is one more in that list," the author says, adding that she did her job to the best of her ability and how people react to it is really not in her control.

Recipient of the Padma Shri in 2017, Somaaya has written over 13 books on the history of Hindi cinema and biographies of Bollywood stars, including 'Salaam Bollywood', 'The Story So Far' and her trilogy, 'Amitabh Bachchan - The Legend', 'Bachchanalia - The Films And Memorabilia of Amitabh Bachchan' and 'Amitabh Lexicon'.

She is now working on a nostalgic idea of movies in the 90s, besides penning her parents' love story when they migrated with six children from Karachi in 1947.

"It is going to be a difficult write because I have to rely on my older siblings to tell me the story and most of them are no more. Still I have faith that I'll be able to do it... that some magic will happen," she says.

‘Star - Gazing’

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, September 13, 2020

Jupiter gets direct on your solar return chart and this will prove to be very beneficial and favorable for the whole year. You will enjoy best health this year. Your enemies and opponents will not be able to cause any harm, however hard they try but you need to keep an eye on their activities. You will get support of your bosses and associates. You will use your capabilities and increase your profits. You will also take tough decisions in business and trade, which will keep your influence and domination, intact. You will be in a strong and able financial condition. You will also find inspiration for new works. Auspicious functions like marriage of a family members or arrival of a new baby will take place.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

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

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

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

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

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

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

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

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

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

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

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



Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

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

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

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

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

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

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

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

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

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

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

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

Artificial Intelligence: Futuristic Career Option

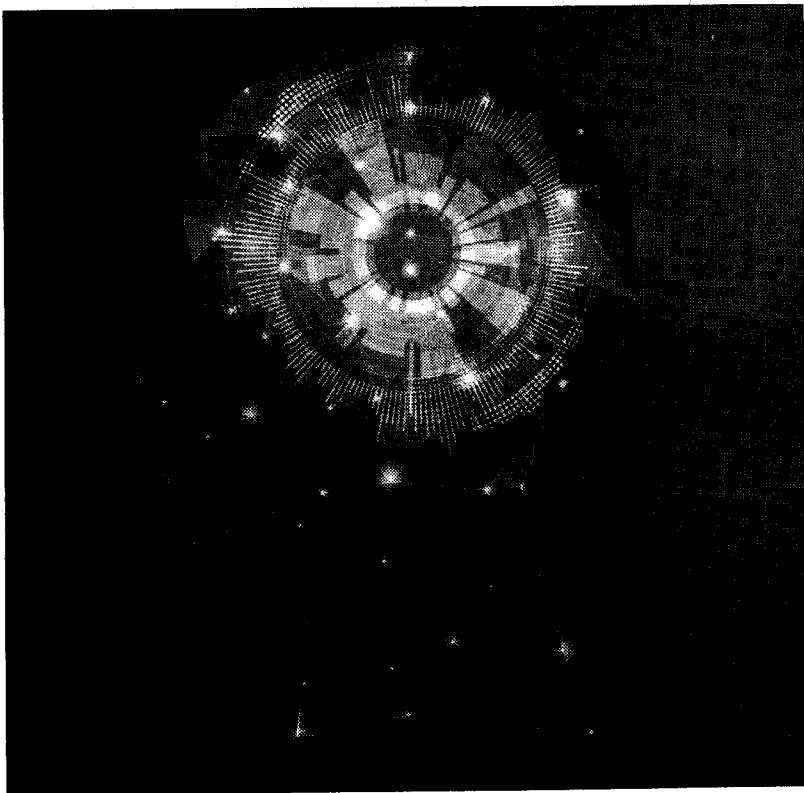
By Ranjan K Baruah

We are moving ahead for our future and new career avenues are getting more demands in the age of science and technology. One of the areas where we may focus more is artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence (AI), sometimes called machine intelligence, is intelligence demonstrated by machines, unlike the natural intelligence displayed by humans and animals. Leading AI textbooks define the field as the study of "intelligent agents": any device that perceives its environment and takes actions that maximize its chance of successfully achieving its goals. Colloquially, the term "artificial intelligence" is often used to describe machines (or computers) that mimic "cognitive" functions that humans associate with the human mind, such as "learning" and "problem solving".

In today's world we have seen the importance of machines and computers. The recent pandemic due to COVID 19 has bough human more close to machine system. Right from online classes for the young people to healthcare for the elders, we are all connected with machines and systems. AI is poised to disrupt our world. With intelligent machines enabling high-level cognitive processes like thinking, perceiving, learning, problem solving and decision making, coupled with advances in data collection and aggregation, analytics and computer processing power, AI presents opportunities to complement and supplement human intelligence and enrich the way people live and work.

India, being the fastest growing economy with the second largest population in the world, has a significant stake in the AI revolution. With incredible advances made in data collection, processing and computation power, intelligent systems can now be deployed to take over a variety of tasks, enable connectivity and enhance productivity. As AI's capabilities have dramatically expanded, so have its utility in a growing number of fields.

While AI has the potential to provide large incremental value to a wide range of sectors, adoption till date has been driven primarily from a commercial perspective. But it is not only limited to commercial perspectives and it can make positive impacts on other social areas too. According to a paper of NITI Aayog, in India it can make impact in a) Healthcare: increased access and affordability of quality healthcare, b) Agriculture: enhanced farmers' income, increased farm productivity and reduction of wastage, c) Education: improved access and quality of education, d) Smart Cities and Infrastructure: efficient and connectivity for the burgeoning urban population, and e) Smart Mobility and Transportation: smarter and safer modes of transportation and better traffic and congestion problems.



There is no doubt that AI might just be the single largest technology revolution of our live times, with the potential to disrupt almost all aspects of human existence. With many industries aggressively investing in cognitive and AI solutions, global investments are forecast to achieve a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 50.1% to reach USD57.6 billion in 2021.

There are many institutes offering courses related to AI. Aspirants should be from the science stream to do courses related to AI. Different IIT, IITs, NITs apart from other leading institutes in India offers courses related to AI. There are some online courses to make students aware of the foundations and basics of AI. Job opportunities are in different sectors which are related to AI or similar activities. There are start ups in India related with the same areas. Government of India has started many projects where qualified aspirants may join. Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology has started different initiatives and projects.

There is no doubt that future belongs to them who are qualified and skilled and plan career accordance with time. The future is more with AI or machine learning. This is the right time to choose these kinds of subjects to make our career vibrant and get placement easily and at the same stay safe and stay healthy in the time of pandemic.

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

“As long as there’s a few farmers out there, we’ll keep fighting for them.”

– Willie Nelson

The Shillong Times

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Parliament again

PARLIAMENT starts its delayed Monsoon Session today for a fortnight’s deliberations and for conduct of important business. The last session ended right when Covid came calling, and life was brought to a standstill. Covid-induced social distancing norms stopped a recall of the Parliament for its monsoon session, but better late than never. The proceedings will be limited to a fortnight, and urgent matters and bills are bound to come up for discussions and passage.

The government is bound to face a tough time, as its failures on several fronts are exercising the minds of the people and the Opposition. The government faced the Covid scenario with grit and determination in the beginning, and the total lockdown began from March 25. Things looked like being under control for the first couple of months, but the scenario is worse today. India is edging close to the top position in the world in Covid spread, though the figure of deaths so far is very high. With the daily infection rate touching a lakh or so, the pandemic seems unstoppable unless an effective vaccine appears on the scene.

While everyone lent their shoulders for the migrant labour to fall on and cry when they made a clamour for immediate return to their native states from the urban sprawls in Mumbai, Delhi etc, the government facilitated their travel by special trains. They took with them the virus, and the result is the present uncontrollable scenario. China with tough measures claims to have controlled the virus spread, and its total number of infections is in the range of over 85,000 while India’s daily infection rate is much higher than this number. State governments now need to act responsibly. The Centre should now explain why the scenario worsened.

In this parliament session, the government will sweat it out to answer why the national economy is facing such adverse odds, the growth having fallen into negative territory. Public sector banks are in a state of collapse, and steps like merger alone will not save them from doom. The government has not been able to set right the bad loans problem, which act like a canker on the banking system. The six years of the Modi rule could not do much to reverse the trend. Corruption, rather, is not limited to one sector. The entire system is getting corrupted and the government is throwing its hands up, rather than taking effective steps to check maladies like these.

Doing away with Question Hour by itself will not save the government from embarrassment during this session. The opposition must pin the government down on all major issues that directly affect people across India in this limited span of two weeks.

TO THE EDITOR

Kudos to the entrepreneur

Editor,
Through this column I would like to congratulate this young achiever and talented man Rudy E Kharmawphlang. To me he has become an inspiration to the youths of our state and even outside, and the saying absolutely befits him, “Where there is a will there is a way.” My major findings of utmost importance are as below:-

First, the struggle that Rudy Kharmawphlang narrates where he started looking for a government job here but, was disappointed to see that no matter how eligible a person is, the backdoor entry is rampant.

Second, the research part of Rudy where he attracts foreign team members. He says he was glued to his desktop for months trying to get all the information, and finally connected with people from Israel and Canada who believed in him and encouraged him to fulfill his dreams.

Third, the team formation and exposure journey wherein Rudy says, that he realised that this would be a big project, so he decided to form a team of four people – one fabricator, two civil contractors, one marketing and one publicity person and myself to kickstart the operation and even took his team to Dhaka

for a five-day exposure trip in 2017 to learn more about the technology.

Fourth, the determination of Rudy and his team while countering several rejections. They submitted their proposal to the bank only to have it rejected on the excuse that it’s a high-risk project. They then approached NABARD but were again disappointed as the bank said the project did not fit their existing schemes. Rudy then approached NEDFi but here, too, they were disappointed.

Thereafter, they went to the fisheries department for help and submitted a proposal but were told that aquaponics and hydroponics were not in tune with their guidelines. Finally, they went to the North Eastern Council but here, too, they had to route their application for assistance from the state government.

The branding and creation of products as Rudy describes. He created this set-up on the roof so that he can experiment with it. Now the enterprise called Sawaiom Agro and Allied Products is producing and harvesting nice fresh vegetables every week. Now he grows kale, lettuce, Swiss chard, tomatoes, bell peppers, basil, broccoli, mustard leaves, strawberries, etc. Lastly, the situation Rudy Kharmawphlang found himself in wherein, young entrepreneurs look

to the government to handhold them, but it is unfortunate that genuine projects are not selected.

I therefore would like to say to Rudy that his talent and skills are visible now. He is a self made entrepreneur, and I hope and believe that in future Meghalaya Institute of Entrepreneurship will recognize and add to his and our State’s glory.

Yours etc.,
Joydeep Sharma
Shillong-2

Education is student-centred

Editor,
The number of articles that have been published in your esteemed newspaper on the changing contours of education is significant, not only because the deadly corona virus has necessitated it but because of the inherent flexibility of education. That must now, at least be recognised. Education has an inheritance of adaptability and flexibility. That is because education is student-centred and not teacher-centred or, at best, a collaborative effort between teacher and student. Some of these articles have suggested that online education has come to stay. That is to say that distance education should be adopted for disadvantaged learners. In fact when we go back to the conventional classroom teaching, online

education can still continue. The radio and the television must also be used and new courses must be developed in modular fashion.

Yours etc.,
Ananya S Guha
Shillong -3

Selective protests on issues

Editor,
Several individuals and groups have made their voices heard on the issue of construction of a mall at Barik (old PWD premises) and those who spoke out are vehemently against the idea of a mall in the middle of the city and so near the Civil Hospital and the State Secretariat. Ironically, some of the noisiest pressure groups have remained uncannily silent on this matter. They are also silent on the issue of illegal coal mining and the destruction to the environment due to limestone mining. But the same groups are against uranium mining. Is it because uranium is mined by a government agency and hence they would not be able to extract money from the UCIL or the Atomic Minerals Division here, whereas coal being in the private sector allows for all kind of vested interests to operate?

Whatever be the reasons for their silence on issues affecting the environ-

ment, they are exposing themselves and have by default become supporters of anti-environmental projects. This project should in fact be discarded on the basis of being environmentally unsound. Hope the people win and that the Government is forced to abandon the project.

Yours etc.,
Daplin A Kharkongor,
Via email

Deplorable road condition

Editor,
The road from Mawroh junction (Soul Kitchen point) to Mawkyroth junction (NEHU-Mawtawar road) is in urgent need of repair. The road is in a pathetic condition where potholes are all along this stretch and the road edges are being eroded by rain water. There was some ray of hope a few months ago when there were rumblings and talks that the road will be double-laned for the ensuing National Games. On June 14, 2019, it was reported in a local vernacular daily that Rs 12.50 crore has been sanctioned to re-lay the road from Mawroh to Umjarin from the Central Road Funds. There have been many inspections conducted by the PWD officials and also by the MLA, P T Sawkmie. However, nothing has moved till date for reasons unknown. The pan-

demic has of course stalled most of the projects in the State but I would urge the Department to please start the work if things are in place. Presently, the road is in bad shape and all I pray for through this letter is to do some minor repairs to make it motorable till the major repair and reconstruction is effected.

Yours etc.,
Reward Rymbai,
Via email

Relief to pensioners

Editor,
The government of India is now providing a big relief to its elderly pensioners. The government has relaxed the existing schedule for submission of Life Certificate. According to reports, all Central Government pensioners can submit Life Certificate from 1st November 2020 to 31st December 2020 and during this extended period, the pension will be continued to be paid by the Pension Disbursing Authorities uninterrupted. As an outcome of COVID-19, this is the right move and ensures the safety of senior citizens and bank staffers. It is expected that all state governments should take such actions and facilitate the elderly pensioners.

Yours etc.,
Amit Singh Kushwaha,
Satna (MP)

Kitchen garden

Farmers’ fortitude in the rural areas

By H H Mohrmen

Picture a rural household and the image that comes to the mind is a house with a garden, a pig sty and a chicken coop. This is a typical house in rural areas. The three components of the rural household is not mere arrangement for convenience sake but it represents one important part of life in a village. Apart from the pig and chicken shed, almost every household in the villages maintain a kitchen garden adjacent to their house. The importance of kitchen garden to the villager has not received any serious consideration from the policy makers. It is treated as a tradition that people have been practicing since time immemorial, but there is wisdom in the entire scheme of things.

From the nutrition point of view the kitchen garden which may vary in shape and size caters to the nutritional need of the members of the entire family. At a glance one would see that in the simple garden, the house owners would plant all kinds of vegetables that they need, depending on the season. The kitchen garden which is considered insignificant is in fact a source which provides them a complete diet that they need on a daily basis. Except for major crops like rice and potatoes which farmers plants in the field, the garden provides the family all their nutritional needs.

The other significant aspect of the garden is that it is traditional farming which means that neither chemical compost nor chemical pesticides are used in the garden. The farmers are health conscious and consume produce from their respective gardens only which are organic by default. Apart from variation in the shape and the size of the garden, the other unique aspect of every kitchen garden is diversity of vegetables found there. No matter how big or small their kitchen garden is farmers will grow varieties of vegetables there that will supplement their nutritional needs the whole year round.

However it was the first lockdown due to corona virus pandemic which made people realise the importance of a kitchen garden. The garden not only provides the house owners the

much needed vegetables throughout the lockdown period, but the diversity of vegetables planted in the garden is the basis of food security for the farmers.

The kitchen garden supplies the farmers vegetables that they badly need during the lockdown. More importantly it gives them comfort because it ensures uninterrupted supply of food especially during times of crisis. The lockdown due to pandemic has proved that the kitchen garden stands in good stead for the farmers. Due to the shutdown of markets kitchen gardens provided the much needed vegetables for the rural households. The lockdown helped the farmers realise the wisdom of keeping kitchen garden which our ancestors have practiced since time immemorial.

Kitchen garden is another example of typical subsistence farming practices which adopted by the farmers in the rural areas. The reason is because primarily kitchen gardens are mostly kept for farmers’ own consumption. Kitchen gardens not only provide food for farmers but it also supports the farmers financially when they are able to sell the produce which is in excess of their need.

This story of a participatory guarantee scheme (PGS) group from Mulum village best describes how a kitchen garden not only provides the much needed vegetables for the farmers during lockdown but it also helps the farmers earn some money from the surplus that they produce. The PGS group in the village was initiated and hand-held by SURE in collaboration with NESFAS as part of the ‘No one shall be left behind initiative’ a project supported by REC. The PGS was able to supply and sell its excess produce to places like Jowai.

An interesting turn of events was when the dorbar chnong decided to intervene. When the leaders of the village realized that the government was going to extend the lockdown, out of concern for shortage of vegetables for the community’s own consumption, they suggested that the PGS

should slow down its supply of vegetables outside the village.

During the lockdown the War Jaintia area under Amlarem sub division was one area which had to bear the major brunt when markets were closed and supply of food was stopped. The topography of War Jaintia area is steep and there is no scope for planting rice or even to have a small kitchen garden. People in the area therefore depend solely on supply of food from outside for their consumption. In the entire War Jaintia area not only rice comes from outside but people have to depend on supply from outside the region even for vegetables. To some extent rice and other essential items were supplied by the government from the Public Distribution System (PDS), but for vegetables they had to rely on the markets and the same did not come because markets were closed due to lockdown.

The traditional planning of the settlement of villages in the War Jaintia area is also not feasible for a kitchen garden. In the War Jaintia area houses are built very close to each other and footpaths criss-cross one another. There is hardly any space between two houses or a public space. Houses in a typical War Jaintia village do not have backyards or front yards so the possibility of having a kitchen garden is almost zero. Moreover the torrential rains carried away all the top soil down the slopes to the plains. Hence the soil in the area is dry and arid and is not conducive for starting a garden.

The other major problem of not having a kitchen garden in the War Jaintia area is also because the economy of the people in the area is cash crop economy. The people of Amlarem subdivision totally depend on cash crops like aracanut, betel leaves, broomstick and to some extent pepper. Vegetables produced from the area are insignificant. Land tenure system in the area in which land is owned by the clans should not come in the way of farmers having a kitchen garden because

clans do lease land to others for farming purposes.

The lockdown due to the pandemic has made the people of the area realise that being a cash crop economy compelled them to depend on supply from outside for all their basic needs. And unlike farmers in the different parts of the state, they have to depend from outside supply even for vegetables. Fortunately during the lockdown their vegetable needs were compensated to some extent by wild edibles from the forest.

People in the War Jaintia area need to rethink and explore the idea of having even a small kitchen garden of their own. It is not impossible to start a kitchen garden. The government only needs to think out of the box and help introduce kitchen gardens in the area. Of course it is true there is no space to start a kitchen garden near human settlements or in the villages but there are places outside or in the suburb of the village which are not steep and can be used as kitchen gardens.

If space and land constraints are the problem, people can start kitchen gardens using new farming practices like for example vertical farming or maybe new farming technology. Fertility of the soil can also be addressed by teaching farmers the different methods of making compost like Vermicompost, Berkley and Bokashi composting. Patricia Mukhim the Editor of the Shillong Times recently shared a story on her Facebook page about Rudy E. Kharmawphlang a young entrepreneur who grows vegetables using new farming ideas like hydroponics and aquaponics. Perhaps these new farming ideas will be suitable for those who live in the War Jaintia area where land and soil fertility is a problem and help them grow vegetables at least for their own consumption.

People in the region need to have a kitchen garden because it is their first line of defence in their fight against lack of nutritional food. Kitchen gardens are the households’ fortitude in the rural areas.

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Indian slowbalisation

Revival only via cash, jobs

By Shivaji Sarkar

It is globalisation across the globe. The world has applied the brakes on the economy due to an unprecedented civilisational lockdown. India, termed as the engine of global growth, has taken a big hit and it may take quite a few years for it to regain its strength.

All economies in intense relationships having lost over 30 per cent of their GDP are now getting more local and regional. Never before has civilisation panicked before an epidemic as it has unwisely done now. Let there be a probe whether it is a conspiracy to kill Indian economy or not.

The supposed disease is not lethal, in the Indian context, but the panicky closure of all activities, travel and business has contracted, a better word perhaps is ruined, the economy. Rightfully former Reserve Bank of India Governor Raghuram Rajan says that India’s GDP contraction must alarm everyone. He is correct because India, the global growth leader, had started slowing down since August 2019 amid Sino-US trade war, thaw in EU economy and fall in world demand.

Even with some resumption of activities its fall in GDP by minus 23.9 per cent in June quarter so far may have an average contraction of 14.8 per cent (Goldman Sachs) or 11.8 per cent (India Ratings) or 10.5 per cent (Fitch Ratings) for 2020-21. Most of these estimates indicate a looming deterioration in asset quality in financial sector. The agencies are expecting positive growth not before 2022. Fitch says India records sharpest GDP contractions but expects a rebound.

The Union Finance Ministry sees ‘V’ shape recovery. There are talks of many other shapes, including a ‘K’ shape. The K is reflective of the stock market performance, mostly moody – sharp decline to occasional hike to sharply different pathways – in short erratic. This has links to the mutual funds, many insurance companies, provident fund, including government’s NPF and EPF.

The world stock markets are in tizzy except for tech giants like Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, Facebook and Google which have added \$1 trillion to their market capitalisation. Cornerstone Macro says 100 of the 500 on Standard & Poor’s index, are trading at more than 50 per cent below their peak. Indian situation is similar as we find that Reliance has added \$10 million. Some other tech companies have done well. But most others in mid and small segments particularly airlines, real estate, hotels, restaurants are not in demand.

Through 2019, initial public offerings (IPO) dried up as volatility grips the market. Till August 2019 only 11 companies launched IPOs raising Rs 10,049 crore compared to 24 public issues raising Rs 20,559 crore in 2018.

There is an ‘X’ factor too being discussed since August 2019 amid the then global growth slowing down, affecting the Indian economy. It is a twin balance sheet problem of high non-performing assets in and credit stress in companies.

The job creation growth fell alarmingly since 2018-19, according to CARE Ratings study of 960 large companies, in farming, crude oil, telecom, iron and steel, mining and hospitality. In the large firms, the job growth was 4.2 per cent (5.78 million) against 6.2 per cent in 2017-18. The centre for Monitoring Indian Economy estimated in 2018, 11 million people lost their jobs, 9.1 million in rural and 1.8 million in urban areas.

The slowdown has been

building up for global and domestic reasons. The country had gone through many unavoidable shocks. With GST and political tilt economy is more centralised than federal. Somehow allowing space to States is replaced by a command mechanism possibly with a belief that it would lead to better controls and performance. This is against the basic cultural ethos of this country.

The GST strengthened the command structure as States became dependent on the centre for getting back what they could have earned or collected on their own. It has led the States to penury for no fault of theirs. How they would have earned revenue in the lockdown is not known but certainly State treasuries would not have been empty.

In the new scenario, the States, including those run by non-BJP parties, have to borrow Rs 97,000 crore from a special window of RBI though the total shortfall is estimated at Rs 2.35 lakh crore. This would allow them to get a part of the GST cess levied on liquor, cigarettes, aerated water, automobiles and other items.

As such, this would help them pay salaries to the staff and may meet some administrative expenses, but certainly would not be enough to pay for development-oriented projects. The States would have to cut capital expenditure (capex) by Rs 3.4 lakh crore. The borrowings would increase States’ deficits. Revenue expenses would also increase leading to sharper contraction.

A rating agency ICRA calculated that actual deficit for States would be Rs 2.9 lakh crore, Rs 57000 crore more than estimated, in 2021. The Centre’s shareable taxes at Rs 13.4 lakh crore for the current financial year, ICRA says, is 30 per cent lower than the budgeted amount of Rs 19.1 lakh crore.

The Indian economy will be in the cycle of losing growth momentum witnessed in six quarters before September 2019, when growth fell to 4.5 per cent as per Central Statistical Office (CSO), the lowest since March 2013. The IMF 2019 forecast Indian economy could end up doing worse as subsequent developments have proved it.

The present developments reveal that 68 per cent companies will see hurdle in recovery. This is as per a survey by Federation of Chambers and Commerce and Industry (FICCI). The remedy suggested is simple – additional cash transfers to migrant workers, poor and farmers and a temporary halt in GST collection. The companies also want financial liquidity, managing costs, manpower availability and supply chain issue solutions. Though unlock has a positive impact, if the liquidity and transactions in cash do not improve, the hiring and expansions may not happen.

With the mini trade deal with the US unlikely till US presidential elections in November and the world remaining in a thaw, the Indian job scenario and growth is to remain difficult. Engineers, pilots, journalists, labourers all have lost jobs. The IT, automobile, manufacturing, mines, transport and other sectors are hit hard. The CMIE estimates 18.9 million (about 2 crore) jobs are lost during April-July 2020, including 5 million in July.

All this calls for a full scale overhaul of economic policies as it’s nothing short of a national crisis. All political parties, stakeholders and policy makers must sit across the table to debate and evolve that elusive new path to come out of this slowbalisation.---INFA

“Wonder is the basis of worship.”
— Thomas Carlyle

The Shillong Times
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ADCs and accountability

THE world ‘autonomous’ in defining the District Council an institution created by the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution needs to be revisited. Autonomy to the Councils was intended to enable the tribes, then under the governance of a majority non-tribal government to self-govern and protect their customary laws and practices. This word autonomous is now understood as a “laissez faire,” functioning with no accountability for the various acts of omission and commission of the elected Councilors. The non-application of the Anti-Defection law in the Councils has turned the Councilors into mercenaries jumping from one party to another for opportunistic reasons. All the euphemisms about protecting culture and tradition and the rights of tribals are now passé. Once the Executive Committee is installed and a Chief Executive Member is elected there is a rush to see how money can best be used for personal comforts.

The fact that in 2016, six vehicles comprising 4 Scorpio vehicles whose market rates at the time ranged from Rs 8-10 lakh rupees were being auctioned for Rs one lakh to Rs 1.40 lakh and most of those taking part in the auction were wives and children of the MDCs, shows the extent to which corruption has penetrated into this noble institution. That there is hardly any opposition in the ADCs is nobody’s case. Today’s opposition is just waiting in the wings to jump into the ruling conglomerate at the first opportunity, so why should anyone blow the whistle.

That an amount of Rs 84.79 crore was allegedly spent on a road that does not even exist should actually make the people of Garo Hills erupt in anger at being taken for a ride. There is indeed a gross poverty of character which defines the mess these Councils are in. In many ways the Councils are equivalent to grassroots institutions like the Panchayati Raj that are closest to the people or should be so, but here they have positioned themselves as symbols of authority with no accountability. The manner in which staff are appointed lacks all principles of transparency. Yet these same institutions claim to be the avant-garde of tribal cultural practices and tradition. Is corruption now blatantly displayed by the MDCs a core value of tribal culture or does it reflect everything that goes against traditional value systems?

There have been many studies conducted on the efficacy of the district councils to meet the aspirations outlined in the Sixth Schedule. All those studies converge on one point - that the original intent of having these autonomous councils to enable self rule by tribals residing in predominantly non-tribal areas or governed by them, have reached their shelf life. Now that the tribes themselves are in the seats of power, the ADCs in such states are just another hierarchy of governance with no contribution to the well-being of the people that elected them.

TO THE EDITOR

All are equal, but...

Editor,
In a recorded interview on a YouTube channel, Director of the movie ‘Lorni the Flâneur’, Wanphrang K. Diengdoh correctly said that there are no secrets in Shillong. This place is too close-knit for comfort at times. Thus, the identity of the driver of the high-priced Jeep Wrangler Rubicon that dashed into a shop at Malki Point about a month ago is not a secret. It is also not a secret why the OS,oops, the OSD to the CM, spurt expletives when asked by a reporter to provide details about the accident. It was, to say the least, a ‘cheap’ show of transient power. More recently, in one’s opinion, it would have also boded well for the government’s image had the minister who tested positive in Manipur, been transported in an ambulance like all Covid19 patients, thereby reducing the risk of further infection. But the truth sometimes unravels itself in ‘accidental’ ways.

In our case as common citizens, we are subjected to harassment and red-tapism in the hands of law agencies whenever such accidents happen to us. But whining is futile because we live in an unequal society. And the parliamentary system of democracy adopted by India has only widened

this gap, as it licenses politicians and their minions to behave like demi-gods instead of subservient servants of the people.

It will thus augur well for our ‘accidental’ Chief Minister [‘accidental’ as in ‘handpicked’ like Dr. Manmohan Singh] to rein in his allegiant proponents, and deter them from unashamedly stretching their muscles. Such wackadoodles need a wrap on their knuckles!

More distressingly, things are not looking any brighter on the governance front either. Meghalaya boasts of pioneering some innovative programmes, which were later replicated by the Central Government, like the SRWP and CRRP launched by the BB Lyngdoh Ministry in 1990-91, and the MHIS by Dr. Mukul Sangma’s government in 2012. But the present government doesn’t seem to have enough caliber to wield such magic, and the flâneurs of the town are bringing to dinner tables only overt secrets of unabated illegal transportation of coal, mushrooming of coke factories, shameless destruction of forests, and rampant quarrying. And as a result, the flâneurs say, we should look forward to more Sora Complexes, Bazaar Indias, and Sora Arcades to blossom in this ‘prosperous’ Meghalaya land.

Opening of ‘places of worship’? But, this is not the time!

It is difficult to comprehend as to ‘why’ the issue of opening of ‘places of worship’ has taken centre stage again. Have we not gone through it already and realized that it was best to keep that in abeyance? However, these days people are talking about it as if it is some trivial issue. Are there reasons for such views? Is it because we are tired of factoring the havoc-creating potency of covid-19? Or, is it because we have given up on the desire to fight against covid-19 and thereby leave everything to chance? In actuality, whichever is the answer; it does not bode well for the near future. In fact, we are throwing ourselves into a whirlwind of certainty as far as a continued spike (and maybe worse) in covid-19 cases is concerned. Accordingly, the plan to open up places of worship from October defies all logic and it goes against the established ‘body of knowledge’ as far as the nature of the pandemic is concerned. Moreover, there are enough evidences which act as a stern warning against any hasty and rash opening decision. In addition, it is also about getting our priorities right. However, is the state government willing to pay heed?

To start with, we must look at the major economies in Western Europe. Spain was amongst the first to open up after being able to ‘partially’ control the pandemic. This was in early July. Gradually, Germany, France, Italy and United Kingdom followed suit. Today, these countries are seeing a resurgence of covid-19 to the extent that France has been talking about a need for another nation-wide lockdown. Well, it is a matter of debate if they are witnessing a second wave of the pandemic or not. But, how does that matter? The point is that if you open up your ‘mass-gathered’ activities (whether religious or otherwise) too soon, there will be serious consequences. These can have dire implications for our health infrastructure. So, should we take the risk? Moreover, why look so far? In fact, there is a glaring example closer home. The Indian state of Kerala celebrated Onam recently. To understand the nature of the pandemic all we need do is to turn to news stories whereby the sudden surge

in covid-19 cases post the celebration is widely documented. Till date, Kerala is still seeing a worrisome increase in cases. As such, from being considered as one of the better performing states in controlling covid-19, at present, it is in the news for all the wrong reasons. Hence, before the final decision is taken by those in the corridors of power, please, do sit up and take note!

Coming to the context of Meghalaya, the phrase we

we have been able to achieve this because of the ‘behavioural change’ towards fighting covid-19 epitomised through wearing of masks, washing hands and social distancing. However, we must not forget that all of this works only under a situation where we continue to restrict mass-gathered events/festivals. Yes, it is agreed that we have to live with covid-19. But, that does not mean that we allow it to explode. Any hasty and rash decision will throw a spanner in the works



all have to accept is ‘community transmission’. In simple terms, when the source of a particular covid-19 case cannot be established then it is considered to be a community transmission. It implies that the novel coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2 is openly circulating amongst us and causing the disease covid-19 at will. This is one of the reasons as to why Meghalaya is recording one-hundred plus cases over the last many days. However, these numbers are still under control. This is because the health infrastructure of the state is not yet stretched.

As long as this is so, we can consider that things are under control. On hindsight,

and all the good work that has been done will be cancelled out. Importantly, October is the month for Durga Puja. It is a week-long festival involving gathering and movement of people. It is a highly risky situation which must be avoided for now. Come to think of it, the State Government must be already aware of the risks involved. But, will it let better sense prevail? In terms of priority, the opening of schools (and other educational organisations in due course of time) is more urgent and important than opening of places of worship. This is because examinations are near and by now we are all aware about the limitations of online teaching-learning.

The crux is that online

classes are not a substitute for physical classroom interaction. This is especially so in case of school education. If we observe and discuss matters of education with the students, we will realize that online classes cannot deliver on a subject-matter as desired. The human touch is missing. Moreover, there are certain technical topics (particularly those requiring ‘on-the-job’ learning) which are near impossible to be delivered over the online platform. The end result is that our students learn lessons partially. Their learning is cosmetic in nature. Yes, some of us would point to the role of parents in teaching their kids. Fair enough! However, at the same time please note that not all parents have the capability/time to teach. There are many parents who cannot deal with high school mathematics/science. Hence, let us cut to brass tacks and focus on urgent and important things. School is that priority! Let us take one thing at a time. From 21st September, let us see how the staggered opening of schools’ goes.

If everything goes well, then only we may take up the issue of places of worship in due course.

In the end, as The Good Book says, ‘there is a time for everything’. Keeping in mind the increase and number of covid-19 cases in Meghalaya, the potential of mass-gathered events/festivals to spike-up cases; the difficulty to maintain covid-19 protocols when gathered as a group/crowd and the need to focus first on school reopening, it is urged that the State Government takes a serious revisit on the issue of opening of places of worship and realize the logic of keeping it in continued abeyance till the time Meghalaya is really able to see a decline in daily cases.

As a Christian, this is the one suggestion that is laid down with the hope that we act on the issue logically and scientifically rather than with blind emotions. After all, as of today, if opening is to be seriously discussed, it makes more sense to open the four corners of a school rather than open the four corners of a church/temple/mosque/gurdwara!

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Question hour an essential ingredient of vibrant democracy

Modi govt showing scant regard for basic norms of democracy

By Harihar Swarup

Long before Prime Minister Narendra Modi, there was PM Atal Behari Vajpayee, whose primary identity was that of an outstanding parliamentarian. Elected to Lok Sabha a remarkable 10 times, hurling speech after thundering speech, taking opposition attacks on the chin, when Vajpayee was PM it was sometimes so difficult to get him out of the House, that government files had to be taken to his Parliament office.

Vajpayee followed the example of his self-confessed role model, Jawaharlal Nehru, the original parliamentarian-PM who not only attended almost every day but prepared painstaking replies to all questions directed at him. Nehru and Vajpayee would have recoiled in horror at the Modi government’s recent decision to virtually abandon a long established parliamentary tradition – question hour.

Question hour in Parliament is an hour when MPs get to cross-question and interrogate ministers on ur-

liamentary performance. A media saturated politics has created personality cults which short circuit Parliament. National and state elections are fought around the personality of the supreme leader, so that most individual MPs and MLAs are faceless, lacking their own identities. They are surrogates coasting along in the backwash of a supremo-centred wave. It was the Modi persona that dominated a majority of the 543 Lok Sabha constituencies in 2014 and 2019. In Bengal Mamata Banerjee is a similarly dominant leader. In fact question hour has also been cancelled in the forth-coming Bengal assembly session.

Parliament is also becoming irrelevant because of the fundamental de-legitimation of debate across our intensely polarised society. Asking any kind of question is seen as politically motivated or loaded with “agenda”. Only when genuine debate – and not the meaningless TV shouting match – is re-legitimised, can Parliament see the return of



gent issues, a crucial democratic institution by which peoples’ representatives hold a powerful executive accountable. The government last week decided that for the upcoming monsoon session it was going to “do away temporarily with question hour due to the extraordinary situation caused by Covid”. Question hour is to be drastically truncated: No questions can be asked extempore, only written questions are to be submitted beforehand to which ministers will give scripted answers.

To use Covid as an excuse to restrict Parliament is highly disingenuous. In fact, it is now more crucial than ever that the government is questioned on access to healthcare and mass unemployment. However, in India coronavirus is seriously endangering the health of democracy by increasing the stranglehold of government and disenfranchising citizens. The pandemic is leading to a dangerous spike in state power and a loss of basic citizens’ rights and freedoms, a democracy deficit which may haunt us even after Covid recedes.

Yet even before Covid, there’s been a systematic dilution of parliamentary practices with ceaseless disruptions and decreasing time for genuine debate and questions. Neither the PM nor the principal face of the opposition have distinguished themselves in Parliament. Rahul Gandhi opted not to lead his party in the House, choosing Mallikarjun Kharge in 2014 and Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury in 2019, the latter known primarily for feisty lung power than parliamentary intellect.

In the 16th Lok Sabha, Rahul didn’t ask a single question in question hour. Modi largely stayed away from the cut and thrust of parliamentary debate, staying silent during contentious parliamentary debates like triple talaq and Article 370 last year.

The main reason for the rising disdain for Parliament among top politicians is the increasing disjunction between electability and par-

liamentary norms. A polarised society is bound to have a dysfunctional Parliament. An example of political hyper polarization was seen in the recent controversy over the Parliament standing committee on IT and its decision to summon Facebook in the first place for allegations of political bias. Parliament committees are supposed to be bipartisan spaces to take up citizens’ issues. Instead there was an unseemly confrontation between BJP’s Nishikant Dubey and the chairman Congress’s Shashi Tharoor for summoning Facebook in the first place. Instead of Facebook being asked to explain itself, politicians publicly fought with each other.

Governments with hefty majorities care little for parliamentary norms. There is the ordinance route. Ordinances were meant for the extra-ordinary situations but today they’re freely used signalling an impatience with debate. From the nullification of Article 370 which was rammed through without an extended debate to amendments to the Aadhaar Bill which in 2016 was passed as a money bill (requiring only a yes in the Lok Sabha), government diktats have taken the place of legislative deliberations. The first Lok Sabha had 677 sittings, the 16th only 226. When a government refuses to be questioned or challenged, Parliament ceases to matter.

In fact in India the more powerful a politician, the less likely they are to submit to no-holds-barred questioning, seen in the fact that neither Sonia Gandhi nor Modi hold open press conferences. This regal disdain for questions does not fit into a modern 21st century democracy.

Ironically, while downsizing the value of parliamentary traditions, the Modi government has proposed constructing a new parliament building under its new Central Vista project. But instead of another brick and mortar structure, gleaming on the outside but potentially hollow on the inside, why not build better democracy within Parliament instead? (IPA Service)

“When grand plans for scientific and defence technologies are made, do the people in power think about the sacrifices the people in the laboratories and fields have to make?”

— A. P. J. Abdul Kalam

The Shillong Times

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Visual media must change

THE Supreme Court has finally wielded the stick and asked the electronic media to behave. The context was the airing of communally sensitive material on a television channel, which said Muslims are trying to infiltrate the civil services through secret operations. The main interest of the electronic media, it noted, was for increasing the TRP ratings and thereby grab more advertisements. In the process, truth cannot be a casualty; the court has stressed. Sensationalism is the bane of the electronic media, and it often borders on irresponsibility. Freedom of the media is a sacred trust and a free-for-all media riding on this trust is not acceptable either.

The court has also directed the government that the ownership structures of the electronic media required a relook. It says the entire shareholding pattern of visual media should be made public; revenue models be reviewed and checks done whether the government is favouring one or another channel with more advertisements etc.

Checks and balances are a must for all, including the government, public institutions and private entities. At the same time, it is a debatable point as to how far a government can go in curtailing the editorial freedom of media establishments. General guidelines like avoiding release of matter or material that will hurt communal equilibrium, national integrity etc., are already in place, and this is acceptable to all. But, often these lines too are transgressed in the frenzy to gain a special edge. Freedom, as the court noted, is not absolute.

Rightly, the apex court has taken note of the excessive roles being played by anchors of news programmes, and pointed to the large extent of time taken by them to project themselves at the cost of muting the panelists on the show. As of now, anything is passé.

The electronic media in India has failed to match international standards when it comes to quality vis-à-vis airing news and related programmes. The focus is not on grabbing visuals to reach the viewers, but to get together a team of ‘favourites’ and hold forth on subjects, to finally project one side of the issue in a more forceful manner. It is timely that the apex court has come forward to bell the cat.

This is time for the government to take matters forward and set things right, rather than sleeping over the matters that the court has referred to. It remains to be seen how much interest the government would take, though, as the present situation suits the powers-that-be.

Critiquing the institution of the Dorbar Shnong

By Albert Thynniang

“A tradition is kept alive only by something being added to it.”

— Henry James

In July a Rangbah shnong (village headman) in the suburb of the state capital refused to let a person working in Guwahati to attend his father’s funeral though the outstation bereaved person was in possession of the necessary permission from the district administration (The names of the headman and the locality are withheld as the affected person fears backlash for his family).

This is a highly arbitrary and illegal decision. How can a headman ban someone from attending a funeral when the district administration had granted permission? Does the authority of the headman supersede that of the Deputy Commissioner? Does it mean that before the headman the document from the DC is of no value? Under what law did the honourable headman act? If the headman could undermine the authority of the DC, then the DC is not needed. Fortunately or unfortunately, as the case may be, the mourning young man did not inform the police or did not appeal to the concerned authorities otherwise the ‘esteem’ of the headman could have been hurt.

In the past too we saw arbitrary and illegal actions by headmen like ostracising families for filing RTI to unearth corruption, questioning unfair practices and suspicion of witchcraft. Recently there was a story of a family in West Khasi Hills which faced social boycott for the last 13 years was deprived of government aid even during the lockdown.

From early on Meghalaya government’s COVID-19 response was to involve the traditional local institutions, particularly the Rangbah Shnong to deal with the extraordinary situation. The grass-root traditional bodies were given the responsibility to run ‘community quarantine centres’, facilitate accommodation of returnees in government and community quarantine facilities, man ‘entry points’, supervise containment zones, motivate people to stay indoors, ‘enforce’ shutting down of shops and even restrict vehicular movements. With logistical support from the government task forces were formed to carry out the mandated tasks. Public representatives are invisible and the ADCs have played a second fiddle in the fight.

The role of traditional institutions has been hailed and they are even credited for keeping the number of Chinese originated virus down. Reports say village and local committees help state agencies manage the situation and ensure strict enforcement of COVID-19 protocols besides being proactive in spreading awareness about the disease

to prevent its further spread. The commendable contributions by local institutions in the last few months are appreciated.

However, in the absence of any clear cut rule and procedure the headmen and their dorbar function arbitrarily. The aforementioned example is the most bizarre but is not an isolated case. We recall the horrendous experience in finding a resting place for Dr. John L Sailo Rynthathiang because the Rangbah Shnong and Dorbar Shnong of Nongpoh vetoed against laying the first COVID victim to rest in his own farm in the Ri Bhoi headquarters. The Jhalupara authorities participated with an agitating crowd and locked the crematorium on flimsy reasons. The government authorities were subdued before unreasonable local bodies hijacked by a mob mentality.

A friend of mine narrated his annoying journey from Shillong to Mawkyrwat, South West Khasi Hills. Though he had the valid pass generated from the online application he was stopped at every village dubbed as entry points. Intimidating volunteers detained him for a long time at each stop asking unnecessary and irrelevant questions. Initially we also saw many villages putting up barricades blocking on-going commuters from passing their village.

Meghalaya along with the states of Nagaland and Mizoram and some areas governed by Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) were exempted from The Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992 by which the Panchayati raj system was instituted in the country. This ‘recognition’ of the state’s grassroots governance structure with a long history and legitimacy among people of the state does not necessarily mean that the parliament has given a legal stamp on the institution of the Dorbar Shnong in Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Nokmaship in Garo Hills. In fact, not even the state government has enacted any legislation to ‘legitimise’ these village-level assemblies. Their roles and functions are recognised under the law only by KHADC, JHADC and GHADC within their own respective jurisdictions.

There have been instances in the past when traditional institutions were challenged in courts. Way back in 2008 the Gauhati High Court (before the Meghalaya High Court came into existence) ruled that headmen and Rangbah Shnongs were ‘unauthorised persons’ for registration of sale deed or any deed of transfer. In 2015 the Meghalaya High Court passed an order that issuing

of certificates by traditional heads to residents is illegal. Sensationally the sordar of Wakhken village in East Khasi Hills, Skhembor Khongjirem was arrested for violating the court’s verdict. The then CEM, KHADC Adelbert Nongrum had to be charged with contempt of court for terming the ruling a ‘hidden agenda against the indigenous community’ and for ‘daring the Court to hold him in contempt’.

Attempting a temporary solution arising out of the Synjuk Ki Rangbah Shnong (SKRS)’s agitating threat for non-cooperation the then state government had the Ordinance that sought to empower traditional heads and institutions, approved by the Governor.

In February 2016 the Supreme Court allowed the headmen in the state to ‘function as per the customs, usages and traditions’ but did not stay the High Court order asking the State government to frame rules for tribal village heads specifying their roles and functions.

The conflict between traditional and modern institutions is bound to occur and reoccur because time and the nature of administration have changed. The claim that NOCs for the purpose of birth/death registration or for registration of any document or for building permissions or for obtaining loan as being part of customary laws is fake because they did not exist even say 60/70 years ago. There was no need of any NOC then, there was no loan, no building permission and no registration of any kind, whether land or vehicle or birth or death. These are recent requirements. Therefore, the question of NOC issuance being a traditional practice does not arise at all.

Reforming and empowering the traditional institution of the Rangbah Shnong and the Dorbar has been the refrain. The Khasi Hills District Council (Village Administration) Bill, 2014 and The Jaintia Hills Autonomous District (Establishment of Elaka and Village and Election, Appointment, Powers, Functions and Jurisdiction of Dolloi/Sirdar and WahehShnong) Act, 2015 were passed by KHADC and JHADC respectively but their status are far from being operational. Attempts to codify customary laws were also made in Khasi and Garo Hills but the contentious (and political) issue of ‘tribal-non tribal parenthood’ meant that this compilation is hindered from becoming a law.

The village heads and other traditional functionaries themselves prefer to function sans reforms. Take for example the High Court’s suggestion to adopt the Assembly and Lok Sabha polls to the election process of

headmen, bringing them under RTI and putting in place an anti-corruption mechanism! Will the traditional stakeholders agree to these proposed reforms?

Traditional institutions in matrilineal Meghalaya are male dominated. The village council or the Dorbar Shnong has been an exclusive right for male members. Only two years ago the Meghalaya High Court broke the age-old practice enabling women to participate in the election of traditional heads, thus effectively enabling qualified women to be part of the Dorbar. While women welcomed the judgment men leaders associated with the District Councils were circumspect, perhaps fearing that it could set a precedent for women’s participation in the higher level of traditional institutions like the Syiemship.

If traditional institutions like the Dorbar Shnong are to have a role in the 21st century and beyond they have to adapt according to the ever changing time. Appealing to customs and traditions for something that did not actually exist will lead to irrelevance of these institutions. Our forefathers governed villages in their own setting. There was no elected government, no legislature, no judiciary, no democratic institution, no administrative institution, no health care institution and no law enforcing agencies. There were no government schemes and financial assistance, no accounts and no social audit. We clamour for empowering traditional institutions but are they willing to function according to the principles of democracy, accountability and transparency? Unless modern principles are added traditional institutions will not be alive for long.

With regards to COVID-19 response has the state government gone overboard in involving traditional village heads? Can we say that in volunteers we see extra-constitutional elements? We may not see lathi-wielding volunteers as in Telengana and elsewhere but could similar situations arise? The government which has done very little for so long for the preservation of traditional institutions has suddenly ‘empowered’ them at the time of the epidemic. For the government, the practice has been that in normal times they forget traditional leaders; in challenging times they utilise their services to the point of permitting and overlooking their arbitrary, unreasonable and even illegal actions. How long can this go on?

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Indian defence preparedness jolts Chinese plans

By Barun Das Gupta

The defensive or offensive capability of an army is determined not merely by the number of troops it has, the type of weaponry it has and the skill of the men in the army, navy and air force and to handle their weaponry to the best advantage. It also depends on the industrial base of the country, its economy (because war makes a heavy demand on a country’s resources) and finally, on the mood of the people: how enthusiastically they are supporting their government in conducting the war and the extent of social unrest prevailing in the country.

That there is considerable social unrest in “communist” China is a fact that can no longer be suppressed by the Chinese rulers. An interesting fact, officially admitted, is that in 2011 the Chinese Government spent more on “internal security” than on defence. The amount spent on internal security was \$111 billion against \$106 billion on defence. In normal times a strong and authoritarian government can effectively prevent social unrest from spilling over and burst into large scale violence. But public support for the government becomes a crucial factor in times of war. It is here that there is a marked difference between India and China. In India, despite all the opposition to the BJP Government’s policies and politics, all political parties, all sections of people, are firmly against China’s attempts to grab Indian land and its leadership’s generally hostile attitude to India.

The Chinese rulers are distrustful of their people. That is why every effort is made to prevent people from knowing what other countries are writing or speaking about China. Free access to the Internet is one thing that Xi Jinping and his supporters do not want. There is a sophisticated internet censorship. Criticism of government policies and the political system is taken as disaffection and retribution follows swiftly.

As far as the standard of living and the quality of life of the Chinese people are concerned, the official position of the Chinese Government is that it seeks to build a “moderately prosperous” society. Unlike Russia, the Chinese leadership has always claimed that its goal was to build socialism with “Chinese characteristics.” What these “characteristics” are, the Chinese Communist Party has never cared to define or explain. Lenin and his comrades never talked of building “socialism with Russian characteristics” before or after the October Revolution. Attributing “national” characteristics to so-

cialism – which is an international movement and the goal of every society – is a thinly veiled attempt to justify and rationalize every departure from the known and accepted principles of communism.

That is why the CPC leadership wants to achieve a “moderate” level of prosperity for its people while its aim remains world domination and replacing the United States as the world hegemon in not-too-distant a future. It wants to make China a strong (if not the strongest) military power in the world.

It is precisely here (the military superiority of China over India) that the Chinese leadership has been jolted by a shock in the Ladakh sector. The Indian army responded to the first Chinese incursions on May 5 with great alacrity and in no time presented the Chinese with a formidable strength matching theirs. The Galwan clash of June 15 in which 20 Indian soldiers were killed and an unknown number (China has still not revealed the number) of Chinese were killed or maimed came as another shock for China.

Subsequently, the Chinese were outwitted and outmanoeuvred when the Indian troops took possession of most of the hill tops in the Pangong Lake area, giving them vantage points to mount constant surveillance on the movement of Chinese troops. The Chinese made several desperate attempts to dislodge the Indians from the hill tops they had occupied, but each time they failed. This failure is the background to the meeting of the defence ministers and foreign ministers of the two countries in Moscow on the sidelines of the SCO meet. Each time, the initiative for talks with India came from the Chinese side.

Now the world knows about the failure of the Chinese army to achieve its strategic and tactical objectives in the Ladakh sector. It is being widely commented upon by the foreign press. Even Chinese strategic experts are grudgingly admitting the military might of India. In a recent article, Huang Guozhi, editor of the Chinese magazine Modern Weaponry has written: “At present, the world’s largest and experienced country with plateau and mountain troops is neither the US, Russia, nor any European powerhouse, but India.” The Indian political and military leaderships have sent a clear message to Beijing: India does not want a war with China. But if the Chinese choose to engage in a military misadventure against India, the Indian armed forces are ready to re-buff and repel the Chinese in a way to dissuade them from making similar ventures in future. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Murky affairs of our District Councils

Editor, I congratulate the BJP President Earnest Mawrie for exposing huge corruption the District Councils in Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills. The charges prima facie appear genuine. More so, since there has not been any contradiction from the people accused of syphoning off large amount of funds for expediency. These funds would have got the people in the rural areas better infrastructure and would have contributed to the ease of living. But no, the District Councils which are meant to protect the interest of the indigenous people is itself the enemy to the cause. Unless there is convincing response to the specific charges, we the people would be free to draw our own conclusions.

It is significant that NPP President Dr WR Kharlukhi has called Mr Mawrie “tin

pot dictator” and brushed aside the allegations as “unsubstantiated”. He has also rejected the idea of handing over the matter to the CBI on the ground that the BJP did not follow the “proper procedure”. This is ridiculous argument coming from the ruling party president. He sidetracked the real issue of corruption and instead attached the messenger. By calling names, instead of agreeing to investigate the matter, Kharlukhi has exposed his weak defence. He is aggressive in his statements just to cover up the issue.

Since the matter is on the public domain, and it relates to the welfare of the indigenous people, we shall watch how the alleged scams play out. With BJP not showing any desire to brush it under the carpet, it is unlikely that NPP will have respite from this crusade of BJP against its own government. Be that as it may, it is being wondered why can’t the Anti-Corruption Bureau or the Chief Vigilance Commis-

sioner take suo-motu cognisance and register a case?

Yours etc., Evanstar Sohliya, Shillong-2.

Evils of Reservation

Editor, Demography-based reservation in crucial sector of education jobs and promotion is definitely a very retrograde step as many better ranked candidates have to yield place to that of much lower ones! In the process, very often quality takes a beating rendering great injustice to those with superior intellect who have missed the bus just due to the quota system. Social justice would be much better served if irrespective of demographic credentials students of underprivileged background get facilitated with free education, coaching and books. But thereafter admission to universities or job sector should be based on sheer merit i.e. rank and marks.

However, the real picture

is absolutely different with more and more communities demanding reservation. And various political parties and governments are also sponsoring it with renewed zeal. Any aggrieved person holds every right to protest against reservation through peaceful, civilised means on the basis of principle, but targeting the benefitted individual is simply not done.

It must be remembered that the reserved individual has not framed the laws. The policy of reservation has been launched by the government and the concerned individual has merely taken the facility of quota system in an absolutely legal route. So principled fight against reservation should not “inspire” anybody to spew venom against the benefitted individual! Moreover there is no reason to believe that the individual that benefitted through reservation, is necessarily inefficient or worthless. As a matter of fact I have intimate experience of witnessing from close quarters how many employees of reserved

category work much more efficiently and sincerely than many of their general category counterparts! So though reservation policy is undesirable as many eligible candidates lose their entitled place under the sun, but it must also be admitted that intelligence or quality is not the sole monopoly of non-tribals of so-called upper caste.

In this context, the vulgar attack on respected Jadavpur University teacher Maroona Murmu is highly disgusting and condemnable. The concerned “brave” students in social media have every right to post their opinion against reservation but hold absolutely no right to indulge in personal attacks against the history associate professor by invoking her tribal/reserved status and questioning her quality in the most barbaric fashion!

Since they have no better answer or logic to counter her post --- “academic year could not be more important than a student’s life,” the said students had no other option but to character assassinate her out of context just like

typical “nationalist” saffron Bhakts! It is indeed disgusting to witness the moral degradation of Bengal by drawing “inspiration” from their “role models” of culturally alien vintage so as to immerse with “national mainstream”!

The administration should promptly nab the vitriol-spewing students and ensure exemplary punishment for insulting not a Scheduled Tribe but for abusing a free citizen of this independent, democratic land.

Yours etc., Kajal Chatterjee, Via email

Poor Customer Care of Jio

Editor, It has come to the notice and experience of many customers about poor quality of customer care, and increased charges by Jio, the mobile service provider. The Customer Care Centre personnel are rude, and do not have any intent to support the customer. They tend to

limit their customer care by reeling off what is displayed on their system, which, in any case is known to the customer. They are also very rude, in addition to giving wrong advice.

Further, the quality of the Jio network has dramatically deteriorated, even in promising locations. In the service centres of Jio, courtesy is missing. Moreover, Jio has also started compulsorily charging on certain items like SIM card, Jio app, etc.

Apparently, after occupying the top slot among the mobile service providers, Jio seems to believe that the customer can be taken for a ride with poor customer care.

Yours truly D Bhutia, Guwahati – 2

Congress in a glass house!

Editor, In the last few days we have been reading in The Shillong Times an interesting development over alleged corruption in our Dis-

trict Councils. Ever since BJP President made public the charges of diversion and swindling of central funds, there has been a war of statements between the NPP and the BJP. So far no other political party has reacted or at least not made their stand public. This is not surprising. Normally, in a democracy the opposition remains on its toes to pounce on the ruling side for the drop of a hat. And there is a serious charge levelled by a ruling coalition partner against the opposition Congress’ principal rival, and yet there is complete silence from the national party. It reflects on the state of affairs of the Congress which is rudderless at the moment. Is it because the Congress which ruled the state and the District Councils all these years is equally guilty of turning a blind eye to corruption in the State? Indeed, if you are sitting in a glass house, you cannot throw a stone at others!

Yours etc., Samuel Lyngdoh, Via email

"My reading of history convinces me that most bad government has grown out of too much government."

— John Sharp Williams

The Shillong Times

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MPs' salaries & MPLADS cut

AN Ordinance to effect a 30% salary cut of Members of Parliament for one year was passed in April last. The Ordinance was ratified by the Lok Sabha in the ongoing Parliament session on Tuesday. The cut in salaries was necessitated to meet the exigencies arising out of COVID-19 pandemic. The Salary, Allowances and Pension of Members of Parliament (Amendment) Bill, 2020 was unanimously passed by the members of the Lower House.

The MPLADS was also summarily suspended for two financial years (2020-21 to 2021-22). The saved amount will go to the Consolidated Fund of India to fight the Covid-19 pandemic.

MPs get a salary of approximately Rs one lakh per month. A cut of 30% would reduce the salary to Rs 70,000 per month. The combined strength of MPs in the Lok Sabha (543) and Rajya Sabha (245) is 788. Hence there will be a monthly savings of Rs 2.36 crore. The MPLADS scheme allows an MP to spend Rs 5 crore annually for specific development schemes in the constituency. The amount saved from the MPLADS is 3,940 crore annually. This amount can now be deployed for emergency measures that are either related to procurement of RT-PCR testing kits, Rapid Antigen testing kits, PPEs and in strengthening the public health care system which is n shambled. But fighting Covid also means reviving small businesses and entrepreneurship that have suffered during these months of Covid. It also means ploughing funds into the agricultural sector which is the mainstay of farmers. The ongoing farmer's protests across the country should push the Government to consider their plight and help them come out of the farm crises they were being hit by in the past and which has exacerbated now with Covid

In the North Eastern states where revenue generation is very low or non-existent and where economic activities, mainly tourism related, have come to a standstill, young entrepreneurs who have invested in tourism-related facilities need to find new livelihoods to cope with the economic stress until tourism becomes a viable activity post Covid. The entire North Eastern Region is known for its agricultural and horticultural products. The region produces several varieties of fruits ranging from pine-apples, oranges, peaches, plums and other local fruits. These are mostly wasted because they are perishable and there are no cold chains or fruit processing units that can take care of the entire value chain.

Meghalaya has the best turmeric from Lakadong in Jaintia Hills with a curcumin content of 7.9% - the highest in the world and known for its medicinal values but it has not yet been adequately branded and marketed. This is the time to seriously invest money and method into these activities to enable small farmers to survive. MPs from the state should make a pitch to bring in funds for these activities.

On religion – A discourse

By Deepa Majumdar

Within the sphere of Time-Space-Causation that hosts human History, there is something perennial about the nature of religion. If church, temple, mosque and other external insignia of the human heart have endured and stood the test of time, despite the tumult of History – this is because religion, at its highest, delivers a numinous fire, which illumines the rest of History.

What is religion in its heart and essence? One way to answer this question is to envision religion as a fountainhead of the highest human aspirations – whether moral values and ideals, or the thirst for salvation and numinous oneness. In its highest mystical aspects, religion fulfills us in ways that nothing else can. In terms of its heart and essence therefore, religion is an instrument of Self-knowledge that transports us from the mundane level of the ego, to our true nature, which is divine. Delivering us from lower levels of truth to God qua Truth itself, religion becomes a vehicle that enables human communion with God. Unlike Plato, who claims that the Good (his God), is the source of truth, Christians like St. Augustine and St. Catherine of Siena, identified Christ with Truth itself. Equally, Gandhi asserted that God is nothing but Truth. Religion therefore is a vehicle of ascent.

As a mere instrument, religion cannot be anything more than a means to an end. Religion can never and should never be an end in itself. The end sought by religion is our numinous communion with God, experienced in the ultimate experience of unio mystica. From the Vedantic standpoint, the primary side-effect of this hallowed goal is Self-knowledge, or manifestation of the divinity that is always innate in us. Thus, a fuller definition should describe religion as not only an instrument of numinous contact with God, but thereby, also one of Self-knowledge. This is religion at its highest level.

At its lower levels, however, religion can inspire violence for at least two reasons. First, we become violent when we mistake religion as an end in itself, instead of a means to an end. Second, we become violent, when we give our idolatrous loyalty to the religious identity, instead of God, who alone deserves our loyalty – when religiosity consists of fighting over the religious identity, rather than the quiet, diligent praxis of the heart and essence of religion. Although means and ends are usually related, there is something dangerous about treating the lesser of the two, (means), as the greater (ends). Thus, when we convert religion, from instrument, to end in itself, we become violent. We depart from the Truth that rules at the summit of religion – descending from

its numinous peak to its lower ideological levels. We also depart from Truth when we uphold a religious identity above sincere praxis of its basic tenets.

The majority of religious fundamentalists, who kill in the name of God, are zealots, because they cleave to the religious identity, instead of the heart of religion and its practice. Wholly bereft of bhakti (devotion), they turn to religion prematurely, without first traversing ethical forms of secularism that serve as buffer zones safeguarding the numinous aspects of religion from its ideological extremes. Like a fruit that rots when ripened prematurely, the religious fundamentalist "rots" when he turns reli-

gious prematurely. A severe distortion of the saints and mystics engendered by the same religion, he now interprets his own ego as God. Indeed, no zealotry and xenophobia can match those of the religious bigot. Equally, no hypocrisy can match that of the religious bigot. Yet, religion is not a double-edged sword with a moral day and night – its numinous light the day, and its dark violence, the night. Instead, it is a noetic steeple with myriad levels. What are these different levels? The Truth that rules at the summit illumines the upper echelons of the steeple of religion with its ambience and glow – igniting the numinous fire of Self-knowledge. The midlevels serve as a repository of discursive expositions – like theology and religious philosophy, which can never equate the mystic's direct communion at the numinous pinnacle. At this midlevel, the genius of religion also gives us a treasure-trove of techniques and methods – like prayer, meditation, rituals, and wisdom. But the lowest level of religion runs the risk of becoming contaminated by politics, and hence muddled by egotism and violence.



ST File Photo

All the major world religions that have stood the test of time possess this lowest level, which, with its noxious fumes of bigotry, serves to disguise, conceal, and contradict the numinous summit of religion. If the Abrahamic religions have a history of violence – both outer (forced conversions, crusades, de-

struction of other religions, including indigenous religions, etc.), and inner (oppression of women and denominations that are minorities, the burning of witches, etc.) – so do the religions of the east. Thus, Buddhists have a history of violence in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Hinduism comes with two original sins, both of which drew righteous rebukes from Swami Vivekananda – the oppression of women, and the caste system. If Europe burnt witches, Indian Hindus, through the abominable custom of Sati, burnt widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands. Equally abominable is the caste system, which belies and contradicts altogether the sublime message of oneness preached by Advaita Vedanta. By attacking and persecuting Muslims, Christians, and 3 of 4 other religious minorities, present-day Hindu fundamentalists are adding a third dimension to this litany of ideological violence.

All religions without exception, run the risk of three levels of violence. At the lowest (as already stated), when politics corrupts religion, we have literal physical violence in the name of the religion. At a higher level, we have the mental counterpart of this, in the form of religious intolerance, bigotry, and hatred for the atheist and the religious other. At a still higher level, we have religious materialism, which comes with two faces of violence – first, through religious voyeurism, and second through the irrational level of superstitions, etc.

First, we have religious voyeurism that is endemic to conditions of advanced capitalism. Parading itself as religious tolerance, this voyeurism is, in fact, a soul-searing superficiality that prevents the votary from striking roots within any one religion. We see this face of religious materialism in the dilettante, who flits from one religion to the next, sometimes practicing several in the same day – with no serious roots in any. Second, religious materialism expresses itself in the form of superstitions, false prophets, and the penchant for quasi-materialistic modes of therapy. It is not difficult to distinguish both

faces of religious materialism from sincere faith. For, unlike votaries of the latter, religious materialists are wholly bereft of higher faith and bhakti, which serve as the surest corroborations of devotion.

Yet, to be fair to religion, it must be acknowledged that religious ugliness, which belies all true religiosity, is barely religious. Bereft of all semblance of bhakti, and an offspring of identity politics, this ideological level is also bereft of any practice of true religiosity. The slightest practice of any true religion expands the soul, from narrow prejudices endemic to the religious identity – to greater and greater forms of religious universality that strengthen particularity.

When we practice a religion in its sublime aspects, using the instruments of prayer and meditation to suffuse our souls with the sublimity of bhakti, we expand ourselves to embrace all true faiths, even as we strengthen our roots in our own religions. If anything, the practice of religion emancipates us from all identities (whether religious or secular), enabling us to reject them as so many forms of idolatry.

When it comes to religion therefore, what matters most, is how we use our God-given freedom of will. We use free-will, first, to choose a particular religion, and second, to choose specific practices within this religion. Unlike prior ages, modernity allows us religious choices, which reveal our inmost moral proclivities, serving as insignia of how we use free-will. Thus, more materialistic votaries will choose to belong to the materialistic level of religion, reveling in 4 of 4 superstition and trite forms therapy. But higher aspirants will yearn and thirst for God with an aspiration that defies all human limits. While religion comes with its own essence, it is up to us to choose which aspects and levels we practice.

If at the highest level, the hearth of the numinous fire that illumines a religion inspires in us a centripetal felicity that serves as the heart and essence of all positive forms of cosmopolitanism, gathering all together and destroying all alienating forms of otherness – then at the lowest level, religious zealotry, whether physical or mental, serves as a centrifugal force that destroys cosmopolitanism. If at the highest level, we pierce Time to touch the bright star of Eternity, then at the lowest, we kill in the name of God. Religion therefore is the greatest of all conundrums.

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Dichotomy in govt's fancy investor-friendly regime

Sacrificing long term goals for short term gains

By K Raveendran

The reported remarks by a key Toyota executive in India about how the company looks at its business in the country in view of the high levies on the passenger car segment typically signifies the lack of consistency in the Modi government's much-trumpeted policy of making India more investment-friendly.

Initial reports of the company planning to halt further investments in India have since been disclaimed. But the clarifications seem to be part of a damage control exercise.

Shekar Vishwanathan, the vice-chairman of Toyota Kirloskar Motor, the Japanese automobile major's local unit, had told Bloomberg in an interview that Toyota would go slow on further expansion of its India operations because of the country's punitive tax regime for the automobile industry.

Minister Prakash Javadekar soon got into the act and issued a denial, which was followed up with

means to an end. So any approach that jeopardises the long term perspective for the sake of short term gains is self-defeatist. Essentially, this is the problem with the approach of the government.

On the one hand, the government has announced plans to offer incentives worth \$23 billion to attract firms to set up manufacturing, including automobiles, which have been promised production-linked breaks. But the automobile sector attracts some of the highest rates of taxation. Motor vehicles, including cars, two-wheelers and sports utility vehicles attract taxes as high as 28 percent. There could also be additional levies, ranging up to 22 percent on a plethora of reasons, such as the type of the vehicle, length or engine size. In some cases, this could be as high as 50 percent.

Automobile has been one of the worst affected sectors even before the Corona virus changed everything and put the country and its



a retraction by the company itself. Company vice chairman Vikram Kirloskar said Toyota was investing over Rs 2,000 crore in electric components and technology for the domestic market and export. He also reiterated the Japanese auto giant's commitment towards India.

It is satisfying that the irritant has not grown into a serious problem, but the issues thrown up by the remarks remain as valid as ever. More important is the fact that it typically signifies

economy in one of the worst crises. Lack of demand had forced manufacturers to cut down and even halt production and resort to large scale layoff for workers.

The automobile sector, with its high aspirational value, could have been an ideal kick-starter for revival of demand in the economy as affordable personal commute is an unavoidable necessity. But this is possible only vehicles are made affordable. The high rate of taxation in the automobile sector is actually pricing out

"On the one hand, the government has announced plans to offer incentives worth \$23 billion to attract firms to set up manufacturing, including automobiles, which have been promised production-linked breaks. But the automobile sector attracts some of the highest rates of taxation. Motor vehicles, including cars, two-wheelers and sports utility vehicles attract taxes as high as 28 percent."

TO THE EDITOR

Rights & entitlements of PWDs

Editor,
With due respect to the Government of Meghalaya, on behalf of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) for the state of Meghalaya, I would like to bring to your kind notice regarding the Chief Minister's Social Assistance Scheme for PWDs which was started in 2014 at the rate of Rs. 500 per month. Initially, we appreciated the efforts taken by the Government at that time but with time I would say that it's been difficult for us to meet our daily needs with this meagre amount. I am apprised that other states in India were provided assistance of Rs 2000/3000 or at the very least Rs 1500 per month on a regular basis.

My question to the Meghalaya Government and to the Chief Minister

is whether they reckon that this Rs 500 would meet all the needs especially when the market prices have just shot up? Or does the Central Government not provide adequate funds for this particular Scheme? And why is this amount not paid to us regularly?

Coming to my next point, are we the PWDs entitled to the Unemployed Allowance Scheme only up to the age of 32 years as told to me by a staff of the Social Welfare Department? If so what will happen to PWDs after they cross 32 years of age? And I am sorry to say that we have not yet received the allowance of 2019/2020. Why are we being deprived of our right? Are we also not members of the same society?

I urge the Government to seriously look into this matter for the welfare of all persons with disabilities.

Yours etc.,
Bertina Lyngdoh
Resident of Bethany Society
Shillong -3

Extend license validity

Editor,
Different departments of the Government of Meghalaya issue licenses for different business and other operations. Most of these licenses are valid for one year only. This creates a lot of problems for the licensee who has to renew the license annually. Why not increase the validity of licenses from one year to three years. This will not only reduce the workload of the government by two-thirds but will also help ease the pressure on the licensees.

Your etc.,
Ajay Gupta,
Via email

Parent's dilemma

Editor,
As a parent of a student of Class 9 living in Laitkor, I

am unsure whether to send my son to school on Monday when the school reopens. My son has always used the local transport facility up to Don Bosco junction. Now the local buses are not running regularly and the school does not have a school bus. I cannot afford to send him in a taxi every day. Besides, taxis do not allow social distancing and people are cooped up close to one another. That might also be the reason for the community spread of Covid. If my son does not attend school he will miss out on his classes. If he has to walk with a mask on for at least 10 kms he will become breathless. Has the Government considered all these factors when announcing that schools would reopen? It shows that not much thinking has gone into this subject of reopening of schools. The directive has come from Delhi where every school must compulsorily have a school bus. Other schools like Kendriya Vidyalaya, BK Bajoria, Po-

lice Public School are just a few of the schools in Shillong which have school buses. Others have always stood against the idea of school buses saying they have no parking space. The Government has also softened on this issue. Now we parents have to pay a high price for this grave lapse on the part of those who run schools without considering the plight of parents.

Parents of students studying in the elite schools have their own vehicles but what about those students who depend on public transport? Can it be guaranteed that the child will not touch the bus railing while getting into the bus or while getting out? We parents are in great anxiety just thinking of what could happen to our children each day that they go to school and come back home. As it is Covid has made our lives so stressful and with schools reopening, our concerns are only multiplying. I wish the Government had taken the views of parents also when deciding to reopen schools at this juncture.

Yours etc.,
A Kharpran,
Shillong-10

Kudos Arunachal CM!

Editor,
Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Pema Khandu tweeted that he had tested Covid positive and asked all who had come in contact with him to get themselves tested. In fact, other ministers from the same state had also made their Covid statuses public. It's only in Meghalaya where public representatives are so secretive about their Covid statuses. The Power Minister has not said a word about his Covid status other than what we learnt from the media. When will we ever see transparency in Meghalaya's public life? It tells a lot about the character of our public representatives.

Yours etc.,
P. Lyngdoh,
Via email

a convoluted approach by the government towards its stated goal of making India the manufacturing hub of the world.

Prime Minister Modi keeps harping on the theme, but many of the policies of his government are not commensurate with the requirements for making the dream a reality. It betrays a lack of vision in the whole approach and a clear failure to think out of the box. It also explains the failure of the government to make effective intervention to stimulate demand in the economy, which should have been the most important part of any stimulus programme. It also explains why the slew of stimulus initiatives, if these can be described as such, have failed miserably.

Government, of course, needs money to run its establishment. But that is not an end in itself; it is only a

large populations from the market, which brings out the folly of the government's policy.

Lower prices would encourage more and more people to own vehicles, which could more than compensate for the loss due to a reduction in the tax. But a bigger benefit is that it could revive demand in the economy, which is what India needs currently more than anything else.

The absence of demand-side measures in Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's economic package has meant that there will not be any recovery even in 2021-22 and 2022-23. With practically little being offered by way of cash support in the stimulus package, no pick-up is in sight for demand, which continues to be one of the biggest pitfalls of the government's policy. (IPA Service)

"The bravest thing I ever did was continuing my life when I wanted to die."

— Juliette Lewis

The Shillong Times

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Democracy's pride

WORK will soon start for a new Parliament Building, and a promise is that it could be completed and inaugurated in less than two year's time. The new building is designed as part of the wider Central Vista project, a brainchild of the Modi government, and this in totality could take shape over a period of a few more years.

The need for a new parliament house is unquestioned. The present one is nearly a century old. It has eroded its strength, and it lacks sufficient space to accommodate the MPs of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha even as creation of more constituencies is being contemplated. Constituency reorganization work is currently under way to balance the seat strength with the population growth.

A few aspects however make the present plan of a new parliament building and the Central Vista Project untenable. One is the question of shrinking finances and whether it is appropriate to carry forward this projects at a time when the nation is facing a serious economic crisis due to the pandemic. The other is about the plan and whether there is any guarantee that the new edifice will be an improvement on the present one which is iconic; a gigantic structure that stands out for its grandeur and elegance.

Another fear is also whether the invocation of the 'Bharat' spirit so special to the saffron band and its ideological grandmaster, the RSS, would mess up with the project. The world has changed a lot from the ancient Bharat days. Any new endeavour should reflect these changes, rather than the nation hanging on to all its old moorings by way of nostalgia. As far as government spending is concerned this recession is the right time for spending more government money to rev up the markets and increase liquidity. So, the pumping of nearly Rs 900 crore for the Parliament Building works should not be scoffed at.

How the new edifice will look is being debated. The new building too should be iconic since it represents the image of the world's largest democracy. A split look, as the images showed, might be a dampener at first sight. Faith is put on the Tata Group that has won the bidding for construction by edging out the L&T. Both have high reputations.

The Tatas can be depended upon to do an impressive job and, unlike many others to also do justice to the funds that the government would put at their disposal. There are environmental concerns about the Central Vista project. It is important that this project does not add to the congestion in the capital as also the loss of tree cover.

Mental illness at the time of Covid-19

By Patricia Mukhim

September 10 is observed as World Suicide Prevention Day. This year the country has been furiously and sometimes more than necessary on the death by suicide of Bollywood celebrity Sushant Singh Rajput (SSR) on June 14 this year. Never before has a person's state of mind been ripped apart and dissected by so many non-experts blabbering their views on any TV channel that gives them space. But what's worse is that SSR's own therapists have made public his mental state thereby violating patient-doctor privacy. That the family of SSR don't find this violation of his personal life is reflective of today's family values.

Having had a family member with mental illness who subsequently died by suicide, one fears to tread this territory because one can never really understand the human mind and why some are pushed into the zone of mental disequilibrium which then manifests in their behaviour. In 2019, India reported an average of 381 deaths by suicide daily totaling 1,39,123 fatalities over the year, according to the latest National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data. We will have to wait and for this year's data and it is expected to be a staggering figure considering we are all battling not just the pandemic but also the economic and mental consequences it has unleashed.

We are all staring at an uncertain future and those with already fragile minds are now teetering on the edge. We don't have enough therapists/psychologists/psychiatrists to deal with the growing number of mental health cases. As family members we are often at sea on how to deal with our own kin who pass through this dark night of the soul. What do we say which can trigger depression and what should we not say? It's a tough call that only those who have walked the tortuous path of having a family member 'with a different mind,' can comprehend.

It's hard enough for people with mental illness who live with their families to deal with their demons. At least such people still have a support system; someone to tell them it's time to eat, to sleep and to complete their chores to the extent possible. Think of a celebrity having to live

up to a star status, surrounded by fair weather friends and to pretend that all is well when everything inside is a blistering furnace that triggers anger, restlessness, despondency, panic attacks, anxiety, sleep disorders; and of course a craving for substances that temporarily numb all feelings. It must be worse after waking up from such a sedated sleep. Then there's the quest for the same substances because the real world seems formidable and scary. Add to that the pressure to look 'normal' and smile when meeting with prospective film makers and producers. One can only imagine the pressure that Bollywood stars live with. From the outside it looks hunky dory but inside it's apocalyptic. Only the person with such a mind knows what she/he lives through.

Peter Stockland of the think tank Cardus says, "The combined effect of fear and exhaustion produces a cynicism so deep, murky and toxic that it verges on the sin of bearing false witness against reality." The reality today is that nothing is certain; millions of people holding a job are not sure when they will lose it and after that, where the next meal will come from. To bear false witness to this reality is to pretend that things are normal; that there is no need for course correction in one's life and relationships; that one can continue to be uptight and unrelenting in one's stances and still emerge unscathed after the pandemic. This is to ride the wave of unrealism.

Covid has brought along with it a dystopia that we are all just beginning to deal with in ways we are unsure of. Our comfort zones have been rudely shaken and we face new challenges every day. Some in a profession that requires constant engagement with the custodians of the public purse which is what journalism is all about, are expected to stay above the gurgling torrent of waves in their subconscious minds and to continue to ask questions with respectful diligence. It's a different matter that we sometimes overstep our brief and don the mantle of jury, judge and executioner and pass verdicts on a daily

basis. Clearly that's not our brief. We ask questions and put out answers after we have analysed them and found they are not clever attempts at cover-up. At the end of the day it is the reader that has to judge who is right and who is wrong and give the verdict come election time.

The mental health of journalists is of great import because every journalist sees the world through his/her prism. That prism is derived from our own conscious, unconscious and sub-conscious minds. Our view of politics, economics and society may not always be correct. If our prism is distorted our reports too are coloured. We see the world as a place where people are unjustly punished; where there's no justice; where everyone is conspiring against the proletariat and wrongdoing is therefore the only thing we can write about. We miss out on positive stories that are hope giving especially during these times. Covid has cast its dark shadow over the world. Why should we add to that darkness with stories of pessimism? And might it not be that such pessimism comes out of the depressed mind of the journalist?

Gabriel Arana, a freelance reporter who edited the Huffington Post series on mental health, once said, "As a journalist, you're sort of expected to be the one reporting on trauma, not the one suffering it yourself and so a lot of people see it as almost their professional poise not to divulge when they're suffering, when they're either feeling burned out, or going through a depressive episode." He says that the idea that journalists are supposed to be superhuman observers of history and not feel anything "is not true and sort of harmful."

During the Covid journey, although journalists are not considered frontline workers, they are very much in the firing line. Journalists are now more prone to burn-out. Look at reporters covering the Rhea Chakraborty/SSR case for some TV channels. They look like people possessed by a fervour to find the culprit in what they believe is a case of murder. And now when it's getting murkier with the cocktail of Bollywood stars, drugs and

sex and what have you, journalists seem to be pumped up with adrenaline the whole day. But by evening the fatigue they suffer is a silent, unspoken, private matter witnessed only by their family members.

Philip Eil in an article for www.vice.com titled, 'When Being a Journalist Is Terrible for Your Mental Health' said, "When I had my burnout episode, it was like a spell had broken, and I could clearly see the mental health risks of the job. And they were everywhere. A Commander-in-Chief (Donald Trump) who has declared the news media the 'enemy of the American people.' An industry where literally hundreds of thousands of print journalism jobs have disappeared in recent decades, and where remaining jobs can pay less than the local median income. A job that requires absorbing some of the worst aspects of humanity, from corruption, to climate change, to crime, to child abuse and so much more. A job that presents a never-ending stream of deadlines, an urgent sense of competition, and an expectation to—in the words of a journalism job posting I recently read—'dominate the conversation on social media.' Any one of these factors could have an effect on the mind of a level-headed, healthy person. Toss them together and you've got a psychological minefield."

Philip Eil admits he has been rattled by his work, sometimes severely, and he is fine with admitting that. He says, "From my conversations with experts, I've learned that ignoring mental health issues may actually make a person a less effective reporter. University of Toronto, psychology professor Anthony Feinstein tells me that, just as an unwell physician might make a bad diagnosis, 'I think there's a real risk that if a journalist is unwell psychologically, that can affect their work... It could give a certain slant to a story that might not be accurate.' Journalism is serious business. If a journalist no longer has an open mind because cynicism and distrust have become second nature then its best to leave the profession than be a prophet of doom and gloom."

Home ministry's statement on no migrant labour death data shocking

Govt deliberately avoiding paying compensation

By Arun Srivastava

The oldest, primary and simplest duty of a government is to protect its citizens. But it is a national shame that Modi and his government have committed the worst crime of not performing the bare minimum constitutional obligation and task of protecting crores of pandemic hit daily wage workers. The shocking reply of the government admitting its failure on the floor of the Parliament was most deplorable. Without an iota of humiliation the government confessed; "no data about the death of the migrant labourers was available with them". This reply coming from the cabinet minister not only shames the government but it also critically exposes its insensitive attitude and approach towards the poor of the country.

Modi does not get tired of expressing his lip service to these poor people. He puts on the mask of being sensitive and concerned of their plights and miseries. His hate and double speak towards these people is also exposed in the observation of the government that as no data of people dying on the way is kept by them the question of paying compensation to the families of these labourers arises.

This attitude of Modi and his government makes it absolutely clear that he is mainly concerned for the welfare of his rich friends and corporate cronies. It is sad still there are some persons who nurse the view of Modi being sympathetic to the common and poor people. There is no doubt they live in fool's paradise. This brusque reply was not simply a mechanism to stone-wall the mechanism of providing the replies to the questions inside the parliament, but more than that through its posture the Modi government also managed to send the question that they are not more than "termites" and does not matter to it.

Yet another question put to the government; "Whether the government has failed in assessment of problems faced by the migrant labourers during the lockdown imposed by the government" really shredded the class character of Modi government. The reply: "India, as a nation, has responded through the central government, state governments, local bodies, self-help groups, resident welfare associations, medical health professionals, sanitation workers as well as a large number of genuine and bona fide non-government organisations in the nation's fight against the unprecedented human crisis due to the outbreak of Covid-19 and countrywide lockdown," intriguingly failed to make any sense. As Modi usually boasts, the "most competent government in Independent India" could not reply whether it has assessed the problem. If it had assessed what was its findings?

The government data about the total number of workers, around 1.04 crores, who returned home during the lockdown period was also skewed. The number of such labourers was around 4 crores. One thing is noticeable that almost all the ministers of the Modi government, following in the footsteps of their leaders have mastered the art of speaking lies. Though the government announced a special economic and comprehensive package of Rs 20 lakh crore, the labourers are yet to benefit.

While the government has no data of Migrant deaths, the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) has furnished the figure of 972 deaths till July

4. This is indeed a commendable task performed by a research group using its own limited resources. The minister did not feel ashamed in replying; "no data of people dying on the way are kept". Does he want to say the local police stations and health care units are defunct and not supposed to perform this task? Nevertheless these are reported deaths and onus lies with the government to verify these deaths and give compensation.

According to the SWAN, 216 migrants died of starvation and financial distress, 209 due to road or train accidents, 133 committed suicide, 96 persons died aboard Shramik Special trains and 77 died due to lack of medical care. As many as 49 deaths were reported at quarantine centres, 49 deaths were attributed to alcohol withdrawal and another 48 to exhaustion. The most significant finding was police killed 300 labourers while they were fleeing the cities. The remaining 65 deaths are unclassified.

While government admitted that no compensation has been paid, Modi resorting to populism had tweeted on May 16 that an ex-gratia amount of Rs 2 lakh is to be paid from the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund to the next of kin of each of the migrants who died in an accident at Auraiya in Uttar Pradesh.

This entire exercise raises yet another question whether the bureaucracy has ceased to take Modi and his announcements seriously. Why so far no public statement was made whether the compensation was paid? Or, as usual this was a juma, a gimmick, played by Modi. It is sad that so far the labour ministry of the Modi government has not come out with the detail valid report about loss of jobs by these poor people.

The report of the Action Aid India, which surveyed 11,537 people from 21 states finds that over three-fourths had lost their livelihood since the lockdown began on March 25 and close to half had received no wages during the lockdown. Five out of six respondents said they got inadequate food during the lockdown. Yet another organisation Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University, which surveyed 5,000 workers from 12 states reveals that two-thirds had lost their jobs. Nearly 90 per cent of the urban self-employed among those surveyed lost jobs and 91 per cent of Below Poverty Line households were left with no work. Similarly, 67 per cent of the respondents did not receive the Rs 500 a month for three months that the government had promised under the Jan-Dhan Yojana.

Recently Modi said the millions of workers who returned home during the lockdown had 'turned adversity into opportunity'. But incidentally his government has not placed the cases of such transformations in the public domain so that these can motivate others. In fact ground reports present a contradictory message. Though the labourers have started returning no government agency is seen standing by him. For scarcity of alternate jobs at their villages, the workers are coming back, but they are forlorn and dejected. They don't find that helping hand the Modi government had promised.

A recent study based on experiments in the field shows that local politicians are far less inclined to help migrant workers than residents of their constituencies. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Wonder App for students & teachers

Editor,
I read with great interest your report, "RKM demonstrates no internet online classes" (ST Sept 15, 2020). Being not so techno-savvy, I am inclined to believe that this is a timely creation of a software that would be a game-changer for many of us who are handicapped owing to lack of internet facility. The "HIKAI" project is said to be free for all students of MBOSE. I understand that the hybrid platform can be used in a wi-fi zone with the help of a local server.

What I note with immense delight is that the platform is not the usual practice of sending notes and videos on social media, rather it is a new approach which enables students to access a two-way communication in real time and through an android App which is not dependent on the internet. As a teacher, I think it will be handy tool for people like me and also a blessing for my students.

Hence I am interested in finding out how to get hold of the App. I would like our Education Department to throw some light on this since classes may not start in the immediate future. Let the Department examine and certify the App for wider use in the

rural areas where internet is missing or irregular.

Yours etc.,
P.D. Marwein,
Via email.

Farcical LPG subsidy

Editor,
Currently, the government subsidises 12 cylinders of 14.2 kilograms each per household per year. For additional purchase of LPG cylinders the consumer has to pay the market price. The subsidy provided by the government on the annual quota of 12 refills varies from month to month. The LPG subsidy that is provided by government during the pandemic lockdown period from March 25, 2020 gradually reduced from Rs 189.58 (April 2020) to Rs 19.58 (in Sep 2020) an all time low without any rhyme or reason when the price of crude has a falling trend throughout the world. This 95% reduction of subsidy during a period of 6 months is a farcical subsidy for ostentation only and looks like it aims to close down the kitchens of senior citizens and the bulk of the middle class citizens who have fallen prey to an unprecedented jobless situation in the country—a welfare state. After another six months is the central government mooting imposition of levy instead of providing

subsidy per LPG cylinder to the consumer-citizens to keep their kitchen fires burning? What about the crony millionaire politicians including MPs & MLAs, elected representatives of people voted to power by the people, who are enjoying more than 12 LPG cylinders a year and at what rate? Are they prepared to submit affidavits to the Election Commission stating the number of LPG cylinders they use are with cent percent subsidy? The essence of transparency in a parliamentary democracy is demonstrated by the courage of the leaders to set an example that the common people can emulate. Here, the elected have become VIPs while people have become poorer with every passing day.

Yours etc.,
Samares Bandyopadhyay
Advocate, Kolkata High Court,
Via email.

ernor seeking his intervention for a CBI probe. And, more interestingly, BJP Minister A L Hek has taken a public stand in line with the stand of the party. Hek has announced that he would take it up with the chief minister for an investigation. Clearly, both Mukul Sangma and Hek have their own axes to grind.

Sangma has seized the opportunity provided by its adversary BJP for scoring brownie points. By singling out only the GHADC related scam, the Leader of the Opposition has let the cat out of the bag. He is targeting the Sangma Brothers whose names indirectly figure in the BJP allegations. It is a no brainer that Mukul Sangma is trying to pin down and embarrass the Sangma Brothers now virtually ruling the roost in the state.

However, when a probe is conducted into the murky affairs of the District Councils, the Congress too will have to do a lot of answering. Let us not forget the party was in power for last two/three terms in all the District Councils. And there were irregularities galore. Financial bungling, irregular and random appointment of party supporters, allotment of contracts and other goodies were distributed at the behest of the Congress.

Therefore, Congress too should be ready to face the charges and not apportion the blame at the doorstep of the present dispensation. The belated response of Hek is also not difficult to fathom. He is clearly trying to keep pace with the party boss at a time when there is media speculation of rotation of the party's lone quota of one berth in the ministry. His party contender, MLA from South Shillong, is not going to give him an easy walkover and will surely do everything possible to make a case for himself to replace Hek. It seems Hek is well aware of the situation and has begun to play his cards. So far, he has not made a wrong move. By endorsing the party president's stand on the swindling of central funds, Hek has strengthened his position in the Party. It will now remain to be seen what will be Hek's next move. Will he take the matter to Conrad Sangma or will he remain content with public posturing through the media?

For an independent observer like me, the manner in which Ernest Mawrie has gone public with certain specific claims about the misuse of funds in Jowai and Tura is a curious development. The question that comes to my mind is that how did he get hold of all these facts and figures? Who has leaked all

those details? Since BJP doesn't have much presence in the state, especially in the two District Councils in question, I am wondering whether this has been abetted by the BJP bosses in Delhi. All details about the grants released by the Central Government as Special Grants Assistance during the Modi regime and the diversion of funds and manipulated allocation of bogus contracts etc., on the face of it, appear to be quite plausible. This has been fortified by JHADC chief's own admission of diversion of Rs 20 crore for settlement of staff salary dues. Also, whether the arrival of a new occupant of the Raj Bhavan at the same time is mere coincidence or an indication of centre's move to tighten things up at the grassroots level.

In the end, I would like to be enlightened whether the District Councils come under statutory auditing or not. If yes, then how come we never hear about any audit observations? If the answer is no, then how so? Does the Sixth Schedule provide for such exemptions? Food for thought, indeed!

Yours etc.,
Ajit Prasad Singh,
Via email.

There is a growing concern about the mental health of journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic. The article discusses the pressures faced by journalists, including the loss of jobs, financial instability, and the constant exposure to negative news. It highlights the need for mental health support and the importance of maintaining a balanced perspective in reporting.

The article also touches upon the broader social and economic challenges faced by the Indian population during the pandemic. It mentions the impact of lockdowns on migrant workers and the general state of the economy, which adds to the mental strain on the population.

“Sustainability is no longer about doing less harm. It’s about doing more good.”

-- Jochen Zeitz

The Shillong Times

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Opposition central to democracy

IT is said that in the absence of a strong opposition there is little difference between a democracy and a dictatorship. In a parliamentary democracy the ruling party cannot be given a free hand to expend public funds and to legislate laws which could be detrimental to the public cause. Hence every proposed legislation is debated at length before it is passed by Parliament and State Legislatures. Hence the role of the Opposition is primarily to ensure accountability of the executive. An Opposition party has to meet the criterion of having MPs/MLAs who make up 10% of the total strength of the House or is the single largest group in the Opposition, according to the rules of their respective houses.

The main role of the Opposition is to question the government of the day and hold them accountable to the public. It has to ensure checks and balance to correct democratic practices in the interest of the public. In politics as in law, justice thrives when adversaries compete hence an effective Opposition is crucial to an effective Democracy. The reason why Parliament and State Assembly sessions are held is also to provide constructive criticism of bills, policies and governance. In short, the Opposition acts as a pressure group to prevent abuse of power and the tyranny of the majority. Above all, the Opposition makes sure that the Government does not deviate from Constitutional practices. Hence the Opposition is not a nuisance but a critical part of democracy.

The Opposition raises questions on behalf of the public. Also the Opposition helps to rectify the mistakes and to check the excesses of the Ruling Party without being completely antagonistic. While it is true that today’s Opposition was yesterday’s Ruling Party, it is wrong for the Government of the day to allege that all the wrongdoings are carryovers from the past.

In the context of Meghalaya, several allegations have been leveled by the Opposition Congress about mishandling of the Covid pandemic. This could have been avoided had the Opposition been entrusted with specific tasks in combating the pandemic. But for those in the Government to say that criticism should be suspended merely because the Government is handling the pandemic is to miss the woods for the trees. In fact the suspension of Question Hour in Parliament has come in for sharp criticism as it is akin to suspension of democracy.

The Opposition is meant to oppose but not without sufficient grounds. And there are always grounds for opposing the manner in which Governments both at the Centre and states have been handling the pandemic. Since these are extraordinary situations it would have been more productive if the Opposition extended its hand in tackling Covid rather than offer suggestions after things have gone wrong. But such cooperation is rare as it requires large-heartedness from both sides which is often missing because the Opposition is more concerned with scoring points. This is a disservice to democracy.

TO THE EDITOR

Strange and irrational

Editor,

A number of guest houses and hotels located within thickly populated areas of Greater Laban area of Shillong were notified as quarantine centres after outbreak of COVID 19. One of such centre was set up at Ashiana Guest House, Kench's Trace, in spite of objections raised with the District Administration by the residents of the neighbourhood and also the apprehensions expressed by the Kench's Trace Bishnupur Dorbar. A number of inmates, probably health workers are occupying this centre. An inmate of this quarantine centre has tested positive on September 18, thereby causing anxiety among the nearby residents. The other inmates continue to occupy the building, which has not been declared as a containment zone. As a result free movement of the inmates in and out of the guest house continues unabated.

It is expected that the present DC, East Khasi Hills District who has a proven track record of high degree

of commitment and exemplary performance in her earlier posting, shall take note of this anomaly and revisit the perilous decision of opening quarantine centres in guest houses located in residential zones with high population. While we all laud and honour the dedicated services of our health workers, it is also necessary to insulate the common citizens from avoidable exposure to the pandemic.

Yours etc
Nayanika N. Rynjah
Shillong - 4.

Spare a thought for the poorest

Editor,

Apropos the news, "Centre assures to bail out Meghalaya financially" (ST Sept 10, 2020), I am happy to learn that the Modi Government has agreed to extend generous financial assistance to Meghalaya to tide over the economic hardships brought about by the COVID situation. Unless the centre extends a helping hand, the state will be bankrupt. With no coal business, no tourism, no normal economic activ-

ity for the past five/six months, Meghalaya is reeling under serious financial crisis. The situation has not been helped by the delay in getting state's share on GST and other central taxes.

Chief Minister Conrad Sangma deserves a pat on the back for his sagacity to be close to the powers that be in Delhi. Without support from Central Government, we cannot think of revival of our economy.

However, as the state government will get Rs 400 crore from the centre, I hope that the money will be utilized judiciously. The abnormal situation is going to last longer than we can think. Therefore, the government will have to take cover. If need be, enforce deferred payment of salaries to government servants who, it seems, are the luckiest of the lot for not having suffered financially or work-wise. They are the most protected lot. No, I am not jealous. I only want that all sections of people, including the government servants, to experience the pinch that the common man is going through.

My heart goes out to the poor vendors and hawkers, the small farmers, the daily wage earners etc who have borne the brunt for the past

few months. I shudder think what they must be facing if the situation is prolonged.

In fine, I would urge upon our chief minister to consider giving some kind of financial support to the lowest income group who have nobody to speak for them. They would bless him if he shares a small part of the money that central government is going to release soon for the benefit of the silent suffering mass.

Yours etc.,
Evanora Syiemlieh,
Shillong-2.

COVID – the alternative view

Editor,

It was refreshing to read the interview with two epidemiologists on the COVID situation in the state, "Trajectory of pandemic in state one of the lowest in India" (ST Sept 15, 2020).

My takeaways are two-fold: First, the endorsement of the efforts being made by the state machinery to tackle the problem at hand. Second: The eulogy for our Dorbar Shnongs for their tremendous service.

We the public, who are largely ignorant and cer-

tainly not experts on COVID matters, often wonder whether our government, our officials, our technocrats are taking the right course or not. We have no way to know why certain actions are being taken by the authorities. We simply follow the instructions and advisories issued from time to time without questioning. Further, we tend to get puzzled when critics of the government question the action plans of the government. For instance the Opposition misses no opportunity to find fault with the authorities.

Viewed against this background, I for one am delighted to get the third and independent perspective on the matter. The fact that the two doctors have certified that Meghalaya is among the lowest affected states is reassuring. I don't remember to have read this in the newspapers. However, the doctors' prognosis that the future of course of coronavirus in the state depends mainly on us the public, is a worrying fact. Given the carelessness, if not defiant attitude, of the public at large, I am a little skeptical. The government machinery, therefore, should gear up to enforce adherence of protocols, commonly called SMS, by

one and all. Let there be no let up on this front.

Secondly, the observation about the service being rendered by the Dorbar Shnongs is gratifying. I know for a fact that in my locality and neighbourhood, the volunteer teams raised by the dorbars have been giving yeoman service for the past six months. I am sure the story is the same in all localities. The way the dorbars have risen to the cause deserves unqualified appreciation and gratitude. Maintaining vigilance, supplying essential commodities, controlling public behaviour and being a bridge between the people and the administration, the dorbars have made us proud. I salute their commitment to the public cause of saving the community from the wrath of this virus.

Hopefully this pandemic will lead to the eventual recognition and constitutional sanction to this unique tradition of the local people here.

Yours etc.,
Meban Kharkongor,
Via email.

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Pathway to food security, economic viability and ecological sustainability

Home gardens

By Gratia E. Dkhar

For centuries, traditional home gardens are an integral component of food production for rural families. Considered as the oldest form of agroecosystem, it has evolved from the ancient practices of hunters and gatherers over time. The important characteristics of home gardens are their proximity to the residence, close association with the family activities, wide biological diversity of plants and animal species and the use of simple low-cost inputs. Classified as mixed, kitchen, backyard, farmyard, compound or homestead gardens, the practice is widespread all over the world. The regional ecology of the location, the resources available, social and economic elements influence the composition of home gardens such that each is unique in structure and function. Several studies have documented the instrumental role that home gardens can contribute to household food and nutritional security, livelihood and ecological stability. The very persistence of home gardens in itself is a proof to their intrinsic social, economic and nutritional merits.

Recognising the multiple benefits, several governments, development organisations and United Nations agencies have included home garden projects as part of promoting nutrition and community development. An example of a successful home garden promotion is the case of Bangladesh that started a national garden programme in the 1990s to eliminate Vitamin-A deficiency in the country. In the 2019 Global Hunger Index, India was ranked 102 of the 117 countries with a GHI score of only 30.3 and tagged India as a country with a "serious" level of hunger. The country records high rate of under-nutrition which continues to be a massive challenge. There is also a high rate of childhood under-nutrition in the state of Meghalaya with 31% underweight, 42% stunting and 17% wasting. There is a high prevalence of micronutrient deficiencies with anemia recorded as 68% and Vitamin-A deficiency was 59% among children below the age of 5 and 83% and 48% respectively among women. Micronutrient deficiencies will elevate vulnerability to other infectious diseases and lead to poor health and development particularly in children.

To address the issue of

malnutrition, various state governments and organisations have encouraged the establishment of nutrition gardens in the Anganwadi centres. In 2019, the government of India asked schools to set up nutrition garden to reduce undernutrition and to promote experiential learning. Scaling up the establishment of these home gardens across households can mitigate household food and nutrition insecurity. Home gardens have also been asserted for their economic benefits, contributing to income generation, improving livelihood and promoting entrepreneurship. The risk of food loss from foraging animals and transportation is reduced in home gardens when compared to that of field crops located often far from the residence thus reducing potential income loss. The earnings from the sale of surplus produce and the savings from the consumption of home-grown products contributes to more disposable income for the family to invest in other services and requirements. From the various participatory assessments done by the North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society (NESFAS) on the benefits of home gardens, it was found that a household can save an average of Rs. 73,000 per annum from self consumption of agrobiodiversity products that can come from home gardens. Additionally, earnings from the sale of agrobiodiversity products are about Rs. 20,000 per annum, substantiating the economic merit of home gardens.

Home gardens have an important gender dimension as well. It is the women who are actively involved in home gardening and in some cases are the sole caretakers of these gardens. Their regular engagement in the preparation of land, selection and planting of seeds and planting materials, harvesting and marketing is a reflection of the proficiency related to plants and agrobiodiversity practices that women have developed. The adeptness of women in managing home gardens signifies their role as protector of the environment while the decisions they make have an important bearing on the nutritional outcome of the household. Women are, thus, instrumental in actualizing the benefits of home gardens for their families.

Promotion of sustainable agriculture can also be achieved through home gardens. The mono-cropping of farmlands have led to drastic reduction of crop diversity, loss of biodiversity and increase crop losses from diseases and pests. Home gardens, on the other hand, utilise environmentally sound approaches of food production. The diverse composition of plant species that may include landraces, rare and threatened species as well as several animal species makes home gardens an ideal site for ex-situ conservation of biodiversity. The ecological services rendered by home gardens include nutrient recycling, reduction of soil erosion, enrichment of soil fertility and improved pollination amongst others. In short, home gardens can reduce the negative environmental impacts associated with mono-cropping.

Finally, the traditional home gardens maintained by communities across the state of Meghalaya are a valuable depository of indigenous knowledge. The home gardens practiced in the different communities express the wisdom of traditional culture and ecological knowledge that has evolved over the years of repeated trials, selections and propagation of the most adapted practice. Home gardens are places of innovation that can facilitate the preservation of indigenous knowledge, protection of indigenous crops and the transfer of knowledge and skills from one generation to another. Another dimension of home gardens is the habitual exchange of seeds and planting materials that facilitate social integration between the communities thus strengthening community solidarity.

The pandemic have contributed to people becoming more health conscious and the demand for high value food like fruits and vegetables is expected to increase. However, threat of disruption in the long food supply chain can affect the access to safe food and nutrition. To mitigate this disruption, FAO Director General Qu Dongyu in the meeting of the G20 countries has recommended countries to undertake measures that strengthen local production and shorten the supply chains. Adopting measures to aggregate smallholder farmers scattered across the region, scaling up home gardens and creating easy ac-

cess to market to small-scale producers can be part of the solution to the problem. This can increase productivity and promote rural employment whilst building geographical proximity between producers and consumers.

While home gardens can be used to achieve the target of dietary diversification, improved livelihood and change unsustainable pattern of production, there are several constraints faced in establishing and managing home gardens. Some of the constraints include the access to suitable and sufficient land, access to capital, lack of seeds, planting material and water, absence of advisory and extension services and the need for capacity building of garden owners towards health and wealth creation. A holistic approach which integrates home gardens into the existing social, political, economic and environmental condition of a location will ensure the productivity and the sustainability of the interventions. NESFAS is looking to support vulnerable households through assistance given to establish or support the existing home gardens of such groups.

An important COVID-19 lesson that the pandemic has taught us is that food and health constitute the most important aspects of human existence. In addressing the issue of food security and nutritional diversity, multiple strategies of intervention that hinge on strengthening the local food system would be required. Home gardens can be a micro solution that families can use to recover a diversified diet and enhance food security and nutritional status of households. The underprivileged and the resource poor households can be supported to establish home gardens that would enable them to diversify their diet. Home gardens can be especially important for female-headed families to improve the household nutrition, particularly child nutrition. Advocating at building resilient household food production through home gardens by integrating traditional system with scientific knowledge can achieve higher productivity, economic viability and ecological sustainability.

About the writer
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Doctors too have grievances and the right to dissent

Government must ensure safety of health workers in covid era

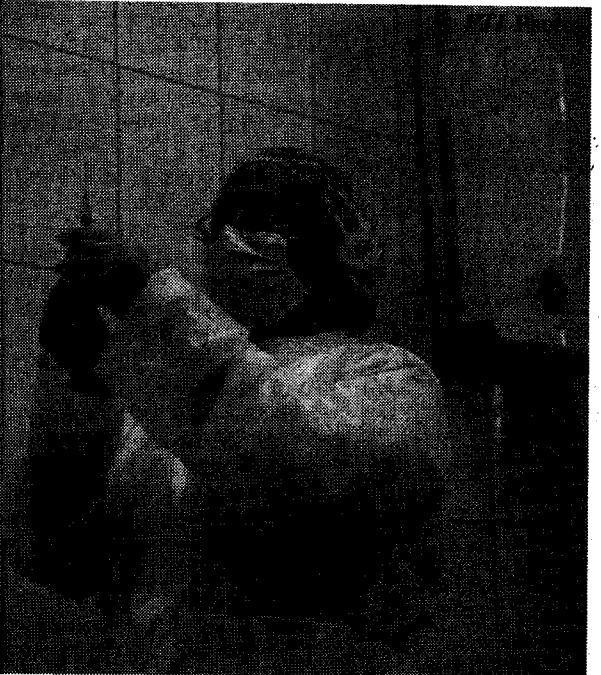
By Dr Arun Mitra

Dissent and different views are the strength of democracy and essential for development of any society. Unfortunately there is increasing intolerance to dissent by those at the helms of affairs. This is not limited to one part of the world or any set of people. Even those who save the life of others are not being spared. Nobel Laureate Dr Denis Mukwege, who has worked for decades with great courage and compassion to address the needs of survivors of sexual violence has been getting threats to his life. He has been opposing the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, in the strife ridden Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and

booked him under the NSA for complete dereliction of duty and constitutional oath. Dr Kafel has appealed to the government to take him back to the job as now he has been discharged by the high court. But the government has not responded so far.

Likewise Dr Anwar who helped hundreds of patients from all communities irrespective of socio economic status and financial considerations during the engineered communal violence in Delhi in the end February has been named in the list of those who in the eyes of government abetted communal violence.

Dr Sudhakar Rao from Andhra Pradesh was sus-



around the world. In 2012 he faced a deadly assault in which he narrowly escaped but his guard was killed.

Undeterred he never gave up and is continuing to raise his voice vociferously. He has operated upon hundreds of such patients and given them a new lease of life both physically and mentally. For his work he was awarded Nobel Peace Prize in 2018 along with Nadia Murad. Threats to his life have increased recently. Several Health activists and Nobel Laureates including the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) Nobel Peace Prize awardee 1985 and then as a partner of International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) in 2017 have in strong words condemned such cowardly acts and have extended all support to Dr Mukwege.

There are reports of onslaught on doctors in Turkey. Doctors who called war a "man-made public health problem" received jail sentences, in the government-led assault on the Turkish Medical Association last year.

In India in the state of Punjab many health personnel faced threat and were attacked during the terrorist violence in the decade from 1980 - 1990. Some of these health activists preached against the violence while there were others who were attacked for extortion. They suffered at the hands of both, the government and the terrorists.

But recently such threats from the state have increased in our country. Dr Kafel Khan, who worked in Gorakhpur and treated the cases of encephalitis, was charged by the authorities for raising voice against lack of oxygen supply and other basic equipment which led to death of several children. Even though he was exonerated by the local enquiries twice, he was not taken back to the job. Not only that, he was booked under National Security Act (NSA) for addressing a rally at Aligarh on the charges of inciting, communal hatred and violence. In a strong worded judgment the Allahabad high court, while relieving him of all charges, has warned those who had

pendent from the job when he raised the issue of lack of regular supply of PPEs during the COVID. After some time when he again raised the issues he was stripped off and dragged by the police. It was later said that he is mentally unstable. To drag a mentally unstable person like this is even a bigger crime because such patients have to be dealt with more empathy and sympathy than others.

It is a matter of anguish that the health workers have been looked upon with suspicion at some places as spreaders of COVID infection. A doctor couple in Delhi had complained that 'the people living in the society where they have their house were against them just because they are on the COVID duty and they feared that this couple will infect them too. Some nurses were not allowed to enter their place of stay fearing that other persons in the locality will catch infection. The health workers engaged in difficult tasks need appreciation and encouragement. But such incidents and in human behaviour discourages them. This can have long lasting effect on their behaviour which may affect the psychological build up of their children.

There have also been incidents when the doctors had been attacked by the mobs and injured seriously just because they thought that their ward has not been treated well.

Whatever may happen, it is the moral, ethical and professional duty of the doctors to continue to work for the betterment of society. The Red Cross, the Doctors Without Borders are the organizations which show the way. In the Sikh history in India Bhai Ghanaiya is a well known figure who gave water to wounded soldiers from both sides of the army despite objections by some of his mates. But Guru Gobind Singh ji appreciated his humanly task.

Let the government and the society realise that doctors too have the right to dissent and express their opinion which must be given due respect and consideration and not treated with violence by the people or the state. (IPA Service)

The Indian village that protects ‘young ladies’

By Mrityunjoy Kumar Jha

Come September and the residents of Keechan, a tiny village near Phalodi town of Jodhpur district of Rajasthan gets ready to welcome their winged visitors from across the Himalayas.

Already 350 “visitors” have landed in the first week of September. Caretaker Sewaram is busy preparing for their comfortable ‘stay’. For the next six months he has a great responsibility - to feed thousands of ‘foreign’ guests every day.

Every year, demoiselle cranes (Grus Virgo), the smallest of 15 crane species, travel from their breeding grounds in Eurasia to India. They complete an arduous 5,000 km journey, migrating over the Himalayas, crossing the mountain range at an altitude of up to 26,000 feet to reach Keechan.

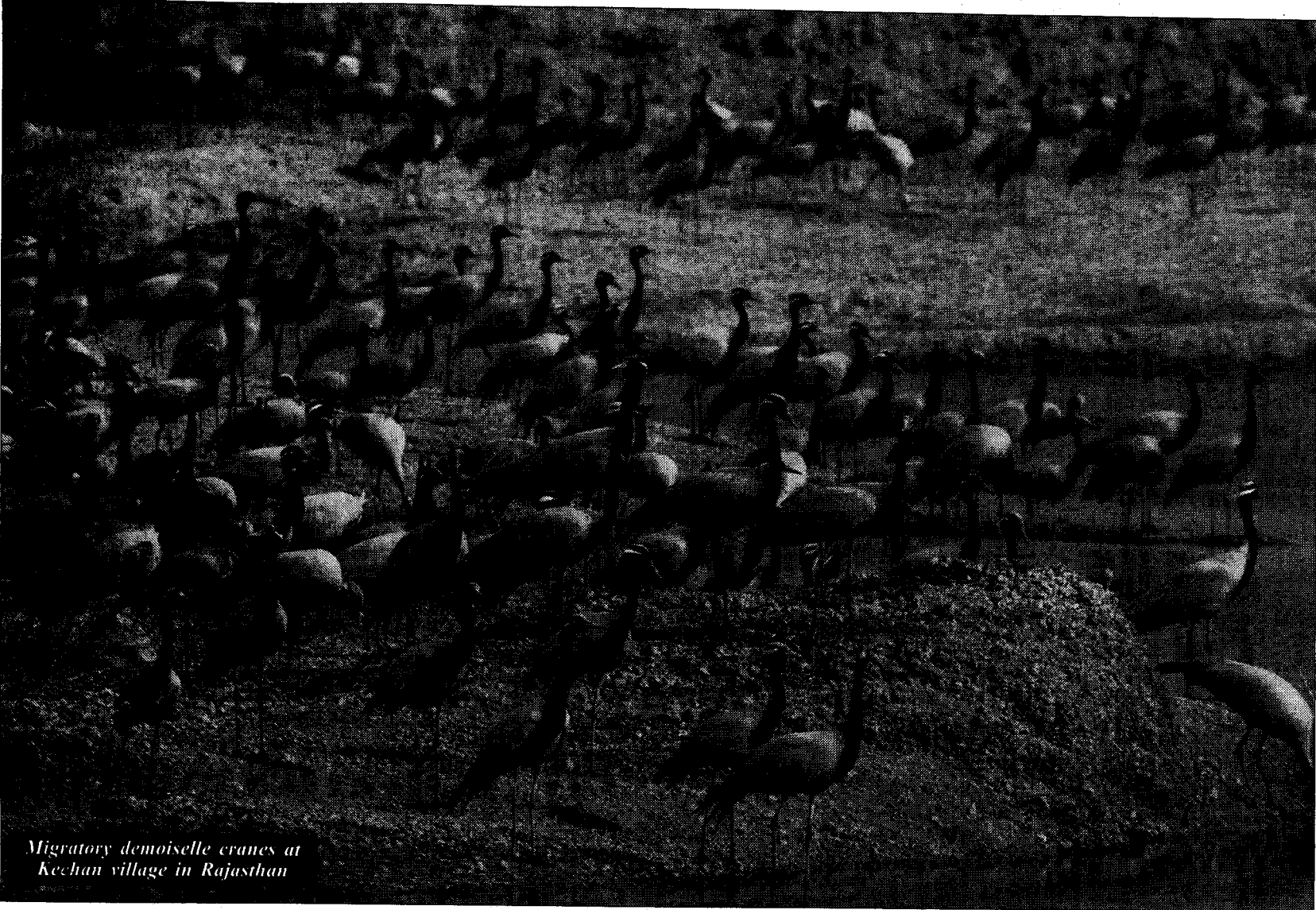
The first small batch arrives in September and rest start arriving from October and stay here till March. These cranes stay in India for the winter. Declared as a World Heritage Site by the World Crane Foundation, Keechan attracts hundreds of Indians and foreigners who come to witness the spectacle of thousands of demoiselle cranes feeding right in the middle of a human settlement.

It was a great experience for me and my guide and wildlife photographer Kamal Sahansi, watching thousands of demoiselle cranes fly in last year. The more I observed them, the more they intrigued me. Demoiselle cranes are migratory birds.

When they were first brought over to France from the steppes of Russia, Queen Marie Antoinette was so taken by their elegant, demure appearance she named them ‘Demoiselle’, which translates to ‘maiden-like’ or ‘young lady’.

Locals call them “kurja”. I learnt that wealthy Jain traders who had poured their riches into building havelis here, have supported feeding demoiselle cranes since the 1970s.

It began with village elder Ratanlal Maloo, a devout Jain who considered it his religious duty to feed the birds of the village. One September morning he noticed a number of cranes eat-



Migratory demoiselle cranes at Keechan village in Rajasthan

ing in the company of his usual flock of pigeons and sparrows. Every year after that, he would wait for the “kurjas”, lavishing them with grain.

Later, he coaxed the panchayat to allot him a piece of land on the outskirts of the village to establish a “chugga ghar” or a feeding zone. Over time, fellow farmers, traders, and merchants started supporting his cause, donating grain for the birds.

With access to plenty of food and no tangible threat in sight, the cranes returned every year, their numbers increasing from hundreds to thousands.

Word spread, and people from different parts of the country came to observe the spectacle. Soon, more contributions flowed in.

Apart from running the feeding operation, Ratanlal started rescuing and rehabilitating injured cranes. In 2009, he received the Salim Ali Nature Conservation Award. Two years later, the custodian of the cranes gently slipped into the night, leaving behind a legacy that continues to shine bright over this desert town. Now his “helper” Sewaram and other residents have continued the tradition of feeding de-

moiselle cranes.

Kheechan starts its day with the morning aarti at the village temple around sun rise. At the same time demoiselle cranes fly to the sand dunes overlooking the Chugga Ghar. After the entire flock of a few thousand collects on the dunes, they slowly march towards the Chugga Ghar — a kilometre away. They fly around the sky to the melody of the morning ragas, making it a perfect sunrise. Meanwhile, a group of about 100 encircle the place, making sure it's safe to land. Once the leader of this group lands, the entou-

rage follows. And then ‘hell breaks loose’ — or is it heaven? Wave after wave of these beautiful birds land inside.

Standing on a nearby roof-top we watch in awe as large flocks of crane fly over from the nearby sand dunes. First the ones that are close to the enclosure, and then the ones that have lined up all the way up to the dunes. But their discipline is extraordinary. Though there are thousands on any given day, inside the enclosure, there are not more than 500 of them. Through your camera lens, all you see is a mass

of blue-grey backs, with a few necks popping up now and then. But if you watch from ground level, it is a fascinating scene. You see a crowd of spindly legs and bent necks, with long orange beaks urgently pecking at the grains on the ground.

Systematically organised flocks of birds arrive, feast and depart — making space for other groups. Their departure from the Chugga Ghar is like a military drill. Before taking off, each group arranges itself in a queue, the flock follows the leader and they cover the sky. The sight of so many live birds outside of a TV screen or photograph is a sight I will never forget. They're usually a skittish bunch, and as soon as one sets an alarm, the flock takes off en-masse.

After a sumptuous meal, the ladies fly off to the two village ponds. They have a dip in the lake, and the romantic ones indulge in ballet-like mating dances. Just before sundown, they call it a day and fly off to nearby fields for the night. This routine continues till March, when one day, without a warning, they fly off to the land of their origin in the thick of the night.

Interestingly, I noticed one lone and limping demoiselle crane which was not part of the flock. Caretaker Sewaram says this crane was left behind two years back and is now a permanent resident of the village. Surprisingly, last year when the cranes arrived, neither this lonely one mingled with them nor did they try to include him.

Sewaram is full of stories and Rajasthan has a rich tradition of both oral narrative and written literature on these graceful birds. The most famous is a song ‘Kurja’, which tells the story of a woman who wishes to send a message to her absent husband by a Kurja and is promised a priceless reward for this service.

You should also know why in this vast desert with numerous places with similar advantages, nowhere else you find demoiselle cranes in such huge numbers. Why? My guide quips: “Maybe, by now Kheechan is in the genes of these birds!” (IANS)

(This content is being carried under an arrangement with indianarrative.com)

A Bio Pirate in the rainforest of the Amazon

By Parag Ranjan Dutta

Nineteenth century Brazil — In the equatorial forest of Brazil some trees, creepers and climbers were growing profusely that yielded juice or latex. Latex, the milky fluid from which rubber products were made was mainly obtained from trees known as ‘Hevea Brasiliensis’ or Hievea which grew predominantly in the Amazon Basin of Brazil and also in Bolivia and Peru and some other Latin American countries. It was also known as ‘para’ rubber because rubber used to be exported through the port of Para, eastern Brazil. The seeds of rubber Hevea contain cyanic compounds and are poisonous to humans unless treated.

Interestingly rubber got its name when people in Britain found that it could be used to erase or “rub out” mistakes written with pencil. Long before Brazilians started manufacturing natural rubber some Latin American nations had already been using rubber for different purposes for generations. That was a period when 99 per cent of world’s natural rubber was produced by Brazil and the whole world was at the mercy of the South American nation for this indispensable commodity. The Brazilian government did not allow the technology to be transferred as it jealously guarded the interest of the rubber industry. Though rubber trade was solely controlled by certain business interests there was no such law prohibiting the export of seeds and plants. Around that time an English gentleman, Henry Wickham, a planter, explorer and adventurer who tried his luck in a number of countries arrived in Para from Trinidad.

The fortune hunter, Henry Wickham in one of history’s act of bio piracy stole a treasure from the rainforest of Brazil that changed the course of history and the monopoly of the South American nation. On June, 1876, at the request of the British India office he silently smuggled out 70000 thousands odd rubber seeds to Queen Victoria’s scientists at Kew Botanical Garden in London that were nurtured carefully. Expenses of procuring seeds, freight and others were met by the British India Office.

Only few survived due to much care and nurturing, but many perished due to cool climatic conditions of Britain. In order to convince the custom department of Brazil to grant him an export license Wickham deliberately misinformed the custom officials about his cargo being exceedingly delicate botanical specimens for delivery to her Majesty’s own Royal Garden at Kew. And for this he came to be known as a bio pirate. Forty four years after this act of treachery he was knighted in 1920. Though only about 4000 seeds germinated at the Kew Garden, but were enough to become the basis of initiating plantations in British colonies across Asia. In his non-fiction thriller *Thief at the End of the World: Rubber, Power and Seeds of Empire* the American author Joe Jackson narrates the amazing story of bio-piracy of a man of reckless courage, adventure and self destructive ambition.

Much before Henry Wickham’s adventure in Brazil Christopher Columbus in pursuit of a new route to India landed in Haiti in the Caribbean Islands. On August 3, 1492 Columbus sailed from Palos, Spain in three small ships — Santa Maria, Pinta and Nina. Exploring through the Caribbean Sea looking for gold, Columbus landed in San Salvador, Haiti on October 11. Columbus was the first European to see the native children playing a game with round shaped objects that bounced. Long before Columbus explored the Caribbean region the native South American Indians knew the art of making rubber balls from latex. The rubber balls were used in Aztec ceremonial games. Ancient Mayas and Incas also were making different grades of rubber. In 1735 Charles Marie de La Condamine, a member of the French Geographical expedition team to South America was the first person to give an account of native South American system of rubber production. La Condamine called the rubber tree ‘carutechona’ the French spelling of a native term for ‘weeping trees’.

With the invention of automobiles the demand for rubber boomed. Soon Manaus, situated on the Amazon was booming with activity and became the heart of rubber trade. It was around 1839 it was discovered that rubber had many industrial uses. In 1888 John Boyd Dunlop used the first bicycle with pneumatic (inflatable) tyres and is still remembered today for founding the company that bears his name ‘Dunlop Tyres’. Water proof raincoat, very often called Mackintosh was invented by a Scottish man Charles Mackintosh in 1923.

In olden time when cars started rolling on the streets of London the tyre used to melt during the summer season and crumble during the winter. This problem was solved when on December 29, 1839, when Charles Goodyear, an American self-taught chemist invented vulcanization, a chemical process of hardening rubber by combining with sulphur that gives rubber strength, resistance and elasticity that would support extreme temperatures.

British realized that it was not possible to grow rubber trees in England due to its cool climatic conditions. Henry Nicholas Ridley, an English Botanist was the person who brought the rubber seeds from Kew Garden to Singapore and then to the mainland Malaysia in Kuala Kangsar. An Anglo-Dutch treaty divided the Malaya Archipelago between the British and the Dutch when Malaya came under the British rule. Only 2400 seedlings were sent to British Malaya, British Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), British Ceylone (Sri Lanka) and India. Because of the similar geographical conditions of Brazil British colonists began promoting the commercial production of plantation rubber in Malay Peninsula.

In Malaysian plantations everything was foreign in nature including capital, management, technological knowhow and others except local labour. Long before in 1895 Ridley convinced two coffee growers of Sri Lanka to make an attempt to plant rubber trees in two acres of their

estates. 1919 seedlings grew very fast in the Gamapha Botanical Garden. The first rubber seedlings to India were brought to Goa, a non-traditional area for rubber cultivation. It was an Irishman, John Joseph Murphy, known as Kerala’s ‘rubber man’ who set up the first rubber plantation in India. Efforts also on to grow rubber on a commercial scale at the Botanical Garden, Calcutta. Commercial plantation of rubber in India began its journey with the initiative of the British planters when they formed the ‘Periyar Syndicate’ in Kerala. The local governments of Travancore, Madras and Mysore also encouraged the rubber cultivation and even granted land. It took six years to see the first result and there was no looking back. India entered the rubber map of the world and Kerala, because of the more favourable conditions with high temperature and heavy rain fall became the most important rubber growing region.

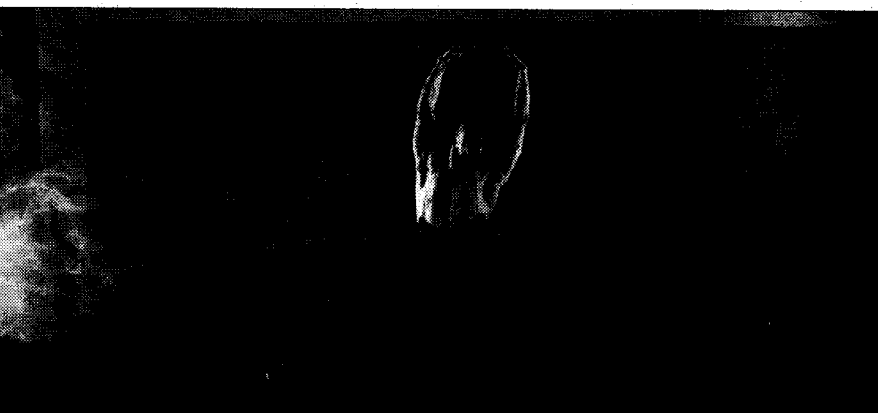
During the world war II Japan invaded Malay in December 1941 and captured Singapore. Japanese invasion of South East Asia in cut off about 90 per cent of the natural rubber supplies, a strategic war material to tire manufacturers. Japanese had a very decisive plan, secure the rubber fields and cut off the supplies to all the enemy countries like Britain, China and French colonies. Because of the war the supply of plantation rubber from Malaya became uncertain because it could not be shipped out to major consuming countries. Plantations came under heavy Japanese bombings and work almost came to a halt. During the war every machine needed rubber. It was difficult to fight the war without rubber. US military needed rubber for trucks, airplanes and jeeps. Germany desperately needed rubber from Malaysia during the peak war time because of their stealth submarine called U Boat. It was named U-480, considered by many to be the first stealth submarine, equipped with a special rubber coating, which made it difficult to be detected by British Sonar, a technique which uses sound to detect objects, usually under water.

Many scientists soon realized the importance of rubber and that the development of synthetic rubber will be a goldmine. A German chemist team headed by Fritz Hoffman succeeded in the production of a substance called isoprene, the starting material for the production of synthetic rubber. But it is believed that it was Chaim Weizmann, a chemist and also the first president of independent Israel was the person who first developed Isoprene.

Though the future of plantation rubber is not very bleak but facing a stiff challenge from the synthetic rubber sector. Plantation rubber has a problem of steady supply and the synthetic rubber have more advantages over plantation rubber because it is resistant to certain chemicals and has a better aging and can withstand a wider range of temperature.

(The author is former Head, Department of Geography, St. Edmund’s College)

Wah Ballet: From Delhi to London



By Sukant Deepak

Four years back, the first class made him uncomfortable — an alien dance form, rich kids all around, those sleek uniforms and shoes... The then sixteen-years-old Kamal Singh, son of an e-rickshaw driver could not wait for it to get over. But the teacher, Fernando Aguilera, director of a ballet school and company in New Delhi knew immediately there was something special about the young boy.

If you think this is straight out of the film ‘Yeh Ballet’, you are right.

Recently, when The English National Ballet School of London, England, sent an invitation, offering him a place in their one-year Professional Trainee Programme, he just could not believe it. It was both great and sad news.

“That was the happiest day for me. But the fee — eight thousand pounds and living expenses in London to the tune of a thousand pounds per month, how could I even think of affording that?” he tells IANS.

For someone who wants to see himself in *Swan Lake* and *Sleeping Beauty*, a modern day fairy tale unfolded soon. When his teacher started a crowd funding campaign for Rs 15 lakh on Ketto on September 1, he had no idea that by September 16, the entire fund would be raised, with actor Hrithik Roshan con-

tributing Rs 3 lakh, becoming the biggest donor from India.

The shy 20-year-old smiles: “I still can’t forget the initial years, those moments when you are inching closer to your dreams but terrified of everything evaporating in minutes, despite all the hard work. I come from a family where my father earned Rs 300 a day, there were times when there was not enough to have a meal at night.”

Attributing his success to Aguilera, originally from Argentina, who came to India 23 years back, the dancer says that it was only after the teacher offered him a scholarship, promised to take care of his transportation and uniform expenses that he could seriously think of joining regular classes.

“Otherwise how could I pay the institute’s fee? It would take me more than one hour one way to travel from my home in Vikas Vihar to the institute in Saket.” Excited that after the year’s training in London, he would have the chance to a to enter the English National Ballet Company, as a professional dancer on a monthly salary, Singh says that initially it did take some effort to convince his father to let him concentrate on dance.

“And Aguilera helped there too. He met my father and told him that I had the potential to become a professional and dream of a better life. Of course, the

fact that money was a constant problem at home kept bothering me,” remembers Singh who has two siblings.

A student of the Government Boys Senior Secondary School in Vikaspuri, he has been staying at his teacher’s house ever since the lockdown was clamped.

“He did not want my training to suffer, so invited me to stay at his place. You know whenever I thank him for all he has done for me, he just tells me to keep quiet.”

Fernando Aguilera makes it clear that it was tough to ignore Singh’s natural flexibility and flair, even during the warm-up session of the first class.

“And as the classes progressed, I was smitten by his commitment and discipline. Honestly, discipline is the key here. He would keep smiling even if I told him to repeat a step hundred times, which happened often,” he tells.

The teacher, whose 12 students have now joined professional ballet companies across the world and several more are instructors, insists that despite all the hurdles, Singh refused to quit. “The financial background of his family, the problems with English... there were many, but the point is, he overcame all. And yes, he did not run away because I am strict,” he laughs.

(The author can be contacted at sukant.d@ians.in)

By Prasanta Talukdar

The historic Stilwell Road was constructed by the US during World War II. It was a strategic military route, so that the Western Allies could supply the Chinese as an alternative to the Burma Road which had been cut by the Japanese in 1942. The valley of the Upper Brahmaputra during that time to Burma Road connecting to Kunming, China passes through Lekhapani, Jairampur, Nampong and Pangsau pass, India- Burma (Myanmar) border. It winds up the passes of 9000 feet Patkai Range and emerges at Shindbuiyang and then Myitkyina. Originally it was called 'Ledo Road'. Initially, this project was prospected by British long before the Second World War and could not implement until the agreement between the British and US.

British railway builders had surveyed the Pangsau Pass, which is 3,727 feet high on the India-Burma border, on the Patkai crest, above Nampong of Arunachal Pradesh and Ledo of Assam. They concluded that a track could be pushed through to Burma (Myanmar) and down the Hukawng Valley. Although the proposal was dropped, the British prospected the Patkai Range for a road from Assam into northern Myanmar. British engineers had surveyed the route for a road for the first 130 kms. Then British Premier Winston Churchill dismissed it as 'an immense, laborious task, unlikely to be finished before the need for it has passed'.

After the British had been pushed back out of most of Burma (Myanmar) by the Japanese, building this road became a priority for the US. Ledo was chosen as the starting point for this important road because it was close to the northern terminus of a rail line from the ports of Kolkata and Karachi. Lend-lease supplies destined for China typically travelled from the west coast of the United States by ship across the Pacific before being transferred to railway wagons and shipped to northeast India. Its objective was to provide an overland military supply route to Yunnan in China where forces under Chiang Kai-shek the then revolutionary and military leader who served as the leader of the Republic of China were seeking to push back the Japanese advance. But not everyone was convinced of its utility.

A charismatic, though somewhat unorthodox commander, he wore a tattered old army hat and uniform with no insignia of rank while in the field. His blunt candour and willingness to share the hardships of the common

Historic Stilwell Calling

soldiers earned him the nickname, 'Vinegar Joe'. US Army General Joseph Stilwell was a West Point graduate with extensive experience in China and most importantly, someone who was willing to stand up to the recalcitrant and corrupt Chiang Kai-shek. On his desk was a motto inscribed with the words — 'Illegitimi non carborundum, a form of fractured Latin that translates as 'Don't let the bastards grind you down'. During the First Burma Campaign, which ended in the Allied defeat of May 1942, Stilwell led the retreat of a group of about one hundred soldiers and civilians on a hazardous 210 kms march through the Burmese jungle and safely into India. On his arrival in Imphal, he told reporters, 'We got a hell of a beating. We ought to find out why it happened and go back!'

The 19,000 kms supply line was the longest in the war — and the most dangerous. After arriving in Ledo, ammunition, machinery, fuel and other essentials were loaded on to C-46 aircraft for the perilous fight across what was known as 'The Hump' — the eastern most spur of the Himalayan Range to Kunming. The air route, which passed over 4,500 meter high ridges, was so hazardous it came to be known as 'Skyway to Hell' and 'the Aluminum Trail' by the remains of downed aircraft on the ground. Averages of eight planes a month were lost because of the 300 kph winds, blinding rains, snow, ice and enemy re.

According to the US Defence Department, more than 500 aircraft and 1,200 crew members who flew 'The Hump' are unaccounted with 416 Americans missing in India alone. The hazards and logistical limitations of the air route to China made the construction of a land route more urgent. Pushing hardest for its construction was the American General Joseph Stilwell, the first Deputy Supreme Commander of the South-East Asia Command and head of the China-India- Burma (Myanmar) theatre. But this road is important. It is a reminder of the time when Upper Assam was the headquarters of the Northern Area Command — known as the China- India- Burma (Myanmar) theatre of the war — and evidence of this can be seen in Ledo and its surrounding towns. Bailey's bridges, Nissen huts and disused airstrips dot the landscape.



A signboard at the start of the Ledo Road listing the distance in miles. The photo was taken in 1945. (Photos contributed by author)

On December 1, 1942 during the Second World War when Burma (Myanmar) was fully under seize by the Japanese forces, General Stilwell had organized a 'Service of Supply' (SOS) under the command of Major General Raymond A. Wheeler, a high-profile US Army engineer and assigned him to look after the construction of the Ledo Road. Major General Wheeler, in turn, assigned responsibility of base commander for the road construction to Colonel John C. Arrowsmith. The road construction work started on the first 166 kms section of the road in December 1942.

The road followed a steep, narrow trail from Ledo, across the Patkai Range through the Pangsau Pass also known as 'Hell Pass' for its difficult terrain, and down to Shingbuiyang of Myanmar (Burma). Sometimes rising as high as 4,600 feet, the road required the removal of earth. Steep gradients, hairpin curves and sheer drops of 200 feet, all surrounded by a thick rain forest were the norm for this first section.

Then US President Franklin Roosevelt gave it his personal blessing, promising thousands of troops to aid in its construction. At the time, the intended route of the road had been

only partially explored so engineers had only a vague idea about the topography they would encounter.

The building of this section allowed much-needed supplies to flow to the troops engaged in attacking the Japanese 18th Division, which was defending the northern area of Myanmar (Burma) with their strongest forces around the towns of Kamaing, Mogaung and Myitkyina. Before the Ledo road reached Shingbuiyang, Allied troops (the majority of whom were American-trained Chinese divisions of the X- Force) had been totally dependent on supplies flown in over the Patkai Range.

As the Japanese were forced to retreat south, the Ledo Road was extended. This was made considerably easier from Shingbuiyang by the presence of a fair weather road built by the Japanese, and the Ledo Road generally followed the Japanese trace. As the road was built, two 10 cms fuel pipe lines were laid side-by-side so that fuel for the supply vehicles could be piped instead of trucked along the road. After the initial section to Shingbuiyang, more sections followed: Warazup, Myitkyina and Bhamo, 600 kms from Ledo. At that point the road joined a spur of the old

Burma Road and, although improvements to further sections followed, the road was passable. The spur passed through Namkham 558 kms from Ledo and finally at the Mong-Yu Road junction, 748 kms from Ledo, the Ledo Road met the Burma Road. To get to the Mong-Yu junction the Ledo Road had to span 10 major rivers and 155 secondary streams, averaging one bridge every 4.5 kms.

In late 1944, barely two years after Stilwell accepted responsibility for building the Ledo Road; it connected to the Burma Road though some sections of the road beyond Myitkyina at Hukawng Valley were under repair due to heavy monsoon rains. It became a highway stretching from Assam, India to Kunming, China 1,736 kms length.

On 12 January 1945, the first convoy of 113 vehicles, led by General Pick, departed from Ledo; they reached Kunming, China on 4 February 1945. In the six months following its opening, trucks carried 129,000 tons of supplies from India to China. 26 thousand trucks that carried the cargo (one way) were handed over to the Chinese. The highway crossed into Burma (Myanmar) through the difficult Pangsau Pass of the Patkai Range and was known as the Ledo Road until January 1945, when a connection via Myitkyina and Bhamo was completed to the Burma Road at Mu-se.

For more than two years, as many as 17,000 mainly American engineers oversaw up to 60,000 labourers who worked twenty-four hours a day; seven days a week to convert what had been a jungle track, into a trans-Asian highway. The labourers included the North Burmese Kachin warriors, Bihari tea plantation workers, Travancore coolies, porters from the Garo Hills and Darjeeling as well as troops from the Indian Pioneer Corps. Chinese mule pack trains augmented the inadequate feet of trucks. Along the way, engineers encountered vertical rain-forests, receiving 150 inches of rain a year and frequent earth tremors that triggered landslides.

Malaria, typhoid, dysentery, skin diseases, leeches, forty species of poisonous snakes, ticks, wasps, scorpions and sand flies took a huge toll on the health of workers. Hundreds of bridges were required to span creeks that turned into raging torrents during

the monsoon. Charles Glean, Commander of America's 330th Engineers famously said that the road would stand as the 'toughest engineering job on the planet'. It was also the largest, costliest and most controversial engineering project of the Second World War. The road was finally built at an estimated cost of US dollar 150 million. The costs also included the loss of over 1,100 Americans lives, as many died during the construction, as well as the loss of many locals' lives. The human cost of the 1,079 mile road was therefore described as 'A man a mile'. On May 20, 1945, newly promoted Major General Lewis A. Pick formally announced the completion of the Ledo road, a task he called toughest job ever given to US Army Engineers in War-time.

The road was renamed the Stilwell Road in honour of General Joseph Stilwell. It was officially abandoned by the United States in October 1945, but it remains a major internal route. In the course of time, the Stilwell Road had virtually disappeared due to the road lies in the lands of three different nations that are China, Myanmar and India and due to non-maintenance by the respective nations. However, of the 1,736 kms long road, 61 km of the road lies in India, 1,033 kms in Myanmar and 632 kms in China. In India out of 71 kms, 37 kms lies in Assam and 34 kms in Arunachal Pradesh.

Just outside Ledo, a signpost stands as a reminder of the Stilwell Road's importance. It marks the distances to towns along and way and carries the slogan 'Rejuvenate our life line, revitalize our relationship, and reach out beyond borders'. Today what is known as the Stilwell Road is motorable for barely 60 kms up to the Pangsau Pass that marks the border between India and Myanmar. On the other side of the frontier, what was once a 10 m wide, double-lane, all-weather highway, degenerates into an overgrown track? What could have been a vital trade and transport link between northeast India and the rest of Asia has suffered from decades of neglect.

Though it may no longer be 'the toughest job on the planet', restoring the Stilwell Road to its former glory will take plenty of political resolve, financial commitment and above all common purpose, something that will be difficult given the friction between India and China. The Ledo Road alias Stilwell Road meanwhile remains broken and as is. A silent tribute to all those who laid down their lives to build this road, at a time when the world was at war.

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, September 20, 2020

Venus is forming an angle of 160 degrees with Saturn and it will give mixed results to you during the year ahead. You will have to work hard to earn money. Your expenses will also rise. Some family related matter might also give you some tensions. It will give you some health related issues. Your competitors will turn hostile and make life tough for you. But you will not give up. Family elders and friends will give full support. Even your soul mate will be a source of strength and inspiration. Your bosses will support you fully. Even your peers will keep encouraging you. Ultimately you will be able to execute all your plans. You will plan to buy some property. Students will perform well. Auspicious functions will keep taking place. Your social stature will rise and you will be honoured in a public function. Work related trip will prove beneficial.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

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

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

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

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

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

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

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

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

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

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

This is a phase that brings fun, entertaining events and happiness to the fore. Your effectiveness, self-worth and finances are also highlighted. This stage of your life may be marked by hard work. Financial success may not be remarkable, yet it is generally steady, if slow to come by. Matters of personal courage, confidence and independence are emerging. Issues surrounding income from foreign sources could also figure at this time. You should be careful not to over-analyze your relationships. You feel on top of things with good health and positive energy.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

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

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

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

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

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

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

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

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

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

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

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

Ethical Hacking: Keep the digital world safe

By Ranjan K Baruah

The recent pandemic has taught us many things. We have learned many new things from real life experiences which were not available on books as the crisis did not happened in near past. Schools are yet to be open though there have been changes in lock down condition. In this pandemic situation we have seen the important use of digital medium and uses of internet. Many activities are happening digitally including payment and online trading. This has also created demand for people who can work for the digital security and help others in safety in digital world.

Many of us use internet or are familiar with websites and internet. We have also come across a word called hacking when it comes to cyber world. Security is a major worry these days, not only in real world but also in the cyber world. In recent years, there has been increase in cyber crime cases on the Internet like hacking email accounts, stealing and intercepting sensitive data, password attacks, abusive emails etc. Cyber criminal may be called hackers though there are many types of criminal when it comes to cyber space. As more activities are online due to pandemic, so, it is obvious that many people will face problem and challenges from hackers.

Though there are problems there are solutions too and this brings scope for ethical hackers. An ethical hacker is usually employed by an organization who trusts him or her to attempt to penetrate networks and/or computer systems, using the same methods as a hacker, for the purpose of finding and fixing computer security vulnerabilities. Hacking may be considered ethical only when it is done under a contract between the hacker and the organization.

An ethical hacker is someone who hacks with legal permission to strengthen systems and makes them penetration-proof. An ethical hacker is a network or computer experts. Ethical Hackers are technically skilled IT professionals with a strong desire to solve problems and prevent malicious hackers from causing damage to network systems.

Experts from the field of computer science or engineers or similar may opt to become ethical hackers. They must learn different programming and language or in simple we can say that they are the experts in the field of computers. To become an ethical hacker, being computer savvy and gadget friendly are important pre-requisites. To be a professional ethical hacker one needs motivation, dedication, analytical thinking, initiative, problem solving ability, investigative nature and formal training in ethical hacking.

With internet use growing worldwide and cyber crimes increased as well, ethical hackers have become an integral workforce of any IT security industry. This career scopes brings new hopes for many aspirants who are looking for their career related to IT and cyber world as internet security and networking are the two fastest-growing industries where ethical hackers can find employment in ethical hacking and information security.

Many institutes in India offer certificate and diploma courses in Ethical Hacking and related fields like Cyber Forensics, Information security etc. There are certification available from different agencies and institutes. Some of the courses related to ethical hacking are PG Diploma in Information Security and System Administration, MSc in Cyber Forensic and Information Security, MTech in Computer Science and Information Security, MTech in Information Assurance and Security, MTech in Cyber Security, Certificate Course in Cyber Laws, Post Graduate Diploma in Cyber Laws, Advance Diploma in Ethical Hacking, Certificate in Information Security and Ethical Hacking, Certified Information System Security Professional (CISSP), Certified Ethical Hacker (CEH), Post Graduate Diploma in IT Security, etc.

There are scopes of getting employed in government as well as in private sectors. Aspirants may get chance to work in government agencies such as military and law enforcement agencies, defence organisations, forensic laboratories, etc. Skilled ethical hackers may work for investigation agencies like the Central Bureau of Investigation, the National Investigating Agency, State Police, etc. One may also start own enterprise of ethical hacking by providing services to others. One must have effective communication and networking skills apart from the technical knowledge to become a successful ethical hacker.

(The author may be contacted at 8473943734 or through email at bkranjan@gmail.com)

“A dream is a scripture, and many scriptures are nothing but dreams.”
--- Walt Disney

The Shillong Times

Vol No: L.XIII No. 38 SHILLONG, MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2020

Farm Bills passed

TWO farm bills have sailed through both Houses of Parliament, and the nod from the President to turn the legislation into a law would follow. Styled as the Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020, and the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020, the legislation is seen and projected as a historic farm reform exercise by the Modi government. A related legislation will be presented in the Rajya Sabha on Monday for its passage. The farm legislation will naturally have its pros and cons at the implementation level, as had happened in the case of the GST. The Government naturally feels the Bill is good for farmers as it will end the play of middlemen, and create a new mechanism to enable farmers to sell their products directly to the marketing agencies. The Opposition fears that farms would be sold out to the corporate; that the minimum support price (MSP) system would be abolished and farmers put to serious disadvantage on many fronts. This apart, the farmers and workers in Punjab and Haryana are up in arms, also over a scenario of the mandis (markets) becoming dysfunctional as products would be taken directly from farms by marketing agencies. This will lead to large-scale job losses, they say.

Notably, the opposition to the legislation comes from the Shiromani Akali Dal, a firm ally of the BJP for many years, and from the BJD of Odisha and TRS of Telangana, both parties having close understanding in parliament with the NDA on most occasions in the past. The Left too opposes it alongside the Congress. The NDA this time got the backing instead from the YSR Congress and the AIADMK. In the current circumstances, there is little likelihood of a nationwide mass protest by farmers, as the Covid-linked restrictions are in place. Much of the details of the new legislation are still not in the public realm. Hence a detailed assessment of the pluses and minuses will take time. Many are, in part, presuming and assuming things. Agriculture sector reforms are long overdue; rather reforms had never been attempted in a serious manner by successive governments. The Modi government has brought about market reforms through the GST, and India had economic reforms in the 1990s. Farmers continue to be an exploited lot by middlemen and other vested interests. They do not get even 20 per cent of the actual price on which a product is sold in markets. Such is the play of vested interests. It remains to be seen how things will change post the Farm Act of 2020.

TO THE EDITOR

Sangma versus Sangma

Editor,
Strange are the ways of our political masters. Over the last decade or so, it has been Sangma Brothers versus Sangma Brothers! Look at the way Mukul Sangma and his younger brother Zenith or James Sangma and his younger brother Conrad Sangma have held sway over the course of politics in Meghalaya. When Mukul Sangma was the chief minister and his brother a cabinet minister, both James and Conrad Sangma were in the Opposition. They led from the front to heckle Mukul. Be it inside the Assembly or outside, James Sangma in particular went hammer and tongs against their bete noire. He hardly missed half an opportunity to go after Mukul Sangma. Inside the Assembly, not a day passed when James Sangma did not make noise for good reason or not. What was conspicuous was that James Sangma went personal and made frontal attacks, even hitting below the belt. Mukul being a feisty leader did not hesitate to join the verbal duel. Acrimony on account of political rivalry was the order of the day.

Today, the wheels of fortune have changed 360 degrees. Mukul and Zenith

find themselves in the cold opposition, while the other Sangma Brothers are ensconced in the corridors of power. And see, how the roles have changed!

The diatribes from James Sangma have stopped. He has gone completely silent for the past two and half years. I presume he has taken his ministerial job so very seriously that today he has no time even to talk about the works his departments have been doing. Occasionally, he comes in the news for the wrong reasons, though. He was removed from the Home portfolio after his name figured in certain scams. Although, he was let off with just losing the Home portfolio, there are some unseen hands behind the recent complaint to NGT dragging James' name yet again. Be that as it may, one thing is clear; the rivalry between the two Sangma families is far from over.

The boot is today on the other foot. The Mukul-Zenith combine is leaving no stone unturned to embarrass the Sangmas in office. Small wonder then, Mukul Sangma swooped down like a hungry vulture to devour the other Sangmas on the corruption charges against Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (he is completely silent on JHADC). He rushed to Shillong from his constituency and pressed for CBI enquiry into alleged

scams unearthed by his other political foe, the BJP. He demanded imposition of Administrator's rule (a provision like governor's rule in the states) so that the other Sangmas would not be able to tinker with the records in the District Council. He is worried that the Sangma Brothers in power, whose names somehow find their way into the BJP "charge-sheet", might destroy evidence. It may be another plot to create political discomfiture for the ruling brothers, but the pattern cannot be missed. The Sangma Brothers in opposition are hyper-active suddenly. Zenith Sangma has been using media platforms for scoring brownie points based on truth, half-truth and even concoction!

The long and short of it is that both the Sangma Brothers are not going to end their pathogenic antagonism and would continue to needle each other, while the state continues to bear the brunt of their political chicanery.

Yours etc.,
Kyrmen Lyngdoh,
Viaemail

Uncouth behaviour

Editor,
I have to narrate this shocking and distressing

incident that happened on Friday last. A friend of mine and I - two young women were walking towards Dhankehi for some work nearby and we were shocked to be suddenly verbally harassed by a group of men in khaki and black uniforms in a Police Gypsy vehicle. They said in Khasi, "Ale wan rung ha kali" (Come enter this vehicle). We were shocked and afraid and did the only thing we could at the time - ignore and walk away, pretending not to hear anything. After completing our work sometime later, and while returning we ran into the same vehicle again and one of the men stared at us with the kind of stare which only conveys bad intentions. The irony about this incident is that these uniformed men who no doubt are police personnel, who we the citizens go to for protection, have in this case become harassers. Unfortunately, in our fear and panic, we forgot to check the number of the vehicle otherwise we would have filed a concrete FIR against these people for harassment. It is sad that we had to face such an unfortunate incident from none other than the police themselves, and I hope that this is not a common occurrence otherwise the Meghalaya Police will need a thorough relook at the

discipline, respect and gender sensitivity of its cadres.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Viaemail

Much ado about Wangala

Editor,
Appropos the news on whether or not to hold the Wangala Festival this year in November, (ST Sep 17, 2020) by two factions of the organising committee, is rather disturbing. Mass gathering of religious groups and other cultural festivals have been stopped by the government since the beginning of this year due to the Covid19 pandemic. Religious worship which is more important than festivals is still under restriction for the safety of the faithful. The present situation is such that the authorities have not been able to contain the rise of this dreaded disease in the state and even the most protected VIPs like some ministers have tested Covid positive. Therefore, I feel the situation is still not favourable to conduct such a great festival at this time and the same may be cancelled accordingly.

One faction of the organisation say they will be holding only the ritual

has to take place at the earliest so that the funds due from the central government can flow without any impediment.

ii) For non-Municipal areas the State Government and the KHADC have to make up their minds. If Dorbar Shnongs have to conduct civic governance so be it. Institutional reforms have to take place to empower them accordingly with defined authority and accountability.

iii) Just look at the funding to other local bodies in India. Panchayats receive funds from three sources: Local body grants, as recommended by the Central Finance Commission; funds for implementation of centrally sponsored schemes and funds released by the State governments on the recommendations of the State Finance Commissions. In the case of Meghalaya it has chosen self deprivation. Does it make sense? Some psychiatric treatment is called for here!

iv) One cannot live in the 21st century with 18th century laws and institutions, especially when there is a drive towards Smart Cities. Living with modern amenities which includes space and path for jogging and cycling is the aspiration of every citizen.

v) Cohesiveness of action depends on the clarity of the institutional structure. New York City is the most cosmopolitan metro in the world because among other things it is the head quarters of the United Nations. All activities pertaining to governance of the city comes solely under the Mayor who is elected every four years.

vi) A word about the role of civil society, groups and individuals who have been passionate to revive the pristine name of Shillong. Lately, Operation Clean-Up which started under the banner of the Shillong Times Platinum Jubilee last year; Team Jiva under Jivat Vaswani (City Hut Dhaba); Project Clean Surrounding under Jefferson Kynjing and many other groups led by dynamic youth have been trying to do their part.

vii) The bottom line however lies on reforms. Like Indore the State Government has to demonstrate some political will. If no reforms of any kind take place, then in no time we should be prepared to hear that Shillong will qualify instead to be called SHITlong!

(Email: rvwarjri@gmail.com)

Waste to Energy: Is this a viable project?

By Carmo Noronha

The Social Media Post of the Chief Minister of Meghalaya regarding the INR 14 Crore #WasteToEnergy Project in the Garo Hills is disconcerting. While congratulating our Chief Minister on the transparency regarding the project amount and the title of the Project, I would like to share a few thoughts for consideration of decision makers and the community.

While I do not know the exact nature of the project, nor its location, yet there are a few general principles that apply to all Waste to Energy projects and which need to be shared widely, especially with local communities, whose present and future could be compromised. Across the world, Waste to Energy Projects are being questioned by local communities since they promote environmental racism. This is because waste generated by urban populations is collected and is either dumped in landfills or sent to Waste to Energy

culture since huge volumes of waste are required for the project.

3. Most waste is generated in urban areas and this must be hauled to the plant which is generally in rural areas and hence one can question the efficiency of this system, which will require the use of fossil fuels for haulage and thus cause air pollution

4. Burning trash in incinerators releases various types of emissions including lead, mercury, dioxins and furans, particulate matter, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, acidic gases etc. Direct exposure to such toxins risks the health of facility workers and residents in nearby communities while indirect exposure, through the food chain, poses global risks. The link between cancer caused through various types of pollution is well established particularly through particulate matter and leaching into water and soil.

5. While companies may



Projects.

The way forward regarding waste, (also promoted by the SWACHH BHARAT Mission) is to align with the principles of ZERO WASTE and C I R C U L A R ECONOMY. What is not required in one system can become the resource for another system.. as happens naturally in our forests.

Thus source segregation becomes the non-negotiable!! The forests which have sustained our communities are our ultimate teachers and will continue to sustain us, if we are ready to reflect and learn on how nature works. For any environmental project the three basic principles are ETHICS, EFFICIENCY and ECONOMICS all seen through the eyes of the present and the future and all three working together. At no point can any one of them be compromised. If source segregation becomes the norm then there IS NO WASTE!!

For more detailed information on the subject and for those who are interested, kindly visitwww.no-burn.org from where I have summarised the following:

1. At each stage of the process of Waste to Energy there are pollution and health hazards and impacts: Emissions from hauling waste, Emissions from burning trash in incinerators, Generation of ash and waste water, residue disposal at landfills.

2. Waste to Energy projects put up by private enterprise depend on zeros, while the focus of ZERO WASTE is to segregate at source so that waste is reduced and eliminated. Waste to Energy encourages people to go back to the "shop till you drop", "use and throw,"

promise that they use advanced pollution control systems - the more pollutants an air pollution control system removes, the more toxic its fly ash and waste water is. Incineration also generates new toxic chemicals such as dioxins and furans, which can leach into soil and groundwater and accumulate in food chains.

6. Residues require special treatment and separate disposal but are mostly sent to landfills where the ash can spread via wind and air. Some ash is mixed into concrete to make blocks, mixed into asphalt for roads, or even spread on agricultural lands.

While these may or may not apply to the present project, it is important that they be discussed as they do impact the lives of people. Further, so called "success" of the project may be used to start similar projects in other towns of the State and also in Shillong. I do remember distinctly that a similar project was mooted for Shillong by the earlier Government, but was for some reason shelved.

Environment and development is always the dilemma for the Government and its people especially for a State like Meghalaya with rich natural resources, where extracting resources generates so much revenue. Let us choose wisely for today and tomorrow! To quote Herman Hesse, "For me, trees have always been the most penetrating preachers. I revere them when they live in tribes and families, in forests and groves. And even more I revere them when they stand alone.

(Carmo Noronha is Director, Bethany Society. Email bethanyngo1981@gmail.com)

"People always complain about their memories, never about their minds."

— Francois de La Rochefoucauld

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.39 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2020

Police Reforms Day

SEPTEMBER 22 is observed as Police Reforms Day in India. It was on this day in 2006 when the Supreme Court gave its landmark judgment listing out seven key steps for ushering in the much needed police reforms. These include - limiting political control, merit-based appointment, fixing minimum tenure, separating functions of investigation from maintaining law and order, setting up of a fair and transparent system, establishing a police complaints authority in each state and setting up a National Selection Commission. The judgment came as a result of a long struggle since 1996 by senior police officer Prakash Singh along with senior lawyer Prashant Bhushan and others.

To limit political control the states are tasked with constituting a State Security Commission to ensure that state governments do not exercise unwarranted influence or pressure on the police. The State Security Commission would also lay down broad policy guidelines for policing and also evaluate the performance of the police. It is a sad commentary on the governance of this country that very few states have complied with the Supreme Court directives even today. The apex Court has given a strong call to insulate the post of Director General of Police from politics for which it has ordered that appointment be made through a merit-based, transparent process, and that the person appointed secures a minimum tenure of 2 years. The setting up of a Police Complaints Authority in each state down to the district level is also an imperative since there is hardly any police accountability mechanism in place.

In a scenario where the police are increasingly being accused of being a tool of the government in power it is important for the country to remind itself that the police are paid to protect the life and liberty of citizens. The manner in which the anti-CAA protests leading to the Delhi riots in February this year where 42 lives were lost and the subsequent unfair arrests made, suggest that the police were not operating in a free and fair manner but were tools of the ruling government. This does not bode well for the country as the public faith in the police is shaken thereby pushing people to take the law into their hands.

Meghalaya is one of the few states where a State Security Commission is in place and has been functioning relatively well when compared to other states that did not follow the SC directives in toto. However, police reform measures are not static. New protocols have to be developed for police guidance as fresh and unanticipated challenges emerge in various areas which could result in new frictions. Policing has changed considerably after the Covid-19 pandemic and it is likely that police-public tension points could arise in these extremely challenging times.

Lessons from Meghalaya's State Security Commission

By Aditi Datta

On September 22, 2006, the Supreme Court of India issued a set of seven directives to the union and state governments laying down practical mechanisms to implement structural reforms of the police. One of the directives requires governments, in each state and union territory to constitute a State Security Commission (SSC) as an independent body with a mandate to provide policy direction to the police and evaluate its performance against objective criteria.

SSCs are designed to prevent illegitimate political control over policing and ensure the elected government's supervision does not intrude into everyday management of the police.

However, 14 years after the court judgment, states have failed to establish independent and effective SSCs. Technically, 26 states have indeed constituted SSCs either through police acts or through government notifications. Yet, not a single SSC complies with the court's directives.

The balanced composition suggested by the court with representation of the government, the opposition, police, judiciary and civil society stands diluted in several ways: six states do not include the leader of the opposition whereas 17 states do not follow an independent selection process to pick non-official members. This results in the SSC being dominated by members of the political executive. Among the worst examples of blatant flouting of the court's directives is Bihar: the State Police Board is headed by the Chief Secretary, and includes only two other members -- the Director General of Police (DGP) and the Home Secretary.

Aside from gaps in their composition, the on-the-ground record of SSCs is equally discouraging. Since 2013, only four SSCs have held meetings: Meghalaya (five), Tripura (three), Andaman and Nicobar Islands (one) and Daman & Diu (one joint meeting with Nagaland).

Thus, the Meghalaya SSC tops the list of func-

tioning SSCs, of which in terms of activity, there appear to be just four. Since its formation under the Meghalaya Police Act, 2010, the SSC has met ten times between 2011 and 2017. While its composition, too, is dominated by the political executive without adequate independent members, a review of its meetings, made possible through right to information, offers valuable insights into the measurable impact that an independent oversight

included the leader of the opposition, independent members as well as the police chief, the members highlighted main gaps and agreed on follow-up actions.

For example the SSC met four times to discuss the criteria for appointment of DGP and also shortlisted candidates. It met five times to discuss about police recruitment and directed the home (police) department/DGP to take steps to fill up the vacancies based on current and anticipated vacancy. On crimes

cussed by the SSC was the need to develop a strategic plan, as required under Section 34 of the Meghalaya Police Act, 2010. The Commission asked the Rajiv Gandhi Indian Institute of Management, Shillong, to develop the plan. Although it is not clear whether the plan has since been approved and adopted, the state stands out as among the few in the country to recognize the need for creating a strategic plan.

While the progress of the SSC is a mixed bag, a major limitation is that its recommendations have not been made binding on the state government. Without this, the SSC tends to be reduced to an advisory role instead of a policy-making one as the court had intended.

Lack of adequate independent members is another key gap. It has meant that the SSC lacks expertise and interests beyond those of the political executive. This has a bearing on the mandate itself because the SSC does not have varied skill sets for developing performance indicators, which has remained so far neglected. Absence of business rules governing the meetings has also meant that certain issues were dropped, not followed up on or evolved into something quite different to what was envisaged: thus, for example, the SSC had met to develop Standard Operating Procedures. The scope of this effort was continuously reduced from a broad array of policing issues requiring regulation to just that of motivation of police personnel.

Notwithstanding these flaws, Meghalaya's SSC appears to be the best institutionalized such oversight body in India from which other states can learn. However, it needs to address the shortcomings that have been pointed out if it wants to induce far-reaching systemic changes.

(Aditi Datta is Senior Programme Officer, Police Reforms Programme, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) (www.humanrightsinitiative.org))



body can have on ensuring better policing.

Thus, over the years, the Meghalaya SSC has discussed a range of substantive policy issues. These have ranged from police housing, police budget, cyber crime, Crime and Criminal Tracking Network System, police stations/units/outposts, police retirement, social media management, issues of insurgency and community policing. This itself has set into motion a process of collective planning and review of policing policies and practices. In these meetings, which have almost always

against women, it emphasized the need for ensuring adequate women police personnel in each police station instead of having an All Woman Police station.

It is encouraging to note that two years following the SSC meeting on women in police where the issue of quota was also reviewed, the state passed the Meghalaya Police (Amendment) Act, 2018 introducing 10 percent reservation for women at the Constable and Sub-Inspector ranks. A shared agreement leading to a policy change is more likely to meet success in implementation.

Another issued dis-

While I appreciate the motive of the Government in times like these to reduce the stress on students and teachers with regards to the curriculum, however, 'The Adjusted Academic Calendar' is not acceptable simply because it is not helping anyone. With so many distinguished panel of experts, developers, educators, managers, administrators etc., the least we expect is an 'Unchanged Academic Calendar and Syllabus.'

As a teacher I am very concerned with how very little time we have; how many lessons the students have to learn; how safe are our students and how are we going to approach the next step. Yours etc.,

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As a teacher I am very concerned with how very little time we have; how many lessons the students have to learn; how safe are our students and how are we going to approach the next step. Yours etc.,

Name withheld on request

A concerned Teacher (Teaching Geography and Economics (Social Science))

Municipality & stray dogs

Editor, Stray dogs have become a nuisance in many localities of Shillong. Early risers and joggers face this problem every day. An aged resident of Upper Mawprem has been attacked a couple of times by such strays during morning walks. With the rapid increase in stray dogs in various localities, people find it very difficult to walk on certain roads or footpaths which are strewn with the feces. The issue has become a cause of concern for the parents having small children. They fear sending their children outside not because of a dog bite but because they might return home with dog crap in their show soles.

It's only in Shillong where rampant defecation by stray dogs is taken in its stride. Out of desperation, people these days hang plastic bottles filled with blue-colored water right in front of their entry gates. The belief is that this will scare away the dog from scaping around.

Saturday night was a real nightmare for pedestrians. No one can take the risk of crossing the roads with the flock of unpredictable dogs. Many residents have complained about sleep loss due to the continuous deafening barks. What is disgusting is that the pet lovers, without civic sense, take out their dogs for littering on the main road and lanes. How can people loving exotic pets also be so irresponsible and unconcerned? Do you know they hardly pay a glance over those hungry street dogs?

The rise in number of stray dogs has irked the residents of Upper Mawprem is a cause of huge concern particularly for children and the aged. This has been brought to the attention of the Dorbar Shong as well.

The government should not remain complacent or indifferent when public safety is at stake. The concerned authorities of the Municipality and also Deputy Commissioners must take action. All appropriate measures must be adopted by the Board. Come what may, the government must be sensitive to keep the canine herd on a tight leash.

Yours etc.,
Salil Grewal,
Shillong

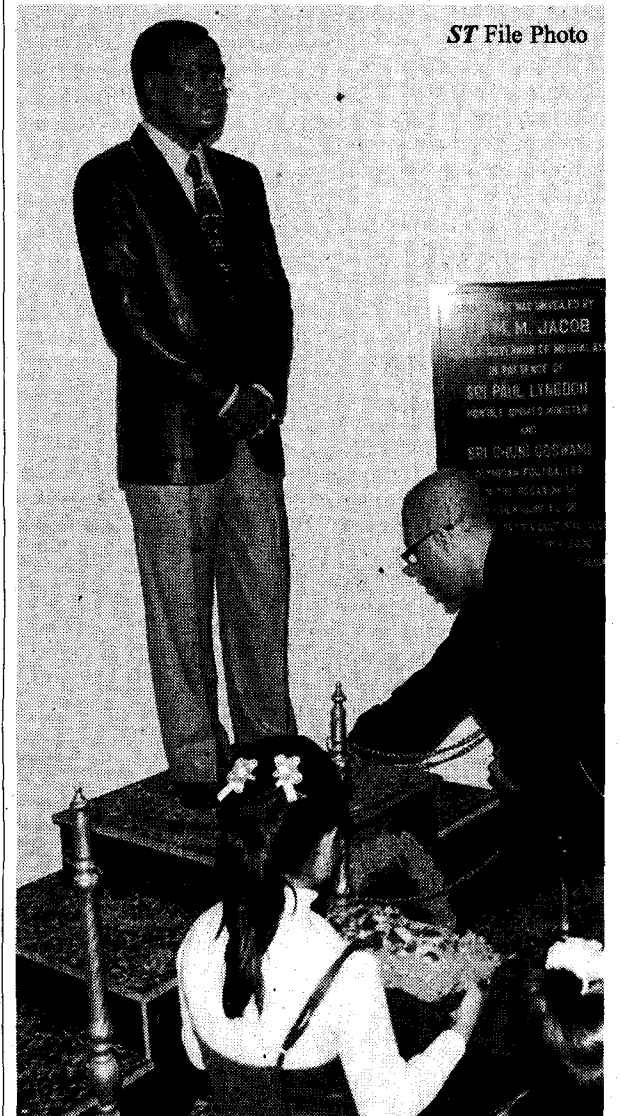
Ardhendu Chaudhuri – As I saw him

By Uma Purkayastha

September 22, 2004, Wednesday was a black day in the history of Shillong. On that day many valuable lives were snatched away from their near and dear ones as the Pawan Hans helicopter of the Meghalaya Transport Corporation crashed at 1:25 pm in the Kyrdem Kulai area of Ri-Bhoi district, about 40 kms from here. The helicopter was returning to Shillong from Tura in West Garo Hills district via Guwahati. All ten persons, including a Meghalaya cabinet minister, two legislators and a former deputy speaker, were killed when the chopper crashed minutes before landing in Shillong, due to inclement weather. When the mortifying news reached Shillong, it sent shock waves followed by a mournful evening! The homes of the victims plunged into sudden darkness and grief, even as they tried to come to terms with the incident. A ghostly eerie look covered the city of Shillong. Everywhere there were deep sighs

I should run after you, not you after me'. That was (L) Ardhendu Chaudhuri! A very simple man but with an extra-ordinary capacity!

Ardhendu Chaudhuri was a smart, vocal and innovative MLA who used to raise points in the Assembly for all round development of the state. He had a magnetic personality to unite people of the multi-lingual, multi-racial society of Shillong, and mingle in the same platform, through socio cultural activities. He started the Food Carnival in Ribong and invited people of all communities to share their cuisine at the Food Carnival so that people get to taste one another's food. This event was a grand success and was much looked forward to. It was a get together for the people of Shillong! Such occasions are rare in Shillong where people of all communities come together in a single platform. They enjoyed the Carnival and the idea of meeting and touching base with one another.



and sobbing and gloom. It was the most unexpected shock; a major trauma!

Ardhendu Chaudhuri, one of the victims of the day, was very closely connected to the people of Shillong. When he passed away he was the sitting MLA of 22 Mawprem Constituency. I, being a resident of Bishnupur area, was also a voter of that constituency. We suffered for years from water scarcity, and absence of street lighting etc. Often we would approach the local MLA with our problems. One morning some of my neighbours proposed that we should go to Mr Chaudhuri with the complaint of water scarcity. To confirm his presence at his residence, I rang him and said that we were going to meet him. Then and there he replied, 'You need not come, I am reaching you just now'.

To our utter surprise, within ten minutes, he reached the spot on a two wheeler, listened to our problems, talked over phone to some persons, and assured us of getting water at the earliest. He was offered a cup of tea, but with a smile he refused to take tea till the water problem had been resolved. Within an hour we got water in our locality. While taking leave he said, 'I am your elected MLA; you have every right to call me whenever you need me. I am always at your service.'

Those who knew Ardhendu personally including the intelligentsia of Meghalaya say that he would consult them before every Assembly session and pick their brains on what questions they considered were of prime importance to the state and needed to be raised in the Assembly. He was not just a constituency MLA but a state leader whose vision went far beyond Mawprem. He understood the true meaning of what it is to be a peoples' representative. It was he who moved the motion in the Assembly for recognition of the Khasi language in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution.

Ardhendu was perhaps the first MLA to voluntarily give an account of how the MLA scheme was used down to the last rupee. He published this in a booklet and distributed it to all the constituents. Such transparency is hardly seen in Meghalaya. Unfortunately, his tenure as MLA was very short; it lasted only one year and a few months. Cruel destiny snatched him away very suddenly, leaving his works half-done! He had a very big heart for the poor and distressed. He was a living example of the adage 'Man lives in deed not in age'. The fatal end came on September 22, 2004, but he has left behind a legacy which is unforgettable.

TO THE EDITOR

The Covid pandemonium

Editor,

As Covid cases rise in the state, so also the alarming increase in deaths which begets the question as to whether our state apparatus is equipped to handle a situation like the present.

People are in a state of panic as all who are taken to hospital for treatment and who unfortunately pass away are invariably tested positive for the virus. We all know that this is a pandemic of alarming proportion and scientists and the health system have been caught unawares as it's a new disease for which there is no known cure yet.

Our healthcare system was and always is in a shambles all over the country and particularly in our state. This is a known fact. Medical care which is supposed to be free in government hospitals is never really free as medicines have to be bought from outside pharmacies and various tests have to be done in private agencies because equipment is always out of order. So how can we expect our healthcare to tackle such a situation effectively?

The recent case of a patient dying because of late arrival of the ambulance to get the patient to a nearby hospital is a case in point. While we laud the initiative taken by our Chief Minister and his cabinet and also the Director of Health services and his team of health workers, it is also important to have someone take emergency protocol initiatives

whenever such a situation arises as was the case talked about earlier wherein the SOP was to wait for the 108 ambulance service to ferry the patient. The matter could have been resolved by the victim's family who could have taken the patient to the hospital maybe saving her life in the process.

People are also scared to go for treatment to hospitals as almost all cases test positive. This leads one to question as to whether these tests are genuine or not. If reports are to be believed, the state government is getting a huge sum for every positive case reported. While applauding the government machinery for the effective tackling of the pandemic, we do hope that those in power do their jobs to the best of their ability and are not lured by the incentives available - meaning pocketing the money meant for the general public.

Only then can they restore the faith that the public has on them.

Yours etc.,
Angela Lyngdoh
Shillong-14

Adjusted academic Calendar 2020-21

Editor,

Following the lockdown to the Covid 19 crisis, all walks of life are badly affected but more so the academic calendar. As much as students miss their regular classes and school activities, teachers are in a fix on how to reach out to students. There have been di-

rections that online method of schooling could be done but it has proved to be unsuccessful considering that a large number of students could not avail the benefits due to various reasons. After over 5 months of uncertainties over the current crisis, my concern is how as a teacher, I should approach the curriculum for this year's session, if at all the situation improves. My hope rests with the wisdom of the Directorate of Educational Research and Training (DERT), of the State Education Department, to evaluate, review and adjust the remaining academic calendar and curriculum.

My anticipation as a teacher was fulfilled when the 'Adjusted Academic Calendar 2020-21' was put forward by the Government of Meghalaya through the DERT on September 17, 2020. In the first two pages of the foreword and acknowledgement by the Principal Secretary, Education Department and the Director Educational Research & Training, much appreciation was given to the State Resource Groups and Professional Learning Communities which comprise of 'subject experts', 'teacher educators', 'curriculum developers', 'experienced educational administrators', 'teams of district managers' and 'Meghalaya school improvement programmes' etc.

However, to my disappointment the so called 'adjusted academic calendar' was more or less the same. One chapter from Geography Class X was omitted. To make matters worse, it makes the existing curriculum more

complicated. I can't speak on behalf of other subject teachers but it's what I observed with my subject.

There's no content related to respective topics; no direction and no outlook. If this is what our system is only capable of, then the outcome is obvious. I say this with regret but from what I can gather it looks like they flipped over the pages of an MBOSE Text book and randomly chose, 'Headings in Capital Letters.' I could give examples from beginning to end of every chapter and topic but it's not possible here. But let me give an example. In the Class X Social Sciences, Geography section: Chapter 5- Minerals and Energy Resources, the chapter 'Conservation of Minerals' was the 'Portion removed from the Adjusted Academic Calendar' whereas Topics like 'Developments that Helped Raise Agricultural Productivity' were included. This doesn't make much sense when the 'Topics removed' and 'Topics included' are related and have the same knowledge base.

The same is the case with other chapters of both Geography and Economics section. If this is the case with my subject then I believe other subjects will have similar faulty context.

"India is a geographical term. It is no more a united nation than the Equator."
— Winston Churchill

The Shillong Times

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UN at 75

THE United Nations is now 75. It's a landmark event for an Organisation that carries its weight with nations as being the single entity that guides the world, though its powers are limited. The UN was born in October 1945, after imbibing grim lessons from World War II and learning from the failure of the League of Nations. It promises to work for peace and strive to avert future wars. The UN has played and continues to play an eminent role in this respect with the collective will of its member nations, now numbering 193.

Headquartered in New York, and a major part of its funds coming from the US government, the American influence on it is spectacular even as UN aims to take decisions in an impartial manner. Addressing the UN this week, via video call from New Delhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stressed for reforms for the Organisation that has carried on without major changes for three quarters of a century. Indeed reforms are called for to make the UN more effective in its handling of international matters.

The UN failed on occasions; as in the US-Iraq War that threw Saddam Hussein out of power in the beginning of this century. Sovereign nations should not be challenged from outside. The US cobbled an alliance of the big powers from the West and went to war with Saddam on the perceived ground that he stocked chemical weapons. Perhaps it was simply an excuse for the US to oust the ruler and grab Iraq's oil wealth. The UN could not stand up to the dictates of then US president George Bush Junior. The devastation it caused was unimaginable. The dust is yet to settle.

The UN is run essentially by a club of big nations forming part of its Security Council. India's attempt to be included in the SC has not succeeded so far, while China is a full-time member of the Council. Right or wrong, China uses its clout at the UN to favour its ally Pakistan, much to the disadvantage of India. Africa as a continent does not have a presence in the SC. Enlarging the number of full-time SC members has been a call that has gone unheeded for decades.

In Climate Change and such matters of global concern, the UN has been doing a good job, though the results are not always inspiring. More needs to be done and the UN must have the clout to push matters to their logical conclusion. On the humanitarian front, the UN is doing a commendable job through its various arms. Entities like the WHO and IMF are also doing a great service to humanity. Hence strengthening the role of the UN is a matter of urgency.

ADCs – Promoting a culture of corruption

By Albert Thyriang

One of the simplest definitions of culture is that it is a way of life. A way of life implies the manner in which one lives. It directly denotes that something is done regularly and habitually because one believes that action or activity is beneficial. So when we speak of a good work culture we simply mean people have the habit of being punctual and regular for work. When we refer to study culture we mean students study regularly throughout the year and not just before and during examinations. If a good work and study culture exists it is because a belief or a conviction has been inculcated in that group of people. Good work culture and study culture are no doubt beneficial.

If a good work and study culture is beneficial their absence produces the opposite effects. We Meghalayans have seen unsatisfactory SSLC results over the years. Perhaps, the main reason is the lack of work and study culture. We know the state's teachers neglect their duties and the community has not been able to impart a study culture in the student community leading to disappointing results year after year. The state does not boast of a good work culture, particularly in government offices. This results in the failure to defeat backwardness and poverty. The major reason for lack of development and progress in the third world is the absence of work culture and the creeping in of unhealthy habits, corrupt practices to be precise. So in underdeveloped or developing countries you will invariably find high levels of corruption. Corruption has become a way of life. Earning through sincere and hard work has given way to earning through quick means. In these countries education too is on the lower side because an atmosphere of study culture is wanting. India finds itself poor and backward with a high corruption perception index while countries like Japan and South Korea have defeated extreme poverty and although ravaged by wars only because they have a culture of industry and intolerance to corruption.

Scams in three ADCs
Since the beginning of this month allegations of multi-crore scams in the Khasi Hills Autonomous Council (KHADC), Garo Hills Autonomous Council (GHADC) and Jaintia Hills Autonomous Council (JHADC) have dominated the state. The BJP in Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills have levelled serious charges of malpractices in the three councils run by the NPP

misusing the Special Assistance Grant Scheme from the central government.

As per the allegations, the Executive Committee of JHADC diverted Rs 20 crore to pay salaries to employees violating the Niti Aayog guidelines that state that the funds were specifically meant for developmental works. Against KHADC the saffron party alleges that 85 percent of work claimed to have been completed for a museum costing Rs 4.15 crore at Sunny Hills is nowhere to be found. The most serious allegations are against GHADC bosses. Besides the Rs 5.28 crore for making untendered documentaries, the scams include exorbitant rates for film making and radio jingles, ghost roads, bridges and footpaths, duplication of projects and high quotations for repairs of buildings. The allegations indict the Sangma brothers, CM Conrad Sangma and Cabinet minister, James Sangma for 'enrolling' close relatives as contractors who have benefitted from the scams for non-existent or incomplete construction.

Why is BJP still part of MDA?

The BJP which has exposed the wrongdoings has been demanding CBI probe into the alleged embezzlement in the three councils while confessing that it cannot tolerate corruption. But is the party which is a partner of the NPP at the state and ADC levels sincere in its intent? Or is it just a political gimmick? Is it merely to command a moral high ground to face the elections due for September-October or later if postponed? Will it remain steadfast in its demand for a CBI inquiry? Will the party succeed in impressing on its masters in Delhi to let the central agency enquire into the colossal scams in all the three major regions in the state? If it does not tolerate corruption why it is that it has not severed ties with the 'scammer' NPP at the state level? Will we see action beyond the 'salvos'?

The NPP, the principal accused does not seem to be too embarrassed and shocked. The state chief, WR Kharlukhi, the lone Rajya Sabha member who took oath recently sees no merit in the allegations branding it unsubstantiated and unverifiable and ridiculing the decision of his BJP's counterpart, Ernest Mawrie for going to the press as a publicity stunt. The lukewarm attitude on the raging issue is complete when Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma was non-committal on ordering a CBI inquiry

making a mere 'we will see' statement.

Where does UDP stand?

UDP, the major partner in the MDA government too is not enthusiastic in tackling corruption in ADCs head on. Its interim head and former Deputy Chief Minister, Bindo M Lanong agrees with the demand for CBI investigation only on condition that the term of reference extends to the two previous terms of the ADCs controlled by the now Opposition, Congress. Does it mean that the present 'thieves' can go scot free even if the 'burglars' of 10/15 years ago are not caught? Is Congress serious about addressing corruption?

This brings us to the grand old party! The former Chief Minister and present Opposition leader, Mukul Sangma half-heartedly approached the Governor seeking his intervention to institute an independent probe and also demanded that the GHADC be brought under Administrator's Rule. The Congress response betrays credibility. The previous terms of ADCs under the Congress were under the scanner for massive corruption allegations running to several crores. RTI findings revealed that lakhs of rupees out of Council's schemes were siphoned off for personal gain. Bribes were allegedly taken from bidders for council gates and illegal traders. An inquiry was ordered by the state government to go into the scam but the report of the one-man Judicial Inquiry Commission has gathered dust. Financial mismanagement was to the point of the GHADC reaching bankruptcy and resulting in the inability of the Council to clear pending salaries of the Council's employees up to this day.

NPP backslides on clean governance

Coming back to the NPP when the party won the GHADC election in 2015 amid blatant corruption perception in the Congress and its controversial extensions, the then supremo (now deceased) had promised a clean administration in the tainted GHADC. He also assured a probe into the corruption charges against the men who ran the previous Council. This writer wrote a piece soon after the elections and had this to say, "Persons like me see only an iceberg in how politics works in our State and can confidently say that clean governance is still a distant dream. Restoring the dignity and image of the House which was badly tarnished will be a herculean task." Proudly the NPP has proved my prediction right. Scams under NPP might be

even bigger than under Congress rule.

Time to jettison ADCs or bring in Anti-defection law

The editorial on September 15 reminded the readers that the District Councils were created by the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution to enable the tribals in the then Assam state to protect their culture, tradition, language, customary laws and practices. The ADCs may work to protect, preserve and promote culture in term of dresses, dances, songs, folklores, languages and customary laws. But are they promoting the values or eroding them? What is the point in dressing well when we are devoid of values? What is the merit in the magnificent and colourful attires, the elegant and graceful steps, the proud and nationalistic songs and folklores, the unique and distinctive customary laws and adages, the advanced languages and literature when we are bereft of values, principles and ethics? Are the ADCs promoting culture or corruption?

One of the characteristics of tribes is simplicity and honesty. Have we lost them? Another salient feature of tribal culture is hard work. You cannot but admire the hard work of tribes engaged in their traditional cultivation. It requires non-stop work throughout the year. Bread is earned by the sweat of one's brow. Is that quality gone? The ADCs which are supposed to be custodians of culture and tradition are imparting counter values of corruption and illegal practices to attain wealth. This is enough reason for the ADCs to be abolished.

One prerequisite condition is a must for the ADC's existence and relevance! The Anti-Defection law must be made applicable to the ADCs. Why should the ADCs be untouched by the law? The exemption is an open invitation to corruption and a legal disregard for ideology and loyalty and a blatant betrayal of the will and a mockery of the mandate of the people. We have seen time and again ugly free switching of parties of elected councilors. Invariably, the party/parties that is/are in power in the state also run the ADCs. The Anti-Defection law has to be embraced by the ADCs if they are committed to any value system and wish to remain 'autonomous' and 'traditional' bodies. As of now ADCs seem to be 'anti-culture' and pro corruption!

(E-mail: thalbert@rediffmail.com)

A Nation divided, broken, torn

By Jagdish Rattanani

There are, broadly speaking, two approaches to building as also to breaking – be it a policy, an institution or for that matter a nation. One is the top down approach that can offer a new vision, open new vistas and push towards a new era. The other is the bottom-up, and this is the one that is said to deliver lasting impact – "block by block, brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand," as Barack Obama once put it. Usually spoken in terms of putting together from the ground up, we have occasion to study this in India for its opposite purpose – the breaking down and the demolition of a whole set of values and ideals that we have regarded as being the core of democratic India. What we are witnessing is the tearing down of a proud and vibrant nation by a tearing down not only of its ideals (which we may argue were lost long before, with the duplicity of a variety of political players) but also of the fig leaf that might allow us to pretend that we are after all work in progress and while we have faults, we are moving in the right direction. This time around, that pretense is gone, too. The covers are off and we can see that we are a nation divided, strict red lines drawn to separate something from its anti-that thing, the establishment from the anti-establishment and Left from the Right. It is for the nation to reflect on the fact that technology via our telecom revolution gave us one India, one tariff, one number. We want "one nation, one health card". We want electricity tariffs to move to "one India, one tariff". Some years back, the title of a chapter in the Economic Survey of India document was "powering one India". We are united in our tech advancement. But we have been fractured at the level of humanity, understanding and togetherness of the larger purpose of what a nation is meant to be. The citadel is being broken from the inside. This is the picture that emerges as we look to the names of anti-CAA protestors put out by the Delhi police for their alleged role in the Delhi riots – Sitaram Yechury, Jayati Ghosh, Professor Apoorvanand, Yogendra Yadav, Rahul Roy and so many others. The action is the most brazen attack to date on citizens' who have over the years stood for a point of view that the government clearly wants to silence. It comes in an atmosphere in which all manner of opposition is being crushed. The attack on rationalists, secularists, NGOs, select academics, the coining of terms like "urban naxals"

(now regular usage in the Indian lexicon), the arrests and continued detention of Varavara Rao and Sudha Bharadwaj, the cases against pro-dalit activists like Anand Telumbde and others, the repeated and consistent attempt to divide along lines of religion, the shrillness of the voices that are let loose to put down any one who stands up to authority – all reflect a pattern and a way of thinking that is alien to the way independent India has been built. You could argue that the nation was built top down, but it is being broken from the bottom up.

This is a threat like independent India has never seen before – the forced creation of chasms that never were so wide that they couldn't be crossed. As it is, our ideology was never strict ideology. It was dipped in a liberal dose of pragmatism so that we have had occasions in the past when Atal Behari Vajpayee praised Indira Gandhi, the Shiv Sena joined forces with the Muslim League and even that we are after all work in progress and while we have faults, we are moving in the right direction. Similarly, the longest serving Chief Minister of West Bengal Jyoti Basu of the CPI(M) had very good relations with the capitalist class and would not be the one to dismiss their concerns. In India, there is a bit of this and a bit of that as the nation works its way to a path of assimilation with a lot of muddling through. We are not America where the lines of the debate are drawn sharply between capitalism and socialism, the public and the private sector so that insurance became an acrimonious debate or between redistribution and rewards. There should therefore be no threat of a Joseph McCarthy rising in the nation. Yet, what we are seeing is the rise of an Indian version of McCarthyism that is dreadful because we may not have left within us the institutional firepower to stand up to it, let alone fight it at least in the near term. New boundaries are tested every time and they seem to pass, either unchallenged or the challengers effectively quashed. How and why have we reached this pass? Why is India, sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic, facing an assault to the very preamble and principles of the Constitution and the values enshrined in it? How and why has McCarthyism, if this is what we can call it, come to India? Answers to some of these questions are not easy. (Jagdish Rattanani is a journalist and faculty member at SPJIMR) (Through The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

TO THE EDITOR

Plight of farmers in Meghalaya

Editor,
Allow me to highlight the plight of farmers of Mawthadraishan area who had a bumper harvest of squash (piskot) this summer which should otherwise have been a cause of celebration for them – but unfortunately it has had a disastrous effect on the price which has fallen to less than Rs 4 per kg which is not even enough to cover the cost of production. The farmers alleged that middlemen and traders are manipulating the price and that, in the absence of regulated markets or a proper storage unit, they are left with only two choices to either let the harvest rot in the field or sell at heavy loss. Such situations faced by farmers of the state are not new and have been occurring at regular intervals

with other agriculture produce such as potato and ginger as well.

The main fear of the farmers in mainland India with regard to The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill recently passed by parliament is that it may lead to withdrawal of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) and open-ended procurement through the regulated markets (mandis) which have benefited farmers in states like Punjab and Haryana. This contention has been stoutly rejected by the government which defends the Bill as part of the measures to free farmers from the grip of traders and regulated markets.

The MSP is a price support mechanism for 22 crops which is announced by the central government before every sowing season and provides guaranteed prices and assured market to the farmers shielding them from the price fluctuation.

While it is true that the farmers in Meghalaya do not benefit from the MSP as it does not cover horticulture crops, the other existing price support mechanism in the form of Market Intervention Scheme (MIS) has also not been implemented to provide price support to the farmers of the state when needed.

The MIS is an ad hoc scheme implemented on the request of state governments for procurement of perishable agricultural and horticultural commodities to protect the income of farmers and prevent distress sale. The scheme requires that state governments share the loss with the central government on a 50:50 basis (75:25 in case of north-eastern states). Under the MIS, a pre-determined quantity at the fixed market intervention price is procured by the procurement agencies designated by the state government for a fixed period or till the prices are stabilized above the market intervention

price whichever is earlier.

According to figures of the Agriculture Ministry, GOI, upland states like Himachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh among other states have been most proactive in implementing the MIS at regular intervals covering commodities such as grapes, ginger, apples, chillies, potato, squash, grapes and pineapples. The question that arises here is what has prevented successive governments in Meghalaya from implementing this scheme for many years now? Why are farmers of the state left to fend for themselves and have to endure extreme hardship by selling their produce at throwaway prices?

In this declared Year of the Farmer with the stated objective to double farmers' income, it is the right time for the state government to declare major crops to be brought under the coverage of the MIS as well as identify a procurement agency and

set up necessary procurement and marketing infrastructure for effective implementation of the scheme. The government should also implore upon the central government for reducing the state government's contribution in the implementation of this scheme from the existing 25 percent to 5 to 10 percent so that the lack of resources will not come in the way of protecting the interests of the farming community.

Some time back the state government had organized with much fanfare a 'Piskot (Squash) Festival' to highlight the potential of this humble vegetable. While such a festival is a welcome initiative, now that the growers of this vegetable are in real distress will the state government rise to the occasion and help the humble farmers of the state?

Yours etc.,
S. Umdor,
Via email

Healthcare amidst a pandemic

Editor,

Needless to say, in the midst of a raging pandemic, the abnormal has become the normal. Our children are barred from attending school nor are they encouraged to mix and play. God only knows what is to become of them. As a tribal society that believes in strong social bonding practices, we have more or less given up socialising. As mortals prone to ailments, disease and illness, we are now most reluctant to visit hospitals, places of healing or even to approach a doctor's clinic. I find friends and relatives, people with normal aches and pains; people with serious lifestyle ailments; patients with chronic life threatening diseases, shying away from seeking medical relief as their fear of Covid 19 contamination is greater than their fear of death! Ironic but true and this emerging trend in health care accessibility

is what is alarming.

Hospitals, clinics and doctor's chambers, where we usually throng to obtain relief from ailments that trouble us have now suddenly become places to be given as wide a berth as possible. Rural people suffer most as hospitals situated in Shillong or other urban hubs have now become centres for the pandemic. Contamination from a Shillong visit and the resulting quarantine back home in the village on the return from the city are inconveniences rural people are loathe to face. This phenomenon has severely affected health care and healthcare related issues for the people of Meghalaya. Something needs to be done about it and Govt has to start looking at solutions outside the box.

One of the solutions under the prevailing circumstances, on how to bring back a somewhat tenable doctor-patient relationship and relief to a suffering patient might be through telemedicine. Consultations between doctor and patient

can be carried through WhatsApp and SMS messages. Doctors in hospitals should start encouraging their patients to indulge in this new form of diagnosis and treatment. Fear has to be overcome and access to healthcare can be made available through use of relevant and appropriate technology. Only under unavoidable circumstances need there be a physical interaction between the doctor and his patient. This new form of medical practice can cover even private doctors and payment of doctor's fees through the internet can be encouraged. Govt needs to enable this and should come up with appropriate Apps for easy contact between doctor and patient as well as payment of doctor's consultation fees.

Yours etc.,
Toki Blah,
Via email

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"Where do the evils like corruption arise from? It comes from the never-ending greed. The fight for corruption-free ethical society will have to be fought against this greed and replace it with 'what can I give' spirit."

— A. P. J. Abdul Kalam

The Shillong Times

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BJP-NPP: A tenuous connection

IT is not always that members of a coalition go public on their internal differences. But this time a constituent of the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA) Government in Meghalaya, the BJP seems to have decided to throw caution to the winds. The State BJP leadership has taken the case of corruption in the Garo Hills District Council which seems to have exceeded all limits, to the national leadership. The NPP President and recently appointed Rajya Sabha has not only rubbished the allegations by a partner constituent but also made some undesirable comments on the BJP State President. How things will pan out between now and 2023 is anybody's guess but coalition partners are wary lest they have to bear the brunt of all these accusations against the NPP which is leading the coalition.

There are many factors at play here. The NPP is not just playing footsie with the BJP but also has some strong ties with the BJP leadership in Delhi and is also supported by the President, North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA), Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma. It is Sarma who runs the affairs of the BJP in the North East and it is he who will finally call the shots. Now where does that leave the state BJP leadership? Do they even have the freedom to function independently and take decisions to sever ties with the MDA at some point? Do both the BJP MLAs in the MDA concur with what the BJP President has done in going public with the allegations of corruption? These are still in the realm of speculation.

The other allies of the MDA Government however, seem to be keeping a studied silence on the NPP-BJP war of words. In fact they are keeping a low profile and going about their business as if nothing matters. After all, it's also a question of keeping the coalition afloat until 2023. The MDA has enough supporters and can do without the 2 BJP MLAs but it's also about honouring a pact made in 2018 and more importantly because the MDA relies heavily on central funds and it is therefore important for the NPP to keep the NDA Government in good humour. A souring of relations at this juncture would not be in the interest of the MDA Government.

What will be of interest is the proposed investigation by the NITI Aayog which has taken the issue of corruption in the District Councils seriously enough to publicly announce the probe. Will the investigation be just a face-saving act or is it NITI Aayog serious? Undoubtedly, the Councils need to be probed and the muck cleansed. That a BJP legislator was poached by the NPP in the GHADC also smacks of an irredeemable fatal flaw that the Councils suffer from which is the absence of the Anti-Defection Act to tie the MDCs to their respective parties.

It is time for him to atone for some of his decisions Letter to Justice Mishra: Constitution, not conscience

By A J Philip

It is your parting comment that you wrote your judgements on the basis of the dictates of your conscience that prompts me to write this letter. I thought all judges, especially of the Supreme Court, gave their verdicts within the four walls of the Constitution, based on the materials placed before them in the larger interest of "we the people".

It is the first time a judge has used the word "conscience" to justify his decisions. You would do well to remember how you took your oath of office.

Did you say that you would uphold your conscience at all times without fear or favour? Did the word "conscience" figure in the oath at all? Like every judge, you had taken the oath to uphold the Constitution, not your conscience. I do not suggest that conscience has no role. The word means the part of your mind that tells you if what you are doing is right or wrong. That depends on the kind of conscience you have. I will come to that in an instant.

When Adolf Hitler sent thousands of Jews to the gas chambers at Auschwitz and other places, his conscience was clear that he was doing a great thing to wipe out all alien cultures from his Fatherland. The Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, which was at one time a great civilisation as can be inferred from Angkor Wat, did worse things in the name of conscience.

Again, it was conscience that guided those who pushed the poor Muslims into the oven of the Best Bakery in Gujarat in 2002. Those "gentlemen" who threw LPG cylinders into the burning houses of some in Northeast Delhi were also guided by their conscience. Mr Justice, your conscience theory is hollow.

You said your conscience is clear as you retire from the apex court. Whether you have the moral right to retire honourably and draw a fat pension or not is a separate question. No, I do not grudge your luck of being born in privilege or, to use a cliché, with a silver spoon in your mouth as the son of a high court judge. What about those whose lives have been devastated by your arrogance and misapplication of justice?

I have a friend who had a house in an apartment complex in Kochi which you got demolished for no rhyme or reason, except to satisfy your ego. Her husband is a doctor in a government hospital in a small country known as the "Abode of Peace" in Southeast Asia. It is a Kingdom where the doctors are paid well. They are a small family. They know that they cannot live on the island, once his job contract is over.

That is why they bought the flat in the hope of settling down in it once they returned to Kerala for good. She did everything possible to furnish and decorate their house. Today, all her dreams lie buried in the debris, part of which is still in the backwaters. You retired peacefully but she can never retire peacefully because you shattered her peace and

sense of security forever.

No, she is not the only one to suffer. She sent me a letter written by a flat owner who bought two flats taking bank loans in the belief that the rent from one flat would help make a living once he returned to Kerala. Today, he has to pay EMI for the two flats he had the mortification to see imploding. Do you know the consequences of your action? You were ostensibly protecting the environment. Did you know that when the great flood occurred in 2018 and water entered the first floor in the Kochi International Airport, not a drop of floodwater entered the five towers which were dynamited?

The buildings did not come up one fine morning. The 343 flat owners were paying land rent and GST on the materials used in the construction on loans advanced by banks which did not sense anything wrong in the land documents mortgaged to them. Finally, the Kerala High Court cleared the construction and people were staying comfortably there. That is when you intervened and ordered the demolition that nobody asked for.

Now that you have a lot of free time as your post-retirement job is yet to come, I am ready to take you to some DDA colonies to show you how tens of thousands of flats have undergone modifications and expansion by greasing the palms of the police and the DDA authorities etc., right here in the heart of India's Capital.

There is the famous apartment complex that came up in Mumbai ostensibly to accommodate the widows of Kargil. It was in total violation of all rules. However, judges, more sensible than you, imposed a heavy penalty and regularised the construction for they knew that the option of demolition would have been environmentally more harmful.

Judge, you could have asked the government to take over the buildings to accommodate central government officials posted in Kochi. Alternatively, the flats could have been given to roofless persons. Or, to the owners themselves who were ready to pay a penalty. Instead, what did you do? You ordered demolition. The Kerala Government had to spend crores and crores of rupees to demolish and clear the debris.

Now, the government will have to meet the demands of the local people whose houses suffered damages when the apartment towers were demolished. A friend suggested that your provident fund etc., should be attached to meet a part of the cost, though there is no such provision in the law. I won't blame you alone for your abhorrent act.

Your higher authorities should have intervened and prevented the demolition. Alas, the Chief Justice was more interested in saving himself from the charge that he sexually exploited a staff member than to be bothered by the travails of the apartment owners.

Do you know that under the new environmental rules brought into force by the Modi Government, the same structures can be rebuilt on the same spot without question? Did you not feel ashamed when you came across this fact? How could you, because you were guided solely by your conscience that had nothing to do with realities?

Arrogance has been defined as knowledge without wisdom. You caused a social turmoil in Kerala by dispensing justice totally in favour of the Orthodox faction against the interests of the Jacobite group.

I could have understood you giving at least some churches where the members are predominantly Jacobites to the Jacobite church. We saw at Mulanthuruthi and other places Jacobites forcibly evicted from their churches. Let me add, I do not have any sympathy for either faction because they allowed a character like you to decide the case when the Bible teaches how brothers should settle their disputes in a spirit of reconciliation.

I remember how arrogantly you threatened to name a High Court judge of Kerala for giving an order which was essentially ameliorative in character. You did not even think that the judge could have been elevated to occupy the same place you occupied in the apex court.

I had the fortune of interviewing Justice VR Krishna Iyer, one of the greatest judges of the Supreme Court. He was courteous personified. He never lost his cool even when I asked him some tough questions like how he spoke to his dead wife.

You should have remembered that the Supreme Court is supreme not because it has superior wisdom but because there is no higher appellate court in India. Yet, you had the audacity to humiliate the judge in your court knowing full well that the victim judge could not retaliate.

I have noticed that the most arrogant persons are the most subservient to their masters. You were no exception. At an international judicial conference in February, you had a forum to expound your legal theories or, as is wont now, to claim that human rights and the rule of law originated in India where there were groups of people who were not only untouchable but also unseeable. Instead, you used the forum to describe Narendra Modi as a "versatile genius" and an "internationally acclaimed visionary". Even Modi would have been embarrassed by your praise. Many of his party men realise that he is a spent force whom they do not know how to get rid of.

When I read your speech, I remembered former Union Law Minister Arun Jaitley who once mentioned that judges were people who moved about in high circles distributing their bio-data. He also described in Parliament how they created jobs for themselves by ordering that every Chief Information Commissioner in a state should be a retired judge.

Sorry, I saw your praise as an appeal to Modi for a post-retirement job. We have seen how Modi picked up Justice Ranjan Gogoi for a Rajya Sabha seat even before the chair he occupied in the Supreme Court had lost its warmth. There are reports that he may even be the BJP's Chief Ministerial candidate in Assam.

I am sure that you know Rekha Sharma, a former judge of the Delhi High Court. Even if you do not know her, you would certainly have read her article entitled "Goodbye Justice Mishra: His legacy casts a shadow over the country's highest court at a critical moment" (The Indian Express, September 3).

You came to the limelight when you were chosen to hear the case seeking an investigation into the mysterious death of CBI judge BH Loya, who was hearing the case of the encounter killing of Sohrabuddin Sheikh and his wife in which Home Minister Amit Shah was allegedly involved. True, you recused yourself from the case when three senior judges revolted against the practice of allocating politically significant cases to you, a relatively junior judge.

The whole country was shocked when Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi constituted a Bench presided over by him with you as a fellow judge to hear the case against himself. If you had any sense of shame, you should not have joined the Bench. How could Gogoi preside over a bench which was constituted to whitewash the charge of sexual harassment against him? Or, do you believe that a CJI has a superior morality that allows him to attempt the physical?

Never before had the Supreme Court's prestige plummeted to such a low depth. While advising my friends to read Justice Rekha Sharma's article, let me mention your parting gift of Re 1 to the national exchequer. What contempt did Prashant Bhushan cause that you did not cause by gagging the Press not to report the details of the allegations against your former boss?

Do you know how much money and time the government and the Supreme Court have wasted to extract that one rupee from Bhushan? This was at a time when the court did not have time to hear petitions about the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution and breaking up of J&K, the brainwave of Amit Shah.

You have retired. You may become a governor or a minister or a chairman of some authority which will fetch you a lot of power and pelf but remember what the great English essayist Francis Bacon said, "Judges must beware of hard constructions and strained inferences, for there is no worse torture than that of laws".

It is a time of repentance, a time to atone for your decisions that have ruined the lives of many, Mr Justice Arun Mishra. (IPA Service)

Twins in cultural life

The Niamtre examples

By Dr Omarlin Kyndiah

In virtually all cultures the birth of a healthy child, a son in patrilineal and a daughter in matrilineal society is a joyous occasion. No such unanimity, however, exists with regards to the birth of twins. Almost all early and primitive societies gave interpretation to twin births which vary from the most auspicious to the sinister. In the ancient legends of Egypt, Greece, and Rome twins have figured prominently and are in a highly exalted manner. They were assumed to have supernatural powers and qualities. Within the African communities, the belief system of twin births varies. The Igbo speaking-people of south-east Nigeria, for example, feared the birth of twins. By contrast, their Yoruba neighbours, in southwest Nigeria, praised the birth of twins. Igbo society viewed twins as a bad omen sent by the "Gods." They considered twins as supernatural beings that could bring devastation to society. Consequently whenever twins were born, their parents had to leave them at the "Evil Forest" to die. Twins were put in earthenware pots and thrown away in the forest. These cultures existed in the Iron Age. Such superstitions and traditions defy the dignity of human existence.

Mr. PRT Gurdon in his book titled 'The Khasis' mentioned that the Khasis consider the birth of twins a 'sang' or 'taboo'. He wrote that, "the Khasis argue that there is but one Ka lawbei (first ancestress) and one U Thawlang (first ancestor), so one child, either male or female should be born at a time. Birth of twins is regarded as a visitation from God for some 'sang' or transgression committed by some member of the clan".

Every summer, in the first weekend in August, thousands of twins converge at Twinsburg, Ohio, a small town southeast of Cleveland named by identical twin brothers nearly two centuries ago. The three-day festival is known as Twins Days Festival, where a three-day marathon of picnics, talent shows, and look-alike contests is organised. This festival has grown into one of the world's largest gatherings of twins.

Doctors in India are wracking their brains to solve the riddle of 220 plus twins born to 2,000 families in the far-flung village of Kodinhi in Kerala. Experts are wondering at the uncommon phenomenon of twin births which is nearly six times more than the global average. This place is known as Twin Town of India.

The Jaintias too have integrated a special belief system pertaining to twins in their traditional religion. The Jaintias saw twins to be significant. In the Pnar language, twins are called "Ki Kha Mynrap". They are looked after and treated with honour, and twin births are much celebrated because they are considered a sacred blessing and gift from God (U Tre Kiro). This belief system on twin births is connected to the myth of the Niaw Wasa. In a Divine Dorbar, God told U Niaw Wasa that they would no longer be able to see Him

since His task of creation is completed. God commands that each family make a hut called 'Yung Blai' and therein He would bless each family with deities. One such deity will emerge as twins, God commanded! These family deities represent the force of nature on which the prosperity of the family depended and also plays major roles in shaping human affairs in the myth of U Niaw Wasa. Many scholars, authors, newspaper writers, and commentators have attempted to study the tradition connected with twin births in the Niamtre family. Their conjecture is that the tradition is influenced by Hinduism. Considered a sacred blessing and gift from God (U Tre Kiro), the twins are given due honour, respect, and special status in the Jaintia family and society. Special rites and rituals are performed in the family that helps signify their cultural identity.

The religions and customs have strong influences on food habits through food laws such as taboos. Among the Niamtre community, twins and their mother are barred from eating potatoes. The species which is prohibited is Solanum tuberosum Linn and not the red skin variety. The exact cause, dating, and the sequence of culture is a difficult one and outside my competence. From antiquity, there is a narrative among the Pnars that on a particular day twin brothers saw the 'twin potato tubers', and henceforth they vowed not to eat potato. However, it is imperative here to mention the cultures of the early Chimú or the Proto-Chimú. In the Chimú native folklore, 'twin potato tubers' are regarded as being endowed with special reproductive gifts. Human twins were likewise endowed with special powers. Interestingly, the Spanish chronicles too speak of the magic value of twin maize cobs.

David Scott the British administrator was the first to introduce potato (Solanum tuberosum Linn) in the Khasi Hills in the early part of the 19th century. Some say that since the Jaintias fought a fierce battle with the British who attempted to suppress their traditions and religious beliefs, that could be the reason for twins being prohibited from eating the potato variety introduced by David Scott.

It is a common practice across the world, that twins are given a special name ranging from names that rhyme (Jayden and Caiden/Akash and Prakash); similar sounding names (Leila & Laura), names that honour the ancestors (Hazel and Vivian), names that start with the same letter (Abhay and Ajay). The fraternal twins of an inter-racial marriage between Amanda Wanklin and Micheal Biggs in the USA were given intertwined names: Millie Marcia Madge Biggs and Marcia Millie Madge Biggs. The Jaintias name male twins as U Ram and Lakshon and Ka Kongka and Durka for female twins. Hence, there is no uniformity and unanimity across cultures in naming twins after the name of gods and goddesses. (Email: kyndiahomarlin@gmail.com)

TO THE EDITOR

Corruption in ADCs

Editor,
We the ordinary citizens of Meghalaya are grateful to the President of State BJP for revealing the corruption in all the three Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in Meghalaya (ST Sep 9, 2020). Subsequently the BJP President has stressed only on the corruption occurring in two ADCs (GHADC and JHADC). The BJP President and others and even the Opposition Leader, Dr Mukul Sangma appear to

have ignored the corruption in KHADC with respect to the establishment of a Museum at Sunny Hills, Shillong which could not be found at the proposed site though it is said that 85 percent of the work had been completed. (ST Sep 9, 2020). Rs. 4.15 crore meant for the Museum is no small amount and cannot be ignored. What about crores of rupees misappropriated during the Monolith Festival in the past years? This also needs CBI enquiry. We would like to know the fate of the Museum through your newspaper and would like to request the Presi-

dent, BJP to let us know the present position of the Museum.

In the case of JHADC, the CEM and CM have also clarified that there is no corruption but only temporary diversion of funds of Rs. 20 crore to pay the salaries of employees which would be recovered when the state Government releases its share of revenue. It is astonishing to know that the state Government has withheld the share of JHADC almost six months after the current financial year had elapsed.

Yours etc.
K. Kyndaid Jowai.

DERT Rejoinder

Editor,

The Adjusted Academic Calendar (AAC) is an outcome of the rationalization of the MBOSE Course of Studies to mitigate learning loss due to the closure of schools to contain the COVID-19 Pandemic. The AAC for classes IX-XII for the session 2020-21 has been brought out as a one-time measure to reduce exam stress and pressure on students through a reduction of the MBOSE Course of Studies. The portions re-

moved will not be part of Internal Assessment or the Board examination 2021. However, if teachers feel that any of the portions removed are required and need to be imparted for the benefit of the students, the same can be taught and assessed internally.

Further, if any school/teacher has covered topics that are not a part of the Adjusted Academic Calendar for Classes IX-XII in the session 2020-21, the same can be a part of Internal Assessment.

The entire process was carried out through large scale consultations with various school principals, teach-

ers and college faculty from different districts of the State. The role of the DERT was to merely facilitate, build consensus and collate the contributions of teachers and subject experts. Due to health advisories and protocols in place, the task of undertaking the rationalization of the MBOSE Course of Studies was made all the more difficult as consultations, reviews and drafting activities had to be done through virtual mode.

Despite these challenges, principals, school and college teachers were able to collaborate with the Education Department and bring out the AAC in record

time.

The larger principle behind the exercise was to promote cumulative learning and not discrete learning. For example, inclusion of conservation of mineral resources is meant to help students understand broader ecological benefits while the topic pertaining to agriculture productivity embeds the concept of food grains production and the role of technology. Delicate and conscious decisions were made while removing content and at the same time ensuring students are exposed to learning progression with focus on concept attainment.

Yes we admit to typographical errors and a few overlaps on account of human error, but to belittle the work of all those involved in the exercise would tantamount to questioning the very capabilities and intentions of those who contributed their time and efforts. We are also open to suggestions on how to mitigate learning losses in the State. Kindly share your suggestions at ict.dert@gmail.com.

Yours etc.,
I/c Director,
Directorate of Educational Research & Training,
Meghalaya, Shillong

"The real mechanism for corporate governance is the active involvement of the owners."

— Louis V. Gerstner, Jr.

The Shillong Times

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Xi quoting scriptures

CHINA'S President Xi Jinping was a symbol of poise and good behavior when he addressed the United Nations General Assembly in virtual mode this week. His assertion is that China is interested neither in a Cold War nor a Hot War, and wants to follow the path of peace. Good enough.

Words can be deceptive; more so when China speaks. A totalitarian state fashioned on Communist lines with shades of capitalism superimposed, and transparency in governance totally absent, China dramatically reversed its former policy of rising as a soft power with no military ambitions. Today, much of Asia is faced with muscle-flexing from China; be it with Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, or India. China is demonstrating its adventurism in the South China Sea, expanding its territorial controls much to the chagrin of the United States as also the littoral states. China is bent on grabbing Indian territory in Ladakh and beyond through overt and covert actions, including sneak-ins, usurpations and self-perfected techniques like 'salami slicing, and with the motto, "two steps forward, one step backward."

Unlike in the past, India has been a bit more alert of late. Its soldiers stopped Xi in his tracks in Doklam in 2017, and faced up to Chinese offensive in Ladakh region this year. India lost 20 of its brave soldiers, but China would not say how lethal the damage was which the Indian military inflicted on it in a swift, bloody counter-attack. Xi has the luxury of suppressing information; India cannot be secretive.

India, it now turns out, is doing more along the LAC, and is occupying hills beyond its normal call. Indian soldiers are proving themselves to be more lethal than Xi thought. Opinion within China itself is turning against him if the western media is to be believed.

Xi embarked on his expansionist agenda at the wrong time. The world was already facing the worst health crisis due to the lethal Covid-19 virus China unleashed — or even manufactured in a government lab in Wuhan — upon an unsuspecting humanity. Global economy took a huge hit. China had sent out the SARS virus some time ago, but its lethality was limited and it subsided in a matter of some months. This is the time for Xi to be apologetic, but he was apparently also seeking to take advantage of the attention deficit in the Trump administration on global matters in view of the election season there.

If Xi does not behave, the wider world will unite to call his bluff. India has already applied the brakes on him, at least for now.

Governance: When state is not a corporate entity

By Patricia Mukhim

Business training, therefore, does not provide skills to deal with real-politik. In running a business one can interview people and employ the best brains, not necessarily to create a homogeneous environment of those who 'agree' with the boss on everything, but to build a team that is courageous enough to dismantle old ideas and create new ones through passionate dissent. Innovation cannot come from a staid group of "yes people." Alas in politics, the attempt has always been to stifle dissent; to bring people to converge on one line of thinking and to believe that anyone who disagrees is the enemy. Without creating space for dissent no institution can survive. Anyone who doubts this

inclined to run with the hare of opportunism than with the tortoise of prudence for obvious reasons. The mistake most politicians in leadership positions make is that they seek validation for their actions rather than the truth about them. The rule of the game in business is, "Avoid yes-persons; seek the truth; seek people who tell the truth and then listen to it even if it's painful." But insecurity pushes people to gather "yes persons" around them because they need constant validation. That's a bad leadership model. A leader cannot be insecure and view every dissenter as the competitor. This holds true of politics too.

At the beginning of the elections, the NPP sold us a brand — the brand was about



should read the book "Dismantle" by Shlomo Maital.

I recall a former chief minister in the early 90's who ran his government for five years by ensuring that his entire team, but especially the major dissenters or likely rebels would meet at his residence every evening. There were several rooms then in Tara Ghar, a room for MLAs with a penchant for card games, another for those who enjoyed their drinks; some just listened to music or chatted away into the night. But it was like a regular attendance-taking. If someone was absent without reason, that person became a potential suspect for planning a game of musical chairs which was quite common in the unstable political climate of the time. That chief minister achieved nothing by way of development. Militancy took an upward swing and we lived lives of insecurity as hapless citizens. A stable government of five years is not a yardstick for achievement. It's better to have a churn than a status quo that benefits vested interests.

Conrad Sangma runs a coalition of the willing. So far the only dissenters are the BJP but they have just two MLAs, one of whom is

"change." We all invested in that brand even though some of the old guard from the competing party who never saw the inside of a business school, leave alone the Ivory League varieties, but had perfected the art of manipulating the political system for their business interests, had by then joined the NPP juggernaut. Most citizens knew then that change cannot be wrought by the same people that created the grunge and skulduggery in the previous government and who had jumped fences for opportunistic reasons. We were doomed even before the start of the game in 2018.

The different regional parties that are part of this coalition are happy to plod along until 2023 knocks at their doors. They, in any case do not have the muscle to correct the anomalies of governance allowed by their senior ally the NPP (senior in terms of the larger number of MLAs they command). These allies have remained silent on the GHADC and JHADC scams. The only squeak that emerged was from the UDP but that was just to put the Congress on notice and not really to ask that the two ADCs be sent to the cleaners.

Dissent and noise were the order of the day in the

1990's when Mr PA Sangma was chief minister and MLAs who had sworn allegiance to him until past midnight of a particular day, quietly pulled the rug from under his feet in the early hours of that same day. Mr Sangma and Meghalaya both got the shock of their lives. Here was a man who showed that he could change things and was actually 'governing' Meghalaya for the first time. He demonstrated that "good governance," was not just a lazy phrase. He was a hands-on CM taking stock of different departments. He pushed them to prepare a white paper on their policy strategies. Since its inception in 1972, Meghalaya functioned without any policy guidelines. That was then. I am not too sure that we have a white paper on critical areas of governance today such as Health, Education, Agriculture & Horticulture, Urban Affairs, especially waste management and the PWD. Do we have goals for the length of roads to be completed within each financial year? Doubtful. I know there is a paper on the Post Covid Tourism but that's about it.

The MDA ship is sailing without any sense of direction. A person heading the Meghalaya Public Service Commission — an important institution on whom the future of the youth hangs by a fragile thread, has been without a Chairperson since May this year. Is this not a priority for the government? Is there dearth of qualified, experienced people who can run the Commission with independence, efficiency and transparency? If the head of an important department of a corporate firm has superannuated, can his post be kept vacant for so long without consequences? The MPSC is, in fact, a Human Resources Management Institution and should be treated as such. Please don't push in political acolytes who can be manipulated to appoint misfits and weed out the meritorious.

Mr Conrad Sangma the business manager needs to know that Meghalaya is not a corporate firm and MLAs in the Government are not directors in this firm. A legislator is a PUBLIC SERVANT, NOT A VIP or a BUSINESSMAN. Let's get this message loud and clear!

Barik— more than a bus stop

By Janet Moore Hujon

She speaks like she sings — with fire and passion — and her bridled fury concentrates the distilled warning against a Shopping Mall in Barik. You can translate her words into English but they will never have the same impact, for you cannot translate an accent — only the voice can confer that tough muscle and ardour that gives the words power. Like all other local accents in Shillong the Malki accent points to a fierce sense of local identity, and listening to Tipriti Kharbangar (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dq_KL3XYUw&feature=share) was a powerful reminder of that. Listening to Minister Prestone Tynsong (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7WkgW58sFc&feature=youtu.be>) however is to wearily acknowledge, yet again, that the status promised by money is the only identity that matters to our governments.

How on earth will a shopping mall — and that too a clone of the Delhi Saket complex — represent the State? In willfully ignoring what is so evidently inspirational around us, it is obvious that the government has little pride in our own vibrant homeland and people. Why kowtow to Delhi? No wonder, despite repeated representations from our authors, our languages are still not included in the Eighth Schedule, for why would a central government, which is at best condescending towards tribal communities, pay any heed to a State that does not value its own genius? To constantly look elsewhere for a lead is admitting to not having our own sources of inspiration.

Minister Tynsong's use of words like 'history', 'hub', 'world class' is just 'appropriate' jargon that fools nobody, and all he succeeds in doing is convincing himself but no one else. Shillong's old buildings like those at Barik, are part of her unique personality, crying out to be preserved. Yet looking at the way our old buildings have been steadily replaced or overshadowed by concrete structures, is to be left in no doubt that the government is bent on nothing less than an erasure of history — never mind the environmental cost. Tipriti, on the other hand, speaks with heartfelt conviction using language that is raw, truthful and not dressed up. No buzz words, no references to history just pure naked pain, for as she points out, with self-serving leaders such as ours, we are already a lost and ravaged people — 'ngi lah long uba jot lypa'. And for decades having watched successive governments desecrate the beauty of our city and our State, we sadly have no choice but to agree. What's so 'world class' about profane destruction?

And that is why the thoughtful plans for an 'Iconic Place' put together by Aibon Mawkhroh and Rajesh Ranganathan are so heartening. Here is a collaboration between like-minded individuals who work together simply because they see, value and want to preserve what is good. The North-East meets the South in a partnership that India should be proud of. A green open space is what fume-choked, noise-polluted Shillong needs, not another playground for the rich where the poor can only stand and stare. Mawkhroh and Ranganathan show that Meghalaya has always had a different story to tell — one that is ancient, benign and for the common good. This is the story of our sacred groves — ki law kyntang — consecrated forests protected for centuries by our ancestors who deeply understood the need to venerate and safeguard the natural wonders of our land to benefit future generations. That our people possessed

such visionary wisdom fills me with intense pride, and wherever their genius as pioneers of the Green Movement is celebrated, that surely is an Iconic Place.

The reference to sacred groves also provides that link to our rural worlds where our weavers and artisans spin and fashion from yarn, cane, wood, and the good earth. Safe in rural Meghalaya is the indigenous knowledge of plants for health and healing and to all these skills and wisdom we need to pay homage. We have to urgently remind ourselves that Meghalaya is not only about the fast-paced life of the city — it is also about the abiding calm of life beyond the roar of traffic, of cut-throat city competition and the feverish search for the next best thing. Like the root bridges, our sacred groves teach us how to work in harmony with the environment and this is what Meghalaya should do — teach and not just blindly follow.

But Shillong is not only about the old and so Mawkhroh and Ranganathan want to tell another story which is about a thriving, growing culture. To call a commercial hub or an IT hub 'the heart of the city', is a contradiction in terms. The heart is about feeling, about sympathy, about empathy about deep joy. This is not what we get from commerce. The heart of the town should be beating with the rhythms, sounds and colours of her diverse inhabitants. Art has always reflected society but in doing so has not been entirely passive either, and this is because artists interrogate the past and the present formulating and promoting critical thought. In this current climate of powerless uncertainty we need more than ever to ally ourselves with those who speak for the many and not the few. If not, we will be responsible for allowing a minority to get away with deciding the destiny and future of an entire people.

As Shelley points out in his 1819 poem The Masque of Anarchy written in response to a cavalry charge against a non-violent protest for the vote — 'Ye are many, they are few'. I am not suggesting that anything as bloody has occurred within our state but it is undeniable that this government has only found it too easy to trample on the heartfelt dreams and concerns of the people. And though that involves no blood, it signifies a deep contempt for the sweat and tears of all who imagine a better world. Hence it is no less an act of destruction. Artists should no longer be just a backdrop to the cultural picture of Meghalaya but should be given centre-stage to tell the 'Other' stories of our people.

To deny ourselves the sustaining life of the imagination is to deny that we as human beings are so much more than just money-making junkies. It is to music, to words, to painting, to sculpture, to ART that our tortured selves turn to both for release and deep joy. Tipriti invokes the old Khasi adage all too familiar but ever fresh and poignant because it contains an eternal truth — ngi dei ban ri khop ia ka sap. Yes we need to hold close our deep yearnings and gifts for artistic expression — whatever form they take — in order to nurture the life of the spirit which, carried in our hearts, will persist long after we are gone. The protection and platform envisaged by the architects will ensure that.

The new Barik can become not only the heart of Shillong but the heart of Meghalaya and Shillong will emerge to become a beacon and not just a faint smudged footnote in history.

A special request — save the old steamroller stationed in the PWD complex — it is a museum piece. Email: jan.moore@hotmail.co.uk

TO THE EDITOR

Govt doctors in private practice

Editor,
While every citizen has the right to work, there are limits to people expanding their area of work. In Meghalaya, there are private and government doctors. Private doctors practice only in their private clinics. But this is not the case with government doctors as they practice in government hospitals as well as in their private clinics which is patently unfair. Hence government doctors get more opportunities than private doctors. Government doctors enjoy good salaries regularly whereas private practitioners have erratic earnings depending on the number of patients they get. Government doctors have to spend their time regularly in hospitals, PHCs, CHCs, etc, according to their duties. If they diligently work only in the hospitals, they will not have time for private practice. Also they can gain more experience in their field of work.

In the case of private practitioners, there are some who practice in private hospitals but they are not different from private doctors working in their own clinics. As time passes, obstacles

and difficulties arise in different parts of the state especially in medical and health care because government doctors are not attending to their duties.

According to the vision of the Commarative People's Party (CPP), it is felt that government doctors should work only in government hospitals. This is important as it will bring consistency in the health care system and those who are ailing will be well served. On this matter, the CPP would like to suggest to the government that doctors employed by it should stop private practice. They should be paid a decent salary and non-practising allowance to enable them to enjoy a decent life. The CPP further urges the government to implement these rules in order to ensure justice and equity.

Yours etc.,
Dr. WA Lyngwi
Convener, CPP
Pyndengnongbri

Unprofessional recruitment in PHE

Editor,
We would like to bring to light the unprofessional practices in the current recruitment methods And

draw your attention to a recent "walk-in" interview conducted by the PHE Department,

Shillong on June 30, 2020. We wish to highlight the lack of orderliness, professionalism and most importantly the lack of ethics with which the interview was conducted. With the rising number of graduates each year, it is expected that any job opening advertised, will attract a significant number of candidates. And, despite on-going restrictions related to COVID-19, that is exactly what occurred during the above-mentioned interview held by the PHE Department.

The following points highlight some of the unfair practices adopted by the interviewers. As the number of candidates increased to around 85, some of us were asked by the employees of PHE to stand in for many other candidates who were yet to arrive. They also told us not to attend the interview, as there were too many applicants already. Firstly, this was not officially communicated to us. Secondly, the number of attendees could have been specified when advertising for the post so that individuals do not waste their time unnecessarily.

Later they decided to conduct a screening process

and rejected applicants who did not have the required qualifications. This is, of course, the right of any organization. However the screening was only enforced halfway through the registration of candidates, (after a 3-hour wait in a queue) where some candidates were allowed to go through, irrespective of their qualifications. This speaks of the unfair and disorganized nature of the interview.

On account of the large number of candidates that did arrive, officials from the Department asked participants to return the next day stating that they wanted to conduct proper interviews so that justice is done. We accordingly complied with this. But the next day of the interview came with its own sets of problems. Some of us waited till the end of the day, and were finally called for the interview only to be turned away summarily one by one, on grounds that they were not looking for someone with our qualifications i.e., MBA, which was shocking and confusing since the advertisement clearly called for MBA, among other qualifications. In fact, other candidates with MBA degrees, who happened to have been called earlier to us were interviewed without any

mention of ineligibility. How fair is this?

If we weren't deemed eligible for the interview, why couldn't we have been told about it on the first day itself, when they conducted the "screening process"? We wasted two full days only to be rejected by a whimsical and unethical change to the qualification criterion. The fact that this is the standard that we have to bear with is demoralizing and discouraging. We took time off from our work and engagements just to appear for the interview only to be dismissed in a very causal manner.

All we ask for is clarity, order and transparency from the very beginning of any recruitment process. Why is this so difficult in Meghalaya? As for the reasons why all this happened the public can come to their own conclusions.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Contaminated fish sold in entire Shillong area

Editor,
Through your esteemed daily, I would like to bring forward an astonishing fact regarding fish, a favourite local delicacy and one of the

most profitable businesses in Meghalaya. Recently, I conducted a two minute survey of fish coming from Andhra Pradesh and found that it contained high quantities of formalin as the fish turned dark bluish and green in colour. I purchased the testing kit (HiRapid Formalin Test Kit for Fish K137) from Hyderabad which clearly mentions the method of routine check and protocols. I can confirm that the fish contained formalin which is dangerous for consumption. Meghalaya should immediately ban the import and sale of such fish keeping in view the safety and security of people particularly, at the time of COVID-19.

I call upon the big players in the fish market to voice their opinions, especially Mitchell Wankhar, the President of Fish Vendors' Association in Shillong and also urge upon the State Government to direct the Health officials to conduct an enquiry as soon as possible.

Yours etc.,
Sanbor Lyngdoh
Shillong-3

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

"A man can't be too careful in the choice of his enemies."
--- Oscar Wilde

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Media – Government Interface

THE media and governments across the world have an uneasy relationship. Governments need the media to disseminate information about policies, schemes and also to tout their achievements. In times of Covid the media has become an even more important tool by which government connects to the people and vice versa. It is the media that brings to the fore the unheard voices from the periphery to those in government because the bureaucracy which largely functions in isolation does not have its pulse on what happens at ground zero. And that precisely is the role of the media. There are many things that go right with governance but because government is run by humans with proclivities towards wrongdoing, the media has to bring such misdemeanours to the fore. It is natural therefore for those in government to view the media as an unnecessary intrusion; if not the enemy. As far as the media is concerned, it needs to balance every story by stitching together the views from different sources. The media cannot concoct stories by listening to one side, however aggrieved that side may be. That would be akin to gossip. It is important to get the views of those accused of wrongdoing and allow the public to use their discretion in forming their opinion.

When media persons call people in positions of authority, they are not doing so to have a chat. There is meaning to that call and the least that public authorities should do is to answer the call and give their side of the story. These days smart gadgets have facilities for sending messages if a call comes at an inconvenient time. Calling back is common courtesy. But some public authorities seem to think they don't owe an explanation for their actions to anyone. In the IAS, there are special sessions on bureaucracy – media interface so that each knows the other's territory and learns to respect those well-laid down red lines. But other services such as the medical, engineering and technical services perhaps don't have to go through a course of handling the media. The bottom-line, however is this - people who have nothing to hide, have nothing to fear. There is of course professional arrogance and the attitude of, 'why should I speak to a media person?' Those who adopt that attitude have not understood the role of the media or the tenets of democracy.

The media has a duty to analyse the information provided by government and stimulate a public debate on issues. As a gatekeeper media has to trigger debates on issues that impinge on the public; and every government decision directly or indirectly affects the public. And the public has the right to get its voice out through the media. If those vested with authority don't understand these basic premises then democracy is subverted. It is clear therefore that without a strong relationship between the government and media, public dialogue, social inclusion, and political participation are all adversely impacted.

Modi's farm bills have set an imperialist agenda in Indian agriculture

Food security of the country will be the biggest casualty

By Prabhat Patnaik

The two bills rammed through parliament last week were objectionable in every conceivable sense. The very fact of their being rammed through the Rajya Sabha, without being put to vote despite demands for a division, was grossly anti-democratic. The fact of the centre making unilateral and fundamental changes in agricultural marketing arrangements which fall within the state list of the seventh schedule of the constitution was a blow against federalism. To resurrect the pre-independence arrangement under which the peasantry was exposed to the capitalist market without any support of the State, and which crushed it during the Great depression of the 1930s, was a betrayal of the promise of independence. To pit millions of small peasants against the might of a handful of private buyers, as the bills propose to do, was to open them up to monopolistic exploitation.

Modi of course has been claiming that the State is not leaving peasants to the mercy of the monopolists, that the government-guaranteed minimum support price (MSP) regime will continue to remain. But the bills contain nothing on this; and the government refuses to incorporate into law, which testifies to its bad faith, the right of the peasantry to get a minimum support price in accordance with the Swaminathan Committee recommendation that puts the MSP at Cost C2 plus 50 per cent. The peasants in short are being thrown, as under colonialism, to the mercies of a market where price fluctuations have a notoriously high amplitude; and they are rightly putting up a fight against their descent into debt and destitution.

In this entire debate however an important dimension has been missed. The debate has been entirely about the condition of the peasantry. But one must also take into account the question of food security, which immediately brings imperialism into the picture.

Imperialism has for long been attempting to push countries like India to become food-import-dependent and to divert their land area currently devoted to foodgrains towards other crops which imperialist countries cannot grow, as these can be grown only in tropical and semi-tropical regions. This however would mean the tropical and semi-tropical countries abandoning food security.

Food security in a country like India requires self-sufficiency in food production. Food imports are no substitute for domestic food production for several reasons. First, whenever a country the size of India approaches the world market for foodgrain imports the world prices shoot up, making imports exorbitantly priced. Secondly, quite apart from the fact that the country may not have sufficient foreign exchange to pay for such import, there is also the additional fact that the people may not have enough purchasing power to buy food imported at such exorbitant prices. Third, since food surpluses exist with the imperialist countries, even buying food at such exorbitant prices requires the blessings of imperialism. In fact denying food to a country at a crucial juncture is a powerful lever in the hands of imperialism to browbeat countries to kow-tow to its demands.

All this is not an abstract matter. India was a foodgrain importer under PL-480 from the latter half of the 1950s. When there were two disastrous harvests in 1965-66 and 1966-67, and Bihar in particular faced famine conditions, India was forced to become a virtual supplicant before the United States for food imports. It became a case literally of carrying food from "ships to kitchens". That is when Indira Gandhi asked Jagjivan Ram, the then food minister, to expedite the drive towards food self-sufficiency, and the Green Revolution was ushered in. The country is still far from being self-sufficient in the sense of growing enough to provide everyone adequate food. But at least it is no longer import-dependent; on the contrary so drastic is the squeeze on purchasing power in the hands of the people that it has been making regular and substantial exports every year despite our people being among the hungriest in the world.

Africa by contrast was cajoled by imperialism into abandoning domestic foodgrain production and shifting area towards export crops. The consequences in terms of recurring famines in Africa in the recent period are too well-known to need repetition.

After 1966-67 an elaborate arrangement in terms of MSP, procurement prices, issue prices, procurement operations carried out in the mandis, a public distribution system, and food subsidies, has been devised which seeks to ensure that the interests of the producers, and the consumers are reconciled and the country grows enough food to obviate any need for imports. This mechanism is fundamentally antithetical to neoliberalism; not surprisingly it has been getting whittled at the margin, through for instance the distinction introduced in the mid-1990s between the above-poverty-line (APL) and below-poverty-line (BPL) populations, with only the latter being eligible for subsidised foodgrains. Even so it has prevented the country's becoming a mendicant for food in the world economy.

Imperialism has made strenuous efforts to dismantle this arrangement, the most obvious being at the negotiations centred on the Doha round of the WTO where the United States has been arguing that India's procurement operations at a preannounced price are against the principles of free trade and should be wound up. No government in India until now was so timid or so gullible as to cave in to this imperialist pressure, because of which the Doha round has been stalled. Now alas we have for the first time a government which is either too scared or too ignorant to stand up to imperialism on this issue. In the name of "modernising agricultural markets" "twenty-first century technology" and such like, it is taking us back to the colonial days when per capita foodgrain output was declining even as land was being diverted towards export crops. It is in reality pushing the imperialist agenda.

True, the immediate beneficiaries of the new agricultural marketing policy will be the Ambanis and the Adanis, but they will be entering into contract farming arrangements not so much for foodgrains as for fruits, vegetables, flowers and a range of other crops which they will not only sell in the domestic market but also process for exports. An essential

New grammar of protests

By Poonam I Kaushish

India has travelled a long way from Tilak's "Swaraj is my birth right" to "strike is my birth right." Today, every section of the society plans strikes as a matter of routine. Be it political protests, labour strikes or *chakka jams* which bring life to a standstill replete with violence, mayhem *et al*.

Last week India witnessed a new and old grammar of protests. In the first, eight Opposition MPs 'dug-in' overnight at Parliament's Gandhi's statue in protest against their suspension over "supposed vandalism" during the Farm Bills debate in the Rajya Sabha. In the second, 18 Opposition Parties and 31 *kisan* organizations participated in a Bharat *bandh* to remonstrate against the Farm Bills passed by Parliament which allows farmers to sell their produce inter-State or intra-State, beyond *mandis* sans State Governments levying any fee on farmers.

Farmers' fear they will no longer get paid the Minimum Support Price, commission agents their commission and States tax. The perfect confetti to corner the Modi *Sarkar*, milk and exploit farmers angst in the hope of garnering attention, scoring brownie points and gaining votes in the forthcoming Bihar & MP elections. Big deal if it ended in national highways being blocked and several trains suspended in the strikers three-day 'rail roko' campaign.

A Union Minister nonchalantly dismissed this as a case of sour losers and sticks in the mud who are fast losing their foothold and significance in Modi's era; are good only at flexing muscles and ratcheting up hostility to rekindle hope that *naarebaazi* is still relevant. Countered by, 'The Government has shown utter disregard for farmers' voices and is using brute force to suppress dissent.' Sic.

Questionably, the issue is not whether the farmers' grievances are justified. Neither is it about exploitation or redress. True, they may have genuine grouses. But this is not the way to go about getting the Government to see reason. But why blame them alone? Our Parties stand equally guilty if not more for using strikes as self-serving and blackmailing tactics to get what they want.

In fact, no day passes without a strike somewhere. Be it a *mohalla*, district or State, the story is the same. Plainly, India thrives on protests. The cause is immaterial. It is all about registering ones protest, the louder the better and bringing work and life to a standstill. Success is measured by how dislocation and discomfort is caused to people.

This raises a moot point: What drives Parties and unions to strike? Is their cause valid? Is the State being unjust or unreasonable? Is it to keep its flock together? Is it the ignominy of becoming irrelevant? Or other political considerations? Guided by citizens interest, commitment for a better wages and quality of life? Importantly, is violence trying to hijack democracy by vicious blackmail and mobocracy?

Sure, protest is an exciting word, the sustenance of democracy and a catchphrase for free speech. Certainly, it's not easy to wish it away, however damaging it may be, as it has become a weapon for the Opposition and unions which resort to it when they feel like venting out frustration, desperation for power, camouflage non-performance or for self-glorification to gain sympathy or wriggle out of working hard. Some old hands at the game confess it's to flex their muscle, flash their strength, underscoring the old saying "*jiski laathi uski bhains*"!

Undoubtedly, in a milieu wherein adoption of strong-arm tactics to extract one's pound of flesh has become our second nature, who should one fault? The polity and the unions are two sides of the same coin. It is only a question of who engineers the strike and for what gain. Part of the current paradox is explained by the changed notion of *hartal aka bandh*. The original concept was centered on the logic that the only way for a group of disempowered people to shake the system is to agitate. But slowly perversion set in. A strike could be effective only if stoppage of work could not be overcome easily by the system. Therefore, the strikers use their power base, including violence, to stall anything that spells change from the set routine. Never mind that in the long run it is detrimental for the country and the people.

Indeed, people are fed-up of strikes each time some *meta* gets a headache or a gripe. According to a recent survey, three out of four people want a legal ban on strikes, 8 out of 10 favour severe punishment or hefty fines for the leaders. Surprisingly, only 15% believe in strikes, 10% in voluntary participation and 60% supported Gandhiji's form of civil disobedience, peaceful *dharnas*, rallies and candle lighting in genuine cases of injustice.

Interestingly, protests rose by 55% from 2009 to 2014, an average of 200 protests every day nationwide with literate States leading the charge. In all, there were 4,20,00 protests over these five years. The sharpest rise came from student-led agitations (148%) followed by communal 92%, Government employees grievances 71%, political 42% and labour 38% according to the Bureau of Police Research and Development.

Parties and their affiliates accounted for 32% of protests and the percentage went up to 50% when their student bodies and labour unions were added. Scandalously, the Bharat *Bandh* to focus attention on labour reforms, cost taxpayers about Rs 18,000 crores, the Jats agitation cost over Rs 34,000 crore, and the Cauvery river row in Karnataka Rs 22,000-25,000 crore according to ASSOCHAM.

As India marches ahead to becoming *Atmanirbhar*, are protests the right recourse? True, the Constitution guarantees one the right to protest as a fundamental right of speech and assemble but it does not guarantee one the right to infringe upon others rights and cause inconvenience to the general public. Remarked the Supreme Court in a petition challenging the Shaheen Bagh protests February, "protesters cannot block public roads indefinitely. If you want to protest, it has to be in an area identified for protest."

Clearly, the time has come to take a leaf out of US law, wherein there is no Constitutional right to make a speech on a highway so as to cause a crowd to gather and obstruct the highway. The right to assembly is to be so exercised as not to conflict with other lawful rights, interests and comfort of the individual or the public and public order.

We need to understand that democracy is neither mobocracy nor a license to create bedlam. It is a fine balance between rights and duties, liberties and responsibilities. One's freedom pre-supposes another's responsibilities and liberty. Paralyzing the State, to get attention and policy reversals only exasperates the public and inconveniences them. Using violent means gets one nowhere as temporary respite is no answer for building a socially cohesive society.

Where does India go from here? How long will our *laissez faire* attitude persist with each shrugging his shoulders and asserting 'how does it matter.' Last week's *bandh* has exposed how dangerous this game has become whereby we can no longer simply dismiss indiscipline and violence as a system's failure. The right of the citizen is paramount. Time now to call a *bandh* against hypocritical Parties and cry a halt to political clichés and strikes! *Bandh karo ye natak!* --

TO THE EDITOR

New era of education

Editor

Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I would like to focus on the new era of education and its effects amidst the COVID19 pandemic. As a university student, I believe I am among the privileged lot that has access to the appropriate infrastructure to learn through the portals of online education. Meanwhile, I also ask myself if we as a country, full of knowledge producers and learners, are ready to switch to a form of education that is not viable or highly accessible.

In a technologically advancing India, is adopting digital learning the way to bridge the literacy gap that prevails in the country? Out of the 3.2 million students formally enrolled in educational institutions, 56% of them do not even have access to smart phones, let alone the internet. Despite the government launching

education portals like DIKSHA and Swayam, the reach of these platforms is limited to those who own the infrastructure needed to be a part of this education system, which is not a big majority. I believe that the educators of this country will agree with me when I say, that this form of learning is exasperating the existing social, economic and educational gap of this country.

My request to all Indians, willing and able is (a) To educate students in our localities that wish to study but do not have the access to education (b) To spread the knowledge, we possess and have privilege access, to those who lack the basic physical space and infrastructure to obtain the learning they have a right over (c) To allow children to come and use our homes as a space for learning and a place that helps them grow and receive the correct education in an appropriate environment with sufficient supplies.

In writing this letter I wish

to inform all Indians to participate in narrowing the digital divide in this era of learning which is also dividing the country.

Yours etc.,
Jayeesha Taneja
HQ EAC, IAF
Shillong- 9

"Depression" can defeat COVID patients

Editor,

When uncertainty and worries come calling, the body's immune system tends to crash. Yet there is enough scientific evidence that a strong immune system also comes from a healthy mind and healthy body. And COVID-19 can be fought only with better immunity. It's an accepted fact that due to the pandemic, the a large majority of the weaker section of people are in the most difficult situation. Their financial hardship is beyond our understanding. Each poor person is now in

a situation where he/ she has very a painful tale to tell so far as his/her day-to-day livelihood is concerned. Therefore, poor people might feel totally lost and disoriented when they are suddenly picked up and sent for quarantine away from home.

I don't want to dwell much on the medical formalities which I find less important here. But what I am really concerned about is the "psychological" aspect and how that really affects their immune system while battling the virus.

Many families have met have expressed their deep sense of "grief" when their breadwinner or family member is taken away or asked for immediate isolation. The poor persons in isolation too have a load of family worries, more precisely, about whether the family is able to get their two-time meals and other basic essentials for their children and wives. Practically there is no one to support their family members when they are in quarantine or at COVID care

centers. They also don't have enough space at home for quarantine as the entire family live in one or two rooms. These factors add to their anxieties in many ways. So, in this worrying situation, they obviously have "low levels" of immunity, with the exception of a few rare cases. I wish the Government would also look into the "psychological aspect" of an individual/patient. Truly, the physical metabolism and immune system of a human body go down when one is psychologically affected and "depressed". A resident of Garikhana confided that due to quarantine isolation his aged father, who had returned from Kolkata, experienced deep depression which consequently gave rise to other health complications. Thankfully he was at home they could immediately call a private doctor for the other treatment and anxiety counseling. What if that aged person were taken far away from home for the quarantine? Many unfortunate things could have been possible.

"Negative" could have been "positive" next day and "positive" could have led directly to the crematorium -- without any contacts with the beloved family members!

If we do not take the potential traumatic aspect of an individual's mental status into account then all our arrangements and missions to fight the virus without vaccines is totally inadequate and farcical. This is my personal observation. Hence I sincerely appeal to the Government to take the mental health aspect at this time into consideration. With the fatality rate increasing by the day, the consequences ahead could be serious. Perhaps mental health problems of which depression is one could be the prime cause of the rise in the death rates.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gawali,
Shillong

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

Khonoma: The first green village of India

By Prasanta Talukdar

A green village is a human settlement that enables its residents to live a good quality of life while using maximum natural resources. The green villages adopt a holistic approach to sustainability which would result in multi fold benefits, both tangible and intangible. The most tangible benefits are the reduction in water & energy demand and better handling of solid waste in the village. The intangible benefits of green villages include access to safe drinking water and sanitation and the basic facilities like healthcare, schools, transport and recreation. Green village is a process that can keep a village attaining sustainable development. Its habitat where one can live in pleasant environment. The village should follow Energy conservation, efficient transportation, biodiversity, waste management, watershed management, rain water harvesting structure, on conventional resources.

Mahatma Gandhi's dream comes true through the village of 'Khonoma' India's first green village, where villagers never cut trees and preserve the forest. The village got its name from 'Khwuno', a small plant that is found in abundance around the village. Angami tribes are the main inhabitants of the village, they are known for their bravery and martial skills. The village is also known for its master craftsman in the art of weaving with bamboo and cane.

Khonoma is located in approx 20 kms west of Kohima, the capital of Nagaland. Khonoma is a hilly area at an altitude of 5300 feet above mean sea level and spread over the 123 sq.kms area. The village is situated in the beautiful mountains in mysterious way so that one cannot see the village until they cross the ceremonial giant gateway, which welcomes the visitors. The village is almost at the base of mountains and shielded by mountains on all sides, also known as 'hidden village'. A big monolithic stone, engraved with the details of Green Village has been installed at the entry way to village. Towards one side of the village were green hills whose peaks were covered in clouds and on the other side the terraced paddy fields could be seen. To promote the green village concept and increase the eco-tourism, tourism department Govt. of Nagaland and Union Ministry of Tourism and Culture has launched the Khonoma Green Village Project (KGVP) on 25th October 2005, inaugurated by the Nagaland Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio.

'Khonoma' has been identified for the Green village project, due to its advantages over other villages such as location, flora-fauna, forest conservation, ban on hunting, jhoom cultivation, construction technique, social infrastructure and great history. KGVP was the first project of its kind and Khonoma is the first Green Village in



the country. The aim of the project was to make Khonoma a model for all villages in Nagaland and other states for eco-tourism. The project has gained widespread attention in India. Though the government has come forward to help and funded the project, but it was initiated by the local people.

After Khonoma green village is considered to be 700 years old settlement, known for its past heritage of fighting and warfare. Naga's has grown up hunting and spending half their life in the woods, head hunting was their one of the favourite game. Khonoma was for a long time the stronghold of the Angamese 'head-hunters' warriors who resisted until 1880 against the British invader. A memorial was built which has been carved to give tribute to the men and women who gave their lives to the vision of free Naga nation. Also, there stands a stone pillar in memory of Mr. G.H. Damant, a British Officer who was the then Political Agent of the British and four other officers who were killed by the village militia in 1879 when the British expedition team came to the village. Khonoma had etched its name into the history of Indian resistance to the colonial invasion. Christianity was introduced in the village in 1890, now most of the villagers are of this faith. Famous leaders of the "Naga National Movement" were born here as A.Z. Phizo.

After Following concepts are being practiced by the villager to make their village green. The Naga tribes are hunter by born, hunting is the game as well means of livelihood for them. In 1993, they realized that trapogan birds are endangered species and 300 of them were killed in few times for their meat in the village. From then some of the ecologically sensitive vil-

lagers launched a crusade against hunting. The residents of Khonoma, Nagaland, did something that no one else in the country had ever done before. They declared a chunk of their forest as a conservation reserve- the 'Khonoma Nature Conservation and Tragopan Sanctuary' (KNCTS). Until then, only the government had identified forests worthy of protection. The village is preserving about 70 sq kms of its community forest. The sanctuary is one of the few community conserved areas in India. Each person of Khonoma, let it be either boy or girl, young or old are the member of one or other bodies of Khonoma such as village council, Village Development Board, student union, Khonoma Women's Organisation etc. In addition, all villagers are part of an 'age group', such groups are formed by boys and girls, who carry out social activities like construction of rest-houses, village paths, and the formation of singing and dancing groups. Each age group is assigned a guardian, who is considered a spiritual parent.

In 2005, the state forest department initiated a proposal for this area to be declared a Community Reserve under the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act as amended in 2001. To protect the sanctuary rules were laid down for the management. In which there was financial fine from Rs. 300 to Rs. 3000 depending on the seriousness of the violation. But more than monetary punishment, the family's loss of face was a more effective deterrent. Youth bodies like, the Khonoma Students Union (KSU) and Khonoma Youth Organization played active role in facilitating this movement they are the one who does monitoring, implementation of rules and levy the fines. Khonoma received the epithet of a 'green village and accolades' in the media. The Naga tribes are known for wildlife hunting for their livelihood. To make the village green the villagers come to ban the hunting in entire forest area of the village extending to 125 sq. kms since 1998. Within a short span of time after the ban of hunting, sightings of deer, wild boar and porcupine, has been started. Many farmers also reported the damage of their food crops by wild animals. In order to deal with this problem, hunting of animals sighted in the fields is allowed but the meat is not allowed to be sold.

The 'Morung', is popularly known as centre of learning. It is also the house of decision making, as an important centre of the village. In these morungs, the duty of the ancients is to inculcate moral values, social re-



sponsibilities, craftsmanship, agriculture, various sports such as wrestling and folkloric traditions such as songs and native games. Khonoma has high literacy rate of approx 85%, there is good educational infrastructure consisting of six schools in the village. Khonoma celebrates 1st September is as the village's 'birthday'. To celebrate it, they come from far and wide. The KNCTS is not a legal government body. However, the Village Council Act of Nagaland gives the Village Council authority to devise mechanism for management of forest resources. Therefore, the Village Council and the entire community under the prevalent customary law recognize KNCTS as a legal entity.

Khonoma is also well-known in agricultural circles for its sophisticated cultivation techniques. Farmers use a form of shifting (jhoom) cultivation, in which they change the land for farming for two years and use Nepal alder (Alnus nepalensis) trees interspersed with the crops and cut their branches occasionally. By cutting smaller branches and leaving only the bigger branches they've succeeded in farming without cutting trees. These trees return nitrogen to the soil, thereby helping the land to rapidly regain fertility when farmers abandon it to move on to the next plot. The village has developed the terraced fields for cultivation since ages, primarily used for

rice cultivation. For farming they don't use any chemical pesticides or fertilizers instead the villagers use sewage and tree as organic manure. Khonoma is home to over sixty varieties of rice, and a diversity of millets, maize, Job's tears, a tall grain-bearing tropical plant, citrus fruits and other crops. The village is rich in biodiversity a large number of birds, primates, reptiles, amphibians, orchids, and medicinal plants and many rare flora and fauna have been inventoried as part of the Green Village initiative. The state bird, 'Blyth's Tragopan', a pheasant now nationally endangered, is reportedly found here. Villagers have taken resolution to conserve the biodiversity and wildlife in the village.

Students union of Khonoma takes care of the cleanliness and solid waste management. At every junction of the village garbage bin has been placed and maintained by the student union. The Village Council has made it mandatory for every household to have dustbins. Once in a month, sanitation drive is carried out. Open Defecation has been stopped. School children are trained to keep their village and houses clean. Community water tank has been constructed at different location for the proper supply of water to houses. They also practice the Rain water harvesting system, re-use of water and underground water recharge through pond and well. The

Naga families practice to cook food in the center of house so that the fumes and smokes kill the insects and the wooden structure could remain intact for years.

Although the village is very small but the proper signage's has been used for one way traffic, bus stands etc. Fresh air, good food, simple life style and sports are the key, which makes the Khonoma people healthy. Primary Health Centre facility is available in the village. Sports and cultural activity spaces has been built at many places in the village. Since 1994, Centre for Environment Education (CEE) has played an important role to make the Khonoma a First Green Village of India.

The India is taking a lead role to develop its villages in sustainable model. Khonoma is the successful example of such initiative and became the first green village of India. The village has been placed on the tourism map of the country and has attracted many wildlife enthusiast, conservationists, researchers and tourists. The green village initiative has firstly taken by the indigenous inhabitant of Khonoma and further supported by the government. The soul of India lies in its villages. If the villages are green and villagers are happy, then the smell of pesticides in the food could be avoided and environment could be healthy.

Silences of the abandoned

By Sukant Deepak

She captures frames of the greatest migration since Partition, but what strikes is not the movement, but in fact an uncomfortable stillness — not just of the people but the entire city. A post-war capital — abandoned, but still standing tall, unable to come to terms with the new reality.

In the initial days of the lockdown, which forced lakhs of migrant workers to flee cities towards their homes on foot, Delhi-based photographer Parul Sharma decided to capture reality at its most profound, laying bare the state's poverty of imagination. The result is the book 'Dialects of Silence', published by Roli Books. A photographic evidence and document of times shot with a iPhone 11 Pro and a Huawei P30 Pro that not only lays bare the great divide but also reimagines a perpetually buzzing city that even ghosts would be scared to inhabit.

Capturing the migrants at different locations to framing Delhi's iconic landmarks in their deserted avatars, Sharma wanted to be closer to a frightening reality: Migrant workers, battling hunger and disease, trying to return to their distant homes; bodies of Covid victims being delivered like packages in crematoriums; the last rites in isolation; and the embers of grief.

"For a photographer living through an unprecedented time of fear and horror, the aura of absence had to be captured and memories to be revisited, in the edifices of Old and New Delhi."

Believing that Photographs capture history in a flash and eternity in a blink,



Sharma, who hit the capital's streets from April 4 and shot over 10,000 images (and continues to), adds, "Books and films can bring to perfection what has been written or filmed long after the moments of creation. Photography doesn't have that luxury. What you shoot in that moment is what you get. That image is etched in time. It is an unchangeable reality."

Born and brought up in New Delhi, Sharma, who left her corporate job in 2017 to pursue photography full time, making her first solo 'Parulscape' at Bikaner House in the same year and going on to exhibit her works on Naga Sadhus and transgenders in a three-week solo exhibition called Mystico India at Florence's leading public museum Marino Marini last year, says even while in the job, she realised that she wanted to wanted to pursue photography focussed on architectural design, form, and the geometry of urban spaces.

Ask her why all photographs are in black and white, and she smiles, "For me the most colourful thing in the world is black and white, it contains all colors

and at the same time excludes all. Black and white is how I have tried to live my life, and it is how I want to define my sensibility in art."

But don't the subjects come back to haunt her? "I still wake up in a sweat shattered with the horror and sadness and sheer aloneness of bodies that came, day in, day out, to the Nigambodh electric crematorium, the Muslim burial ground and the Christian cemetery. Plastic wrapped bodies on a moving beltway into a gas oven, a young widow reading the fatiha before her husband's freshly laid grave, the wrapped bundle of a tiny, abandoned baby who died of Covid, waiting for the gravedigger, and the cataclysmic movement of coffin maker, Mr. Paul, Sawing Timber for coffins June was the cruellest month of all."

Though she wanted to shoot in ICUs, but was not allowed to, Sharma, who feels that photographers have a responsibility to document the present, does plan to exhibit the photographs too. When? "When the darkness lifts," she says with all the seriousness. (IANS)

On the trail of Buddha

By Ranjita Biswas

Deepankar Aron is a senior bureaucrat, not a travel-writer or photographer by profession, forever zooming off to a new destination. Yet, the way Buddhism connected many parts of Asia for centuries has fascinated him enough to travel widely in areas where once the message of Buddha from India was carried by travellers and monks.

Excerpts of an interview:

This book seems almost like a diary on a pilgrimage route - chasing the Buddhist trail, as it were, for you. How long did the book take to materialise?

The 'book' was never really written with a book in mind. The travels in East Asia were spread over a period of six years commencing with the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra in 2009 in which I had gone as a Liaison Officer appointed by the Ministry of External Affairs, and culminating in 2015 which also marked an end to my diplomatic assignment in Hong Kong.

The book is indeed a travelogue of close to 100 destinations scattered over the East Asia from China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Hong Kong SAR and Taiwan, including Tibet. It took another five years be formed into a book, so you can say, it 'took' 11 years in all.

So the common theme is the message of Buddha that spread from India?

The Buddhist trail in the book is indeed the unifying thread that runs through from India to all over East Asia during the course of the last 2000 years. These travels unveiled for me the

enormity of the exchanges and commonalities, especially in the first millennium when modern modes of communication and travel were absent.

However, for me this wasn't something that so apparent at the beginning but in the course of these travels the strong linkages of culture, philosophy, art and architecture between India and East Asia centered around Buddhism started emerging.

Why are you so interested in the Asian destinations, particularly in central and eastern parts of the continent?

Well, I am an Asian to begin with. Going back to the first millennium while trade flourished along the Silk Road passing through Central Asia and other routes including marine ones crisscrossing Asia and Europe, there was a concomitant exchange of religion, art and architecture besides political influences as well, shaping new empires. Kushan dynasty set up by the Guishan sub-tribe of the Yuezhi tribe is a good example. There are many more in the whole of East Asia. Buddhism spread all the way from India to much of Asia, not just East Asia, but also South East Asia. The influence of Hinduism in South East Asia from the Champa kingdom in Vietnam, to the World's largest temple complex of Angkor Wat in Cambodia is also a testimony to these exchanges.

What has been your inspiration behind the travels that culminated in the book?

Well, the inspiration has been the old Indian adage of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' — 'the whole world is one family'!

In essence, it is the spiritual message of 'Oneness' that emerges, something which both Vedanta and Buddhism talk about. The title of the book is inspired by A Journey to the West written by Wu Cheng'en in 16th century China, based on the travels of Xuan Zang or Hsuei Tsang (in India), undertaken between AD 628 and 645 to India in search of the sutras.

Another reason for writing the book is that very little of the vastness and depth of this exchange is known, even to us educated Indians. A lot more transpired than what is recorded in our school history books; it was an eye opener for me.

You talk a lot about the remarkable cave temples in China. S. What do you think is behind Buddhist monks' desire to carve inside caves? In India too we have examples like Ajanta, Nilgiri-Udaigiri caves in Odisha, etc.

Since Buddhism spread along with trade through the Silk Road and various other mountain paths cutting across difficult terrains, it was a necessity to have shelters on the way which could not just provide food and security, but also provide a place of quietude for

worshipping and meditating to recoup the spiritual energy needed to undertake these arduous journeys. Thus, the best place to have a 'safe home' automatically became a cave, a natural shelter.

Obviously, art in the form of frescoes and grottoes could best be preserved for posterity, if made inside these caves and thank God, they did that, for otherwise we won't be seeing them today as they could have been lost to vagaries of time and destruction. It is well known that sunlight damages the colors of paintings. Thus, the frescoes of Ajanta-Ellora or of Dunhuang caves or those of Alchi caves temples in Ladakh have been well preserved thousands of years afterwards.

You travelled to South Korea and Japan as well, chasing the Buddha. Increasingly, it seems how invaluable was India's contribution to the religious-cultural maps of these countries but it's less written about.

Absolutely, there was a tremendous amount of exchange between India and Korea on one hand and India and Japan on the other. Buddha's relics called 'Sari or Sarira' came right upto Korea; there are mountains in Korea (Gaya-san) named after Gaya; one of the most popular sects of Buddhism in Korea is called the Jogye order which is same as Dhyana (India) or Chan (China) or Zen in Japan. There was even a princess from Ayodhya who married a Korean king some 2000 years ago as per legend. In fact, 10 per cent of all Koreans (particularly from the Kim clan) say they can trace their ancestry to this princess from Ayodhya!

Likewise, Saraswati is popular in Japan as Benzaiten. Many of the World Heritage Sites of Kyoto are Buddhist monasteries. In quite a few temples such as Sanjusangen-do in Japan you will find Sanskrit names of the gods and goddesses coexisting with the Japanese names.

We seem to have lost the free flowing exchange of ideas on cultural affinities between India and China down the ages due to various reasons, including political ones. How important is it to relook at them today under rising tensions between the two countries?

I think it's extremely important to understand the enormity of the very close civilizational linkages between India and China for more than 2000 years, particularly in the first millennium. More so, in the context of the current situation.

Today, this rich legacy of a common cultural and spiritual heritage, that can still be witnessed from Kashgar in the western-most regions of China to Shanghai in the east, from upper reaches of China bordering Mongolia down south upto Taiwan is a fitting testimony to a harmonious and peaceful exchange between the two ancient civilizations.

(Trans World Features)

India's thermal plant tigers

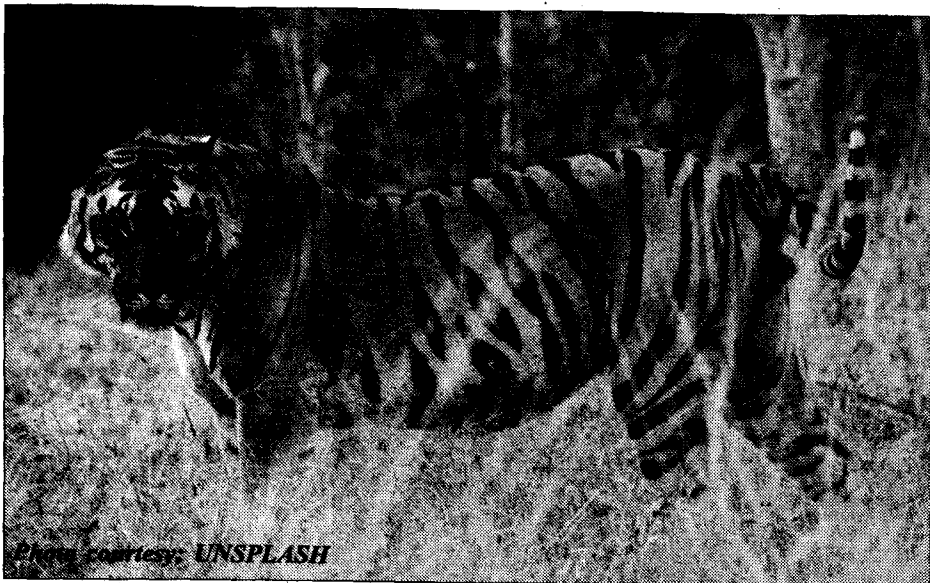
Around five tigers in Central India's Chandrapur region have been observed living in a thermal power station over the past four to five years. Forest officials and wildlife biologists say that these tigers are trying to adjust themselves, through behavioural changes, with protected areas getting saturated. Mongabay-India writer Saurabh Katkurwar reports

Tigers are known for living in dense forest areas, away from human settlements — unlike the other big cats, leopards, that are quite comfortable living in human-dominated habitats and in the proximity of urban areas. But a group of tigers in central India has shown a difference in behaviour, becoming comfortable in an urban setting.

Around five tigers in Chandrapur district of north-eastern Maharashtra have made a thermal power station area their permanent home over the past four or five years. These tigers not only roam freely inside the power station area, which has about 10,000 people, but also frequent the residential areas in the adjoining Chandrapur city that has a human population of over 500,000.

While no explanatory research has been carried out defining such tigers as 'urban tigers', there is anecdotal evidence that indicates that these tigers in the Chandrapur landscape, are less averse to living close to human settlements. Chandrapur district has around 160-170 tigers and half of them have their habitats outside the protected areas. There have been changes in behaviour patterns of tigers in the past few years, which may have induced by both natural as well as external factors.

Favourable conditions
The Chandrapur Super Thermal Power Station (CSTPS) is connected to famous Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) through a



corridor of coal mines that is thickly covered with Prosopis plant species. Adequate prey base in the form of stray cattle and wild boars, substantial tree cover and a perennial nullah passing through the CSTPS help meet all the basic needs of these resident tigers, point out experts.

The power generation plant is built on 1,117 ha of land, the staff quarters on 340 ha while 2,665 ha is earmarked for ash dump.

Tigers would come to the thermal power station from the TATR earlier as well. However, it would always be a fleeting visit, which would often go unnoticed by people. Now, tigers have made the CSTPS their habitat, staying alongside people with ease.

While factors such as increasing number of tigers and shrinking forest areas are some of the major drivers, some behavioural changes in tigers may also

be responsible for these developments, said V. S. Ramarao, Chief Conservator of Forest of Chandrapur Circle, who has recently been transferred to Yavatmal in the same capacity.

"We have observed the food habits and the living habits of tigers have changed. In the CSTPS, stray cattle and wild boars take care of food while Prosopis trees offer them cover to hide. These tigers are trying to adjust themselves in the new conditions (as there is no space for them to live in the protected areas)," he said.

There are estimated to be 2,000 to 4,000 stray cattle inside the CSTPS area and their number has grown substantially, with good availability of grass and fodder as well as the ban on slaughter of cow and its progeny.

A tigress brought up her three cubs on an ash bund (embankment) a few years

ago. It's speculated that these cubs may have born in the CSPTS area itself and are expected to live in degraded forests or non-forest areas throughout their life.

Bilal Habib, Wildlife Biologist with the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), said the tigers that were born or grew up in CSTPS, which is a non-forest area, would tend to live in similar conditions wherever they migrate to, due to natal memory.

"Technically, we may not call the tigers in the CSTPS area as 'urban tigers'. However, the mental setup of such tigers would be influenced by where they were born and grew up. Due to natal memory, such animals would consider the areas like the CSTPS as their habitat," he said.

There are some examples that also reflect the effects of natal memory. One tiger moved out of the CSTPS about three years ago and travelled to neighbouring

districts of Yavatmal, Wardha, Nagpur. It preferred to stay in the non-forest areas during its journey and finally landed up in Satpura Thermal Power Station in Sami in Madhya Pradesh's Betul district.

Adjustment for survival
Survival is a major driver for the tigers adapting to the conditions that may not be ideally suitable for their livelihood, said Nitin Desai, central India director of Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI).

Word of caution
Abundance of cattle and the dense cover of Prosopis trees, which grow like big shrubs, have provided a suitable environment for the development of breeding grounds in the CSTPS. Habib though, cautioned against letting the CSTPS turn into a breeding ground. "If there are going to be such urban tigers, there will be more and more human-animal conflict," he asserted. "We need a policy, thought process about what is to be done with tigers in human-dominated areas."

The Maharashtra government is contemplating mass-translocation of tigers from the CSTPS and other areas where human-tiger conflict is expected to flare up in near future, to nearby forests. However, there is a note of caution from some conservationists. They said the space that falls vacant after the translocation of existing tigers would be occupied by new tigers.

(Mongabay-India/TWF)

Turning rejection into opportunity

By Vishnu Makhijani

He was twice rejected by one of India's top FMCG firms when he applied for a job from campus. More than once, he did not get the promotion that he thought he richly deserved. The draft of his first book on advertising cases was rejected as a plug. Several clients, on multiple occasions, rejected campaign ideas that he had projected.

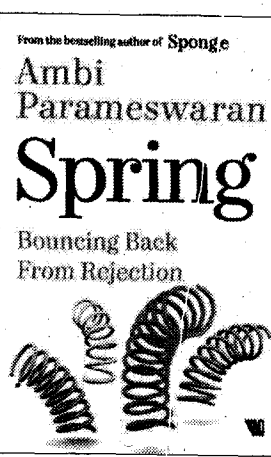
And all that transformed him into becoming a spring that helped bouncing him back after being repeatedly pushed and pulled.

Today, after a 40-year career in corporate India, Ambi Parameswaran is a best-selling author of 10 books, a brand consultant, the founder of a brand advisory and a much-in-demand speaker at industry events.

"The big learning for me, as I reflect back on my journey in the world of business is that there is no one magic bullet to handle rejection," Parameswaran writes in *Spring - Bouncing Back From Rejection* (Westland) as he details his own torturous journey and that of individuals across the spectrum who fought off adversity and offers a three-step process - a Rejection Processing System (RPS) - to 'survive multiple rejections, near-death experiences and more'.

"Getting rejected is something that worries everyone. And somehow it seems to be a big black hole that can swallow you in full", he writes, adding: "But the truth is that the most successful of people you know have had to go through rejection multiple times in their lives."

"Someone whom you think was a born leader probably got rejected many



times before he landed the right job. Numerous best-selling authors have had to submit their manuscripts to multiple publishers before someone decided to risk their reputation by publishing a first-time author. The same is true of some of the biggest movies and television programmes. Movie stars who have won multiple Oscar awards, who have numerous hits under their belt, have all faced rejection," Parameswaran writes and goes on to lists a virtual Who's Who of individuals who proved that perseverance pays.

To name just a few, there's Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, Steven Spielberg, Amish Tripathi, JK Rowling, Ernest Hemmingway, George Orwell (rejected by TS Eliot of all people), Vladimir Nabokov, Stephen King, Jeffrey Archer, Ariana Huffington, The Beatles and Dilip Kumar (now known as AR Rahman).

There's also the saga of Savan Harish Kotecha, a songwriter of Indian origin, as related by Derek Thomson, a senior editor at *The Atlantic* and a news analyst for NPR (National Public Radio of the US). Kotecha received 160 rejection letters while trying to break into the highly competitive music

business. He eventually landed a job as a writer and producer for other singers/songwriters such as Madonna, Nick Jonas, Backstreet Boys, Ariana Grande, Usher, Justin Bieber and One Direction.

What's the lesson to be learnt from all this?

"Be ready to anticipate and accept rejection. If you are convinced about what you are setting out to do, don't let rejection derail you. If your heart says you have a winning concept, don't give up. Brush off the rejection and spring back to make a fresh attempt," Parameswaran writes.

Enter his RPS, or rather, climbing "the three peaks of rejection management" which he explains thus: "The first stage of handling rejection is the ability to anticipate and accept rejection. Don't take it personally. Quiet your inner critic."

"The second stage is processing and recovering from rejection. Can you decode the rejection message? Is it a hard rejection or a soft one? Who can you go for support? Do you have a confidant who can help you?"

"The third and final stage is learning and progressing after rejection. What can you learn from the rejection? What mistake did you make and should avoid making the next time? What lesson did you learn?"

Here's a book that proves that the proof of the pudding lies in the eating, with its 18 chapters grouped into three parts, each with a broad sequence but which can also be read in any order, "so that you can spring back with a smile on your face when you are hit by a rejection".

So, go ahead and take the plunge! (IANS)

‘Star - Gazing’

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, September 27, 2020

Moon square Uranus on your solar return chart will give mixed results. This is going to be a not so good time period for you. You will be tested to the fullest and made to work hard. Yet your plans will get struck. Your enemies will have an upper edge for the time being. You will be hopeless at times. Your colleagues will also suspect your intentions. Even your superiors would not support you. You will also find some persons turning inimical suddenly. Health of some elderly person in the family may also need medical attention. You will be kept busy. But the tide will turn gradually in your favour. You will get full support from life partner and children. Brothers/sisters will also provide you timely help. Friends will provide financial support. You will be drawn to spiritualism and religious activities.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)
The week begins on a positive note. The planetary configuration indicates that your efforts, confidence and courage brings success in monetary gains and your energy increases for work projects. Your job environment is lively. Your outlook on life has been a little more serious and responsible. In the past while, you might have reached out to others in an attempt to validate yourself, looking for ways to boost your confidence. Health is likely to prosper and medical procedures or programs, if necessary, are more likely to be successful.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)
This week brings love, harmony and entertainment in professional and personal relations. Your physical body and mannerisms are a focus. There would be a newfound identity and a realistic understanding of your own limitations and your capabilities as well. In terms of career and projects, outward signs of progress would lay a foundation for future success and progress. Lifeless or outworn relationships may have been especially hard to bear for you. You could take up some form of physical program that completely changes the way you feel about yourself. The things that give you joy and positive feedback figure prominently and you feel renewed and regenerated.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)
This phase brings success in professional and personal relations. You would feel particularly strong and personally powerful. There is no such thing as playing the victim, you're the victor and you feel it. You enjoy an increased ability to concentrate and focus on what really matters to you. It would be wise to make something of your hobbies—even if it doesn't bring an income, you might find that expressing yourself creatively really helps to define yourself and to understand yourself better. Health is likely to be balanced.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)
This is favorable period for hobbies, sports and competitive exams. Your creative abilities are reflected in your outlook on life and love and romance are life experiences you strongly identify with. You display great skills in sports or physical activity that wins you appreciation and an opportunity to travel. Try to be just and fair when making decisions, as you do your best to see both sides of an issue. People notice and admire you for your pleasant and cheerful personality. You are bolder in expressing your love, yet not aggressive either. Artistic self-expression is important, possibly through music, fashion and writing. A strong desire for companionship dominates at this time.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)
The first phase of this year increases confidence and courage at work place. It's a great time to do something entirely new and pioneering. Discussions and ideas about finances and material security figure strongly. Although you like the good things of life and may spend quite a bit on clothes, furniture, and entertainment, your innate sense of security will not permit you to go overboard to the point of extravagance. You will have the ability to build up financial reserves and resources, for this planetary placement can bring a good deal of success in all monetary pursuits.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)
An excellent week for money, career, and romance awaits you. Friends and loved ones take priority. You don't find yourself lacking in opportunities to socialize. You are likely to enjoy a strong feeling of happiness and solidarity in

friendship, or with groups of like-minded individuals. You are more peace loving than usual and slightly detached on a personal level as you feel drawn towards religion and spiritualism. This is a good time for research and meditation; but do avoid being dragged down by issues that have outgrown their worth and purpose. Examining the past in order to improve the future is certainly worthwhile, as long as you don't waste your energy.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)
The planetary configuration brings success, responsibility and maturity. You have much energy for new moneymaking projects, or for stepping up existing ones. Matters of the heart touch you deeply. You may willingly play a supportive role to the family and offer compassion and selfless love. This is a rather happy, goal-oriented time on the professional front. Relationships take on a fun outlook and activities with children increase. You possess extra charm in your professional interactions. A new affair is in the offing for the unattached. More opportunities to socialize and network could present themselves now.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)
This period is good for money, family, status and happiness. Money matters come into focus for you. You adopt a serious approach to business because you are in the spotlight. The desire for some form of recognition and financial success is apparent. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you at this time. Your love life is more attractive and charming. Public relations work, marketing, promotional activities and other such endeavors are favored now. You may face some minor ailments on the health front.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)
Diplomacy, correctness in manner, finesse, and charm will be a big plus in aiding financial gains, especially in areas requiring public contact. You feel drawn to intellectuals with whom you can communicate well and exchange ideas. You know how to relate to others and you do so in a natural and warm manner. Your vision is practical right now, and you want to see tangible results for your efforts. Recognition is likely to come your way whether you ask for it or not along with the responsibility that comes right along with it. Do what you feel is right, keeping in mind that you are in the limelight during this phase.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)
This is an excellent time to create a budget or financial plan, or to rid yourself of old habits that undermine your sense of personal power and self-mastery. Smoothing out your close personal relationships is what makes you happy. If single, you are more than willing to enter into a committed relationship. In general, you are adaptable when it comes to your affections. You pour more energy into self-promotion or business activities. Foreign places may particularly appeal now. You tend to be expansive and generous when it comes to love. Dealing with one situation at a time releases some tension and anxiety.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)
Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering at this time. On a more practical level, you may be dealing with joint finances and shared resources. Social life takes priority in your life. You would become serious about family relations and feel responsible towards them. Social interactions of a personal, one-on-one kind are emphasized. Conflicts with a partner over values or personal possessions are likely to occur. You are more willing than usual to explore life's secrets. Taking care of business is your main focus. A health routine started now is likely to be successful.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)
This is a generous, pleasantly emotional, and creative phase. Striking a balance between your attention to your career and to your family life is necessary. Taking steps to improve your family and home life as well as your career and public life will be in order. You will also thoroughly enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities, especially in the company of a loved one. You need the energies, companionship, and support of other people, and they may also seek out your support and companionship. It's important to include others rather than to go solo for the time being. However, bending too much to the will of another is not advised either.

27th September is World Tourism Day

Rebuilding tourism in a safe, equitable, climate-friendly way

By Ranjan K Baruah

In the recent pandemic the worst affected industry or sector is tourism. We know about the contribution of tourism amongst lives of millions around the world. It provides livelihoods for millions of people and allows billions more to appreciate their own and different cultures, as well as the natural world. For some countries, it can represent over 20 per cent of their GDP and, overall, it is the third largest export sector of the global economy.

COVID-19 has directly impacted the tourism sector which has directly impacted people directly associated with the tourism sector. There is no country which has been unaffected when it comes to the tourism sector. Restrictions on travel and a sudden drop in consumer demand have led to an unprecedented fall in international tourism numbers, which in turn have led to economic loss and the loss of jobs.

Impact in tourism has impacted conservation of biodiversity mainly in national parks areas and other biodiversity rich zones. The sudden fall in tourism revenues has cut off funding for biodiversity conservation. With 90% of World Heritage Sites closed as a result of the pandemic, humanity's cultural heritage is at risk in all parts of the world.

Development through tourism can also keep rural communities alive. It is estimated that by 2050, 68% of the world population will live in urban areas, while 80% of those currently living in 'extreme poverty' live outside of towns and cities. We must be aware that tourism employs one in every ten people on Earth but because of the pandemic, 100-120 million direct tourism jobs are at risk. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) foresees that domestic tourism will return before international tourism and there is no doubt that if managed well, this could benefit rural communities. Interestingly tourism is a lifeline, offering young people a chance to earn a living without having to migrate.

Like many other days World Tourism Day (WTD) is observed on 27th

September around the world. On this Tourism Day, the COVID-19 pandemic represents an opportunity to rethink the future of the tourism sector, including how it contributes to the sustainable development goals, through its social, cultural, political, and economic value. This date was chosen to coincide with an important milestone in world tourism: the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the UNWTO Statutes on September 27, 1970 and the day is observed since 1980 and making it to 40th celebration in 2020.

The 2020 edition of WTD, with the theme of "Tourism and Rural Development", shall celebrate the unique role that tourism plays in providing opportunities outside of big cities and preserving cultural and natural heritage all around the world. This year's observation comes at a critical moment, as countries around the world look to tourism to drive recovery, including in rural communities where the sector is a leading employer and economic pillar providing jobs and opportunity, most notably for women and youth.

The United Nations Secretary General in his message said that "in the 40

years since the very first World Tourism Day, much has changed. Demand for travel has soared. The world has opened up, allowing more people than ever to explore the globe and its different cultures." "In this most challenging year, let us focus on tourism's importance for people living in rural areas, so we can deliver on the promise of the Sustainable Development Goals to leave nobody behind", he added.

It is the role and responsibility of each and every one of us to contribute positively in rebuilding the tourism industry. Apart from government, other agencies like private sectors and others must take positive steps to rebuild the sector as it engages rural communities' part from others. New schemes and supports have been announced by different ministries for rebuilding the sector and it is up to the people how they take it ahead. On this day let us also commit to be responsible tourist post pandemic and contribute for sustainable development.

(With direct inputs from UN publication and feedback may be sent to bkranjani@gmail.com)

"The same way that racism is a white person's problem, violence against women is a men's problem."

— Gloria Steinem

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.46 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2020

Domestic violence spiralling

THE news of a senior IPS officer of the rank of Special Director General of Police, Madhya Pradesh beating his wife and the act being recorded on CCTV and now going viral is appalling. But what is shocking is the man's response when queried by television channels about the brazen act of domestic violence by the very person who is a guardian of the law. The perpetrator of this incident without batting an eyelid said this misunderstanding between him and his wife has gone on since 2008 so it's nothing new. Further, he said that anything that happens within the four walls of a home is a private matter which should not come under public scrutiny. That the abuser reiterated time and again that a family dispute is not a crime shows he has no idea about the Domestic Violence Act, 2005 which women have been using to get protection from their violent partners. Worse is that the accused police officer unabashedly defended his actions saying that if his wife continues to live in his home, travel abroad at his expense and is enjoying his patronage then she has no business to complain.

The Domestic Violence Act, 2005 defines domestic violence as any act that harms or injures or endangers the health, safety, life, limb or well-being, whether mental or physical, of the aggrieved person or tends to do so and includes causing physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal and emotional abuse and economic abuse. It includes attempts to harass, harm, injure or endanger the aggrieved person with a view to coerce her or any other person related to her to meet any unlawful demand for any dowry or other property or valuable security. The Act also includes threats to an aggrieved person or any person related to her by any conduct that can injure or causes harm, whether physical or mental, to the aggrieved person. The Act also states that a woman does not have to wait over a long period of time before reporting domestic violence.

The Madhya Pradesh Home Department has in an order passed on Monday relieved the 1986 batch IPS officer of his charge at the Directorate of Public Prosecution with immediate effect.

The Covid pandemic has in any case led to a rise in cases of domestic violence due to stress and anxiety because of loss of income and isolation and because during the lockdown, for once, husband and wife are bumping into each other 24x7. All these are factors are triggers of violence in the home and exacerbate existing conditions for violence such as alcoholism. Violence of whatever form committed by a husband on his wife even within the confines of a bedroom constitutes domestic violence. That most women choose not to complain for fear of a future without a support system is what needs to be urgently addressed.

Meghalaya grassroots governing institutions

By Toki Blah

Meghalaya is currently caught up in a debate over the nature, profile and structure of its Dorbar Shnong. No doubt, the Dorbar Shnong (Village Council) system (within the context of this article, the term Dorbar is loosely used to cover all the three systems of grassroots governance prevailing in all the three District Councils of the state of Meghalaya) is an integral part of the culture and identity of both the Achik and Hynniewtrep people. We have been carrying on with the system since time immemorial; it's our way of life and many sincerely believe that it would be a sacrilege to tamper, amend or even improve upon the traditional roles, function and overall characteristics of this traditional system. As a matter of fact many senior and revered politicians; policy makers and youth NGOs included, become totally disoriented and agitated even on the simple issue of calling the Dorbar a Village Council. (Shnong is village & Dorbar is Council, so where is the problem God only knows). The traditionalists would have nothing to do with change! Well there is nothing like a crisis to jolt one up from an ill deserved conservative complacency and the Covid 19 crisis has managed to reveal, the warts and all the faultlines within the Dorbar system. Albert Thyrniang's article, "Critiquing the institution of the Dorbar Shnong," (ST Sep 16, 2020), has managed in no small way to illustrate the fallings and shortcomings of the Dorbar system within the context and administrative demands of the 21st century.

Thyrniang has rightly pointed out that our Dorbar system has been exempted from the provisions of the 73rd Amendment and the Panchayat System of grassroots governance. He further adds that "This 'recognition' of the state's grassroots governance structure does not necessarily mean that parliament has given a legal stamp on the institution of the Dorbar Shnong and the Nokmaship". He is correct and Justice SR Sen's 2014 ruling over the legality of the Dorbar system remains unanswered till today. Our grassroots governing institutions need to be endowed with Legislation. Meghalaya lacks a uniform, standardized and identical system of grassroots governance. Garo Nokmas act on their own. Jaintia Hills and Khasi Hills Rangbah Shnongs are as arbitrary as they wish to

be. Each district council however is so obsessively possessive of its stranglehold over its respective traditional grassroots bodies that the overall need to revive our traditional bodies; make them relevant to today's needs and for a unit form system of grassroots governance for the whole of Meghalaya has been deliberately ignored, blocked and thwarted by the very institution of the 6th Schedule created to safeguard and promote the interests of the Dorbar system.

There has to be a standardized and regulated system on the election of these grassroots bodies. This is not a call for infringement on tradition but simply an attempt to bring traditional practices at par with the demands and needs of a democratic society of the 21st century. First, we can't have a Rangbah Shnong holding office arbitrarily for as long as he wishes without elections. Second, we can't allow only persons from a certain clan to hold public office of the Shnong and neither can we prevent any longer the participation of women in the affairs of the Shnong. Such traditional practices might have had validity and public acceptance in the dim and distant past. Today they are at variance with the concepts of modern democratic practices and are constitutionally void. They continue to exist simply because no one has cared to challenge them before a court of law. And this is the point I wish to highlight. As a conscious and thinking society we simply cannot just depend on legal interventions to improve on every aspect of our day to day lives. We need to consciously legislate laws that are relevant to our social and economic well-being. We have elected representatives and it is their constitutional duty to interpret the legal and legislative requirements of society. Disbursing MLA funds is just an incidental part of administration. Sadly the very opposite is happening with our legislators.

What has the Covid pandemic revealed about our grassroots bodies? Aside from the critical aspects critiqued in Albert Thyrniang's article mentioned above, the current plague has also uncovered some very interesting but positive characteristics of the present day Dorbar. Mainly because of its non political profile, the Dorbar

still carries the respect and confidence of the community it serves. Because of its participatory nature it still has the trust and faith of its constituents. Believe me this is a huge social capital which other grassroots institutions in the country, the Panchayat included, are yet to attain or achieve. The way in which the Dorbars have been able to produce front line volunteers in the fight against Covid; the manner in which important announcements of the Government are disseminated; the Dorbar approach towards Covid quarantine; all of this with minimal facilitation from the Government is something to be appreciated rather than belittled. It is to be noted that Dorbars working in tandem with Government are a blessing for the people. Dorbars require simple tweaks and assistance to make them world class institutions of grassroots governance.

Lack of Accountability and Gender Sensitivity are however some of the main drawbacks of Dorbars especially those that lie beyond the pale of urbanised centres. Some believe and practice the principle that accountability lay simply in meetings of the Executive Committee. Office bearers feel they are answerable to no one but themselves. Some even believe that they are a sanctified body answerable to no one else but God the Creator (ka Dorbar Shnong, ka Dorbar Blei). The General Body is never called and major policy decisions are taken without its approval or knowledge. In a society governed by the rule of law and the Constitution, it is not uncommon for such believers to find themselves in unnecessary trouble with higher constitutional authorities. This sort of behaviour contradicts the very concept of simplicity and transparency, issues that are the mainstay of traditional governance. With some Dorbars the participation of women in Dorbar affairs continues to remain a thorny issue despite the fact that within that very Dorbar there might be women more highly educated and more articulate than its men folk. In such cases male ego triumphs at the cost of good and participatory governance.

Governance today, be it at the village level or the national level, depends more on the management of resources than any other factor. Traditional resources at the disposal of our grassroots

institutions were limited and few, limited perhaps to land only. Today the resources to be managed are numerous and most important of all are the financial resources that come our way. Since these involve public money, the need for proper financial accounting systems is a must to ensure transparent financial transactions at the Dorbar level. But proper financial management is one of the drawbacks of the Dorbar system. Most Dorbars do not even maintain proper books of accounts let alone proper auditing and assessment of income and expenditure. This must change if Dorbars are to remain relevant and meaningful to the grassroots governance systems of the 21st century. This will of course call for an in-depth review and relook at the manner in which we have managed and handled our Dorbar systems.

A realistic review, especially within the context of the Covid 19 pandemic, will reveal that the Dorbars have more to do with; have greater interaction with; and have more in common with the functions of the district administration than with any other entity. This is because both the State Govt and the Dorbars carry the same mandate – providing equitable service to the people. Viewed from this perspective the ADCs are an interloper with very little constitutional powers to serve the general interest of the people, aside from their singular mandate to preserve tradition and culture.

To therefore allow the District Councils to control the constitution, role and functions of the Dorbar is to perpetuate disservice to the people and the community at large. Unfortunately this is what is actually happening. Now under List II, Para 5 of the 7th Schedule of the Constitution read with Para 12 A of the 6th Schedule, the State Government can step in to bring in Legislation for a uniform standardized format for the role and function of grassroots institutions throughout the state of Meghalaya. It will streamline governance. It will uplift our grassroots institutions. It will bring in modernity to tradition. It will be the greatest service done to the people of the state. It is the felt need of 21st century Meghalaya.

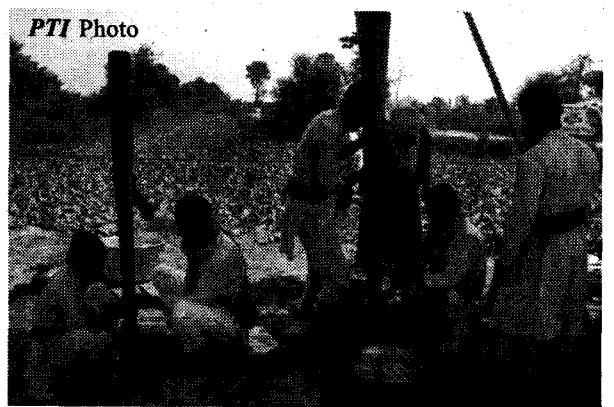
New laws won't protect farmers, consumers Peasants fear corporate control of trade

By Nantoo Banerjee

Bringing three important agriculture-related bills in Parliament at one go and getting them passed in less than a week's time without any serious debate or special scrutiny are most unusual, if not unprecedented. On the face of it, the bills seek to double farmers' income which the ruling BJP promised before the last Lok Sabha election. They also seek to conditionally contain retail prices of key agricultural products. Here lies the apprehension of both big and small farmers. Consumers are not convinced. Farmers fear a gradual extinction of the Mandis and the minimum support price (MSP) system. To prove the opposition perception wrong, the government took a highly

munerative prices, oversight of players, transactions and prices, and empowerment of state governments to regulate and place all markets on a level playing field. The Essential Commodities Amendment Bill 2020 appears to legitimise hoarding by big players. Few will disagree that the government does not have even the capability of knowing what stocks are existing with who, when and where. After the exercise turns into law, it will help attract private investment in post-harvest infrastructure. The government will have little role or authority to ensure the interests of poor consumers and farmers.

The government said that the bills would transform the agriculture sector. It would



unusual step by announcing increases in MSP of six Ravi crops — by two to six percent — months ahead of the schedule.

Farmers from Punjab and Haryana, who have been at the fore front of the anti-legislation agitation, will be big beneficiaries. Among the key Ravi crops are wheat, Bajra, lentils, mustard and gram. The immediate government action is seen as an attempt to allay doubts of farmers over the future of the MSP regime in the wake of at least two of the farm bills. The three farm bills are: the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill and Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill. The first two were passed by Lok Sabha on September 17. The Upper House of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) passed the contentious farm bills on September 20 amid uproar by Opposition members. The bills have triggered protests by farmers and opposition parties in several states.

Unfortunately, the bills seem to have little for marginal farmers with small holdings in states such as West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and Assam. They will continue to get exploited. The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill is rather harsh to consumers. The current structure of middleman operation is expected to be replaced by big monopolies. There is no reason to believe that the latter will be more considerate to consumers. They are expected to follow the market forces and demand-supply situation. The new set-up will not only see fragmented markets with different sets of rules but also fragmented regulatory structures that will create a more bumpy ride for farmers who want legally guaranteed remunerative prices. The new rule concerning farm products export may help multinational corporations get away from stock limit imposition. The government may not be able to even verify if the stock limit is fake or real. The price rise triggers to bring in stock limit regulation are too wide to be relevant for poor consumers.

It would have been better if the government sent the bills to parliamentary committees to scrutinise the details instead of hurriedly passing the bills. There is little justification for such a hasty legislative push at this point of time. Clearly, the bills do not provide farmers what they need and they are asking for — guaranteed re-

raise income of farmers. The government had earlier promised to double farmers' income by 2022. It said the Bills will make the farmer independent of government controlled markets and fetch them a better price for their produce. The Bills propose to create a system in which the farmers and traders can sell and purchase outside the Mandis. It also encourages intra-state trade. The government claims that this will reduce the cost of transportation.

Further the bills formulate a framework on the agreements that will enable farmers to engage with agribusiness companies, retailers, exporters for service and sale of produce while giving the farmers access to modern technology. The bills also will remove items such as cereals and pulses from the list of essential commodities and attract FDI. The legislation will allow the government to invoke the Essential Commodities Act only if retail prices rise 50 percent in case of non-perishables and 100 percent for perishable items from the average retail prices in the preceding 12 months or last five years. The most contentious part of the amendment of Essential Commodities Act is that the legislation will do away with the imposition of stockholding limits on a number of items except under 'extraordinary circumstances' such as war and natural calamities. Cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, onions and potatoes will no longer be regarded as 'essential commodities'. The removal of stockholding limits of such commodities is designed to attract corporate investment in the farm sector. Investors need not fear regulatory interference in their business operations. Private investors will control cold storage, warehouses and food supply chain.

It is too early to predict how the withdrawal of stock holding limits and the decisive play of private sector organisation in the supply and prices of the so-called 'essential commodities' under the existing legal definition will impact the prices of the commodities and their import-export trade. Big companies in the commodity trade will dictate terms on both farmers and consumers. This is truly a major concern. The Essential Commodities Amendment Bill fails to clearly address these concerns. Apart from the fact that the legislations will intrude into states jurisdiction in the sphere of agricultural production, procurement and pricing, they will promote corporate cartelisation of the trade. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

On good governance & Meghalaya

Editor,
Your Friday column on good governance (ST Sept 25, 2020), has provoked me to dwell on the term "good governance". Some years ago, "India Today" magazine in a national survey had put Meghalaya at the bottom of the list of small states in matters of good governance. The then Chief Minister DD Lapang was left wondering why Meghalaya which was then a peaceful state should get such poor rating. There was not much public debate on the issue. And the matter was soon brushed under the carpet. Now that you have tickled the issue of good governance again, I am tempted to expatiate what constitutes good governance. Let me enunciate 10 top criteria to judge good governance: 1. Rule of law. 2. Transparency. 3. Accountability. 4. Best use of resources (human, financial, technological, natural, environmental). 5. Responsiveness. 6. Consensus oriented. 7. Equity and inclusiveness. 8. Effectiveness and efficiency. 9. Participation and 10. Addressing interests of the stakeholders. Let's us now look at each

of the ten criteria vis-a-vis Meghalaya.

Rule of law is something that will embarrass our leaders, unless they are thick skinned and brazen. Since the birth of Meghalaya how murderers, looters and all kinds violators of law have not been brought to justice is a design and not an accident. It's an undeniable fact that criminal justice system, has completely collapsed. Nobody wants to go by the law, only expediency matters in this state. Transparency is fine as long as it relates to others. Government after government has been guilty of lacking transparency in their decision making process. There's so much of opacity that we have become used to it. That the present government haughtily declined to share an innocuous report of enquiry on a government hospital's refusal to admit a pregnant woman which led to the death of her child speaks volumes about the lack of transparency.

Accountability is what every arm of the Government is expected to demonstrate. But with the exception of the judiciary which manages to extract some response from the executive, the legislature has failed to pin down the government because the legislators' interests lie elsewhere! The

media is too docile and seldom raises incisive questions that could floor the government. But knowing the media today (as everywhere in India), it has become a lap dog and not a watch dog.

Best use of resources: How the meagre financial resources at the disposal of the government are being manipulated is visible to all. So many scams have surfaced since Meghalaya came into being. Now, after 50 years, scams have become an acceptable way of life here. How our environment is being devastated, how forest cover is being lost (until apex court put a ban), how coal extraction is a systemic failure abetted by politicians; how best human resources are being sacrificed in acute form of nepotism. The list is unending.

Responsiveness: Does our political class show any responsiveness? Do they have genuine concern for the citizens? Or do they only take care of their vote banks? Public grievances are simply ignored. You have to be a bully or muscle your way to be heard and for government to act.

Consensus oriented governance is unheard of in Meghalaya. It is my way or the highway. Look at how the Barik project has been playing out. Despite public outcry, the government of

the day is going ahead with a "balanced" approach between commerce and environment. Why couldn't the government hold a public debate or consult opinion makers and social leaders? Will anybody answer?

Equity and inclusiveness: This is an area of skating on thin ice. An honest question: Does the government treat every citizen equally? Are the policies of the government "inclusive"? Do all government programmes include all sections? We have to be brutally frank to give an honest answer to these posers.

Effectiveness and efficiency: Has the governance system been effective and efficient? It is for all to see the net result of several lakh crore of rupees spent on improving the living conditions of the people over the past five decades. Where has the money gone? If we take only the realm of education, health care and potable water, it will be seen that the state has achieved little. NEHU, NEIGRIHMS, IIM, IIHM, NIT etc are all central government projects. Barring the private institutions, no educational institution or hospital worth the name has been created by Meghalaya government. The state's track record in this regard is abysmal.

Participation: People's participation in building Meghalaya is next to nothing. Who cares for Meghalaya? It's everybody is for himself. People vote once in five years and then the chosen ones rule the roost.

Stakeholders' interests: This is served, only if they are on the right side of the dividing line. What are the interests of the common man? They want ease of living. Are people of Meghalaya, barring the privileged lot (creamy layer) allowed to have a stake in governance? The hoi polloi either have limited aspirations or seldom share their agonies. In any case, their basic interests remain unaddressed.

I leave it to the readers to pass their value judgment on Meghalaya's governance report card. I am not giving them more than 20 marks out of a possible 100!

Yours etc.,
DS Singh,
Via email

II
Editor,
Your byline article "Governance: When state is not a corporate entity" (ST Sept 25, 2020) provides plenty of food for thought. However, I am not interested in passing a judgment on the performance or the lack of it of

the present government headed by Conrad Sangma, a "generation next" leader of Meghalaya. Yes, he is well educated, articulate and suave. As the son of the redoubtable Purno Sangma it adds to the general expectations about him as the chief minister. Whether he will deliver or not, only time will tell.

To be fair to him, his tenure has been rocked first by protracted public agitations and later by COVID pandemic. Perhaps it is unfair to pass judgment on his government at this stage. I also realise that he has inherited a system that is hardly conducive to good governance. The constant political blackmailing by the MLAs and political parties to meet their insatiable demands for the goodies doesn't help Conrad Sangma. Moreover, he has the onerous task of establishing the NPP as a national party. All things put together, it is understandable that he is unable to give the best performance. I for one would like to give him one full term of five years for proving himself. Until then, let's keep our fingers crossed.

Yours etc.
Shemphang Diengdoh,
Via email

"There is certainly a longstanding idea within western culture that civilization is only a thin veneer. As soon as something happens, say a war or a natural disaster or an epidemic like we're going through right now, the worst comes out in each of us."

—Rutger Bregman

The Shillong Times

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China-Pak tie-up

INDIA is holding out with courage in Ladakh, and there's neither war nor peace in the snowy mountainous region for now. And, New Delhi has its eyes fixed on Pakistan too to detect any untoward activities. Two developments on Tuesday signify that tension will continue to build up along the borders on both sides, and the present military reinforcements there will continue.

China, having faced more resistance than expected along the LAC, has sought to provoke India with a new taunt that it will not recognize Ladakh as a Union Territory -- an independent status that it was bestowed with, a year ago, by New Delhi during the bifurcation of the Jammu and Kashmir province into three centrally administered entities. This Chinese stand must sound like music to the ears of Pakistani generals and the rest of the establishment there. But it is also a day when India sought to throw a spanner in the works in Pakistan's wheels in Gilgit-Baltistan, the restive province which India has a special claim on.

New Delhi's protest against Pakistan's move to hold an election in GB in November and declare the region as its fifth province is seen as a fresh reinforcement of the Indian stand that GB is part of India as per its accession in 1947, which was later occupied by Pakistan. The Modi government has repeatedly declared that India wanted this province back as it was part of the wider Kashmir. UN refers to GB as 'Pakistan administered Kashmir', while India sees it as 'Pakistan Occupied Kashmir'; its geographical contiguity with Ladakh being a significant factor.

Pakistan is emboldened to make GB its fifth province, against calls by Azad Kashmir leaders there, because it is no more restrained by former UN resolutions which had clubbed it with the Kashmir dispute. India's change of Jammu and Kashmir's status obviously emboldens Pakistan to bring GB under its direct administration. How this could play out in the UN is worth a watch, but Pakistan will have full support from China at the world body.

The result is that there is increasing convergence in the perceptions of Pakistan and China in matters related to Kashmir and Ladakh, and this is bound to raise the temperature in the geographical region further. India will be readying for a two-front war if China chooses to complicate matters further in Ladakh and beyond. Pakistan could be hoping to take full advantage of such a situation as, after the surgical strikes and Balakot, it remains on a weak wicket.

What has led to the recent havoc?

By Albert Thyrniang

Heavy and incessant rain that lashed Meghalaya for three/four days resulted in tragic loss of lives and extensive damage to property. We see live images of waters in rivers rising dangerously, floods in low lying areas climbing alarmingly, landslides in unsafe zones rolling down terrifyingly, wooden bridges being swept away agonisingly, roads being blocked excruciatingly and households being buried unbearably.

Among the first victims of the heavy downpour were the deaths of at least four people in Warsan Lyngdoh area in South West Khasi Hills district in which a jeep with six passengers was swept away by the strong current of Tihiang River on September 22. Reportedly the vehicle's occupants included class IX/X students who were on their way to Mawkyrwat, to re-attend classes. This unfortunate news was broken via a Whatsapp group. Being a person from the same district and as someone who had crossed the river on foot as a kid 35/40 years ago this writer asked for some details in the said media group. To my horror someone preached that it was the will of God that the four died.

Attributing God's hand for a disaster or misfortune is the both simplistic and problematic. It shuts everything down. It prevents enquiries. It even absolves any possible mistakes, culpable or non-culpable on humans. There is no question of blaming anyone, but what if the driver made an error in deciding to cross the raging river? Would that be against God's will? What if the driver decided to put off the trip to the district headquarters? Would that be against God's plan? What if the state government had ignored the area by not making roads and building bridges? Would the blame be on God or on the government that fails to provide the basic infrastructure for communication?

If we are quick to accept God's curse (as many do for COVID-19) we are also swift to declare God's blessings. What is wrong with acknowledging God's blessing? Well, if a 'blessing' comes through fair means it is fine. But when 'God's blessing' is used to justify ill-gotten wealth, landing a job through bribes, securing a business deal through unfair means then it is not right. A person once paid huge bribes to get a dream government job. He promptly threw a sumptuous dinner preceded by with a prayer service attended by well-known church leaders and elders. He considered it God's blessing. Out of gratitude for his generosity he threw a lavish party. It might have been possible that the beneficiaries of the alleged corruption in the three ADCs have no qualms in thanking God for the 'lakhs/crores' meant for the general

public.

It is best to guard ourselves from attributing God's hands to natural calamities. It is beneficial if we don't caricature God as the taker or giver where it is unnecessary. It could be to our merit if we look for answers from nature. The recent rain related disasters can be ascribed to the following causes:

Government's undue neglect

The sad loss of lives lays bare government's long neglect in far flung areas. The rain has cruelly exposed the backwardness in rural Meghalaya. Our own citizens have to live at the mercy of nature. A large part of the population of the state has seen little development.



File Photo

What development do you speak of when there are no roads and bridges? These neglected areas are the 443 km international border with Bangladesh to the South and the 885 Km interstate border with Assam to the North. Some of the 'less privileged' areas this writer has personally been to are Ranikor, Nonghyllam, Langrin, Lyngngam, Shallah, Chokpot, Baghmara, the plain belts, Dadenggre, Rabhagre, Langpih, Umsohait, Mawlasnai and some stretches along the Jaintia Hills-Karbi Anglong districts. All these 'sectors' might not have been in the news in the current fury of nature, but the video of a wooden bridge on the National Highway to Baghmara being carried away by strong currents, went viral. Why on earth should a national highway still have a wooden bridge? The answer- government apathy!

Unchecked deforestation
The most affected districts are West and South West Khasi Hills. The reason is large scale deforestation. The whole of the twin districts have almost turned bare. Once blessed with virgin forests these districts are now treeless. The indiscriminate and illegal felling of trees for timber and charcoal are the cause for the fast disappearance of forest cover. The thick forests along the Shallah-Nongstoin road of fifteen/ten years ago are but a flashback today. Hence the

flash floods and the mudslides! No wonder Nongstoin, Kynshi and Mairang are easily flooded in recent years. MLAs inspecting the damage and supervising relief works will become a regular affair if the trend is not arrested.

Poverty is forcing people to part with their only possession. Lack of alternative source of income has compelled villagers to look at trees for essential bucks. The government is quite helpless in enforcing the Forest Act. Enforceable laws may also be absent. Truck loads of timber and charcoal can be seen being transported within and outside the state. Obviously there are illegal timber factories that are operating clandestinely with the knowledge of the authorities. The beautiful furniture and the charcoal for fuel may come into our homes from the forests that are getting depleted. A point to ponder!

Unregulated urbanisation
The unregulated urbanisation of Shillong city is for all to see. The city has been expanding in an unplanned manner. Disasters are waiting to happen. The sad Dhoi Ghat incident in Laban on September 25 in which five members of a family were buried alive by debris of a landslide can be attributed to unmonitored urban expansion. Additionally, a 12-year-old girl in Madanring Wahthing too died in a landslide. If the underprivileged sections of the society have to build ramshackle wooden houses precariously over rivulets in the steep slopes below the Shillong peak then disasters are a natural consequence. Today it is avalanches; tomorrow it could be tremors or something else.

Unscientific earth cutting
Landslides have occurred along the Shillong bypass, the Shillong-Guwahati and the Shillong-Tura high way. It can be seen with naked eyes that in many places the earth cutting is done unscientifically. Hills are chopped perpendicularly. Man made precipices literally hang over our heads.

A person in the know in Tura once told this writer that the authorities have no choice in cutting the hills in this manner because land for

construction of roads has not been acquired by the government. So the PWD can't go beyond its limit of ownership. Many wonder why Shillong-Nongstoin-Rongjeng-Tura state highway is so winding. All along the picturesque 323 km drive the travellers' eyes fall on obvious and 'easy to straighten' spots. The simple answer is those spots do not belong to the government. In 2016, the digitally inaugurated two-lane roads by PM Modi had to be built without acquiring additional land. Acquiring sufficient land would have taken an unimaginable length of time and the centrally sponsored project would have never seen the light of day. The peculiar land-ownership system in Meghalaya makes land acquisition an extremely onerous task.

Consequences of development

The above highlights bring us to this next point. It is obvious that some of the disasters occurred as a result of 'developmental works'. We crave for fast track development but its execution could be environmentally undesirable and unsustainable. We are appalled to see heaps of mud irrevocably damaging paddy fields, hills being butchered, rivulets and streams being eternally lost all along highways that go under the knife of earth cutting machines. Perhaps we have to take them into our stride. It would be ideal to have it both ways - modern development and preserving the environment. But balancing the two is never an easy task. The conflict between the two can never be resolved. The battle between development driven governments and environmentalists is a reality all over the world.

The state government has to now contend with rebuilding the infrastructural damage caused by floods and landslides besides the continued fight against COVID-19. Restoring washed away roads and bridges and providing relief to the affected will take a toll on a cash strapped state. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma might have asserted that the government will do the restoration works but what is sure is that the rain gods have made the life of people more challenging.

It can be said that part of the calamity is nature's fury and part of it is man-made. The ferocity of nature is worsened by uncontrolled urbanisation and indiscriminate deforestation coupled with government's indifference towards providing basic amenities to its citizens. Preventable elements of natural tragedies must not be ignored lest the same is repeated.

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Farmers need price assurance too

By Ajit Ranade

One silver lining to the 24 percent fall in quarterly GDP between April and June, was that growth in the agriculture sector was positive at 3.4 percent. This is the first time in India's history that we are experiencing a steep recession without any adverse shock of drought or a failed monsoon affecting agriculture. Another notable positive development was the robust procurement of the spring harvest (rabi crop) especially of wheat. Not just the frontrunners like Punjab and Haryana, but also States like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh had a good rabi procurement by the Central government run Food Corporation of India. When FCI does procurement, usually through its designated agencies, based in various States, it means that the farmer gets the assured price called the Minimum Support Price (MSP). That was over 1900 rupees per

sated with measures like MSP. However, it is important to note that even if only 6 percent farmers get paid from the FCI procurement process, the price floor established by the MSP does indirectly benefit a much greater proportion of farmers. Forty years ago, possibly for the first time, there was mass mobilisation and an agitation of farmers led by a most unlikely and uncharismatic leader called Sharad Joshi. He was a mathematics graduate who came from a family with no background in farming. Yet he understood the farmers' plight, and his earliest slogan was "give us a fair price for our sweat and toil". This was the famous onion agitation of 1978-79 and then the tobacco farmers agitation in 1981. Getting a fair price, or some assurance is a basic need of the farmer. Suffering from the vagaries of nature, it is made worse due to the exploitative practices of mid-



quintal this time.

The MSP is determined as a political decision, based on inputs given by the Commission on Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP). This commission was set up nearly 60 years ago, and provides a logical and scientific basis to costs, and hence what is a reasonable price to be paid for the crops. Due to input cost escalation, for seeds, pesticides, diesel, credit, fertilisers etc, the MSP too needs to go up, so that the farmer receives an adequate return. Otherwise, it is a loss-making proposition. In the past 50 years, the average escalation in MSP has been about 6% per year for wheat and similarly for rice. But the actual procurement by government has gone up nearly 70 to 80 times during this period. This procurement by the FCI has three objectives: firstly, to give an adequate support price to the farmer; secondly to ensure food security to the nation by keeping this in buffer storage; and thirdly to provide this grain to the Public Distribution System (PDS) at the ration shops at very cheap prices, to make it available to the poor and needy. The difference in price paid to the farmer and received from the PDS is the food subsidy budget of the Central government which has crossed 2 lakh crore, i.e. 1 percent of GDP. The procurement process is humongous, with the total crossing 90 million tonnes, of wheat and paddy. Even though the MSP assurance covers 23 crops, including cereals, oilseeds, pulses and commercial crops like sugarcane and cotton, the de facto position is that the bulk of the spending is on just two crops i.e. wheat and paddy. Moreover despite being a national policy, the farmers who sell their crop to FCI come from only half a dozen States. And these constitute barely six percent of all farmers in the country.

The volume of procurement by FCI is huge, and constitutes nearly one third of all grain production in the country. That is a big intervention in the agriculture economy, and something that displeased even the World Trade Organization. But back in 1994, India convinced the negotiators who were forming the WTO, that on net basis the Indian farmer was not pampered but in fact had negative support from the government. The terms of trade in fact are tilted against the farmer vis-a-vis industry, and this has been sought to be compensated with measures like

dlemen who enjoy disproportionate bargaining clout. They can and do resort to deceit and trickery to exploit the small farmer. This is the reason for the genesis of the Agriculture Produce Marketing Committee (APMC), a system introduced nationwide in the early 1960's. The APMCs were supposed to be run democratically, with periodic elections, and a majority representation of farmers. The APMC was a formalisation of the mandi system, which has existed since centuries. But over the years even the APMC system was captured by vested interests, with a political nexus, and dynastic control. To this day there are barely 4000 APMC market yards, when the need is for maybe 40,000 market yards in the country. The license raj of the APMC system has a stranglehold on the farmer as well as the buyer, who were compelled to only go through this statutory middleman. It is this middleman whose power has been diminished by the new Farm Bill introduced in parliament, in a pandemonium. The farmer is now free to sell his produce within or without the APMC. If he has more choice, then that can only be a good thing. But for the full import of this reform to be felt, it will take some time. There is fear that a new class of middlemen representing corporate interests will emerge. But reform cannot be held hostage to imagined fears. However, what is needed is some price assurance scheme, which was administered using the FCI and MSP.

In a fully developed market economy, price assurance is available to the farmer through the futures markets. But this is considered as speculation and forward / futures markets need to be more liquid and price discovery more transparent. Till then some form of government intervention in MSP is needed. It is the fear that with the dilution of the APMC, even the MSP regime will go away, that is currently fueling the farmers' agitation. And this needs to be addressed not just by verbal assurances, but by some form of codified, written promise by lawmakers. With this important supplement, the farm bills represent a significant step in economic reforms in agriculture.

(Dr Ajit Ranade is an economist and Senior Fellow, Takshashila Institution)
(Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email editor@thebillionpress.org)

TO THE EDITOR

NEPA violates Covid protocols

Editor,
The North Eastern Police Academy (NEPA), a premiere institution of the country, situated in Umsaw, near Umiam lake, is under the Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India. This Institution should have joined hands in helping out distressed families during the pandemic. Alas! NEPA has not responding to the needs of those around it.

Right from the commencement of the lockdown in the first phase, the directives of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India, have not been complied with. The directive regarding 33% attendance was violated. Staff over 50 years of age and suffering from different ailments, were all made to attend to their

duties. They were not allowed to 'work from home' although the classes for the trainees are reportedly conducted online.

NEPA is located in Ri-bhoi district which is considered a green zone. Hence there is little chance for anyone within its campus to get infected. But in March, 2020 on the plea of workload for financial year ending, the staff from East Khasi Hills (orange zone), were compelled to attend office regularly even after commencement of the first phase of lockdown. And they continue to attend office despite regular courses not being conducted due to the lockdown. Govt. of India has imposed restrictions on spending. Yet the official vehicle of NEPA is sent to pick up and drop staff from different locations in East Khasi Hills. Some staff from the sur-

rounding areas are attending office regularly. This puts them at risk of exposure to COVID-19.

It is also a matter of concern that the second in command of this institute (since Director is not in the station presently) who is from the Border Security Force (BSF) has been visiting Guwahati along with his family members in the official vehicle of NEPA on several occasions during the lockdown just for shopping purposes. Because of the NEPA tag the police personnel on duty at Byrnihat check post (entry/exit point of Meghalaya) do not restrict the NEPA vehicle. Probably the mindset of NEPA officers is that they are exempted from coronavirus because of their location in a campus within green zone.

As per Govt. of India directives, all activities in training institutes are to dis-

continue during the lockdown. Educational institutions including colleges and universities have been holding online classes but in NEPA, trainees from different north eastern states assemble in the parade ground to give their regular attendance and listen to their instructors' advice as they do in normal times. These novice trainees are seen in uniform performing duties along with police officers of Meghalaya Police at different locations even around the Bethany hospital, Shillong in the month March & April, 2020 when the lockdown was in full swing. Immediately thereafter the cases of COVID-19 were detected in Bethany hospital of Shillong.

Even after repeated directions by Govt. of India, no building or premise has yet been earmarked as quar-

antine cell/center within the NEPA campus. The residents of the villages surrounding NEPA also avail medical services from NEPA hospital. In NEPA approximately 800-1000 people including ladies, children, senior citizens, trainees from different north eastern states, staff above 50 years of age are residing in the campus. In case any of them test Covid positive they will have to undergo quarantine in the residential premises.

Another instance of deliberate contempt of Govt. of India's directives by this institute is when official orders are issued by a concerned officer to celebrate the farewell of a staff who completed his deputation at NEPA. The function was held at the auditorium on May 19, 2020 where 100 plus staff had assembled inside the auditorium hall. It is not known if farewell functions are per-

mitted by Govt. of India.

The Govt. of Meghalaya has constituted over 7000 COVID-19 committees in both urban and rural areas to combat the coronavirus pandemic. It is imperative that such committees functioning in the villages around the NEPA campus communicate to this institution that they should not violate Govt. of India & Govt. of Meghalaya guidelines since there is none in NEPA who can take constructive decisions in compliance with such directions.

Yours etc.,
Prakash Gupta
Umroi, Ri-bhoi
Meghalaya

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