

"One can go to war alone, but you can't build peace alone."

—Jacques Chirac

The Shillong Times

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A lost opportunity

IT's a debatable point whether the Opposition INDIA bloc has managed to draw a new bout of energy from the Loktantra Bachao rally at Ramlila Grounds in the national capital on Sunday. The presence and absence of several top opposition figures at the rally were equally noted. What could have been a full-throated war cry against the Modi dispensation, against the backdrop of the 'emergency-like' situation prevailing in the state vis-a-vis a blatant muzzling of opposition voices, failed to make a major impact. The rally was participated on record by 28 opposition parties – a formidable figure-- but several top opposition figures were missing on the dais. The Congress fielded Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi and Mallikarjun Kharge even as the party stressed that the rally was not person-centric (meaning, Kejriwal), but had the wider goal of protecting democracy and the Constitution, both being "under threat." Opposition leaders like Uddhav Thackeray, Sharad Pawar, Akhilesh Yadav and Tejashwi Yadav were present but prominence went to Sunitha Kejriwal, wife of the arrested chief minister. Her reading of a letter from Arvind Kejriwal listing six promises to the nation, including free electricity to the poor, by itself might not help whip up the national mood also as the AAP has no reach in most states. Overall, the meeting failed to make an impact.

A question posed by Kejriwal, that "God has gifted everything to India. Yet, why are we lagging behind? Why are we illiterate," made eminent sense. But politics and elections are, in a way, senseless games. These require more punch to take matters forward. Having been accused in the Delhi Liquor Scam, Kejriwal lost a part of his halo that he had painstakingly built over the years. What might also raise eyebrows is the sudden projection of his wife as his alter ego, even as she stayed all along on the sidelines of politics and power. There is merit in the accusation that Kejriwal sought to perform a Lal Prasad in Delhi, a la the installation of Rabri Devi as CM in Bihar years ago when Lal was first jailed in the cattle feed scam. This, somehow, is typical of politics across states, evident also in the presence of several dynasties on the dais at Ramlila Maidan. It would appear that politics today cannot be divorced from dynasties, with a noticeable exception in the BJP ranks, but there too the "son rise" as in Karnataka in the form of Basavraj Bommai which was a notable exception. The Opposition push against the BJP this time might be handicapped by many constraints like this. This is time for the INDIA bloc to inspire confidence in the people. Any mis-step would only undercut their chances of a better performance at the hustings.

It is still a dream Mr Chief Minister

By HH Mohrmen

Data of NDPS cases in Meghalaya

As per data received from the office of the IGP, CID, Shillong, it shows that there is an increasing trend of drug activity in the state. Numbers of cases registered, persons arrested and drugs recovered is increasing day by day. Data of NDPS cases in Meghalaya from January 1, to October 13, 2022 recorded that the numbers of cases registered is 84, arrested accused male 169, arrested accused female 23, and numbers of accused arrested 192. Data of NDPS seizure in Meghalaya from January 1, to October 13, 2022 is, Heroin 4074.481 gms, Ganja or cannabis 3788.574 gms, Opium 644 gms, Yaba tablets 11364 numbers, others Psychotropic Substances 15,934 numbers, and Codeine based syrup 743 bottles.

Drugs Prevalent in Meghalaya

According to sources, drugs that are prevalent in Meghalaya as on 2019 as per data collected by the National Survey on Extent and Pattern of Substance Use in India stands as follows: Alcohol current use is 3.4% dependence 0.9%, Cannabis current 1.68% dependence 0.15%, Opioid current use 6.34% dependence 0.75%, Sedatives current use 0.95% dependence 0.09%, Cocaine current use 0.05% dependence 0.09%, Inhalants current use 0.08% dependence 0.01%, Amphetamine Type Stimulants (ATS) current use 0.05% dependence 0.00%, fortunately no use of Hallucinogens is found in the state. The other very startling statistic in Meghalaya is the opioid consumption rate. In the last survey done it was found that opioid consumption in the state stands at 6.34% while the national average is 2.06%. (The source of the data is from Data on the magnitude of substance Use in Meghalaya from the National Survey on Extent and Pattern of substance Use in India, 2019.)

This was the first ever survey and was conducted by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MoSJE) through the National Drug Dependence Treatment Centre (NDDTC) of the All India Institute of Medical Science (AIIMS), New Delhi. The survey was done across 36 states and Union Territories between December 2017 to October 2018. A household sample survey (HHS) was conducted among a representative sample of 19 to 57 year olds. A total of 2,00,111 households were visited across 5,808 Primary Sampling Units and 186 Districts with a total of 4,73,569 individuals interviewed with 4000 households in each state and 12,500 completed interviews of individual in each state. It may be noted that in Meghalaya the sample survey was collected from three districts East Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills and West Garo Hills Districts.

ent/broken families/living with relative or no parents, 46.6% of the users come from a family where there is fight in the family, which has history of physical/verbal abuse 45.3%, of drugs users stated stress, physical and psychological health, peer related factors as the reason for their indulging in the habit.

Smoking the genesis of it all

To begin with the state not only has a problem with drugs is that it even has a large number of people who use tobacco. Amongst the different tribes of the state smoking in public is an accepted norm, it is considered as normal activity for men. It reminds one of the incident when the writer was just starting his ministry at Puriang in the early part of nineties. On one cold winter day, while sitting around the fireplace with the elders of the church while they shared the traditional hookah made of bamboo from one person to the other and when, the traditional pipe reached the place where I was sitting it was passed without me even smoking it. Mrit Nongsupung the eldest of them all, then remarked, "Shish! ngi ne ngi Babu tse ngew kum ba ym ia shi para shynrang hi rae," which means that since, I didn't smoke it didn't feel like it is an all man's club. It is generally accepted that one has to smoke to be manly.

This is evident from the data about the alarming statistics which is that over 50% of tobacco users in Meghalaya started to smoke before the age of 17, compared to the national average of 23.6%. Not only that we also have a large number of people using tobacco, in the state. Children too start smoking at a very early age.

Smoking in public places including inside public transport is still prevalent and if one tries to talk sense to the smokers, the person will be sidelined and even mocked because it is still an accepted norm in the state. Despite efforts to build on existing initiatives like Tobacco Free Educational Institutions (ToFEI) a major campaign was organized but it is questionable as to how much impact this has made. School children are involved in the campaign and they had lost many precious school hours but have we seen the decline in the number of young people indulging in smoking or, smoking in public? As per

sources the top five districts in smoking are East Khasi Hills, East Jaintia Hills, West Garo hills, South Garo hills and Ri Bhoi District.

Government's intervention to support Adolescents and Youth

In order to address the problem and issues faced by children and adolescents of the state the government has envisioned a holistic approach to improving the well-being of young adults through the efforts initiated by Early Childhood Development (ECD). This program specially targeting adolescents initiated by the Government is called Meghalaya Program for Adolescent Well Being, Employment and Resilience (MPOWER). These programs are targeted at enhancing the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of the youths, instilling in them the values of resilience and risk aversion and to enable them to transition from school to work. Unfortunately till date the program has not reached the masses.

Government's intervention to Combating Drugs

To combat the drug menace in the state, four years ago the Government came up with the Meghalaya Drug Abuse Prevention Policy, but that was just a policy. Two years later the Government of Meghalaya June 3, 2023, launched the Drug Reduction Elimination, and Action Mission (DREAM) in order to implement the policy.

The youth are the future of the state and the Government needs to take a good care of them. The Government has introduced programs like YESS and has spent a lot in constructing sports infrastructure and organizing games etc. But is that enough? DREAM is built on the Meghalaya Drug Abuse Prevention Policy, 2020, but is this enough? Has the Government done anything other than coming up with a policy and a mission plan? Despite the gravity of the situation, nothing is seen on the ground as yet. The Government has not put its money where its mouth is.

There is a lot of money for organizing festivals and but unfortunately the government has not allocated funds for the implementation of DREAM. Why in the case of Meghalaya, organizing festivals take precedence over implementing important programs like the DREAM project which is envisioned to help combat drugs. The reason is because the Government thrives on the limelight, so programs or projects which do not give the government visibility or publicity it longs for are not being prioritized.

Why is Arvind Kejriwal in trouble?

By Salil Gewali

In the grand theater of politics, Arvind Kejriwal now finds himself caught in a web of his own making. Following multiple summons by the Enforcement Directorate, the recent arrest of the Delhi Chief Minister is not without reason. The fact that his key MLAs are also behind bars on various serious charges speaks volumes. His mentor, Anna Hazare, burst in anger last Friday, stating, "I am very upset that Arvind Kejriwal, who used to work with me and raise his voice against liquor, is now making liquor policies. His arrest is because of his own deeds..." Has the truth eventually opened up like a flower from its bud as nature's process? Have the laws of karma boomeranged? It is unfair to jump to conclusion and blame the Delhi CM at this juncture.

Needless to say, Arvind Kejriwal was once lauded as the paragon of integrity. However, his journey from a determined anti-corruption activist to an allegedly tarnished political figure emerges as a cautionary tale in the annals of Indian politics. In his early days of social activism, Kejriwal stood shoulder to shoulder with the masses, always speaking out against the corrupt establishment. Alongside Kiran Bedi, he came down heavily on Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, Sheila Dikshit, and Robert Vadra during the "India Against Corruption movement," first initiated by Anna Hazare. But contrastingly, the sudden U-turn of Arvind Kejriwal and his arch-rivals from Congress party has never failed to baffle the masses. Were his disillusioned party members perfectly "right" who later became disgusted with Kejriwal's posture and style of functioning?

Kejriwal's former associate, Dr. Munish Kumar Raizada, a senior neo-nationalist from Illinois, USA, once enchanted by Kejriwal's rhetoric and ambition, found himself fully ignored soon after the former became "more equal," occupying the chair of the Delhi Chief Minister. Dr. Munish was so upset that he was determined to bring to light the murky realities of camaraderie in AAP. He said it reminded him of George Orwell's "Animal Farm."

He finally came out with the documentary film, "Transparency: Pardarshita" to lay bare the alleged hypocrisy that lies beneath the veneer of selfless service, exposing Kejriwal's alleged involvement in various devious practices he once vowed to eradicate. A professor from Delhi University humorously noted, "We were all awe-struck when Arvind Kejriwal and his colleagues traveled in autorickshaws to the CM's office after his first victory. However, we were totally shocked when we heard about his alleged 45 crore spurge on refurbishing his official residence at Civil Lines in New Delhi.

How can we place our trust in leaders who seem to have a penchant for luxuriating in the hard-earned money of taxpayers?

No less shocking is that Dr. Kumar Vishwas, once the most trusted confidante, turned into an ardent critic of the Delhi CM. He vehemently accused Arvind Kejriwal of cozying up to Khalistani sympathizers and separatist leaders. Dr. Vishwas often suggested that Kejriwal has not only betrayed the party's founder members and supporters but is also capable of betraying the country in his pursuit of power.

To everyone's amazement, this Sunday, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a leader of the Khalistani separatists, issued a warning through his video, alleging that the Delhi Chief Minister collected about \$16.70 million for his party from Khalistani sympathizers. Hopefully, in time, the truth will be known.

Yes, when it comes to the much-touted liquor scam, Kejriwal's right-hand and former Deputy Chief Minister of Delhi, Manish Sisodia, is now in Tihar jail. The trouble for AAP seems to run much deeper than what is apparently visible. An elderly gentleman in Delhi laments that every wife with a drunkard husband and every mother with drunkard sons would be fuming with anger if they knew about the additional facilities provided to "drinkers" by the AAP government in the last two years. With a surge of high-class liquor outlets throughout the capital, it appears that the AAP government is all set to roll out the red carpet for a "drinking spree," thereby pulling social and family values apart. Shockingly, the Delhi administration has also moved to introduce a scheme for the "home delivery" of liquor to consumers, perhaps maintaining privacy, which is currently awaiting approval from the Lieutenant-Governor.

While countless families grapple with the devastating impact of alcohol abuse, the AAP administration seems more focused on ensuring a seamless supply of intoxicants, all in the name of revenue generation. Should we consider ourselves fortunate to have elected leaders who seem determined to push society into a pit of debauchery? Even a hardcore drunkard would be shocked witnessing his son/daughter indulging in alcohol. Do AAP leaders take pleasure in seeing their sons become addicted to alcohol and fall into ruin? Are we "lucky" to have elected leaders who are focused on pushing society into a "pit of debauchery"? Now, perhaps the AAP should consider changing its party symbol from a "broom" to a "Johnnie Walker bottle".

Letters to the Editor

Humanity above all else

Editor,
Each one of us are born into a faith and a belief that defines our path here on earth. I strongly believe that no religion will propagate hatred and animosity. After all, religion is the path to God. We may belong to any religion but what is more important is in the way we lead our lives here. What matters most is the love and respect that we need to have for one another. The question that comes to mind is do we have respect for one another anymore? Horrifying and gruesome news that we read of in the newspapers, social media seem to suggest that we humans lack love and reverence for each other.

If there is love and humanity will we even dare to subject one another to pain and hurt? Of what good is religion if we fail to practice righteousness, love and respect. The way to God is surely through the love and care that we have for each other irrespective of our origin, faith, sex and colour. I came across a quote by H H Younus Alghar that says "Humanity is the biggest religion." That made me reflect on the true meaning

of religion. God thrives in hearts that are pious, pure and compassionate. Compassion is fellow feeling and humanity. A heart and mind that is pious and pure has no place for envy, hatred, anger for another fellow human being. It is in such a heart that God resides. That is religion! Can we rise above worldly treasures, cynicism and practice humanity? Surely we can!

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

Always blame unknown 'miscreants'

Editor,
Apropos of the news item dated March 27, 2024 captioned "Two killed in Ichamati after anti -CAA protests," I would like to question the concerned authority as to how the killing of innocent persons can serve in attaining the objectives of the anti CAA protesters. This is not at all a maiden act. Similar incidents have continued since the past five decades. In Ichamati, a similar incident took place in the last part of 2019 that continued till lockdown due to Covid19. This type of

killing is a regular feature in Meghalaya and unfortunately these are always termed as acts of unknown miscreants. How long will the authorities keep their eyes blindfolded and blame such murders on miscreants?

Your etc.,
Krishnendu Deb,
Via email

Brookside: A tribute to Tagore

Editor,
While conveying my gratitude to the Department of Arts & Culture, Government of Meghalaya, and the concerned ministers for laying the foundation stone for 'Tagore Cultural Complex' in the Brookside Complex. ('Minister lays foundation stone for Tagore cultural complex', ST. 7th March 2024), I would term it as a long-cherished dream come true!

It was in 1961, during the year-long centenary celebration of Tagore, at Brookside complex, that (L) Mrs. Helimon Khongphai, Retd. Headmistress Govt. Girls' High School Shillong, a great Tagore fan who had personally met Tagore at Shantini-

ketan, first proposed that there should be a Rabindra Memorial in Shillong. She said, "If every capital town of India has a Rabindra Bhavan, why should Shillong, the capital of Assam be deprived of the same? It is a must."

The proposal was widely acclaimed and accepted by the audience. Unfortunately, despite all sincerity the plan remained unfulfilled but Tagore enthusiasts pursued the issue relentlessly while celebrating Rabindra Jayanti at Brookside complex, every year.

It would not have come into existence.

After necessary renovation and cleaning on January 21st 1992, the 20th anniversary of the statehood of Meghalaya was celebrated at 'Brookside' complex. On that auspicious occasion, a 'Rabindra Art Gallery' in memory of Tagore, was inaugurated by the then Madhukar Dighe, the then Governor of Meghalaya. That was also achieved by the sincere effort of the Department of Arts & Culture Govt. of Meghalaya 1992.

At that public gathering of Meghalaya Day 1992, at Brookside complex, the elite of the city, including RT Rymbai Retd. IAS, Helimon Khongphai a veteran educationist, Prof. B Dutta Ray, Kalpana Gupta, journalist and several others were present. In his speech, Rymbai proposed that a full size statue of Rabindranath Tagore be placed at the entrance of the Brookside complex to commemorate the great Nobel Laureate Tagore's stay here. Khongphai repeated her previous proposal of "Rabindra Bhawan" which she had proposed 30 years ago. Governor, Madhukar Dighe, heartily welcomed the proposals and assured to fulfil them at the earliest.

In 2010, in the Assembly

session, a proposal for immediate renovation of 'Brookside' and placing a full body statue of Tagore there, was proposed by Padmashree Manas Chaudhuri, then MLA Meghalaya. This proposal was accepted by the Meghalaya Assembly. Accordingly, a full-sized statue of Tagore was placed and unveiled at the Brookside complex, on May 9, 2011, on Tagore's 150th birth anniversary, courtesy, the Government of Meghalaya.

The Departments of Arts and Culture, Government of Meghalaya and the Director I.C.C.R Regional Office Shillong took maximum care and supervision to protect the serenity of the Brookside complex, once graced by Rabindranath Tagore. The dilapidated condition of the century old construction of the bungalow was renovated by the Arts and Culture Department, without hurting its original construction.

Indeed the Department of Arts & Culture, Government of Meghalaya deserves all credit for its contributions towards safeguarding and maintaining the Brookside Complex, to mark it as a Rabindra Memorial. This will attract thousands of Indian and foreign tourists in the near future.

Yours etc.,
Uma Purkayastha
Shillong - 4

On reckless driving by motor-cyclists

Regarding the above stated subject published by your daily on March 27, 2024 which a concerned citizen had written; I would like to applaud the writer for bringing to light this extremely important matter. It is pertinent for your readers to note that I am a two wheeler rider myself since 1998 and ever since I had witnessed an enormous change in the driving etiquette in our city by almost all sections of drivers of four wheelers and two wheelers.

Only a thin percentage could be considered as sane and ethical drivers. Those driving the Syndicate or City buses, a few of the red buses, the private buses and a fraction of the private and the commercial LMV may be considered road worthy drivers; while others are best if given the open fields or the kutcha roads to drive on, for there is no sense of ethics in their driving style.

It is surprising to see how the authorities turn a blind

eye to gross traffic violations on the road by doing the following:-

When two wheelers detach their registration number plates and ply without one yet move freely in town; and even if the plates are fitted they are done in such a way that they are not legible which leads to suspicion.

That they overtake from the left side of other vehicles which are ahead of them while traffic is still flowing. Such actions take the driver of the preceding vehicle by surprise and frequently lead to accidents. On certain occasions the errant riders even blame the preceding driver instead of themselves for the incidents where certain cases of bullying are also witnessed.

Hence while endorsing the views of the letter writer on the mentioned subject, I urge the authorities to take steps to discourage such reckless drivers and to firmly tame such individuals by any mean possible.

Yours etc.,
B. Yngrope,
Shillong - 6

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"Every act of creation is first an act of destruction."

— Pablo Picasso

The Shillong Times

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Whither Human Rights

THE Meghalaya State Human Rights Commission was created to address issues of human rights violations in this state and the inability of ordinary citizens to access the rights guaranteed under the Indian Constitution. But like every other institution this one too goes down the way of disuse. People continue to die in the illegally operated coal mines of the state particularly in Jaintia Hills but the State Human Rights Commission is oblivious of all these evils carrying on under the very nose of the government and law keepers. The recent deaths at Ichamati have now turned into a slanging match between the group that feels victimised and the several custodians of the rights of tribal communities. Meanwhile the "suspected" killers remain at large and going by our past sordid history in law enforcement it is highly unlikely that the killers will ever be nabbed. This will be yet another forgotten bloody saga. Those who know the killers will not bled and those killers lay in wait for the next victim. This is part of Meghalaya's dark history which is not recorded in its 50-year historic annals as it would not sit well with readers worldwide. In fact, every document about Meghalaya in these last 50 years are euphoric plaudits for successive governments and nothing about the myriad acts of corruption that have marred the progress of the state.

Institutions such as the Human Rights Commission or the Lok Adalat are created for the public to access justice and rights but they soon become a secretariat with employees paid by the state and little accountability. They only have annual celebrations to tell the world they exist and then it's back to business as usual with no accountability whatsoever. The State Human Rights Commission is expected to take suo-moto action when the state is complacent in its duties; more so when there are targeted killings and the state is absent from duty or takes the deaths as mere statistics.

Institutions tend to suffer from a status quoist syndrome where files are perused and signatures appended as a rigmarole with no thought or feelings invested in the whole process. When humanity is absent from those presiding over institutions that are created to safeguard the rights of all citizens and not just the privileged few, then the entire functioning of such institutions is futile. Institutional leadership is the key to making the institution and its human resource responsive to peoples' needs because it exists primarily to serve people and to address their lack of access to rights, especially the right to life which appears to be taken lightly in this State.

The Poison of 'Othering' in the Soil of Meghalaya

By Mawphniang Napoleon

The powerful testimony (SPECIAL ARTICLE - Irrational passions; the politics of othering & unwarranted killings (ST March 29, 2024) by Patricia Mukhim has struck a deep chord within me, reverberating through the fabric of my being as a concerned resident of our beloved Meghalaya. Her uncompromising words lay bare the raw wounds inflicted by the insidious force of 'othering' - a malignant ideology that has taken root and spread like an aggressive cancer through the veins of our society.

As Mukhim recounts with searing honesty, the senseless killings at Ichamati and the systemic failure of justice to prevail serve as tragic reminders of how far we have strayed from the path of compassion and human decency. The very notion of 'othering' - the act of dehumanizing and ascribing negative traits to those deemed 'outsiders' - is an affront to the fundamental tenets of our shared humanity. When we allow this 'us versus them' mentality to take hold, we not only diminish the inherent worth of our fellow beings but also chip away at the very foundations upon which a just and harmonious society must stand.

The annals of human history are replete with harrowing examples of the devastation wrought by such divisive ideologies. From the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust, where millions of Jews and other minorities were systematically dehumanized and exterminated by the Nazi regime, to the genocide in Rwanda, where the Hutu majority turned on their Tutsi countrymen with unimaginable brutality, the blood-stained pages of our past bear witness to the tragic consequences of allowing the cancer of 'othering' to fester unchecked.

Closer home, the ethnic conflicts that have plagued states like Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur for decades serve as grim reminders of the toll exacted when we succumb to the seductive whispers of those who seek to sow the seeds of discord. The displacement of thousands, the loss of innocent lives, and the shattering of countless dreams - these are the bitter fruits borne by the tree of division and mistrust.

Yet, even in the face of such stark historical lessons, we in Meghalaya seem to have fallen prey to the poisonous rhetoric peddled by opportunistic politicians and vested interests. The narra-

tive of 'protecting the tribals against the wily non-tribal' has become a well-worn tactic, exploited to garner votes and consolidate power. But at what cost do we perpetuate this dangerous myth?

The very premise of 'othering' the non-tribal residents of our state - individuals and families who have called Meghalaya home for generations, contributing their sweat, toil, and talents to the development and progress of our shared homeland - is a grievous injustice. To label them as 'outsiders' or 'threats' is not only a willful denial of their deep-rooted ties to this land but also a betrayal of the rich tapestry of diversity that has always been the hallmark of our region. We need only turn the pages of history to find shining examples of how the embrace of diversity has enriched and strengthened societies across the globe. The United States, a nation forged by immigrants from every corner of the world, stands as a testament to the power of unity in diversity. The incredible accomplishments and contributions of individuals from myriad backgrounds have propelled that nation to the forefront of innovation, progress, and global influence.

Closer home, the vibrant cultures and traditions of the North-Eastern states themselves are a living embodiment of the beauty that arises when we celebrate our differences rather than fear them. The intricate weave of diverse ethnic groups, each with their unique customs, languages, and ways of life, has created a tapestry of unparalleled richness and vibrancy. It is this very diversity that has made our region a jewel in the crown of India's cultural heritage.

Yet, tragically, we seem to have lost sight of this fundamental truth, allowing the poison of 'othering' to seep into our collective consciousness. The dehumanizing language used to describe our non-tribal brethren, such as the degrading term 'poi-ei' mentioned by Mukhim, is a stark reminder of how far we have strayed from the path of compassion and inclusivity.

It is a bitter irony that even the teachings of Christianity, which espouse the virtues of treating others as we would have them treat us, seem to have had little impact on our collective behaviors. How can we reconcile the tenets of this faith with the very act of 'othering' and dehumanizing our fellow human beings?

Is this not a betrayal of the fundamental principles of love, empathy, and respect for the inherent dignity of all people?

The time has come for us to engage in some deep soul-searching and confront the ugly realities that have taken root within our communities. We must ask ourselves: What kind of society do we aspire to build? Do we wish to create a haven of harmony, where diversity is celebrated and every individual is afforded the opportunity to contribute to the betterment of our state? Or do we resign ourselves to a future of division, mistrust, and stagnation, where the politics of 'othering' hold sway, and the dreams of our children are shackled by the weight of prejudice and narrow-mindedness?

Breaking free from the divisions of our past will not be easy, but it's a journey we must undertake. It requires sustained effort, confronting harsh truths, and challenging deep-seated biases head-on. We have to engage in difficult conversations, listening openly to the stories and perspectives of those who have endured being treated as "others."

The writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie said it well: "The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." For too long, the narrative around our non-tribal brothers and sisters has reduced them to a single, incomplete story - painting them as outsiders, threats to our way of life. We must reject this narrow view and seek to understand the nuances, complexities, and rich tapestry of experiences that make up our diverse communities.

Through open and honest dialogue, we can begin dismantling the walls of ignorance and mistrust dividing us. We need spaces where people from all backgrounds can share their stories and engage respectfully. It's in these spaces that true understanding can take root and empathy and compassion can be sown.

But words alone won't cut it. We must demand accountability from leaders and institutions upholding the law. The repeated failure to bring perpetrators of senseless violence to justice is a stain on our conscience. We must raise our voices together, demanding justice for victims and protection

for all citizens, regardless of ethnicity or religion.

Education shapes the hearts and minds of future generations, so it's our sacred duty to instill values of empathy, critical thinking, and appreciation for diversity in our children. Exposing them to different cultures' stories, histories and perspectives can nurture an inclusive mindset rejecting harmful "othering" narratives.

Literature, art and cultural expression are powerful tools for fostering understanding and empathy. Imagine a young mind immersed in Toni Morrison's novels illuminating the harsh realities of racism and oppression faced by African Americans. Or the impact of engaging with vibrant indigenous art and storytelling traditions persisting despite centuries of marginalization. These broaden our horizons but also appreciation for the resilience, strength and humanity of the "othered."

Our efforts must extend beyond borders, as the struggle against "othering" is a global imperative demanding collective action. We need only look at the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar, conflicts fueled by ethnic and religious tensions, or systemic racism persisting in developed nations. We have a moral obligation to stand in solidarity with those facing injustice, lending our voices to the call for equality and human dignity worldwide.

We must draw inspiration from those dedicating their lives to justice and human rights - Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela. Their legacies remind us that through non-violence, compassion and unwavering commitment, we can ultimately triumph over division and hatred. Their teachings show the path to an inclusive society requires confronting our own biases, challenging perpetuating systems, and steadfast belief in the dignity of all humans.

Emboldened by the many individuals and groups globally promoting inclusivity, celebrating diversity and dismantling dividing barriers, we are not alone. By forging alliances and collaborative efforts, we amplify our collective impact towards positive change.

It's through this sustained, collective commitment that we can heal wounds inflicted by "othering" and lay foundations for a society embracing the rich tapestry of our shared humanity.

(The writer is an Advocate and Trade Unionist)

Lok Sabha elections 2024: An objective assessment

By VK Lyngdoh

How the general election to the 18th Lok Sabha from 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency pans out on April 19, 2024 given the parties position as on November 25, 2023. Let us examine region wise how each party will fare in the contest for the Shillong Parliamentary Constituency to the 18th Lok Sabha.

Jaintia Region

The contest in 1. Nartiang Assembly Constituency will be between the INC and NPP. In 2. Jowai AC it will be between the NPP and UDP. In 3. Raliang AC NPP will get through easily. In 4. Mokaikoi AC will be a triangular contest between the NPP, INC and UDP. In 5. Sutnga-Saipung AC the contest will be triangular between NPP, INC and UDP. In 6. Kliehriat AC the contest will be between UDP and NPP and in 7. Amlarem AC the contest will be between the NPP and UDP. It may be noted that overall, in the Jaintia region the NPP has 41% of the vote share as of 2023, followed by UDP 30% and INC 16%. The AITC has a vote share of 5%, BJP 4%, Independent 2.7% and VPP 0.3%.

Ri Bhoi Region

The contest in 8. Mawhati AC will be a triangular one between the INC, NPP and UDP. In 9. Nongpoh AC too the contest is going to be a triangular one between the UDP, INC and NPP. In 10. Jirang AC the contest will be between the NPP and INC. In 11. Umsning AC the contest will be triangular between the INC, UDP and NPP. In 12. Umroi AC the NPP will have no contest. Overall in the Ri Bhoi region the NPP has a vote share of 31%, INC 26%, UDP 21, AITC 11%, BJP, HSPDP and VPP 3% each, and Independent 0.5%.

East Khasi Hills Urban region

In 14. Pynthorumkhrah AC the contest will be triangular between the NPP, INC and VPP but given the support of the BJP the NPP will come through. In 15. Mawlai AC the contest will be between the VPP and NPP. 16. East Shillong AC the contest will be between the NPP and INC but given the support of the BJP the NPP will come through. 17. North Shillong AC the contest is going to be triangular between the VPP, NPP and UDP. 18. West Shillong AC the contest will be between the UDP and NPP and in 21. Nongthymmai AC the contest will be triangular - between the UDP, VPP and NPP and with the support of the BJP and AITC, NPP will sail through comfortably. Overall in East Khasi Hills urban region the VPP has a vote share of 27.5%, BJP 23%, NPP 16%, UDP 14%, INC 12%, AITC 6% and Independent 1.87% according to the last available data of 2023.

East Khasi Hills rural region

In 13. Mawrenkneng AC the contest is going to be triangular between the VPP, UDP and NPP. Similarly, the contest in 20. Mylliem AC is going to be triangular between the INC, VPP and NPP. In 22. Nongkrem Assembly Constituency the contest will be triangular between the VPP, UDP and NPP. In 23. Sohiong AC the contest is going to be between the UDP and NPP. In 24. Mawphlang AC the contest is going to be between the UDP, INC, VPP and NPP. In 25. Mawsynram AC the contest is going to be between NPP and UDP and given the support of BJP, the NPP is in an advantageous position. In 26. Shella AC the contest is going to be between the UDP and the NPP. In 27. Pynursla AC the contest will be triangular between the NPP, INC and UDP according to the 2023 data. In 28. Sohra AC the contest is going to be between NPP and UDP. In 29. Mawkyrwat AC the contest is between the NPP and UDP. Over all in East Khasi Hills

rural region the NPP has a vote share of 37.83%, UDP 28.57%, VPP 13.34%, INC 7.77%, BJP 5.14%, AITC 2.58%, HSPDP 2.48% and Independent 1.76%.

West Khasi Hills Region
In 32. Nongstoin AC the contest is going to be triangular between the INC, NPP and UDP. In 33. Rambrai-Jyngam AC the contest is going to be between the RDA, NPP and INC and in 34. Mawshynrut AC the contest will be between the RDA and NPP. Over all in the West Khasi Hills region the NPP has a vote share of 29.60%, HSPDP 26.91%, INC 18%, Independent 8.88%, UDP 6.8%, AITC 4.67%, VPP 3.4% and BJP 1.11%.

South West Khasi Hills Region

In 35. Ranikor AC the NPP is yet to open an account in this Constituency but with the support of the BJP it will contest with the UDP. In 36. Mawkyrwat AC the contest is going to be between the RDA and NPP given the fact that the MDC from Mawkyrwat has shifted to NPP though RDA is in an advantageous position. Over all in South West Khasi Hills region the UDP has a vote share of 40.64%, BJP 16.45%, INC 14.80%, HSPDP 9.09%, AITC 7.07%, Independent 5.19%, NPP 4.79% and VPP 1.48%.

Eastern West Khasi Hills Region

In 30. Mairang AC the contest is going to be between the UDP and NPP given the fact that the MDC from Mairang has shifted to the NPP. In 31. Mawthadraishan AC the contest is going to be between the RDA and NPP and the former is in an advantageous position. Overall, in the Eastern West Khasi Hills region as things stand the UDP has a vote share of 42.53%, INC 23.92%, HSPDP 21.67%, NPP 9.56%, VPP 1.18% and BJP 0.46%.

In political discourse, the concept of vote bank refers to a loyal bloc of voters from a single community. These voters consistently back a particular candidate or political formation during democratic elections. The term "vote bank" often arises due to an expectation of benefits whether real or imagined from the political formations, sometimes at the expense of other communities. Some of the key points about vote banks: A vote bank is a group of voters aligned based on factors such as caste, sect, religion, or language. Political parties recognise these groups and tailor their strategies to appeal to them. The existence of a vote bank can be both persistent and subject to change. Some vote banks remain steadfast over time, consistently supporting a particular party. However, shifts can occur due to changing demographics, political developments, or shifts in party policies.

While vote banks play a role in electoral politics, they are generally considered undesirable. Relying solely on vote banks can hinder the principles of representative democracy. It encourages voting based on self-interest rather than informed judgement. In India historically some of the first identified vote banks were along caste lines. Other vote banks have formed based on religion, language, or other community characteristics. Some argue that vote banks based on caste or religion hinder secularization efforts. While vote banks persist, they are not static. Political dynamics, social changes and evolving priorities can influence their composition and impact over time. However, informed judgement, taking into account the national perspective and current dynamics of politics in India is imperative while casting our vote for a political party from the prestigious 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency to the 18th Lok Sabha.

Letters to the Editor

Evil of othering

Editor,
I am writing to appreciate the article, "Irrational Passions; the Politics of othering & unwarranted killings" by Patricia Mukhim (ST Mar 29, 2024), as well as the letters protesting the horrifying Ichamati killings of two "non-tribal" persons. To think that in the twenty-first century we still have such crude and violent othering of local minorities is sobering. But all acts of violence always boomerang back to the violator. I have witnessed the subtle ways in which America's violence in Iraq boomeranged back through a downward spiral that continues to this day. Unless protested and confronted vigorously, such violence will come back to haunt and hurt the Khasi community more than any other. Love of the particular, when it is at the cost of the universal, is nothing but narcissism. Love of the tribe should prepare the tribe member for the greater love of the universal, whether India or the world. Besides, the term "non-tribal" is impolite and anonymising -- as if the rest of us can be lumped together under one label, with no individuality whatsoever. The above article reminded me of Dr Martin Luther King Jr.'s application of the words of the great Jewish

philosopher Martin Buber. In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King says that racial segregation substitutes the "I-thou" relationship for the "I-it" relationship -- by objectifying the other. I mourn this needless loss of two lives.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar
Via email

Unjust Treatment of Local Artists: A Call for Reforms

Editor,
The Jaintia Hills Winter Festival organised by Creonative Media Event Management company supported by Meghalaya Tourism on December 28-29, 2023 held promise as a showcase of local talent set against the stunning backdrop of Meghalaya's natural splendour. However, what happened behind the scenes has left a bad taste in the mouths of many local artists. Despite putting their hearts and souls into their performances, many musicians go unpaid, whereas an international act was promptly compensated. Such discrimination strikes at the heart of our artistic community and requires quick action. Shillong, known as the Rock Capital, has a thriving

music culture that has produced innumerable musicians through the years. However, the dilemma of these artists seeking proper recompense highlights a wider systemic issue. It is intolerable that local artists, who make significant contributions to our cultural scene, are placed in financial limbo while others receive preferential treatment.

This is about more than just delayed payments; it is also about respect, acknowledgement, and our artists' livelihoods. Many people rely on music as a source of income, passion, and survival. Denying them due recompense is to erode the fundamental foundation of our cultural identity.

I urge the event organizers, Meghalaya Tourism, and our Chief Minister to address this injustice promptly. Local artists deserve nothing less than fair recompense for their efforts and passion. Further, we ask the Government to establish laws that ensure artists receive timely remuneration at all festivals and events. It is critical that we foster an environment in which our artists may thrive, certain that their contributions are acknowledged and respected.

In conclusion, let us stand in solidarity with our local artists and demand the reforms required to protect their rights. Only then can we really commemorate Shillong's past as the Rock

Capital while also ensuring a bright future for our cultural community.

Yours etc.,
A concerned performer,
Name withheld on request
Via email

Empathy, compassion, love intrinsic to education

Editor,
I am writing to share some important insights inspired by the character Ram Shankar Nikumbh in the wonderful movie Taare Zameen Par. These insights offer valuable lessons for our education system and society.

In this heartwarming film, Nikumbh, portrayed by Aamir Khan, exemplifies kindness, patience, and understanding. His caring approach towards Ishaan, a child with dyslexia who struggles in school, underscores the need to recognize and support the unique talents and needs of each student.

Nikumbh's ability to look beyond grades and see the individuality and potential of his students reminds us that education is about more than just test scores. It compels us to create an inclusive environment where every child feels valued, understood, and

encouraged to explore their strengths and interests.

His dedication to Ishaan's well-being highlights the importance of patience and perseverance in education. Nikumbh's belief that every child can succeed with the right support emphasizes the transformative power of guidance and encouragement.

Furthermore, Nikumbh's collaboration with Ishaan's parents underlines the crucial role of parental involvement in a child's education. When educators and parents work together, they foster a nurturing environment that supports a child's growth and development.

In a society that often prioritizes academic achievements, Nikumbh's example prompts us to reconsider our approach to education. It inspires us to prioritize empathy, holistic development, and individual growth over standardized measures of success.

Let us draw inspiration from the compassionate character of Nikumbh in Taare Zameen Par to transform our educational landscape. By embracing empathy, patience, and collaboration, we can create an inclusive environment where every child's unique talents are recognized and nurtured.

Yours etc,
Pankaj Kumar,
Shillong

Need for strict environmental norms in hilly areas

Editor,
Ladakh's climate activist, Sonam Wangchuk asked the Centre to safeguard the fragile ecosystem of Himalayan mountains in Ladakh. Fragile ecosystems in both Ladakh and Uttarakhand demand careful environmental impact assessment before undertaking excavation for building a tunnel or a high-rise. The Silkyra tunnel in Uttarakhand's Uttarkashi had collapsed trapping 41 workers for 17 days in November last year. The project has again restarted. Recently, an operator, Govind Kumar, was killed when a machine on which he was sitting fell into a 25-foot-deep trench near the mouth of the Silkyra tunnel. Was there proper evaluation of safety and environmental issues before resuming the project?

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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"A scapegoat remains effective as long as we believe in its guilt."

— Rene Girard

The Shillong Times

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Demographic dividend

THE World Bank has observed that India, as also the entire geographic region with its high population growth, is squandering the demographic dividend. Well said. With a population bulge of 1.40 billion, India might soon edge past China and become the world's most populous nation. A major difference between India and China is that China uses its manpower to the maximum, even by coercion, while India encourages laziness. A nation grows by using its people's productive energies. China has shown it and is today the world's second largest economy, next to the US. India is in the fifth slot, next also to Japan and Germany.

Japan is a hard-working nation. Like a phoenix, it emerged from the World War II nuclear bombings, took lessons from Germany and worked hard, excelled in technology and built a huge economy. Germany benefited hugely from the Industrial Revolution that started in Europe in the 18th century. India was at the receiving end of the Industrial Revolution as cotton and other natural resources from this country were shipped to Europe to feed their factories there. The post-Independence era from 1947 did some good to India under the visionary leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel. The succeeding generations of politicians that ran this nation showed a penchant to play to the gallery and demonstrated a lack of long-term vision. The poor remain poor despite the Garibi Hatao slogan raised by Indira Gandhi in the early 1970s to win a parliament election. The food security law brought into force some 40 years later by the UPA-II government was, on the face of it, a good idea. But, with hugely subsidised or free rations becoming a right of the citizens, the large army of India's poor have lost their urge to work. A lazy nation gave a booster dose to laziness.

With the corruption graph rising in recent decades, setting up industries has become a more expensive proposition. Those who attempt it will have to grease the palms of politicians and bureaucrats. The hurdles are many. The dawn of the age of Liberalization in the early 1990s promised an end to the Licence Raj, a largely corrupt practice, but it reappeared in new forms. Even to start a modest holiday home to rent out space to tourists, as many as 20 clearances have to be obtained from the 'authorities'. Industrialization has been largely hit and the nation is relying on manufactured goods from China. This is worsening the joblessness scenario. As the tracking agencies noted, the employment ratio for the South Asia region now is at 59 per cent against 70 elsewhere. Female employment ratio is at its lowest in India, below 40 per cent, and the youth unemployment ratio is currently over 45 per cent.

Letters to the Editor

Evils of the caste prejudice

Editor,
When Dalit and OBC students demand caste reservation in proportion to their respective population in a private university, some people have criticised it by raising the flags of merit and Indian brotherhood. Every Indian state has its quota of Lok Sabha constituencies, for example 29 Lok Sabha seats have been earmarked for Madhya Pradesh on the basis of its population. This is absolutely necessary for the existence of a federal structure. Similarly, reservation for SC, ST and OBC in proportion to their respective population is needed to ensure social justice.

Without reservation in the parliamentary seats on the basis of the population of a state, the regional balance of power would greatly be damaged. In that case, many states of India may not have representation in Parliament because nepotism and regional favouritism in the guise of meritocracy would throw a challenge to proportional representation.

Then Parliament would look like the Indian cricket team where players only from a few states get a chance to represent the whole country. Though there is a regional quota for selectors to minimise regional favouritism but more often than not, selectors face charges even from those who are against caste reservation that a player of his state has become a victim of nepotism.

Just like the state quota for Lok Sabha constituencies is a must to safeguard the interests of all Indian states, the caste reservation is also a necessity for democratic distribution of power among all communities and castes in India. Caste is a reality in India. One in four Indians (27 per cent respondents across India) said that the practice of untouchability had been followed in her or his daily life (the 2011-12 India Human Development Survey - IHDS-2).

According to studies conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research in 2016, only about 5% of marriages in India are inter-caste marriages. Caste identity cannot be changed with the change

The recent killing of Ishan Singh and Sujit Dutta (Phurruin Dutta) in Ichamati, Shella, has once again brought to light the fault lines that exist between the indigenous and non-indigenous communities in the state. The animosity predates the CAA, but the passing of the legislation and the formulation of the rules have only exacerbated the divide. Ichamati has, especially, been a volatile location, having seen the outbreak of violence in 2020 during the CAA agitation when 35-year-old Lurshai Hynniewta, a member of the Khasi Students' Union, was killed in clashes with some members of the non-indigenous community. The violence reached Shillong as well, where one Rupchan Dewan was stabbed at Iewduh, leading to his death. After that, the government imposed a curfew and clamped down on internet services to prevent any rumor mongering that might inflame the situation further. Fortunately, this time around, the violence has not spread beyond Ichamati, which is understandable since the people killed belonged to the non-indigenous community, who are minorities in the state. Among the political parties, as of the writing of this article, only the VPP and BJP have condemned the killings and demanded action, while others have kept mum. The Chief Minister has especially been quiet, which has been the biggest disappointment. For me, the killings in Ichamati have been quite a traumatic moment since I had visited the area a few years ago and met and stayed with the local non-indigenous community, who were very gracious hosts. And it is the experience of that visit that I am going to share to help others understand the people who have been caught in the crosshairs of this violence.

I remember going to Shella for the first time in 2012. In 2020, a few months after the violence in which Lurshai Hynniewta was killed, I was visiting it again as part of a social audit team to assess the functioning of a couple of schools in Ichamati regarding the implementation of a government scheme meant for the SC community. Nothing much had changed since 2012. The road from Ichamati to the village where the school was located was almost non-existent. It was bad enough in winter, and I shuddered to imagine what the condition would be during the monsoon months as the area lays directly on the path of the south-west monsoon winds, which bring rainfall to the entire North East. Then there's the excess runoff from the Sohra plateau, which drains to Shella, turning it into a massive wetland. People would, in

fact, use boats to travel as the roads are submerged during this period. Has the situation improved since 2020? I don't know as I have not been to the area since. But I doubt any substantial change has taken place. We reached the village late in the afternoon, where we were greeted by the school officials. A preliminary inspection of the school infrastructure was conducted, which, on casual viewing, was already revealing the inadequacy of the facilities. The school had no water or play ground for the school-children. In the next couple of days, there were focus group discussions with each individual class, followed by personal interviews with randomly selected students. I interviewed a dozen boys and a couple of girls. After the interviews were done, I took a walk around the village with another member of the social audit team.

I was curious to understand how the conflict in Ichamati started and its aftermath. We met a person who was quite comfortable talking about it. This person was a resident of the village and was present at the school when we first arrived. According to him, it was the passing of Donkumar Roy that changed the dynamics in the area. Acutely aware of the need to maintain peace in a multi-ethnic Shella, the (L) Donkumar Roy never allowed any meeting that had the potential to disrupt that harmony. After his demise, that arrangement no longer existed, and the local pressure groups were able to convene an anti-CAA and pro-IJP meeting in Ichamati. Trouble erupted after one of those meetings, which spiraled into an ethnic conflict whose configuration was not as simple as presumed. There were a lot of different groups involved in the incident (indigenous and non-indigenous), but according to our respondent, only a couple of non-indigenous groups were targeted by the administration. One has to always take any testimony with a grain of salt, especially when personal interests are embedded. But having lived through the heady 90s, when ethnic animosity was pervasive, I knew there was an element of truth in his story.

The next day, we went to see the Indo-Bangla border, which was less than 30 minutes away from the village. There we met an upper caste person who was one of the few people who owned land in the village. Most of the people in the village were landless, renting land from the Khasi community on which they grew paddy (three varieties) and some vegetables. The biggest

Interestingly, some persons who are against caste reservation, support state quota for parliamentary seats, gender reservation, reservation of seats for senior citizens in buses and trains! They protest when a reserved part of a street (footpaths) is occupied, forcing vulnerable pedestrians to walk on the street. This underlines that there are misgivings about capabilities of backward castes. When Aryans came to India, they saw for the first time in their lives excellent urban planning and civilisation. Our Dalit brothers and sisters carry more DNA in their body of those town planners and engineers than their higher caste counterparts. Dalits have systematically been exploited for centuries and forced to forget who they really are.

As a matter of fact, more and more people are realising the necessity of reservation policy in our country. It has been decided that 33 percent seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies would be reserved for women after the next census.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Who are the people of Ichamati?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

market was Ichamati, which, after the incident, had also undergone some changes. Many of the shops belonging to the non-indigenous community were closed down and had not reopened until the time of our visit. In response, the village organized its own market where people from surrounding villages would come with their produce. Some people from the village were engaged in export business to Bangladesh. However, the COVID-19 pandemic had brought about a disruption in it as well. The last couple of years had been particularly difficult for the people of the village. Even in normal conditions, schemes rarely reached the village, with more than 2/3 of the residents not having any voting rights despite having the paperwork, which proved that they were long-time residents of the area. Having been marginalized for a very long time, the ethnic conflict and COVID-19 only served to marginalize them further. In all of this, the presence of the school was one of the only few bright spots.

The last day of the visit consisted of a focus group discussion with the parents. Most of the parents were from the village itself. Some had come from a neighboring village, which during the monsoon season could only be accessed by boat. The findings were shared with the community, which knew that the situation was not perfect but also understood that it was an improvement from their own days. One of the parents became very emotional during the hearing. She recounted how she herself got no opportunity for education when she was young but wanted her children not to suffer the same fate. Neglected by those in power and belonging to lower strata within their own community (SC are the former untouchables of Hindu society), the plight of many of the parents was a particularly heartbreaking one.

The curious thing about the social audit exercise was that this particular social audit was being done for a scheme that had yet to be implemented, revealing the apathetic attitude of those in positions of power. One of the recommendations the social audit team made was to immediately release the funds so that the scheme could become operational. Those who had come from other villages also hoped that similar schemes would be available to them in the near future. Were the recommendations implemented, and were the other villages given the benefit of the scheme? I don't know. My assignment ended after the exercise, and I have not kept in touch

with those working on the scheme. But I hope they have the scheme and that the other villages have received the same benefits as well. A very common concern of the students and the parents was also the lack of higher education institutions. After matriculation, students had two choices: either go to Sohra or Shillong for higher classes or stop their studies. For the lower-income families of the village, this was a particularly difficult choice. There was one particular case that encapsulated the problems of education faced by the people in the village. During the personal interview, my colleague encountered a bright student who is the topper in her class. Her family is among the poorest in the village, and they live in a house that has no electricity. Like many others in the village, they are landless. She wanted to study further but knew it would be impossible unless the current school gets higher secondary classes. Education could be the only way for her to escape the clutches of poverty and, in the process, uplift the condition of her family as well. What has happened to her? Will she be able to achieve her dreams? Or will she be forced to get married, have children, and spend her life regretting what could have been? This is not just her story but that of many of the young people in the village.

Border areas in Meghalaya have always faced the brunt of apathy and neglect. At the same time, in the past, these areas were in the zone of transition between different cultures and must have been particularly vibrant, a zone of not just cultural exchange but also of trade. Partition has now made these areas a forgotten zone, remembered only during times of crisis. The non-indigenous population of this particular area faced additional challenges because they are the 'other'. Can we, as a community (i.e., the Khasi community), who are a minority in this vast subcontinent, justify perpetuating the same treatment that we accuse others of doing to us? And without overcoming the majoritarian prejudice that permeates this subcontinent, can we ever hope of building an egalitarian society for ourselves? I don't think so.

For many of us who are not from Ichamati, we will have many opinions about what has happened. But in all of that, the human stories of the people who stay in the area should not be forgotten. In the end, that's the only thing that will keep us human, and I hope we don't forget that.

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

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Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Ghost Wearing A Helmet!

The skeleton standing in the middle of the road, at the dead of night, got me startled. "A ghost wearing a helmet!" I whispered in fear, stopping my car and walking towards the eerie bony figure dancing up and down in front of me. "I never thought ghosts needed helmets!"

"If I had only worn one when I was alive, I wouldn't be a ghost now," wept the strange figure. "If I had worn a helmet, I wouldn't be seeing my two children starving and my wife struggling to make ends meet. If I had only worn a helmet then!"

"You are wearing one now," I said.

"Now, when it is too late," said the ghost, putting his hand on his fibreglass helmet and trying to tug it off, "Now it's stuck to me forever!"

"What happened?" I asked.

"I was a small business man, who was just beginning to do well," wept the ghost, "I used to trudge all over town marketing my stuff."

"A successful ghost story!" I said happily.

"My business did well," continued the ghost, ignoring my comment, "and I was able to shift into a bigger flat, and my children were put into good schools... and then I bought a motorbike!"

"A rags to riches story!" I said.

"A riches to dust story!" cried the ghost. "It was the pride of my life, my most valued possession."

"And what about the helmet?" I asked, looking at the contraption on his head.

"Ah the helmet," said the ghost again trying to pull it off, "It was given to me by my wife, she said she loved my

streets are not. Like an avalanche, bikes have come to stay, but rules have not. A few years ago, I stopped by a traffic policeman and asked him why he was not penalizing those who were not wearing helmets, "They are poor people sir!" he replied.

And that is the attitude of those in authority. Not for a moment do they think that that same poor person once dead leaves behind a starving family, and because of the attitude of policemen and the stupidity of the bike rider one death causes a family to die.

Each of us has a responsibility to see that lives are saved. I had a rule I made for both my daughters. I knew that I could never prevent them from going pillion on someone's bike, so I told them, "See to it that you wear a helmet when you sit behind!" "But dad, guys don't carry an extra helmet!" They both cried.

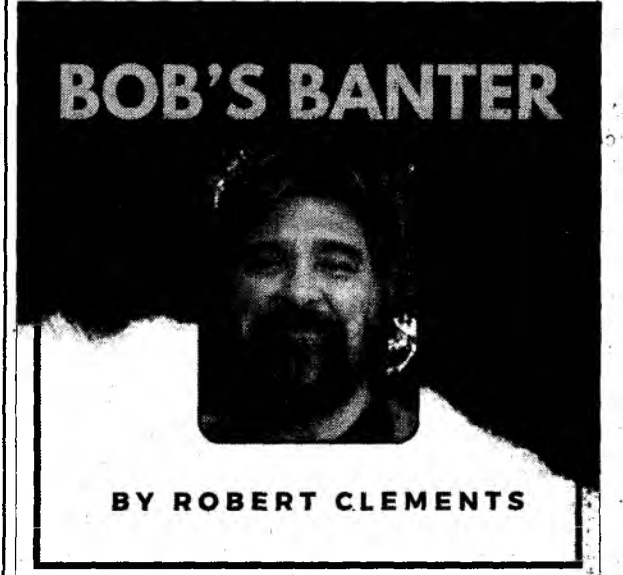
"The guy who values your life will!" I said, and left it at that.

I once remember I was hopping mad to hear my eldest had gone on a long jaunt with a guy from her college on his bike. I called her and even now so many years later I can hear her shaky voice telling me, "But I'm wearing a helmet dad!"

And now there's something else that's crept in, and that is an absolute disregard for rules. Bike riders overtake from any side, and if that car or lorry swerves, there's no place for bike and rider and even the unfortunate pillion to be under the wheels of a truck. And that's instantaneous death.

Why do they do it? Well, I can think of nothing else but impatience.

We seem to be a country



head and wanted it intact!" "A wise woman," I said. "Who I laughed at," said the ghost bitterly. "I never once wore the helmet!" "Blockhead," I shouted. "Yes," said the ghost,

of impatient people. We do the most dangerous things, because we cannot wait a few seconds. I would suggest that the police make it compulsory for every rider to paste a pic of his family somewhere on

"There are thousands of us, who have lost our lives because of our stupidity," cried the ghost, "But worse there are hundreds and thousands of pillion riders, wives and children who sit at the back without one. Tell them to save their heads and wear a helmet. And not just wear one to fool the cops, but to buckle it up. It's no use wearing a helmet after you're dead, it can't even protect you from your guilt!"

"Though it was more mince-meat when I had the accident. There was nothing left of it!"

"And how come you are wearing the helmet now?" I asked.

"She threw it into the funeral pyre," said the ghost weeping. "And now I have to wear it forever, as a reminder of my foolishness."

"What a sad story," I said.

"There are thousands of us, who have lost our lives because of our stupidity," cried the ghost, "But worse there are hundreds and thousands of pillion riders, wives and children who sit at the back without one. Tell them to save their heads and wear a helmet. And not just wear one to fool the cops, but to buckle it up. It's no use wearing a helmet after you're dead, it can't even protect you from your guilt!"

I watched the ghost fading away, a helmet on his broken skull!

The story might be an imaginary one, but the deaths on the highways, and even

the bike's handlebar where he or she can see it all the time. "I'm going to take a risk by overtaking from the left," he says to himself, then sees the pic of his little child or loving wife and stops himself. Isn't it better that he comes home a few minutes late than never coming home at all?

There are thousands of ghosts like the one you've just read about, some waving helmets they should have worn and others copies of traffic rules they should have followed. Look carefully when you take the road next and you will hear them whispering and waving to you like those pitiable monsters in Netflix's 'Walking Dead' pleading with you to ride your two-wheeler with care for yourself and concern for your family.

Hush! Can you hear their weeping?

The Author conducts an Online Writers and Speakers Course. For more details send a thumbs-up to him on WhatsApp 9892572883 or bobsbanter@gmail.com

"Setting goals is the first step in turning the invisible into the visible."

— Tony Robbins

The Shillong Times

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Lok Sabha election sans noise

WHY does the Lok Sabha election lack the hype and hoopla of an Assembly election? An analysis by this newspaper finds that the common person in Meghalaya hardly knows what the role and responsibilities of a Member of Parliament (MP) is. Political parties and candidates also take advantage of this ignorance to reduce the political speeches to bragging rights about what their party candidate would do once he/she is elected. Even the issues raised at election platforms are intended to deceive and to promise the electorate even what is unrealistic. Why should political parties spend so much time castigating one another instead of laying out the priorities of their party in the next parliament. In fact, the scenario building exercise should have started now. And the scenario is that if the BJP wins the next elections by a majority, the Constitution would undergo certain amendments/additions, that are intended to bring uniformity – whether that be in religion, language, culture, worldview et al. In such a situation what will an MP supporting the NDA-led government do under the circumstances? What if the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) is implemented right after the first session of the next parliament? What will be the stance of the MPs belonging to the NPP? What about those MPs belonging to the other parties should they win this Lok Sabha election? The Congress MPs have the INDIA backing. What if the UDP/VPP/Independent MP candidate wins? Who will they align with to amplify their voices? Alone they have little chance of being heard? In any case when certain controversial policies are framed that are likely to jeopardise the future of minority rights, who will stand with them to ensure that such policies don't see the light of day?

These are questions that the electorate should be raising before the MP candidates instead of listening to long-winded speeches where candidates engage in mud-slinging, personal attacks and rhetoric. Elections are about the ideology and the manifesto of the political party/parties and such manifesto should be studied and analysed to see if they meet the needs of the people in these small states. A majoritarian ideology that seeks to bring uniformity of laws and to even dilute the protective mechanisms granted to scheduled tribes in this region has to be contested. That contest cannot come from a party that is already aligned with the ruling party. Does the electorate of Meghalaya understand these nuances of politics? Or are they ready to vote for a candidate on the basis of their grandstanding? A political party that seeks to upend everything that the drafting committee of the Constitution worked so hard at including – which is respect for the diversity that India represents, cannot hope to hold the polity together in what can best be described as a bouquet of aspirations. For this to happen, the electorate must vote with their brains, not with their emotions.

Easter celebrations in the backdrop of elections

By Albert Thyriang

Easter was celebrated on the last day of the financial year. Hymns of 'We rejoice because Jesus has risen from the dead. He has overcome death, Satan, his temptations and sin. We too will rise again with Christ,' echoed in every church. But what does 'Christ has risen,' mean? What bearing does the defeat of Christ over sin and death have on his followers? When we say, 'We too will rise again with Christ' does it mean we will rise again only after our deaths? We start with events leading to Calvary.

Money kills
Judas Iscariot sold Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Today's value is about Rs 25,000. The betrayer led Jewish authorities to Christ in Gethsemane. Realizing his foolishness the 'finance in charge' attempted to return the 'blood money' to the chief priests and later hanged himself. The love for money caused Judas's own demise and contributed to Christ's death.

Christians in India celebrated Easter against the backdrop of the upcoming general elections. The present government boasts of massive development in the last ten years, of having met the aspiration of young Indians and of having modernised the country. The merits of the claims are debatable. The 'Acche Din' has not arrived. Modi's nine-year reign is dubbed 'disasters' by critics. Sceptics say there is hardly any smart city, no ideal village, no district where every house has a toilet, no district where new hospitals are running well, no sector where one lakh jobs were provided and so on. Regardless, it is undeniable that more development happened. The point is, the obsession for economic progress has also caused certain 'deaths.'

Many a citizen feels that democracy is in real danger. Another term for Narendra Modi, with the same or a greater majority could end the India we know and love. The Constitution could be changed. Secularism could be deleted. India could become a Hindu state. Hence there are other ideals more important than economic prosperity. Riches are meaningless if democratic rights are absent and pluralism is denied. It is commendable that some Christian leaders are openly speaking up against bringing back the Hindutva forces to power.

The BJP possesses unmatched resources. It is possible that MLAs from other parties in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Goa, Manipur and other

states were paid crores to join the Party. The democratic process was subverted by money power. The misuse of the ED and other law enforcing agencies made opponents run to the ruling dispensation. Should we still support a party that pays scant respect for the will of the people under the pretext of economic welfare?

The electoral bond is the biggest scam in independent India. The cash of the BJP alone is almost equal to that of the combined opposition. With the scheme being declared unconstitutional quid pro quo links will be established. This enormous wealth could have been used to 'kill' rivals and gain undue advantage. However, this humongous asset could lead to electoral 'death' of the ruling party.

In our state we talk of political parties and candidates purchasing voters during elections. This easy money has killed our conscience. Our 'inherent value' a 'riew tip briew tip Blei' race (a God fearing race) and 'kamai da ka hok' (earn through honest means) is suppressed. The 'Christian teaching' of honesty is forgotten. The 'Christian' state feels no guilt over sin. Judas still has lots of fans, among them are the 'closer' disciples who readily grab the 'election money'.

Rules flouted
After his arrest Jesus faced six trials – three religious and three civil. First, he was taken to the former high priest called Annas, then to the current high priest Caiaphas and then to Sanhedrin, the Jewish court. The charge was blasphemy. The decision was death. The trials had serious illegalities. The religious leaders flouted the rules they themselves enacted. Among other practices, no one was to be judged during the festive days, no accused was to be tried at night and each member of the court had to vote individually to convict or acquit someone. Jesus was tried before and after midnight. The trial took place during the feast of the Passover at lightning speed and Jesus was convicted by public acclaims. Throughout the trials Jesus was given no legal representation though the rules said otherwise.

Since the Jews had no authority to execute Jesus, he was taken to Pilate. The charge was changed from blasphemy to treason. The Roman governor in Judea found Jesus not guilty. Pilate sent Jesus to Herod – the tetrarch (ruler of a minor principality) of Galilee since Jesus

was from there. Found innocent Jesus was re-despatched to Pilate. For the second time Pilate found that Jesus committed no crime. But since the crowd was enraged they persistently shouted, 'crucify him'. To Pilate a riot was imminent. To satisfy the mob Pilate ordered Jesus to be flogged. Roman flogging was to extract flesh from the body. However, the crowd wanted nothing less than death by crucifixion. Pilate made a last attempt to save Jesus. He proposed a hard-core criminal, Barabbas to be crucified in place of Jesus. Astonishingly the blood thirsty mob, filled with hatred for Jesus, preferred to free Barabbas. Pilate washed his hands off the matter and handed Jesus over to the Jewish authorities.

Flouting of rules by law-makers and custodians of the law happens even today. Everyday we see convoys bypassing traffic. Eager policeman wave their flags signaling that everyone else should literally make way for their bosses. At times these escorts shout at drivers and passers-by for being 'slow' at clearing the path. Politicians inside SUVs must be enjoying the privileged status. VVIPs often stop traffic for hours. Even ambulances with patients are not allowed to proceed to hospitals. Deaths have occurred in ambulances due to VVIP movements.

Pilate signed Jesus' death sentence purely on popular demand. The trial was a mockery. Though innocent, Jesus was condemned to die. Passion and hatred decided the outcome. To save himself Pilate blamed the crowd. Even today we come across court judgments being influenced by charged-up public opinion. Worse, passion rules the roost. The unwarranted killings in IChamat the day before Good Friday is due to irrational hatred for others. Cases of lynching on suspicion of being witches (menshohoh) are regular here. Ugly scenes of mob lynching suspected criminals are also quite common. Homicides are committed based on passions. Individuals are not even given the chance to defend themselves. Shockingly, a large section of the public seems to be okay with such cold-blooded murders. Apart from the BJP no party has condemned the IChamat killings.

Political decisions are also made under popular pressure. In December 2019 the whole Legislative Assembly succumbed to an emotional public call and adopted the

resolution to implement ILP in the state. Till date the issue hangs fire. The previous year, the resolution for inclusion of Khasi and Garo languages in the 8th schedule was also passed without doing the ground work for one of the two. The fear of displeasing a community led to the thoughtless action. Where is the logic that both the languages must get recognition at the same time? And then an MP is rumoured to have objected because only one language is ahead!

Back to the very first paragraph! Resurrection is not only in the next world. Easter is for the living. It is meaningful only if we make efforts to defeat the 'deaths' of the here and now. According to statistics Christians drink the most (28%). All others are behind. Studies also show that tribals drink more than non-tribals. Alcohol consumption cause chronic diseases like high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, liver, kidney disorder and different types of cancers. A WHO report says Alcohol kills 2.6 lakh Indians every year. World-wide there are about 2.0 million premature deaths and 117.2 million become disabled annually due to alcohol use.

The second war is against tobacco. Smoking leads to cancer, heart diseases, cardiovascular diseases, stroke, lung diseases, diabetes, tuberculosis and other illnesses. Nearly 1.35 million deaths occur every year in India due to tobacco use. Annually, Easter celebrants sing, pray and chant 'Christ has risen, Christ has defeated death and sin, we are also risen and we are a new people.' But we continue to drink, smoke and use tobacco. Thousands fall sick. Thousands go to Vellore and other hospitals for treatment. Many of them smoke and consume tobacco. Crores are spent. Liquor and tobacco have snatched away innumerable lives and impoverished countless households.

Destruction of the environment is another 'death'. Images of air, water and soil pollution, the indiscriminate deforestation and earth cutting are daily images before us but who cares? The evils of plastic use needs emphasis. The principle of reduce, reuse, recycle has to be practised. Plastics takes anywhere between five years to 600 years to decompose. An 'exhibition' of the above three 'deaths' was created in the church compound. The video of the model was shared with local WhatsApp groups.

We have to rise up from these 'deaths'. Easter is alive and relevant.

Shillong Lok Sabha seat: What an MP election is not!

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

The Member of Parliament (MP) election is not like the MLA or MDC election. In electing an MP the stakes are higher and this is more so in the case of Lok Sabha where life-changing laws are made. For example, take the Aadhaar card. Earlier people resisted but now everyone needs to have one as all schemes are routed through it. Else people always thought that Meghalaya was exempted from Aadhaar. It is to be factored that when it comes to the Lok Sabha grand picture, Meghalaya with its two seats is basically at the receiving end with little or no bargaining power. Now, if one were to closely follow the election campaigning methods for the Shillong seat, one can be excused for mistaking it as an MLA election. The arguments which are based on national perspective are missing. This is what an MP election is not. Below are some cases in points.

An MP election is not about whether a mei-nah or pa-nah should vote or not for NPP, it is not about whether the candidate who hardly wears the jainsem locally would wear it frequently at Lok Sabha; it is not about church elders distributing alcohol to voters; it is not about mother's or father's surname and it is also not about standing alone in the Lok Sabha. An MP election is about addressing legislations and amendments that would change traditional practices and norms. For example, consider The Constitution (125th Amendment) Bill, 2019. This amendment provides for the presence of village and municipal councils. The village council is meant for a village or a group of villages in the rural areas and municipal council for the urban areas. The administration of these councils will be under the respective ADC's in terms of their composition, powers, functions and election processes. In addition, the village and municipal councils can also play a role in planning for development, deal with land reforms and land use, etc if the Governor of the state wishes to devolve such functions to them. Now, these are far-reaching amendments which would dilute the dorbar shmong oriented local administration which currently exists. Now, everyone will have the right to contest for locality posts across genders and with compulsory elections. However, none of the political parties and candidates has made their stand clear on this issue. It is time for them to spell out what their approach will be in terms of bargaining with the new central government to preserve Meghalaya's local traditions and norms.

An MP election is not about who has the best or worst of songs, it is not about someone being angelic or demonic, it is also not about a possible demise of any political party because of instances from past history like the PDM and PDF, neither is it about going to church service or otherwise. An MP election is about figuring out the sea change undergoing in India in the last five years through 'deliberate systems.' For example, take Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), National Register of Citizens (NRC) and Uniform Civil Code (UCC). This writer coins them as 'deliberate systems' as they are aimed at deliberately reforming the nation as we know it by the year 2047. The BJP talks of Amrit Kaal (Era of Elixir) as a vision to be achieved by 2047. Embedded deep within the idea of Amrit Kaal is the seed of Hindutva. If everything goes according to plan, the Bharat of 2047 will be nothing like the India of today. CAA, NRC and UCC are nothing but strategies for the achievement of the long-cherished vision of BJP. CAA is now in place. NRC will then be the basis for the deporta-

tion of illegal immigrants. This would ensure a proper assimilation of the Hindu population which would then make the implementation of UCC seamless. UCC would require a religious basis for administration and it goes without saying which religion that would be. Currently, zero content has come from the parties and candidates on this matter. The voters need to hear unequivocally and without any ambiguity what is the roadmap of the parties/candidates on dealing with such 'deliberate systems'.

An MP election is a strategic election. It directly impacts on the well-being and rights of the people. It is less about getting and/or making schemes. In its normal course of governance any central government would come up with developmental schemes. An MP election is one that would define the direction which the nation would take in the coming five years and beyond. It is about ensuring that the Constitution of India is respected and followed and that amendments to it, if any, would not impinge upon the rights and privileges of the people. It is about ensuring that the rights of the minorities are protected.

For instance, take the case of the intention to suppress the rights of STs in recruitments – recently, a UGC document (although later withdrawn) intended to curtail appointment of STs in central universities. Further, what about the degradation of the environment and the continued disregard for a statutory body like the NGT by the coal barons who unabashedly engage in illegal coal mining. It is best if the political parties refrain from making generic statements such as 'we will work for the jaitbynriew' and rather focus and talk more on specifics.

An MP election is about collaboration. Currently, national politics is divided into NDA block and INDIA block. The parties and candidates contesting the Shillong Lok Sabha seat cannot campaign without specifying which block they would be part of. No politician can stand alone in the Lok Sabha. The 'one man stance' does not work. Today, the political picture in India is one of polarization and the parties/candidates must choose sides. For instance, take the case of undue influence (explicit and implicit) on institutions such as the courts, financial institutions, educational institutions, etc. Credible and independent institutions are the hallmark of any democratic country. Any democratic country would fail the moment institutions are controlled by the government of the day with an ulterior motive. For example, SBI recently tried to delay the disclosure on electoral bonds till June 30, 2024. This was done despite clear directions from the Supreme Court to share information by March 6, 2024. This attempt was possible because Government of India is a major shareholder in SBI. This recent episode highlights the need for credible and independent Indian institutions. These are the type of issues which underline what an MP election is all about. Will the parties and candidates take a stand on such issues?

In the end, Shillong deserves a politician who would present the issues of Meghalaya. That the right candidate gets elected as MP becomes imperative. This totally depends on the voters' wisdom. One way to assess is to look at parties and candidates who actually talk on issues with solutions and not just indulge in fear-mongering and mud-slinging on opponents. It is high time we understand the importance of the Lok Sabha election! (The writer teaches at NEHU; email: blyngdoh@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

BJP-NPP bhai-bhai!

Editor,
The prolonged denouement has, alas, let the cat out of the bag; inferring that NPP, a regional party, of Meghalaya has unconditionally won the much-needed support of the saffron party, with an exclusive commitment to defeating the national party Congress and all other regional parties in the ensuing parliamentary elections. Interestingly, while recapitulating the last Meghalaya Assembly elections, 2023, the Congress candidate from East Shillong constituency Manuel Badwar, on the day of his filing of nomination, had unerringly asserted that NPP and BJP, while fighting it out against each other in some constituencies, in their heart of hearts are but playing cheap drama to obfuscate electorates subconscious mind.

From the very inception there were telltale signs that NPP was slyly hobnobbing with the BJP and this had resoundingly come to pass when the NPP member of Lok Sabha, Agatha Sangma, the sibling of the incumbent Chief Minister Conrad Sangma, voted in favour of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), in 2019. Hence, some discerning electorates have presupposed that if

Ampareen romps home in the forthcoming national elections she will have to follow the same trajectory in line with any parliamentary bill that have Sangh Parivar oriented affinity. Hence my Letter to the Editor that surfaced in these very columns captioned, 'Voting for NPP is voting BJP' (ST March 2, 2023) couldn't have been more correct in my pre-cognition of the NPP and BJP's nuanced understanding. Nevertheless, as a caveat, I, for one would like to remind NPP, that a regional party, aligning with an affluent and seemingly invincible national political party can end up in being a kiss of death, and this narrative is demonstrated in absolute terms by the latest collapse of the alignment of BJP and BJD, a regional party of Odisha given that the incumbent Chief Minister of Odisha, Naveen Patnaik, a farsighted and an astute politician, has visualized that in the fullness of times his regional party limited to his State would be overwhelmed by an all influential national political party like the BJP!

Further, to spice up the arguments, on the eve of last year's State Assembly elections, the South Shillong MLA, Sanbor Shullai had aptly asserted the incontrovertible fact by stating that though NPP and BJP couldn't see eye to eye in course

of electioneering but post elections the former would call the latter as Bhai-Bhai, as NPP has had to depend entirely on money doled out according to the whims of the NDA-led Government.

Yours etc.,
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Shillong-2

Bankers should load ATMs with Rs 100 and Rs 200 notes

Editor,
The central government rolled out the Jan Dhan Yojana, a program for which people often heap praise on Prime Minister Modi. It seeks to empower every citizen, focusing particularly on the weaker sections of society. The Prime Minister emphasizes that banking transactions should not be a privilege reserved only for the rich, instead, every underprivileged individual should be brought into the mainstream financial system. In other words, every bank should ensure easy access to financial services such as withdrawals, savings, deposit accounts, remittances, credit, insurance, and pensions. This zero-balance account has also effectively

taught "wasteful" families the true value of saving money in the bank.

Yet, in stark contrast to the objective of the government, it's very disheartening to note that in Meghalaya, the people are unable to withdraw amounts below Rs 500 from ATMs. However, in Guwahati, people can withdraw even Rs 100. This raises a serious question: do the bankers in Meghalaya assume that the people in the state are so rich that they never need to withdraw smaller denominations such as Rs 100, Rs 200, or Rs 300? What is the objective behind forcing people to run from pillar to post, begging for small loans of Rs200 from others? Dear bankers, please note that Meghalaya is the third poorest state in India, outstripping only Bihar and Jharkhand in poverty.

A student from a village in Nongstoin retorted in frustration, saying, "I often face troubles because I'm unable to withdraw small sums of money, a concern, I believe is shared by many others from remote areas who come to town on a daily basis. Technology is supposed to make our lives easier, but it's doing the opposite for us." Certainly, for poor people, withdrawing "larger amounts" always takes a toll on their financial power.

Therefore, with all seriousness I urge the bankers to

load their ATMs with currency notes of lower denominations, starting at Rs100, and if possible Rs150, without any further delay. This is in the greater interest of the public, which has a small bank balance. Having access to smaller amounts of currency encourages greater "savings" – making the banks richer too.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali
Shillong

Reckless two-wheeler drivers endanger lives

Editor,
I would like to express my appreciation for the initiative taken by two members of the public to comment on the recklessness of two-wheeler drivers (ST 27 March 2024 & April 01, 2024). Their remarks and insights, published in the previous editions of The Shillong Times, were spot on and very appropriate. I would like to state that I wholeheartedly agree with them. Their letters to the editor conveyed the same thoughts and sentiments that I have, but in a much better and lucid way than I could have done it.

I would like to urge upon the competent authorities to

take decisive steps and measures to address the menace of reckless driving, especially that of the two-wheeler drivers. While there are a few thoughtful and ethical two-wheeler drivers, most of them are a threat to the life and limbs of pedestrians and car-drivers as they hurl themselves down streets and roads without any care in the world. Some have become so brazen that they have now started to do senseless stunts on streets that are crowded without any thought for the safety of people, especially children and the elderly. Such irresponsible and callous two-wheeler drivers should be penalized to the fullest extent of the law and have their license suspended indefinitely.

The authorities should not approach this matter with any kind of timidity and nervousness. They must address it forthright and with a strong hand. Reckless driving is no longer just a traffic issue but has become a disease that must be nipped in the bud promptly before more lives are lost.

Yours etc.,
P. Majaw,
Shillong-1

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"Unity in things Necessary. Liberty in things Unnecessary. and Charity in all."

— Richard Baxter

The Shillong Times

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'Poor' billionaires

IN all fairness, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has admitted that he's not poor. Considering the tendency among politicians to present a common man's image even as they have funnelled millions or billions into tax havens or invested in benami properties, Rahul Gandhi's election affidavit for the Wayanad Lok Sabha polls shows he was having a cash stock of less than 60,000 and assets of around eight crore. It sums up to him being a middle-class citizen in terms of wealth. His earnings last year were in the range of about 10 lakh a month, including what he got in wages as an MP and from his modest investments. All of what he stated are 'true', it must be affirmed, with a rider that it is impossible to assess the real wealth of Indians today. What they show is generally far from truth, be it in the case of well-heeled politicians, bureaucrats or businessmen, also as the taxation system here is rigid. At the same time, the system also provides sufficient loopholes to the high and mighty to stockpile their wealth in shady holes.

By all means, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is closer to a commoner when it comes to his recorded wealth, a couple of crores, and nothing yet goes to show he has hidden wealth. But, this too is debatable, indeed. The ways of the world are far removed from what one sees on the surface. It is commonly reckoned that Modi, who is not a family man, is mostly, if not exclusively, after power and positions. This was amply proven in the last over 20 years. It is not his money but his tongue power that wins him votes. But, several top politicians who deal in billions are fancying themselves as middle class when it comes to recording their wealth in the election affidavits. The name of the game, often, is to park the wealth in the name of their near and dear ones or dump huge sums in real estate where the recorded price is, say, 10 times less than the market value. Ultimately, this is all a drama.

Fact of the matter is that aspirants in elections in some states are paying crores to major parties, mainly of the regional satraps, to win a party ticket for a parliament seat. Yet, they have the gumption to show their total wealth as a couple of crores. They hoodwink the public and skirt the provisions of the system through deceit. They get away with their act. It is also not easy to assess the wealth of the Nehru-Sonia Gandhi clan in real terms. Records are not the last word.

Elections: It's the season for boasting

By Patricia Mukhim

It's commonplace for the party heading the government to give a laundry list of what it has done for people. What is not said ever is what has been left undone/unfulfilled for decades and because of which Meghalaya is now proudly occupying the third place as the poorest state. Looking at the politicians and ministers through you would be forgiven to think they are overfed and that the poverty stats have got it all wrong. The problem is that the rich have claimed over the shoulders of the poor to claim their places in the sun. These are the people who are eating their cake and having it too.

We have minister-contractors whose sole interest is in winning all the bids for road-making, pipe supplying and laying for the JIM water supply system while others have started constructing hotels and resorts. Recently while on a visit to Laitsohplah I was told that an under-construction hotel complex located in a beautiful part of that village overlooking the Sohra canyons belongs to a minister in the MDA government. When I checked out the profession of this man on his CV provided to the Election Commission of India, I was quite amused that it is "Social Work." In fact quite a few of the ministers are "social workers," since they have nothing to show for as a profession before entering politics.

So now let me get back to the bragging rights campaign. Conrad Sangma has unabashedly laid claim to fame that his government was the first to approach the Supreme Court to lift the ban on coal mining. The Supreme Court has not lifted the ban unconditionally but has stated upfront that rat hole mining would not be allowed and would be replaced by scientific mining methods keeping in mind the environmental concerns. So Meghalaya's Chief Minister Conrad Sangma proudly proclaims that his government did what those before him didn't have the courage to do — go to the Supreme Court to battle out on behalf of the coal mafia. In that aspect, Conrad Sangma does not disappoint. He knows which side of the political bread is buttered and that the NPP needs hard cash to run the organisation. That cannot come from electoral

bonds which despite all the secrecy has now hit the ceiling. Cash transactions on the other hand leave no trace. Coal mining continues the rat hole way and the NGT too appears to have given up on the matter pleading that it is not getting cooperation from the government. Did the NGT not know it was fighting the government because if the entire system is in cahoots with the coal mafia, what does that say?

Of all the things that Conrad Sangma chose to say while campaigning in Jaintia Hills, it was only about legalising coal mining. He needs to keep humouring the coal mafia if the NPP is to survive the vagaries of politics.

"The Supreme Court has not lifted the ban unconditionally but has stated upfront that rat hole mining would not be allowed and would be replaced by scientific mining methods keeping in mind the environmental concerns."

Sangma does not care that there are people dying inside the mines even today! And neither does the NGT. So if you're poor it's your fault that you have to choose to go inside those deadly mines where the whole business is run smoothly — better than even the Godfather.

How many people in Jaintia Hills actually benefit from the coal business, especially the underhand one that is continuing today? Does the state have any statistics on this? Would any of the universities in Meghalaya or any central university have such data? Of course it is dangerous to collect such data or to venture anywhere near the coal mines but isn't that what universities are meant to do? This is so that any tall claims such as that the ban on coal mining has led to poverty are called out and/or backed by evidence.

If a chief minister were to brag about providing better health care, a more efficient and effective education system; better roads; better water supply etc., one can check those out and contest his claims but who would dare contest the 'high level' who run the coal mines.

People who live in Jaintia hills just have to keep shut. It's amazing that neither the Deputy Commissioners of East and West Jaintia hills and the SPs of the two districts have absolutely no idea of the illegal coal trade. I guess Meghalaya is what it is today because of the complicated silence of its citizens. In a break from this tradition of silence is the Environment Coordination Committee (ECC) of Elaka Sutnga that stood up stoically against the coke units that were causing large scale pollution and had become a threat to the health of people in the area. Other than this group, not a single pressure group that shouts at the top of their voices and

level" that are characteristic of Jaintia Hills and also fight their money power is a multi-million dollar question. Elections are getting more expensive by the day. Why do you think the BJP needed the electoral bonds to fill their coffers despite all the claims of Acche Din. The BJP is a shrewd business machine. It easily comprehends that development and all its paraphernalia don't win elections. All the bombast is meant to brainwash simpletons. The shrewd ones want cash. That's what elections are all about anyway. Denying this is to live in a fool's paradise.

And if money is what buys the honey then I suppose the NPP+BJP will take away both seats this time around. I will be very happy to be proven wrong. But coal money has always decided elections in Meghalaya and this time is no different.

As voters we have almost accepted that we vote because we have to vote, not that any kind of change in our stations in life are likely to change. We are hardened by the let-downs we have suffered from one election to the next. The brother of the Deputy Chief Minister has just bought himself a high end Mercedes which we can only see in our dreams and watch the video on social media of how the buyer was feted by the Company. These sorts of images don't even anger us anymore. We have learnt to accept each of these insults to our senses as our lot.

So yes elections will come and elections will go but the poor will continue to slog and only the privileged few will reach the pinnacles of wealth and success because they are on the right side of politics. Sorry but too many of us are on the wrong side of it.

And Meghalaya is already deeply embedded in the rent-seeking economy with many people not wanting to work but looking at easy ways of earning money from vulnerable groups. So elections or no elections matters little to us because we have not learnt resistance and our lips are sealed when it comes to shouting for the right reasons but there's a lot of sound and fury for the wrong ones.

So come April 19 and it's no big deal...

Are NGOs above the law in Meghalaya?

By Patrick Kurbah

A video circulated widely on social media on Wednesday captured KSU members storming inside the Sohra Police Station and arguing with police officers after two of their members were arrested in connection with the murders in Ichamati.

Before this, the NGO also accused the police of carrying out high-handed behaviour because "...the way the police had picked up the two members (it) looks like they belong to a terrorist group", in essence already taking the liberty to colour the situation before any formal investigation has concluded.

The recent arrest of the two KSU members and the previously violent FKJGP rally are indicative of a broader issue where NGOs, intended to serve as civil society's pillars, morph into entities that perpetuate a cycle of violence and disruption of public life. This behaviour not only undermines public trust but also sidelines the pressing needs of the state's populace. Seldom have we seen such NGOs addressing the state's critical issues like unemployment, education, health and infrastructure development.

Despite how vital the role



In Meghalaya, a pattern has emerged where NGOs frequently find themselves at the centre of controversies that contradict their foundational missions or what NGOs are supposed to ideally stand for. The recent incidents, as re-

of NGOs should ideally be in any civil society, in Meghalaya's socio-political landscape, there's a growing concern that their actions are becoming counterproductive. Instead of fostering a conducive environment for dialogue and devel-

"When these entities get embroiled in activities that seem to prioritize confrontation over constructive dialogue, it raises questions about their role and the direction in which they are steering the society. It's imperative for NGOs in Meghalaya to introspect and realign their strategies with their core mission of service to society. This entails prioritizing the state's long-term welfare over short-term objectives that may lead to discord. Collaboration with the government, other NGOs, and the community at large could pave the way for a more prosperous and peaceful Meghalaya."

ported, underscore a disturbing trend where activism veers into arenas that challenge the rule of law not as a matter of questioning but through aggression and with a holier-than-thou attitude.

More importantly, it is made to seem like they are upholding the voice of the public by collectively ganging up with other NGOs whenever there is a threat to the integrity of NGOs as a whole.

The issue is not whether the police are carrying out high-handed behaviour and who has committed the murders. That is definitely a matter for investigation and further, a shame for the society as a whole when innocent people are killed unjustly.

But even if an assumption is made that the police in this case finally find the arrested innocent, the general perpetuated notion as of now through the aggressive stance towards the rule of law begs one to question, are NGOs above the law in Meghalaya? Are members of NGOs becoming so powerful in the state that none of them can be questioned or even touched by the rule of law? Are such attempts even at all productive for their service to the public or is it just a personal fight?

In this regard, let us not forget the October 28, 2022, incident where things turned violent during the FKJGP rally and the public were bashed and physically harassed. Has the FKJGP taken any accountability for the incident or learnt lessons out of it? When the FKJGP has come out in support of KSU with regards to the recent incident, can they themselves claim a clean history now that they are okay questioning the rule

opment, what is particularly alarming in a state grappling with critical challenges, is the lack of outcry supporting the people.

The expectation from such organizations is to champion constructive change, guiding the youth towards positive engagement and leading initiatives that directly address the state's socio-economic challenges. However, when these entities get embroiled in activities that seem to prioritize confrontation over constructive dialogue, it raises questions about their role and the direction in which they are steering the society.

It's imperative for NGOs in Meghalaya to introspect and realign their strategies with their core mission of service to society. This entails prioritizing the state's long-term welfare over short-term objectives that may lead to discord. Collaboration with the government, other NGOs, and the community at large could pave the way for a more prosperous and peaceful Meghalaya.

In conclusion, it is crucial that the actions of NGOs must consistently reflect the principles of peace, unity, and development. As Meghalaya faces the dual task of preserving its rich cultural heritage and navigating the challenges of modernization, the path forward must be marked by cooperation, understanding, and a steadfast commitment to the common good.

Also, one final and very pertinent question that must be asked — how many are actually students in the students' unions that we have in our state?

(The author is a legal consultant)

Letters to the Editor

Kejriwal disrespected Anna Hazare's ideology

Editor, I read the article by Salil Gewali under the caption, "Why is Arvind Kejriwal in trouble?" (ST April 1, 2024) twice over and found it boldly written. I believe every one of us knows Arvind Kejriwal capitalized on Anna Hazare's movement against corruption such as Adarsh Housing Society Scam, Coalgate scam, Commonwealth Games scam, and the 2G spectrum scam and nepotism in the Nehru-Gandhi family in which Robert Vadra was one of the main beneficiaries. In the long fasting program at Jantar Mantar in 2011, Arvind Kejriwal and his team vowed to eradicate corruption without any compromise. He also chose a broom as his party symbol. Later he deviated from his main goal. His AAP MLAs have now been arrested in multiple corruption charges, misconducts, and the liquor scam.

Arvind Kejriwal never respected the principle and ideology of Anna Hazare. In Maharashtra in a temple Anna Hazare had vowed to drive a movement against alcoholism which was destroying many families. He also flogged many drunkards with his army belt. Anna Hazare was supported by many NGOs and women

whose houses were demolished by alcoholic husbands. But over the years his main disciple Arvind Kejriwal has made a policy where youth are encouraged to drink more by opening lots of wine shops making liquor easily available. Does the AAP want to spoil our youths by encouraging excessive drinking habits?

I personally found the last paragraph from Gewali's article very touching — It says, "Do AAP leaders take pleasure in seeing their sons become addicted to alcohol and fall into ruins? Are we 'lucky' to have elected leaders who are focused on pushing society into a pit of debauchery? Now, perhaps the AAP should consider changing its party symbol from a "broom" to a "Johnnie Walker bottle".

I am sure all right-thinking citizens agree with what Salil Gewali has written about the bad-effects of alcohol. All should be concerned about the increasing consumption and addiction to liquor among the youths in Meghalaya also. My close relatives are also victims of alcohol menace since the main bread-winner of the family died of Alcoholic Hepatitis one and half years ago due to excess drinking habits. When the main members of the family become alcoholics, it affects all family members, and the children's studies also get derailed. To sum up, I think the government should not adopt such risky policies to generate revenue, which

ultimately impacts the health of the society.

Yours etc.,
Vijay Sharma,
Shillong-2

Othering is inhuman

Editor,

In the article, "Who are the people of Ichamati?" (ST, April 3, 2024), Bhogoram Mawroh rightly said the passing of Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 increased the divide between tribal and non-tribals in Meghalaya. My father was in the civil services which was a transferable job. As a result, I had to change my school from one district headquarter to the other. I was bullied on the first day in my new school. That was my first encounter with the dangerous game of othering.

Initially, some students behaved as though I was an enemy from outer space. Was it just fun or ritualistic ragging to welcome a fresher? If it is so then where is its origin? It may have stemmed from the paranoia for anyone outside one's herd.

Now, what would have happened, had my class teacher after calling my roll number asked me in front of those students to prove that I was actually a student of that school? In that case, I would have faced brutal ragging in the hands of a bunch of heartless students and my name could have been published in newspapers under the headline - "Ragging took

the life of a young student'. Or I might have become a suicide victim.

But should a class teacher ask such a question to a student when his roll number had already been recorded in the attendance register by the authorities? The same question needs to be asked about the legislation of Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019. Should a government ask some voters to prove whether they are citizens of a country or not after being elected by the votes including the votes of those voters? If they were not citizens how could the authorities allow them to vote? And how could a government challenge the way it had been elected while completing its term of five years?

Two back to back incidents happened last month that brought back memories of the first day in my new school. Sujit Dutta (my namesake) and Esan Singh were found dead at Ichamati in Meghalaya's East Khasi Hills district on March 27 hours after an organisation took out a protest against the CAA.

Debashish Sengupta (37), a resident of Kolkata, was found hanging from the ceiling fan in the house of his maternal uncle in Subhasgram. His father, Tapan Sengupta said, "Since the notification of the CAA, my son has been suffering from tremendous mental trauma and agony and was also in acute fear psychosis for not having all the required documents as shown on social

media and as prescribed in the said notification. On March 19, 2024, suddenly my son told me that he was asking to his maternal uncle at Subhasgram, never to return."

The Centre should take a note about the apprehension someone has expressed in a newspaper after his death, "The moment I formally apply for Indian citizenship, it will be an acknowledgment that I am not an Indian citizen. That is a huge risk."

Any legislation or political action that can increase the divide between different communities and create fear psychosis in the minds of the voters of our country should be avoided. It could spell disaster in our country which has achieved unity by accepting its rich diversity.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Via email

Navigating China's assertiveness: Call for cohesion

Editor, I express my sincere appreciation to NK Sharma for his insightful letter published in this column on April 3, 2024, titled "Discussion on China, Crucial." His astute observations prompt a necessary reflection. It is undeniable that amidst our internal focus, we have seemingly overlooked the escalating assertiveness of

China. Recent occurrences, notably their repeated claims over Arunachal Pradesh and the systematic renaming of localities within the region, serve as stark reminders of the challenges to our sovereignty. The looming threat posed by such actions demands our immediate attention.

Unfortunately, discussions on this pressing issue appear to have been confined primarily to the realms of defence and external affairs, perhaps out of apprehension regarding exacerbating tensions through media displays. However, the gravity of the situation cannot be understated.

Addressing the persistent challenges presented by our formidable neighbour, a global economic powerhouse, necessitates a unified national approach. Strengthening our collective resolve and bolstering the morale of our armed forces are imperative in safeguarding our territorial integrity.

In essence, we must confront China's assertiveness with unwavering resolve and unity. Only through a concerted effort to safeguard our national interests can we effectively deter external threats and uphold our sovereignty in the face of adversity.

Yours etc.,
Krishna Chettri
Shillong-2

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"A mob is not, as is so often said, mindless. A mob is single-minded."

— Teju Cole

The Shillong Times

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Rule of law non-negotiable

POLITICS is not just about having the right people in power but that power has to be constrained by a set of rules. Political power does not grant the right of arbitrary use of power such as scant respect for the rule of law. However, in Meghalaya it is not just the political players that try to subvert the rule of law but other groups and entities too follow the same trajectory. When a crime is committed and the police get into the act of tracking the suspects by taking people for questioning there are attempts to subvert that process by undue use of public pressure seeking the release of the suspects. For too long politicians too have played into the hands of such pressure groups that have time and again prevented the law from taking its course.

In general, the rule of law implies that the enforcement of the laws of a country are applied such that no one—including the most highly placed official or individual or group for that matter -- is above the law. The legal constraint on rulers means that the government is subject to existing laws as much as its citizens are. The application and adjudication of legal rules by various governing officials are to be impartial and consistent across equivalent cases without taking into consideration the class, status, or relative power among disputants. In order, for those ideas to have any real meaning however there should be a demonstrable model that people can look up to. In Meghalaya there is no such model since most murders remain unsolved because the very process is marred by political and other interventions.

The entity that is vested with the power to arrest, investigate and chargesheet criminals is the police. It is unfortunate that in most states of India including in Meghalaya the rule of law is compromised because the police have been reduced to an entity that safeguards only the powerful and those with clout even while ordinary citizens are hard pressed to find justice. Shoddy investigation into crimes result in poor conviction rates even as those with a criminal bent of mind move on to the next crime thereby endangering society. It is a non-negotiable factor that the police must be given a free hand to arrest and investigate crime without second guessing as to what the consequences would be if they arrest someone who belongs to an "influential" pressure group. In fact, the use of such adjectives to describe any group runs the risk of attributing arbitrary powers to that group or groups. The police are not enjoined to take orders from the higher-ups or any other entity if that violates their code of conduct. Meghalaya Police need to stand up for their rights and cannot be seen as a compromised force that is always on the backfoot.

Our Forebears' Politics of Love
Excerpts from "Letters to a Grandson."

By Yona M. Nonglang

Let me dwell at length on the question of what worries me. Mindless jingoism, among other things, should be a matter of grave concern to all of us. The politics of hatred for the "other" in the name of "love" only for one's own is not patriotism. It is a sociopathic personality disorder that has lost the ability to comprehend the fact that all life, whether "traikuluk" or "bar muluk," is precious, and therefore, deserving of being honoured.

Our very enlightened, judicious and big-hearted forebears understood that. They also knew what democratic rights of individuals entailed while they made laws that protected our collective rights as people indigenous to this land. They also had the decency and the wisdom not to misuse power, so they chose not to interfere with what people ate, dressed, and so forth. See the diversity in our cuisines and our traditional attires? Respect for, and preservation of, diversity and personal freedom was how they managed their politics and policies—not some oppressive imposition of uniformity in our shared existence.

I suppose that's why they created our genial system that embraced individual and familial choices in matters of the heart too. Children born to both Khasi man or woman, irrespective of the ethnic identity of their mother or father, are all Khasi, according to our genial lineage customary laws. One can only admire the refinement and accommodating nature of our forebears' generous mindset.

And because of this, it's a fact, that if ten of our people were in the same room, they'd joke about how they variously resemble Thais, Malays, Chinese, Bengalis, Sindhis, Africans, Europeans, Tamils, and so on. Which is, indeed, a fascinating mix of diversity of facial and physical appearances that are a testament to our fluid cosmopolitan history. Therefore, as long as this magnanimous tradition of absorption remains, our jaitbynriew will always live together in peace as one. And the question of "duhjaiit" (loss of clan) will never arise even though we are a very tiny minority compared to the more populous ethnic groups around us.

As a male member of our tribe, let me tell you what I learnt from my own father. Right on the very day he enrolled me in school, when all the formalities of enrolment in the school office were completed, the clerk gave him a slip of paper that had my name and Mei's surname on it. "Give this to your teacher," Papa said as he walked with me to the classroom. "She will know who you are!"

It was only when I got older that I realised Papa was a man who was respectful of our customs and traditions. He neither questioned nor doubted his place in the world because of our matrilineal heritage. He was too busy taking care of his family and minding his own cloth-

ing business at law to waste his time questioning the wisdom of societal matters already decided and settled a long time ago.

Papa also gladly blessed my youngest brother's marriage to my sister-in-law who, as you know, is Assamese. And he was the one who advised my brother to go through the rituals of tang-jait for his children even though the church leaders disapproved of it because the missionaries forbade them from participating in our traditional ceremonies. I'll never know what he said to those church gentlemen but the matter never came up again from their side. Our whole family, along with all our kfi and clan leaders, all accompanied my brother and his family to the ceremony. You see, Papa was a very reasonable man who was just being respectful of his

people's faces?

If only he knew what a disturbing spectacle of toxic masculinity he made—that surly, swaggering and vacuous asininity of a self-appointed saviour of jaitbynriew who thinks he has the right to impose his personal prejudice on the rest of us with his insular and dictatorial view of society! I shudder to think what further anarchy awaits us if people like him end up in positions of power.

Because the quality of our politics and governance is only as good as the people we vote to represent us in government. So, the need of the hour is caring and intelligent men and women who respect their roots and who have first equipped themselves with the necessary education and skills sets to sincerely help our situation by running for public office.

"When the best hesitate to fill the power vacuum, it's a fact of history that ill-equipped status seeking stokers of the ill-temper of their times, who are the least qualified for high office, are quick to seize their opportunistic political moment by preying on people's anxieties and discontents through their skilful use of psychological manipulation. You know how cunning charlatans can be when it comes to emotional blackmail. And people end up suffering more when those same charlatans are catapulted into positions of power."

cultural roots. What a shining example of self-respect he set for me.

However, the on-going parochial, divisive and opportunistic identity politics of the misguided among us not only disrespects, but also seeks to undo all of that gallant legacy our forebears put in place. Like the unenlightened ruthless nineteenth century slave-owning white supremacist colonisers of America and the sociopathic twentieth century fascist Nazis of Europe, with their one drop blood "whiteness purity" rule (<https://aaregistry.org/story/the-one-drop-rule-a-brief-story/>), in their insane bid to justify their opportunistic hate-based politics and predatory capitalist business model that resulted in genocides and all kinds of ugly wars, there are those among us who have been insisting on going down that same destructive road too.

I remember listening to a "sengbhalang" hazel-eyed gentleman who vehemently argued in favour of a legislation that would legally ostracise Khasi children of "mixed" parentage. He was adamant that neither Khasi women nor men should marry outside the community so that its "purity" was "preserved!" Didn't he know that his own eyes betrayed the dubiousness of his own "purity?" Didn't he realise he was publicly and rhetorically gouging his own eyes because he didn't like other

Unfortunately, such people seem to be shying away from that responsibility.

"The best lack all conviction," wrote William Butler Yeats. "And the worst are full of passionate intensity."

When the best hesitate to fill the power vacuum, it's a fact of history that ill-equipped status seeking stokers of the ill-temper of their times, who are the least qualified for high office, are quick to seize their opportunistic political moment by preying on people's anxieties and discontents through their skilful use of psychological manipulation. You know how cunning charlatans can be when it comes to emotional blackmail. And people end up suffering more when those same charlatans are catapulted into positions of power.

Because, exposed of their lack of intellectual and ethical depth by the very high office they occupy, they also end up making power and status only about, and, for themselves, their narrow interests and their worst prejudices instead. They push society closer to the brink by adopting extremist posturing on sensitive issues and by using inflammatory language against their perceived enemies in order to fire up the gullible whose political support they depend on.

Adolf Hitler, was a secondary school drop-out who couldn't fulfil his dream

to be a major player in the art world because he didn't qualify for a seat at the arts institute of his choice. Disturbingly anti-social, narcissistic, and power-hungry, he embraced delusions of grandeur by actually fancying himself as the saviour of the "pure white" jaitbynriew.

With no real qualifications for the top job, rabble rousing and emotionally manipulating the ultra-nationalistic sentiments of the dissatisfied Germans of his time was his only way to get publicity. You've heard the saying "Hitler and his rhetoric" and how his inflated, loud and empty talk incited his audience. His politics of hate resonated with those who blamed the "other" for their misfortunes. And because of his obsession with the unhinged idea of white supremacy, he even wrote a book in which he expressed his hatred for Jews, especially, whom he called "parasites."

That man was a highly artful thien, wasn't he? And he made full use of his very flawed imagination in a very deviously ingenious manner by playing to the gallery of the naive Germans who fell for his jingoistic act and looked up to him as their saviour. And when they catapulted him to power, he showed his true colours by commissioning the gas chambers that burnt alive millions of those he dehumanised in order to feed his unhinged hunger for absolute power.

And that unhinged hunger for power came home to roost for him and the "jaitbynriew" he so obsessed over, eventually. Because his harebrained ubermenschen white supremacy pipe-dream ended up bringing Germany down to its knees instead of the promised height of glory he obsessed over. And, like any delusional self-aggrandising pretender, he took the easy way out of that inglorious moment of humiliation by killing himself. At the end of that day, the ugly politics of hate not only destroys its victims, it also brings self-ruin to its perpetrators too.

Mature leadership, on the other hand, strives to create harmony and prosperity for all through informed policy-making. It also seeks to calm down even the most restive of society through skilful negotiations and sound political decisions.

I suppose that's why our judicious and magnanimous forebears, blessed with their beautiful moral imagination and clear moral conscience, decided to put in place their benign customary laws for the sake of societal harmony and peaceful coexistence. No lunatic raving, no hate-filled rhetoric, no narrow-minded politics of fear mongering, of supremacist leanings and jingoism for them. They also refused to interfere in the private lives of their people while they facilitated the means to accommodate personal choices by creating the right kinds of customary laws to meet the different demands of the community.

If only we would continue to appreciate their prudent policymaking skills.

Elections 2024: Issues before the electorate

By VK Lyngdoh

The editorial "Lok Sabha election sans noise" (ST April 4, 2024) has raised many pertinent and crucial issues as to what will be the stand of various parties. In a huge House of Commons (Lok Sabha) with 543 central legislators it is not going to be an easy task for the MPs of small states in the North East like Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura unless they are aligned to NDA or INDIA. To stand alone is next to impossible to drive home their views especially when the cognitive power and energy of an MP is not powerful enough given the present scenario in the country where the Bharatiya Janata Party or for that matter the NDA is surely going to dominate Lok Sabha given their numerical strength. If you are in power then only you can implement your ideas. But if you are not in power, how will you implement your ideas? The editorial has rightly concluded that "electorate must vote with their brains, not with their emotions". However, the upcoming Lok Sabha election in 1 Shillong Parliamentary and 2 Tura Parliamentary Constituencies is significant for the people of Meghalaya. The key issue that are likely to shape the contest are:

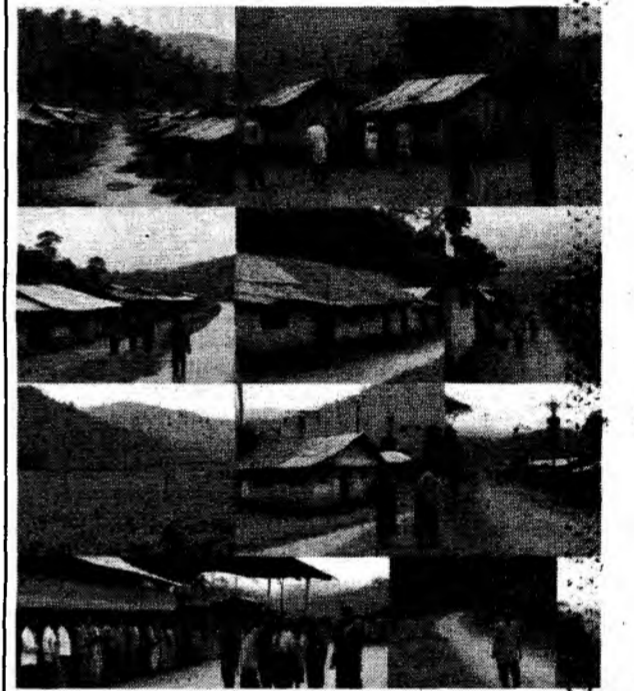
persons.

4. Tribal rights and identity: Protecting tribal rights, languages and cultural heritage is crucial if we talk about preserving the culture of the tribe. Addressing land ownership issues and ensuring forest rights for indigenous communities are significant concerns.

5. Environment and Sustainable Development: For balancing growth and conservation electors want sustainable development without compromising the environment. Addressing water scarcity and ensuring clean water supply are critical issues when we talk about water management.

6. Tourism and livelihood: Meghalaya's natural beauty and salubrious climate attracts tourists. Therefore, if we talk of promoting tourism, enhancing tourism infrastructure is a must to boost livelihoods. Supporting farmers and promoting agro-based industries is essential for the development of agriculture and livestock.

7. Law and Order: Security and safety is the most important aspect of existence and electors expect effective law enforcement, especially in border areas. As far as insurgency and Militancy is



1. Infrastructure and connectivity: People in Meghalaya suffer from poor and bad road conditions and connectivity. Improving connectivity in rural Meghalaya where the bulk of the population (27.2 Lakhs or 85% of the population) reside and work remains crucial as people expect roads, bridges, foot bridges and transportation facilities.

2. Unemployment and Economic opportunities: Creating job opportunities for the youth is essential as Meghalaya faces unemployment challenges, especially among its educated youth. According to the RBI Report November 19th 2022, 7 out of 1000 persons are unemployed in rural and 71 out 1000 persons in urban Meghalaya. Hence encouraging diverse economic activities beyond traditional sectors like agriculture and tourism is vital.

3. Healthcare and Education: Strengthening health care facilities, especially in rural areas is a priority. As far as education is concerned the Annual Report on Periodic Labour Force Survey July 2022 - June 2023 of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation shows youth who are 15 years and above by highest level of education successfully completed out of 100 persons in rural areas as 6.4 are not literate, literate and up to primary is 40.1, Middle class is 32.7, Secondary 9.9, Higher Secondary 6.4, Diploma/Certificate holder 0.6, Graduate 3.8, Post-Graduate and above 0.7 and Secondary and above is 20.8 percent respectively. The corresponding figure for the urban areas is 2.7, 14.3, 20.6, 13.7, 18.3, 0.3, 23.1, 7.0 and 62.4 percent respectively. Given these kinds of educational statistics there is an urgent need for skill development programs, vocational training and better educational institutions that ensures employability of such

concerned addressing security threats must be a top most priority.

8. Political accountability and Transparency: When we talk of accountable governance, electors want transparency, efficient administration and responsive leaders. Addressing corruption and ensuring accountable governance are key concerns.

Remember that these issues resonate differently across regions within both 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency and 2 Tura Parliamentary Constituency. Candidates' ability to address these concerns effectively will influence voters' decisions.

Meghalaya faces challenges related to poverty. Approximately 49% of the population in rural Meghalaya lives below the poverty line. Seventy percent of individuals in rural areas are engaged in agriculture and allied activities. 69.2 percent lack access to cooking fuel, and 23.60% do not have access to drinking water. 55.90% of rural households lack proper housing facilities. 29.88 % of the population is deprived of assets and 9.10% do not have a bank account. The urban population in Meghalaya faces similar challenges. 37.79 % of the urban population remains below the poverty line. 8.10% of the urban population lacks electricity connection. 31.70% of women in urban areas are deprived of maternal healthcare facilities. Overall, 32.67 % of the entire population in Meghalaya is multidimensionally poor, according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) data. The state ranks as the third poorest in India and the poorest in the North Eastern Region. Therefore, it is crucial for the government to address these challenges and bridge the implementation gaps in welfare schemes to uplift the vulnerable sections of society.

Letters to the Editor

A correction please!

Editor,
The special article "Easter celebrations in the backdrop of election" by Albert Thymiang (ST April 4, 2024) made interesting reading and was rich with valuable information but there was an important mistake too. The majority of the Bible scholars believe Jesus Christ died in 30 or 33 AD. If Jesus died in 30 AD, 2024 marks 1994 years ago and if he died in 33 AD, 2024 marks 1991 years ago. The median wage in 2024 in the US is \$56473 per year or \$1086 per week for a 5-day, 40-hour work week. This translates to roughly to \$217.2 per day and thirty pieces of silver are worth 120 days' salary. Then the purchasing power of the coins (Tyrian Shekel) was the equivalent of \$ 26,064 today. Since the dollar is

83.42 to the INR as on 4 April 2024, therefore the 30-silver coins that Judas Iscariot received then is today equivalent to INR 21,74,259 and not INR 25,000.
Yours etc.;
V.K.Lyngdoh,
Via email

True humility

Editor,
A friend of mine invited me to attend an opening ceremony of his wife's art exhibition. A 5-wick traditional oil lamp was to be lit to mark the beginning of the event. Four artists lit four wicks one by one. My friend requested me to light the last one. I was taken aback. "Me! I'm not an artist", I said to myself. Then I thought that I was after all a human being like those four famous artists and my refusal might sound like supporting the practice of casteist categorisation of

human beings.
So, I went ahead and did my little job. After that an artist who was to preside the ceremony went to grace his chair on the stage and called the artist of the day, my friend's wife, to sit at the chair next to him. But she declined saying that she could not sit beside him.

Again I was taken aback. I thought it might hurt the renowned artist the way she was turning down a normal procedure. I thought that some audiences might take a hint that she wanted to cast aspersions on the character of the artist on the centrestage! But I gathered that there was no such misunderstanding. That she was showing her humility and high respect for the artist had been accepted by all including the artist with a grin.

Is it at all humility to belittle our self-esteem and underestimate our potentialities? The answer is simply -

no. C S. Lewis rightly said, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less." Indeed, we must not think that we are less capable. Just like a small banyan seed that has a magic blueprint within it to grow up to become a big tree if it gets a field to grow; every human being has immense potentialities to become a great person if she/he gets a level playing field to nurture her/his talent.

But one must not think only about oneself as it is a falsehood to separate ourselves from the whole universe. By thinking of ourselves less, we will actually be able to enlarge us to live infinity and live oneness where there is no room for little vanity, little self-complacency and little self-pity. And this will help us say a firm NO to casteist gradation.

Unfortunately, humility has often been abused

by two groups of people, hypocrites and defeatists, in two diametrically opposite ways. A hypocrite sometimes says some tongue-in-cheek humble words about herself or himself feigning humility to get puffed up inside with a feel of vanity. On the other hand, a defeatist enjoys masochistic pleasure by uttering a self-lowering remark. It is either superiority or inferiority complex that uses humility in a wrong way. In both of these cases, it is all about humility before human beings. But true humility should only be before the Supreme Consciousness.

The Mother (spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo) said, "True humility consists in knowing that the Supreme Consciousness, the Supreme Will alone exists and that the I is not." One can attain such an unalloyed humility if one realises that everything is One in this infinite universe and to mark oneself as a

completely separate entity is a falsehood.

We need to reflect on the fact that after our deaths the atoms of our body will become atoms of a matter then again some of them become a part of some trees, animals and/or individuals. Even the atoms of our nails and hair start becoming a part of other things during our lifetime! This reflection helps us erase our ego that separates us from the universe. It gives birth to true humility before the One which we are also a part of. Spiritual humility hatches the ego-egg to break the eggshell of separation to give birth to a psychic conscious being.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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How food preferences are linked to cognition and brain health

From the crispy crunch of fresh veggies to the creamy indulgence of decadent desserts, we all have different food preferences. Our palates develop uniquely, shaped by genetics, culture and personal experiences.

Food preferences play a significant role in shaping our dietary habits. Highly palatable foods rich in sugars, fats and salts often appeal to people's tastebuds and provide immediate satisfaction. However, these foods are typically high in calories and low in essential nutrients, leading to weight gain, and a higher risk of physical and mental health conditions.

Now it has been discovered that the food you choose to eat isn't just linked to your physical and mental health, but also to your cognitive function, brain structure and genetics.

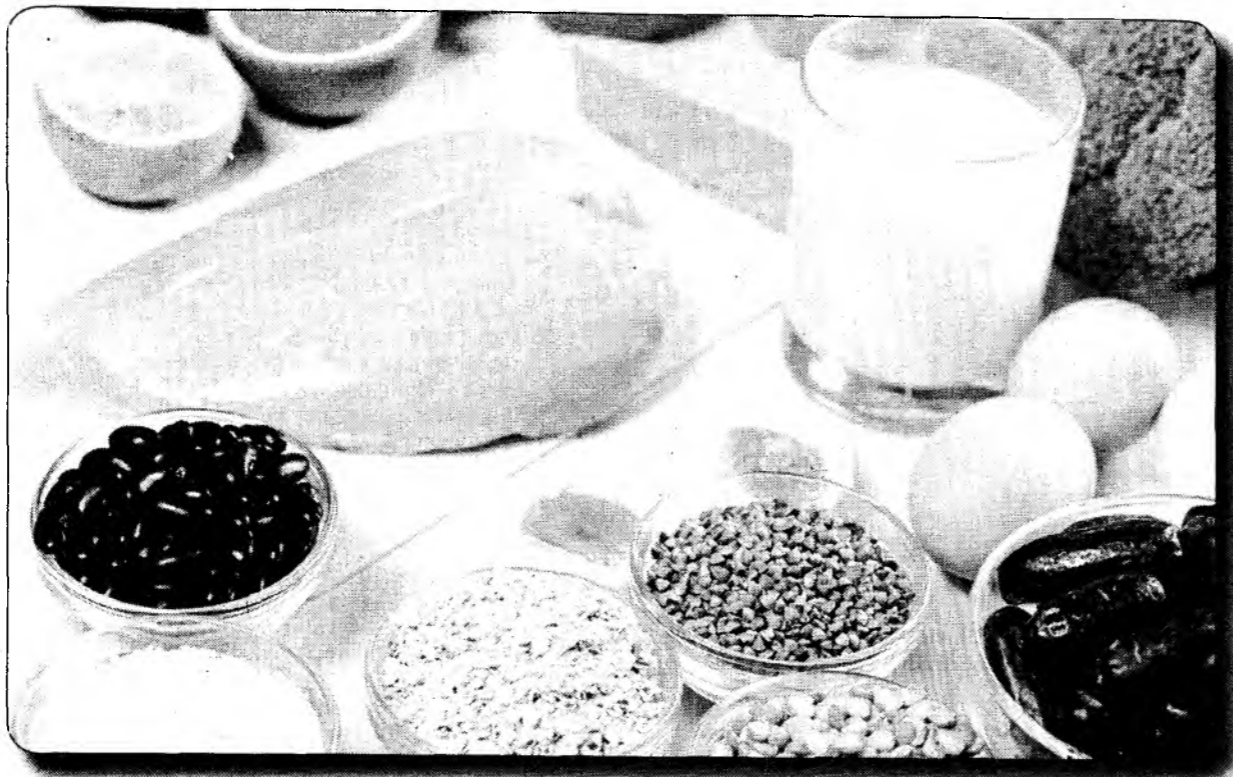
A widespread preference for fast food is likely contributing to an increase in obesity worldwide. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), in 2022 one in eight people worldwide were obese. This rate has doubled since 1990.

Obesity isn't just linked with an increased risk of diseases including type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease, but also with a 30-70 per cent higher risk of mental health disorders.

Benefits of a healthy, balanced diet

A new collaborative study from Fudan University in China and the University of Cambridge in the UK, published in Nature Mental Health, used a large sample of 181,990 participants from the UK Biobank to examine how food choices are associated with cognitive function, mental health, metabolism, brain imaging and genetics.

The researchers examined the consumption of vegetables, fruit, fish, meat, cheese, cereal, red wine,



spirits and bread. It was found that 57 per cent of participants had food preferences for a healthy balanced diet. This included a balanced mix of all the foods the researchers examined, with no excessive amounts in any category.

The researchers further showed that those with a healthy balanced diet had better brain health, cognitive function and mental health than others. The research team compared the balanced diet to three other diet groups - low-carb (18 per cent), vegetarian (6 per cent) and high protein/low fibre (19 per cent).

It was found that people who ate a more balanced diet had better fluid intelligence (the ability to solve new problems), processing speed, memory and executive functions (a set of mental skills that include flexible thinking and self-control) than the other diets. This also corresponded to better brain health - with higher grey matter volumes (the outermost

layer of the brain) and better structured neurons (brain cells), which are key markers of brain health.

Perhaps surprisingly, the vegetarian diet did not fare as well as a balanced diet. One reason for this may be that many vegetarians don't get enough protein. Two healthy, balanced diets for the brain are the Mediterranean and Mind (Mediterranean intervention for neurodegenerative delay) diets.

These promote fish (especially those oily fish), dark leafy vegetables and fresh fruits, grains, nuts, seeds, as well as some meat, such as chicken. But these diets also limit red meat, fats and sugars.

In fact, research has shown that the Mediterranean diet can alter our brains and cognition. One study showed that people showed improved cognition after only 10 weeks on this diet.

Another study showed that following the Mediterranean diet was

associated with lower levels of a harmful peptide known as beta-amyloid in the brain. Beta-amyloid, together with tau protein, are measures of the brain damage that occurs in Alzheimer's disease.

Previous studies have also shown that Japanese diets, including rice, fish and shellfish, miso, pickles and fruits, protect against brain shrinkage.

The research also discovered that there were some genes that may be contributing to the association between dietary patterns and brain health, cognitive function and mental health. This may mean that our genes partly determine what we like to eat, which in turn determines our brain function.

However, our food choice priorities are also affected by a number of factors, including price, allergies, convenience and what our friends and family eat.

Some people opt for going on di-

ets, which may lead to weight loss, but involve cutting out entire food groups that are important for the brain. While there's some evidence that ketogenic diets (low carb), for example, have beneficial effects on the immune system and mental health, it does seem that balanced diets, such as the Mediterranean diet, is best for overall brain health and cognition.

Ways forward

It is clear that adopting a healthy balanced diet and doing exercise can be good for our brains. But for many people, this is easier said than done, especially if their current food preferences are for very sweet or high fat foods.

However, food preferences aren't destiny. For example, if you reduce your sugar and fat intake slowly and maintain it at a very low level over a number of months, you will actually begin to prefer that type of food.

Establishing healthy food preferences and an active lifestyle early in childhood is vital. Other important techniques are to eat slowly, pay attention to what you eat and enjoy it, rather than finishing a sandwich on the go or while looking at your mobile screen.

It takes time for your brain to register that you are full. For example,

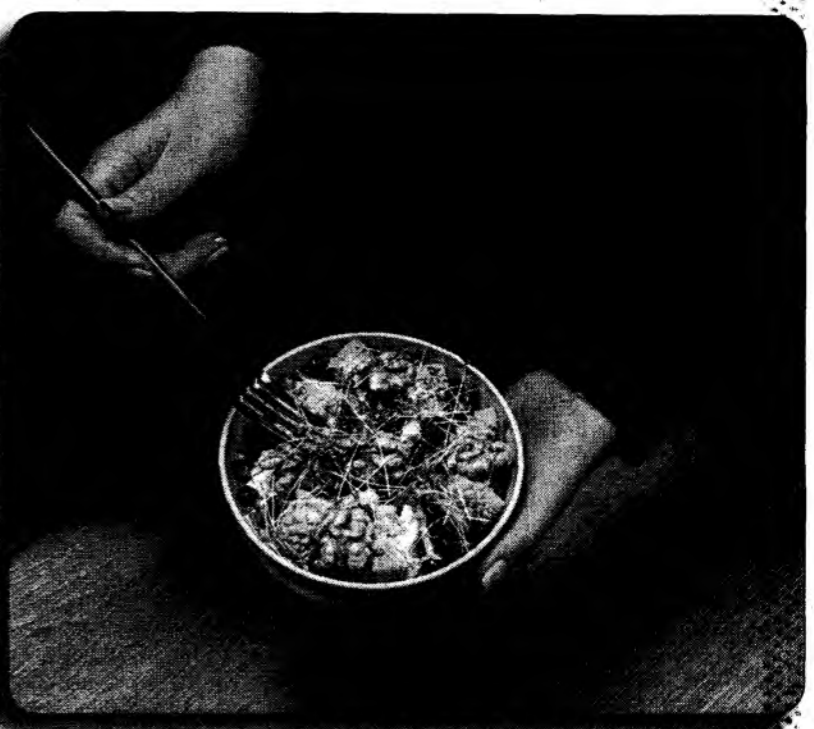
it has been shown that consumers generally eat more when watching television, listening to music, or in the presence of others, because the distraction decreases our reliance on internal satiety signals.

Social support from friends has also been shown to encourage adherence to healthy eating habits, as has cognitive behavioural therapy. Distraction is another excellent technique - literally anything you like to do (that isn't eating) could help.

One interesting survey study found that how you set your priorities affects your food choices: If you are keen to remain healthy and to have a physically fit appearance, you will choose healthy foods.

We live in tough economic times. Socioeconomic status shouldn't limit dietary choices, though this seems to currently be the case. Clearly, governments have an important duty to prioritise affordable healthy eating options. This will help many of us choose a healthy diet for either health reasons, reduced food prices, or both.

Now that we know that the food we eat can actually affect our brains and how well we perform cognitively, having a healthy balanced diet is more important than ever. (The Conversation)



'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, APRIL 7, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'
Moon semi-sextile Mercury on your solar return chart which ensures an exceptional year ahead. You will get lot of opportunities to make progress in life. Money inflow will be continuous. You will like to explore some new business. And could enter into partnership or joint venture. You will use your communicate skills to best of your advantage. And will win big contract or work order for your concern. You can also get involved in some exciting love relations. Ties will go a distance. You will plan to get married and get settled in life. Students will study hard and get success in exams/interviews. Those looking for jobs abroad will get success. Those in creative line of work will also get acclaim. You can be facilitated publicly for your contribution to society. You will look after your family members well.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) There would be a lot of traveling, communications and conversation to keep you busy. Arguments with a lover may be blown out of proportion far too easily. Both you and your lover should avoid harping on the words used and try to get to the meaning behind the words instead. Professionally it might seem like stagnation, but it's actually a period of review and rest. Speculation and gambling are not advised right now. It would be wise to be especially clear when it comes to communicating with romantic partners, and children; or take this time to re-examine issues rather than communicating prematurely.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) Smoothing out your close personal relationships is what makes you happy during this cycle. You would maintain good relations and try to give to others exactly what you would like to receive just now. It's not about you right now - it's about someone else and the sweeter your attentions, the more delicious your rewards will be. You have a greater need than usual for contact and exchange. In general, you are adaptable when it comes to your work. The more willing you are to take on additional or different type of work, the more positive the rewards.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You would admire and adapt new styles, unconventional ideas, and unfamiliar situations. It is a good time to expand your circle of influence. You take an interest in organizing your working environment - and this is an excellent time to do so. You are especially objective and intelligent when it comes to getting a handle on your daily affairs and all of the little things that contribute to a feeling of efficiency and competency. Laying down a strategy would keep you on track. Some travel is imminent and will be beneficial.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This can be a time of achievement, career advancement, and success in business. Work-related travel or the reaching of a wider audience is possible during this period. This is a time when you renew your energy and consider your priorities. Re-thinking the suitability of your romantic relationships is possible now, but you should avoid jumping to any premature decisions. There may be the need to revisit old issues with your children or lover else there could be some communication problems with them.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Communication becomes especially important to you. Smoothing out your close personal relationships is what makes you happy. You are adaptable when it comes to your affections - very willing to compromise, negotiate, and make peace. A new set-up in existing jobs or a new job altogether may be formed in the coming months. There will be a sense of renewal and reinvigoration with regard to your daily activities, health routines, and attention to practical matters. This is a phase when you have an increased awareness of your health.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 24) Your professional skills, wisdom and crafts is appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Personal relationships gain an exciting quality. Tackle sensitive subjects and difficult people

and get your point across. You can trust your intuition about people and situations when called upon to mediate in conflicts and collaborations. Surprises surrounding the compassionate care and attention you give others, as well as the work and service you render, may be in store. This could manifest into finding a balance between practical concerns and spiritual or non-material matters.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) It's easier for you to approach sensitive, intimate, and personal matters with rationality and logic in this period. As such, this is a great time to open up conversations about topics that normally might cause waves, such as those revolving around the sharing of power, intimacy, and finances. You know how to relate to others and you do so with warmth and affection. You will seek out the company of close friends who stimulate your thoughts and ideas. You may attract a younger person into your life.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) Essentially, you are looking to expand your activities, and you may find that you have a lot of energy for higher studies, travel, or simply new subjects during this period. Negative potentials include being excessively opinionated or getting easily fired up over differences in points of view, or legal fights. You may be drawn into some form of service that will bring deep personal satisfaction. You seek perfection and distinction in your work and this quality brings you a more responsible position.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) People see you as a responsible, sincere, loving and lovable person, and as someone who is aware of their needs and feelings, which can benefit you at this time. Others are willing to help and cooperate with you in working towards your goals and ambitions. It would be better to go for long term investments and speculations for financial gains. It would be wiser to face turbulent matters and issues in professional ventures rather than seeing them under the carpet. Don't take the one you love for granted but show your love and appreciation.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) A new work opportunity can change the way you work and relate with people professionally. You are bold and adventurous and you cannot tolerate delays that could hold up your work. You succeed by adopting a new approach and exhibiting a willingness to take risks. You would achieve a lot in business and professional aspects by combining creativity and practicality. Your maturity and objectivity places you in the role of the dependable and someone your family and friends can turn to for advice and guidance. You will be considerably more productive, healthy, and focused.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) Financial transactions and professional projects go ahead smoothly with goodwill and they would be profitable. This is a good time to belong with a friend or a group who shares your own ideas and thoughts. You would attach yourself to more spiritual friends. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting as business opportunities come your way. This is an excellent period for starting new regimens to better your health and wellbeing, such as a structured exercise program and more structured and productive use of your time.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This is an excellent time in which you do some financial planning and strategizing. A financial boost is possible, or you may gain financially through your business partner. Research uncovers new material that allows you to develop a better overall picture of the period's events. This is a phase when you have an increased awareness of the need for someone significant to rely on. You would find a balance between autonomy and dependence in personal relationships. You can expect superiors to support you and stand up for you in tough situations at work.

Learn to sing in Sur with Padhanisa, an AI-based music learning app



Saregama, India's oldest music label announces its expansion of its horizon with Padhanisa, from delivering super-hit music for over a century to creating a platform that simplifies music learning. Padhanisa is an AI based music learning app that aims to make Indian vocal learning simple, easy and accessible to everyone across the globe.

Sharing his views on Padhanisa, Vikram Mehra, Managing Director of Saregama India Limited, said, "Padhanisa is an obvious extension from Saregama. The insight of the app comes from the fact that all Indians love to sing, be it on any occasion or just to feel happy. We truly believe that there are no bad singers, but just untrained ones. So, here we are with an AI based app which trains you to sing in Sur. All you have to do is download the Padhanisa App and start your personalised music learning journey."

Padhanisa aims to be a personal singing teacher for those who enjoy singing but have never considered learning due to a lack of access to the right resources or fear of judgement.

The app's most compelling feature is its individualized class structure, where every session is uniquely tailored to address the specific needs and goals of each learner. By leveraging advanced algorithms and machine learning capabilities, the app dynamically adjusts lesson plans to accommodate each learner's progress and preferences, ensuring optimal results with every session.

The personalized approach of the app ensures that every individual receives tailored recommendations based on their vocal range, suggestions on warmups and workouts focussed on the key improvement areas. A comprehensive assessment of the performance is shared after every level so that learners can keep improving.

The application not only provides a customised platform for music learning but also offers Live Masterclasses by subject matter experts that help learners acquire in-depth knowledge about music concepts and clear their doubts through Q&A sessions.

Padhanisa goes a step beyond just being a music-learning platform. It also allows singers and aspirants to earn perpetually by sharing singing videos through the app. And not just this, but a big one with the Music label too! A chance to sing for Saregama under its Talent Hunt program.

From beginners taking their first steps in the world of Indian vocal singing to performers looking to refine their skills, the app caters to singers of all levels and backgrounds. With its user-friendly interface, comprehensive lesson plans and interactive sessions, it's never been easier to learn singing sitting literally from anywhere. (IANSLife)

Why are working professionals opting for skin boosters?

In today's time, prioritising skin health has become an important aspect. Individuals are adopting comprehensive approaches ranging from skincare routines to dietary choices to advanced treatments for optimal results. According to the latest report, the global market for skin boosters, valued at USD 1.08 billion in 2023, is projected to witness a steady growth rate of 9.0 per cent from 2024 to 2030.

Skin boosters entail micro-injections of hyaluronic acid, along with vitamins and minerals, directly into the epidermis, aiming to revitalize, hydrate, and rejuvenate the skin, thereby imparting a natural radiance. The surge in demand for skin boosters is attributed to several factors, including evolving beauty standards globally, increased accessibility to nonsurgical cosmetic procedures, regulatory approvals for innovative skin boosters, and rising cosmetic demands among the ageing population.

Interestingly, in India, a notable uptick in demand among working professionals has been observed, driven by the fast-paced nature of their lives.

Amidst hectic schedules and prolonged work hours, individuals often grapple with skin issues like dullness, dehydration, and premature ageing.

Skin boosters emerge as a convenient solution, offering quick revitalization and hydration to maintain a fresh and radiant appearance despite busy routines.

Leading the forefront of new-age therapies is bio remodelling that employs ultrapur hyaluronic acid through precise injections to combat ageing signs such as wrinkles and dark under-eye patches.

This innovative approach delivers essential nutrients to promote skin rejuvenation, restoring moisture for enhanced firmness and elasticity.

Profilo, a prominent method within bio remodelling, ensures uniform moisture distribution across critical areas like the face, neck, and hands, yielding immediate hydration and skin-tightening effects. (IANSLife)

"Time gives you experience and maturity to face things in different ways."

—Deco

The Shillong Times

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Game of wooing begins

AS has been discussed in the past, manifestos are a deciding factor in every election. The game of wooing the public begins precisely here and electoral fortunes can shift to one side from the other if the hoi-polloi are carried away by the promises. The Congress party understands this in its years of hopelessness and came up with a manifesto clearly targeting major vote banks. For one, it promised to raise the reservations for the backward, SC-ST communities, who together form a large chunk of the electorate. It also wooed women with a promise of 50 per cent reservations in government jobs and impressive quotas for them in elected bodies including Parliament. The manifesto, with equal flurry, promised a payment of about a lakh for women from each poor family every year. The party's campaign machinery is bound to concentrate on all these when the real electoral fight lasting the coming several weeks unfolds. The minorities, who are already with the Congress for most part, too have been promised a fair deal.

The BJP by its very nature cannot afford to match its promises with what the Congress has done, though it passed legislation in Parliament to reserve one-third seats for women in elected bodies. On the ground, this has not happened yet across the board. The saffron bandwagon cannot promise implementation of caste census as its vote bank in the Hindi belt comprises largely of those from the upper castes. The party has a distaste for Muslims while Christians are also not generally comfortable with its Hindutva offensives. The BJP governments across states have performed in a lack-lustre manner, while this was compensated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi with a high-profile public outreach by virtue of his gift of the gab, not necessarily by his government's performance. How would the scenario now shape up vis-a-vis the results of the Parliament polls is anybody's guess.

On the other hand, the CPI-M that leads the Left movement in the country has come up with its manifesto. It promised many things, including a doubling of the wages for the national rural employment guarantee scheme and restoration of the special status for Jammu and Kashmir — one being an olive branch to poor women and the other to the Muslims. Problem, however, is the party has reduced to near zero in parliament and cannot hope to raise its tally beyond, say, 10 this time too, which makes it an insignificant player, possibly even in relation to Kerala where it got only one seat in the 2019 polls. Even as part of the INDIA alliance, it can only wag its tail. What more is in store, as far as manifestos of other parties are concerned, is worth a wait and watch.

Changing Political Landscape in the State

By HH Mohrmen

The ensuing election to the Lok Sabha has changed the political landscape in the state, at least in the way the different parties' are campaigning for their respective candidates. But what do we mean by changing the political landscape? Here, changing political landscape refers to the shifting dynamics, trends, and conditions within the realm of politics, especially concerning the election to the Lok Sabha. In general, the campaigns organized by the different parties indicate that the political landscape in Meghalaya, or at least in the Khasi Jaintia region, is in a state of flux or transformation.

Educated Candidates

Regarding the education of the candidates, we could not ask for a better list than the one we have now. The line-up we have in the election for the Shillong Parliamentary seat consists of three candidates holding doctorate degrees, with one holding dual masters. The other two candidates at least have university degrees; one has an engineering degree, and the other has a law degree. So, in terms of the education of the candidates, the voters are spoiled for choice. This time around, the wish of many voters to have candidates who are educated is fulfilled, and there is no room for complaints anymore. This is a very promising trend indeed, which hopefully will trickle down to the legislative assembly and the autonomous district councils too. It starts from the top; so hopefully, educated candidates will henceforth contest elections to the State Legislative Assembly and the Autonomous District Council.

The Changing Campaign Scenario

While the old parties in the state still spend money making and decorating their campaign pandals and hiring costly sound systems, this time around, voters saw the emerging new trend in the way the new party campaigns for their candidates. The new kid on the political block of the state campaigns to fight against corruption using bare necessities. In every VPP campaign, one would only see one table, a few chairs, and a simple public announcement system, and that's about it. No pandal, no decorations, no expensive sound system; at times, one could rarely even see the party's flags during their campaign. At most, the party would spend fifty

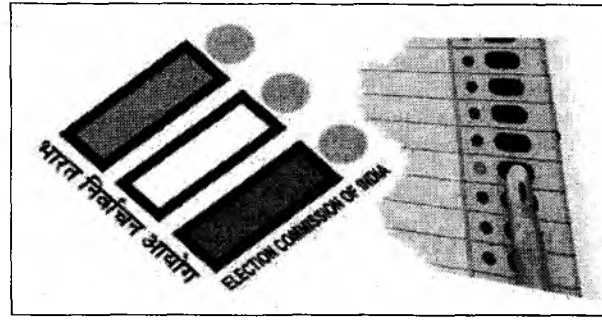
thousand per campaign, and this is another trend that gives the voters hope for a better tomorrow because other parties spend lakhs of rupees just to make pandals and decorate the campaign ground.

Is BJP's withdrawal from the race an advantage to NPP?

It is both yes and no. Yes, because the NPP will be able to consolidate its presence in the urban areas where there is a non-indigenous population, and on the other hand, it will be to the Congress's disadvantage. But the NPP is also likely to lose a huge section of voters who hate the BJP and blame it for its anti-minority approach. It depends on the size of the population that decides to vote against the party, not for

them to become corrupt. He said the voters ask them for money so where will they get the money from if they do not indulge in corruption. This is the same politician who with pride on his face last year said in public, "ngi pnybieit man ka san snem, ki bieit ruh man ka san snem," and now he has changed his mind. In one of the meetings where he campaigned for the Party candidate, he asked the Opposition to prove, where and when did he indulge in corruption and if they can prove that he was corrupt?

That is a good question, but the internet and social media have helped the public to become smarter because clips of their recorded speech can be shared numerous



the party's own doing but for the support that it received from the BJP as the NDA partner.

Corruption is No Longer the New Normal

In the state where politicians are getting rich instantly and voters do not ask how the candidates earn their money; in a state where politicians consider it their god-given right to be rich, and the public seldom ask how they can earn so much money when their known sources of income are limited, corruption becomes an accepted norm. For so long, corruption has become the new normal in the state, and it is normal for politicians and their coterie to become rich instantly. Buying houses and property left, right, and center almost every year and having in their collection all expensive cars available in the market, is accepted by the public as normal, and the politicians even boast about it.

Corruption in the state is considered normal because everyone who is in the helm of power is doing it with pride, thereby making it the new normal. There is a video still circulating on different social media platforms where one of the Deputy Chief Ministers said in the campaign last year that it was the public who compelled

times. Another Deputy Chief Minister in one of the campaigns asked, "If we are indulging in corruption then why people continue to vote for us?" This of course is a very valid point. But what he did not state upfront and the public did not ask is - How much money the NPP spent to win the last election. The public statements made by the two politicians during the campaign trail revealed that they have changed their minds; obviously, it is no longer cool to openly or ingeniously say it is normal to be corrupt. If it can at least make them change their stands, it shows that in the big war against corruption, the anti-corruption campaign has already won a small battle.

Calling a Spade a Spade

A few days back, one of the Deputy Chief Ministers also said that it is obvious that the leader of the VPP has this 'holier than thou attitude.' In his call to fight against corruption, he did not shy away from the truth and mentioned that in the last election, there were reports that leaders of the churches were also involved in unfair practices during the election. Taking advantage of this, those opposing the rise of the VPP condemned Ardent for his statement, which they alleged tarnished the image of the

church. They blamed him for his holier than thou attitude, hoping to gain the sympathy of the church elders. It is an open secret that some leaders, which include church and community leaders, used to take full advantage of the elections and make use of the situation for their own selfish interests. It remains to be seen if the statement he made will backfire and have an adverse impact on the prospects of the party candidate or if the public knows best and votes according to the dictates of their conscience. Will the public reward or punish the VPP for daring to call a spade a spade is what the people will have to wait and see.

The Organized versus the Unorganized Party

The debate that is ongoing is whether this election is going to see a triangular fight, with one side being the conglomeration of the regional parties led by the UDP, the Congress, and the NPP. The argument is that these parties are organized and already have their units and the party rank and file right up to the polling station level. This is considered to be the advantage that these existing parties have over the new entrants to the political landscape in the state, the Voice of the People Party (VPP). The VPP has only four MLAs and is not organized and does not have its presence anywhere in the state except in a few constituencies; it is estimated that the party will find it very difficult to perform well. The VPP is considered to be the underdog in this election, and it is true that unlike the good old parties like the UDP, the HSPDP, the NPP, and the Congress, the new party has no presence in most of the 36 legislative constituencies under the Shillong parliamentary constituency.

It is also true that if this calculation is taken into consideration, it is hope against hope for the VPP to even dream of winning the election. The hope for the VPP is only if there is a change in the way the people vote - when people do not depend on the leaders of the parties or when the units and the different groups in the party do not have influence in the way people vote. The chance of the VPP winning the election is only if the hoi-polloi decide to ignore the leaders of the political parties and vote without fear of threats and intimidation. If that happens, then it indicates that there is a change in the voting behaviour of the people - the common person on the street.

Engaging with the Idea of JNU

By DV Kumar

Perhaps no other student union's elections capture the national imagination as much as Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union (JNUSU) elections do. In the recently concluded students' union elections at JNU, the United Left alliance bagged three central posts and the BAPSA (Birs A Ambedkar Phule Students' Association) bagged one central post in the union. The ABVP, student wing of RSS, which has been trying extremely hard to capture JNUSU could not win any seat. What makes JNUSU elections so unique? Why is it that so much interest is shown on a mere students' union elections? The uniqueness of JNUSU elections is essentially derived from the uniqueness of the University (JNU) itself. JNU represents alternative imagination and the power of dissent. It stands against uncritically accepting dominant narratives and paradigms. It develops a questioning spirit without which the whole idea of a university breaks down.

What is the idea of a university? The essential idea of a university is that it should be a space for articulating contending points of view and where dissenting voices could be fearlessly expressed. It is the space where dominant narratives do not go unchallenged and untested. Critical imagination is promoted and education is not treated like any other commodity on a university campus. Universities as the premier institutions of learning and research are expected to reflect on and critique society, its structures and institutions so that corrective steps can be initiated. This is what an idea of a university is supposed to encapsulate. This is what precisely defines JNU. That is probably why there is so much interest about whatever happens in JNU including its students' union elections.

Let us dwell on four critical moments in the history of independent India when JNU lived up to its reputation of standing up for what is right thereby concretising the very idea of a university. First, when Emergency was declared in 1975, it was the students and teachers of JNU who strongly protested and had to pay a heavy price as a number of them were arrested from the campus. They had to endure the high-handedness of police. When Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, tried to enter the campus sometime in 1981 to inaugurate a function, the students of JNU virtually made it difficult for her to do so and she had to find an alternative route to enter the campus. This was in protest against the imposition of emergency in the country. Therefore, contrary to popular belief that JNU has been opposing only the present government at the centre, it always took a position against all forms of authoritarianism as it was demonstrated during the Emergency. In fact, that was the time when JNU came into the limelight.

Secondly, when the Ayodhya movement was at its peak, it was the historians from JNU (Romila Thapar and others) who prepared a document questioning the basic premise of the movement and exposing the sheer illogicality of correcting historical wrongs in a supposedly modern and progressive India. Perhaps no other educational institution provided such a sustained critique based on irrefutable evidence and reasoned arguments on the Ayodhya question. Thirdly, when the Manmohan Singh government launched what came to be called liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation (LPG) programme, it was the economists from JNU (Prabhat Patnaik and others) who critiqued it, along with some others from elsewhere in the country, for its potential to deepen socio-economic inequalities. This critique gained widespread recognition. Strong evidence continues to emerge to support their critique in the form of growing inequalities in India as corporate capital took full advantage of the policy of liberalisation.

Fourthly, when attempts have been made in recent few

years to define nationalism in narrow, alienating and exclusivist ways, it was at JNU in 2016 that a series of lectures (published in a book titled What the Nation Really Needs to Know) were organised about the real meaning of nationalism. They took pains to emphasise the inapplicability of European nationalism which was essentially based on one language and culture in the Indian context. The diverse and pluralist character of Indian society demands democratic, inclusive and secular form of nationalism based on the foundational principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. Any other form of nationalism which goes against these principles would be regressive and destructive. The attention that JNU gets is largely attributable to the interventions it has and continues to make in such critical moments.

G. Parthasarathy, the first Vice-Chancellor of JNU was a visionary. He was very clear about what kind of a university he wanted to develop. He closely followed all the debates in Parliament regarding the starting of a new university in Delhi which was to be named after the first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru. The overwhelming attempt at that point of time was not to establish any other university in Delhi but to start a university which was unique in terms of innovative course structure, high quality of the faculty, enhancing accessibility to higher education to marginalised and deprived sections of the society and promoting critical consciousness among the students so that they can play an important role when they go back to the society they come from. To a great extent, he succeeded in drawing some of the best faculty from different parts of the country and gave full freedom to them to devise their own course structure. He needs to be credited for having started along with some brilliant minds a remarkable experiment in higher education in the country. It may also be mentioned here that the inter-disciplinary structure which the NEP (2020) is focussing on now was part of the JNU innovative course structure from the very beginning i.e. 1969. This was something quite unique at that point of time.

In the last few years, JNU has become the target of sustained and organised attacks from right-wing forces for its tendency to question. Attempts have been made to vilify and demonise the university. People (both students and teachers) associated with JNU began to be called 'anti-national', urban naxals and so on. Bollywood is not to be left behind. A well-known Professor from JNU was targeted in the movie 'The Kashmir Files' and in another movie which was recently released Bastar, JNU was negatively portrayed. It does not require much imagination to know in what light JNU is going to be shown in the forthcoming movie on JNU: Jahangir National University (to be released on the 5th of April). This writer is aware of a number of scholars from JNU whose invitations to different academic programmes at other universities/institutions were cancelled at the last minute due to pressure from the powers which do not like the culture of questioning.

The newly elected student leaders from JNU (Dhananjay, Priyanshi Arya and others) have made their position very clear in tune with the ethos of JNU. They said they would fight for protecting the democratic, secular, liberal and gender-sensitive character of the university (apart from fighting for better library and hostel facilities). The politics of hatred and divisiveness and any attempt to transform India into a singular entity based on one religion, one language and one culture would be fiercely resisted continuing, in a sense the glorious legacy of JNU.

(D. V. Kumar is Professor, Dept of Sociology, NEHU, Shillong)

Letters to the Editor

Voters have a right to the VVPAT slip

Editor,
Another 11 days are left for Phase 1 of the election to the 18th Lok Sabha which begins on April 19, 2024 and 56 days for the votes to be counted on June 4, 2024. The major concerns of discerning voters are about the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and whether their vote is recorded as cast. This concern can be best addressed by a simple solution and that is to present voters a proof of their vote (VVPAT slip) outside the black box so that they can verify and drop it into a box, so that it becomes a second source of truth of the election process, after the Electronic Voting Machine. Since all who are eligible to vote in the 8th Lok Sabha election will still cast their votes by pressing a button on the EVM, they should be given a physical copy of the printed VVPAT slip, which can be verified to make sure that their vote has been recorded as he/she had casted and dropped the VVPAT slip in a box. This ensures that there will be two places where the vote is recorded - the EVM and the VVPAT slip box. Both should be counted and matched before the results

are declared. It is heartening that the Supreme Court has taken cognizance of a petition filed by lawyer and activist Arun Kumar Aggarwal and the NGO Association for Democratic Reform (ADR) that seeks to address the issue of Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) verification during elections. The petition challenges the Election Commission's guidelines that mandate sequential VVPAT verification. Currently, only five randomly selected Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) in each Assembly segment of a parliamentary constituency undergo VVPAT verification. The petitioners contend that this sequential process causes undue delay. The plea suggests an alternative approach and that is a simultaneous verification of VVPAT slips and deploying more officers for quick counting.

The government has invested nearly Rs 5000 crore in purchasing approximately 24 lakh VVPATs, yet presently, only about 20,000 VVPAT slips are verified. The petitioner emphasizes the importance of ensuring that every voter's ballot is accurately counted by allowing them to physically drop their VVPAT slip into the ballot box. The Supreme Court on 1st April 2024 issued notice to the Election

Commission regarding this plea. This is an ongoing matter and the court's final decision will determine the actual implementation. We should not lose sight that in a democracy, sovereignty vests with the citizens and elections are the tools for the citizens to transfer this sovereignty to their chosen representative. To do so, elections and voting systems must adhere to democratic principles. Not only should the election process be free and fair, it must also be seen to be free and fair. If the Apex Court rules in favour of the petitioners, it could lead to more efficient and comprehensive VVPAT verification during elections.

Yours etc.,
V.K. Lyngdoh,
Via email

Evil of caste discrimination persists

Editor,
A memorable incident happened at Metro Railway Kolkata five years ago. There was no trace of Covid at that time and I was only one and half years shy of becoming a senior citizen. I was returning home and was standing before a general seat in a Metro coach, not before a seat reserved for the senior citizens. A young man in his twenties

stood up vacating his seat and asked me to sit there. I declined the offer saying that I was quite okay. Seeing that I was not in a mood to listen to me, I forcibly pushed him to sit again telling him that I had no problem standing. But again, he stood up. Then he said with all the love in the world, "bolchhi tumi bosso (I am telling you to sit)."

In Kolkata Metro Railway coaches, some seats are reserved for women and a few seats for senior citizens and people with disabilities. But there would have been no need to reserve seats for anyone if all the people were like that young man. The reservation signboards over some seats actually indicate that there are many passengers who do not have enough compassion. Reservation of seats in a train therefore acts as a necessary antidote to inhumanity.

Similarly, reservation on the basis of caste indicates that caste hatred, untouchability, and caste favouritism are there in our society. We need caste reservation as an antidote to caste-based nepotism. There would be no need for caste reservation when all the people become as progressive, sane and humane as Nobel laureate, Kailash Satyarthi.

When he was a fifteen-year-old boy, Kailash Satyarthi made a plan to organise

a community dinner where the food would be cooked and served by the Dalits in a hygienic, neat and clean environment. He invited prominent political leaders and people from upper castes. Interestingly, they gladly accepted the invitation. A newly built park in Vidisha with Gandhi's statue at the centre was chosen as the venue.

The ladies who were to cook food had put on brand new clothes and had brought absolutely clean utensils for cooking. The dinner was ready. Everybody had been waiting anxiously for the guests for a long time. But not even a single person or political leader turned up. The food was still fresh but the incident dampened the enthusiasm of Kailash, his friends and the Dalits.

The double standards of those people were out in the open. Kailash clearly understood that the so-called leaders who used to speak against the practice of untouchability and discrimination in public gatherings were actually haters of backward castes. Then Kailash and others sat together for dinner.

While having his dinner Kailash burst into tears. One of the women who had cooked the food walked up to him and encouraged him. She said, "You are the bravest person that we have seen in our life. You are eating the

food that we have prepared." They thanked the boy for his initiative against the hatred for them.

Kailash Satyarthi's failure to organise a community dinner party also uncovered the double standard in our society regarding caste. The situation has remained unchanged. Today caste favouritism can be seen everywhere even in the allocation of PhD guides. It has been reported that upper-caste teachers have been showing a preference for scholars from their own community. On the other hand, upper-caste research scholars are also preferring higher caste teachers.

We need caste reservation in every sphere to minimise the incidents of favouring candidates of one's own caste during the selection process for admission, recruitment and promotion under the guise of merit.

Caste reservation is a necessary antidote to caste discrimination. Let social justice do the final talking. A highly intelligent serial killer may have more IQ than Kailash Satyarthi but we do not need the former.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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"The aim of argument, or of discussion, should not be victory, but progress."

— Joseph Joubert

The Shillong Times

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Needed a questioning electorate

A leading journalist of long standing, when asked at a media conclave in New Delhi what the status of India today is, stated unflinchingly that it is a quasi-autocracy. This should ring alarm bells if people were not living in a delusory world where noise overpowers reason. The very idea of an election campaign is faulty because it allows only a one-sided lecture with little space for questioning. There are myriad questions that demand answers, but candidates here have turned the entire campaign into a slanging match with the same old issues repeated ad nauseum. The jaitbynriew issue has gone overboard without politicians giving people the other side of the picture which is that if the BJP is re-elected, then the tribals and religious minorities would lose whatever rights they enjoy today.

People here have a right to know from the NPP-BJP common candidate as to what is the electoral bond scam and what impact it has had on the banking sector and the entire economy and corporate India as a whole. Why did some pharmaceutical companies manufacturing Covid vaccines donate so much by way of electoral bonds to the ruling party? What is the conflict of interest here? Meghalaya is not an island to be discussing only state-centric issues in a national election. Why is the issue of the Meghalaya Urban Development Authority (MUDA) being raked up in a national election when it should have been taken up in the Assembly which is the proper forum? This attempt to mislead voters who are considered gullible enough to swallow hook line and sinker whatever is being touted at election platforms is an old stratagem. But it is allowed to continue because those who can question do not attend election meetings because those are considered a waste of time. Also there is no civil society that takes upon itself the task of explaining the purpose of the Lok Sabha election to the hoi-polloi.

Meghalaya is now in its 52nd year but it appears that the electorate is just as ill-informed as it was a half century ago when songs and noise were what captured the imagination of the people even while reason and logic were temporarily switched off. Reason and logic return after the elections when the promises made are broken every single day and people realise there is a conspiracy to keep them disempowered by pushing their kids to drop out of school due to poverty or the absence of schools closer to the villages. A disempowered, poor and illiterate electorate is an asset for politicians. They are the ones who succumb to the lure of money for votes. And this appears to be the trajectory that Meghalaya is following every election. An empowered electorate would have asked why poverty has shot up; why children are dropping out of school and why the state of education is in a shambles. But why would politicians want an informed, questioning, educated, rational electorate? They would not be able to sell their silly, vacuous, holier than thou rhetoric then! Frankly, elections only reveal the pathetic state of affairs in Meghalaya.

Letters to the Editor

No significant development in Meghalaya in last 50+ years

Editor,
Shillong city as we see it today is our creation since we attained statehood. What we see today was envisioned approximately 50 years ago. The lowering of educational standards in our state is purely a creation of our past governments. The negligence of past governments in making education the top priority in their policy has reduced our state to the lowest rank in India today. The present government too is in deep slumber by not taking any corrective steps to rectify the various problems in education right from the primary level up to the highest level in our state. What is more alarming now are the flaws pointed out by the leading research agency Nity Aayog such as that Meghalaya has the dirtiest rivers (viz. UmKhrah, Um-Shirpy); is the most corrupt state in India as remarked by the Union Home Minister; Shillong as one of the dirtiest cities in India and Meghalaya being the third poorest state in India. There

are many more flaws that are surfacing like the most ill-planned/unplanned city in India; ill-maintained dirtiest Umiam dam for generation of electricity; city with highest traffic jam in India; the most disorganised and profligate state in India with so many non-essential advisers/chairpersons appointed resulting in the looting of the state exchequer.

Right now, our government is focusing its attention on festivals to attract both local, national and international tourists to our state. I do not argue with this step taken by the government to raise the economy of our state but I fail to understand how tourists would want to come to this state when they hear that Shillong has become notable for its traffic jams and it is increasing by the day. The traffic jam in Shillong was waiting to happen. It started over 25 years ago but our Home Department is sitting idle without thinking of any corrective measures to solve this problem. We see new flyovers coming up in all congested roads of the neighbouring state of Assam as preventive measures to solve traffic congestion but our state is yet unable to take similar corrective measures.

I had earlier pointed out

The people of the Land of Hynniewtep, which includes areas under the Sixth Schedule and non-scheduled areas can elect only one individual to the House of five hundred and forty-three (543) members. An elected representative is empowered by the Constitution to serve not just his/her constituents but is privileged to have a say on issues that concern the 'Nation' as a whole. He or she, after being elected, transforms from particularity to universality and represents the aspirations of the State/community in the larger political context.

General Elections to the Lok Sabha 1977 and 2024:

As the general elections to the Lok Sabha are drawing closer, the air is abuzz with promises (mostly false or undoable) to the accompaniment of drums, music, dances and dark humour. This year it is also marked by low grade politicking and campaigning ever.

In 1977 the Grand Old Party's slogan, "India is Indira" which reverberated throughout the country was also embraced during the campaigns for the Shillong Seat. The "India is Indira" slogan is associated with Indira Gandhi who was the Prime Minister of India from 1966 to 1977 and again from 1980 to 1984. Unfortunately, "India is Indira" reflected the personality cult surrounding Indira Gandhi and sowed the seeds of autocracy and belief that the nation's progress and well-being is closely tied to single strong and powerful leader.

However, Indira Gandhi's rule also faced criticism for being authoritarian and suppressing opposition and civil liberties during the emergency. This eventually led to her defeat in the 1977 elections, demonstrating the importance of democratic values and the people's power to hold their leaders accountable.

Similarly, in 2014 the popular chant "Har Har Modi" became so loud in several States in the run up to the Lok Sabha elections which brought Narendra Modi to occupy the Prime Minister's seat for almost ten years. Although, the BJP leadership then had categorically denied that it was not the official slogan of the Party, much had been said and criticized about his rule. Critics have alleged that elected autocracy is in full display now and Prime Minister Modi is being perceived as a supreme leader with minimal checks and balances. This could potentially threaten the very foundations of democracy.

Perhaps there is now an undeclared emergency and citizens who question the policies of the current government are branded as anti-

From "India is Indira" to "Har Har Modi"

Through the lens of the Shillong Parliamentary Seat

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

nationals and are locked in jails. The weaponization of Enforcement Directorate (ED) and Criminal Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to target opposition leaders, journalists and civil society groups is a matter of great concern. The blatant abuse of Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) is having a chilling effect on freedom of expression, dissent, and the overall democratic fabric of the country. Besides, the aggression of frontal Hindutva based organizations is putting democracy and constitution under peril.

Shillong Parliamentary Seat 2024: Will this election be a redo of 1977?

The 2024 Shillong Parliamentary seat election may not be an exact replica of the 1977 elections, but there are some similarities and lessons to be learned from that period. The 1977 Lok Sabha elections were significant as they took place post-Emergency, a time when civil liberties were severely curtailed, and the ruling party had exercised autocratic control.

Bah Kynpham Singh's critique against the Congress leaders of Meghalaya and his pamphlet "Shithi Sha U Paralok" (The Letter to a Friend Dated 1 March 1977) played a crucial role in mobilizing public opinion against the ruling party (APHL) then. The pamphlet highlighted issues that mattered to the state and community, and it contributed to the creation of a wave of support for the HSPDP candidate, Bah Hoping Stone Lyngdoh.

In the context of the 1977 elections, Bah Kynpham Singh's critique played a significant role in raising awareness about the failures of the APHL-led government in Meghalaya. By pointing out the issues with the subservient functioning of the APHL to the Congress government in Delhi, the failure to protect the people and land in the border areas, the corruption and misuse in Shillong Municipal Board, the public letter contributed to the shift in public opinion.

The domination of high command and single leadership in Delhi, as well as the inability of state units of national parties to take decisions independently is hindering the effective representation of local interests. In a coalition where a regional party is working with a national-based party, it is essential for the regional party to have the autonomy to make decisions that benefit its people. But this has not been the case for Meghalaya since 1972 and till date the ruling party in the State

(whether led by National or Regional Party) remains subservient to Delhi and such servility seems to have no end in sight.

Candidates and Party (s) in the fray:

More than the regional conglomerate or RDA, the VPP is growing in popularity but apart from clean politics, which is seemingly their USP, the new Party has nothing new to offer. Their manifesto is no different from the other regional parties both in style and content. The furiousness of citizens against corruption very well connects the VPP with the masses. But clean politics sans idea and ideology is soulless. The VPP's manifesto is ambiguous, and it has yet to make a clear stand against aligning with Hindutva based party. Will there be a post-poll understanding between the BJP and VPP? And if ever the VPP aligns with BJP it will betray its own ardent supporters who have been praying and fasting for their rise in politics.

The National Peoples' Party (NPP) currently governing the state is facing several challenges, including allegations of corruption and cronyism. These issues have led to the party being perceived as a government catering to the interests of those well-connected within the high-level political circle. Additionally, the NPP's association with the BJP, which is generally not favoured by majority of indigenous people in the state due to its perceived anti-Christian and anti-tribal minority stance, further complicates the situation.

The decision of the BJP not to field candidates for the Lok Sabha election this time can be deduced as a calculative and strategic move by the former. Perhaps, a win by any non-Congress candidate will be claimed as a win for BJP. In the Congress Mukht campaign, the BJP will consider either RDA or NPP or even VPP as a natural ally.

Whereas the Grand Old Party will have to strive harder to re-imagine and repackage itself. How far will the "Paanch Nyay" or five pillars of Justice resonate with the people, especially in Meghalaya which is at the bottom of every development index. There is no denying the fact that the I.N.D.I.A Bloc is the only opposition group which has been formed to challenge the Hindutva based politics from taking over the Nation.

Popular issues for Shillong Parliamentary Constituency:

Every party or candidate is banking on a few popular issues, namely, ILP, CAA

and Khasi language. Rather these issues, no matter how important, reflect the aspiration of just one section of the electorate and almost all party or candidates are not addressing with the same vigour and passion on crucial matters like health, housing, economy, education, workers' rights, unemployment and under-employment, environment degradation, violence against women and minorities.

On the contrary, the electorates should not take seriously candidates who claim to fight for CAA, ILP and Khasi Language. These are long pending and vexed political issues of the indigenous community and shall never be resolved during elections, rather it requires consistent deliberative and participatory exercise.

While CAA must go as it is discriminatory and violative of constitutional morality, ILP must also be critically analyzed and seen against the backdrop of the workings of other constitutionally established laws and regulations, like the Inter-State Migrant Workers Act and Sixth Schedule.

The Khasi language's inclusion in the 8th Schedule has been a long-standing demand, with significant efforts made by the Khasi Authors' Society (KAS) and other stakeholders since the 1970s. Several key milestones in this campaign include (i) 1973: The Khasi authors' collective, under Prof. R.S. Lyngdoh's leadership, urged the Sahitya Akademi to include Khasi as a recognized language (ii) 1976: The Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council passed a resolution for the inclusion of Khasi in the 8th Schedule. (iii) 1977 and 1985: The Sahitya Akademi dispatched expert committees to visit Meghalaya, resulting in reports that emphasized the need for more Khasi-language science books and expanding the language's appeal to readers beyond the community. (iv) 1996 and 2003: Two important committees, the Pahwa Committee and Sitakant Mohapatra Committee, were constituted to study the matter further.

The Government of India is yet to include Khasi in the 8th Schedule. However, the Government of India is only given a standard reply in Parliament on the difficulty in setting criteria for their inclusion. The KAS and other stakeholders must continue to demand and provide compelling arguments for the inclusion of Khasi in the 8th Schedule. Additionally, there's need to collaborate with other groups/organizations that share similar objectives to further strengthen the campaign for the constitutional status of the Khasi language.

peace and freedom from insurgency. Now with the off-shoot of new militant outfits and posts offered to young people to join at an attractive salary there could be a spike in insurgency yet again. Young people of our state are frustrated due to unemployment (arising out of under-development) so they feel encouraged to join new insurgent groups which results in a climate of insecurity and instability of governance in our state. Meghalaya is very poor in all human development indicators (HDI) like education, health, agriculture etc. It is also one of the poorest states with no adequate infrastructure for tourism, etc. As expected, the ranking of our state is at the top only in corruption, unemployment, dirtiness of our rivers, traffic jams etc. Only if there's improvement in all spheres mentioned above can we be assured of living a peaceful life in our state

Yours etc.,
Louis Pyngrupe
(Retd HOD Physics,
Lady Keane College)
Via email

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Electoral bonds speak of a larger collapse

By Jagdish Rattanani

This much should now be clear and settled for any reasonable person: the scheme of electoral bonds was an extortion racket, even if it is granted that (to be charitable to the designers of this ignominy) that was not the intention with which it was devised. The legalised corruption that the scheme unleashed will be studied and analysed for a long time and will go down as a milestone in the history of scandals, one that leaves nothing to the imagination given the remarkable and audited documentation that it leaves behind. Specifics of the transactions in all their horror, particularly when it comes to a) pharma companies and their donations in the wake of investigations into the quality of drugs, b) assorted investigations that began and stopped after "donations", one of these kinds leading to the process against Arvind Kejriwal, c) long-pending clearances and other accommodation in favour of business houses against payments and d) a clear path for foreign funds coming in as donations, are just the headline concerns. They point to not only the anti-national character of the scheme but also stand out as an invitation to corruption — an open doors policy that lays out a clear path to tamper with the Indian system.

What can a business leader or a vested interest not do when the price is known, legal cover is guaranteed, secrecy is written into the law and the party of the Prime Minister of India is the recipient of the booty? It legitimises the "rate-card" method of corruption that makes rent seeking an efficient, predictable and quantitative enterprise, only that this one is legalised, works at the highest echelons of power, and gets your job done, whatever that job be. It

twist is that India must come to terms with the realisation that its directional 1991 turn to the era of liberalisation and privatisation has failed.

India's liberalisation was meant to free the private sector from the license-control-Raj, fire up "animal spirits," the term given to us by John Maynard Keynes, and provide the economic escape velocity to enable us to float high above the so-called Hindu rate of growth. Pre-reforms, businesses kept liaison offices in New Delhi to ease the process of business-government interaction. In one case from a long time ago, the Chief Executive of Unilever in India was asked to meet the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi to help put an end to price control on soap, which had been brought in a desperate bid to control inflation in the light of the "oil shock" of the 1970s. None of this would be required after Dr Manmohan Singh under Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao abolished industrial licensing on July 24, 1991, and declared: "As a whole, the Indian economy will benefit by becoming more competitive, more efficient and modern and will take its rightful place in the world of industrial progress."

What has this turn yielded? We have GDP growth but government spending remains a significant part of this growth. The private sector, reticent as ever, still has to and is equally happy and willing to negotiate the corridors of power and pay speed money to those who matter. The ones closest to power have grown the most. Worse, the inefficiencies this builds into the system will not allow the private sector on the one hand to mature and on the other hand to stand up to authority, build governance systems, take bold decisions and the

"The collapse of India as a modern democratic nation and a firm entry into the territory of a banana republic, with an outer sense of calm barely concealing an inner dealing room where the dirty jobs are done. This is the inner rotteness of India's growth story, a self-imposed colonisation of a nation that has lost its standing, never mind the growing GDP."

marks the collapse of India as a modern democratic nation and a firm entry into the territory of a banana republic, with an outer sense of calm barely concealing an inner dealing room where the dirty jobs are done. This is the inner rotteness of India's growth story, a self-imposed colonisation of a nation that has lost its standing, never mind the growing GDP. What AR Antulay as Chief Minister set up in Maharashtra can be described as an early version of the electoral bonds scheme, save that his collections were meant for the poor and not funds to fight elections. Antulay was forced to resign in 1982 when what was then universally regarded as a monumental scandal about "donations" to trusts he controlled came to light. It was the BJP that filed the case against Antulay, who collected Rs 50-odd crore in trust funds, partly in return for cement allocations to builders at a time of shortages. As the scandal hit the national headlines, the BJP was at the forefront raising issues of corruption. L.K. Advani led efforts to highlight the scandal. Today, the same party has reached a stage where its leadership talks of a pro-rata justification of the collections: we got this much with so many MPs versus the amount that the opposition got with lesser MPs, as the attempted justification offered by Amit Shah goes.

Yet, the deep damage caused to the nation by electoral bonds is not captured in all of the above. The bigger

risks that must come with "animal spirits". Why risk it all when there is a side gate to manage the process? With a bent spine, it is entrenched players who will continue to rule and what we have in the name of the private sector (barring some exceptions) is money-making at all costs and with the least risks to the money-makers. This cannot be the dream of an India firing away on all cylinders to solve the burning problems of society. It is therefore no surprise that with liberalisation, we have built wealth and income inequality higher than that obtained during the British Raj, as the World Inequality Lab's working paper titled "Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj" by Bharti, Chancel, Piketty and Somanchi notes. It should also be clear that India's private sector has not really matured and remains comfortable only as a handmaiden of the government. It may therefore not be a stretch to argue that there is not a strong and purposeful private sector worth the name in India. It is no surprise that many Indians still don't trust private enterprises. In India even today, the working system is to pay a price, buy peace and make money while the government and those with the means stand together in an anti-people agenda.

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

"Tomorrow hopes we have learned something from yesterday."

— John Wayne

The Shillong Times

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Centre-State contest

AT no time in the history of this country has there been so much animosity between states and the central government over disbursement of central funds which is the sine-qua-non of governance in a federal democracy. But since 2014 when the NDA government assumed power the opposition-ruled states have been starved of funds so much so that states have had to approach the Supreme Court (SC) on this matter. On Monday last the apex court called on the Centre and state governments to refrain from a "contest," noting that state governments were approaching the court to seek relief against the Centre vis-a-vis the non-disbursement of central funds.

This time it was the case of the Karnataka Government that was being heard in the bench of Justices B R Gavai and Sandeep Mehta. The Karnataka Government was seeking relief from the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) on account of the drought that afflicted the state. It is unprecedented that state governments have to use legal means to access central funds and that the court had to reprimand the Solicitor General and the advocate appearing for the Karnataka Government — Kapil Sibal- for trading charges. The Inter-Ministerial Central Team had visited Karnataka and given its report and the funds should have been provided within a month of that report being submitted which was December 2023 but till date no funds have been disbursed. Solicitor General, Mehta said the matter could have been resolved if the state government had taken up the matter with the Centre instead of taking the matter to court and also questioned the timing which is on the eve of the Lok Sabha elections. The justices have noted that many states were approaching the Supreme Court to seek relief against the Centre in matters related to disbursement of funds. Earlier, the Tamil Nadu government had also approached the Supreme Court for non-release of funds for disaster management. Even the Kerala Government had filed a petition in the apex court after the Centre curtailed its borrowing limits. The matter is now pending before a 5-judge Constitution Bench.

According to Article 293 of the Constitution states have the right to raise borrowings from the Central government and/or other sources. The courts now have to adjudicate on whether such a right can be regulated by the Central government, and if so to what extent. Article 293 has never been subjected to any authoritative interpretation by the Supreme Court since matters never came before it. The Court opined further that the matter falls squarely within the ambit of Article 145(3) of the Constitution which provides that for the purpose of deciding a substantial question of law as to the interpretation of the Constitution or for the purpose of hearing any reference under Article 143, the number of the judges would be five. In recent times Centre-State relations and federalism are being put to the test. Opposition-ruled states are facing the rough end of the stick. Clearly this is an unhealthy trend and arm-twisting that the Modi Government appears to have used to the hilt.

The good, the bad and the ugly of Narendra Modi

By Dr Nsungbemo Ezung

Rewriting the political record set by India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru is Narendra Modi's personal tryst for destiny as of today. But history records Narendra Modi, seeking to become Prime Minister for the third consecutive term, as a man who was at the helm of power in Gujarat in February-March 2002 when a bloodbath ran the streets and homes of different parts of the state, following one of the worst communal-based violence in the history of independent India. Assuming that Modi cannot be blamed for the outbreak of the communal violence on that fateful month of February 2002 given the long history of communal hatred and the series of incidences of communal violence across India since 1947, we cannot help but keep questioning the dubious role of the state government that he headed at the time. It's hard to believe that the state government of the day would become helpless in the face of the rampaging mob on a violent spree and was forced to watch in silence the mayhem that went on for months claiming more than one thousand lives belonging to different religious communities. Or was that the moment that Narendra Modi had taken and exploited fully to position himself as the new avatar in a new India's political narrative characterized by communally-charged and polarization politics which eventually made him become what he is today.

It would also be difficult for history to forgive Narendra Modi for systematically purging his seniors within his party as soon as he came to power in 2014. The BJP stalwarts, including LK Advani and Dr. Murlimanohar Joshi, who had founded the party and built it brick by brick to let the party emerge as a major political powerhouse in the world's largest democratic country, were all reduced to the status of non-relevance as Modi brought the government that he leads at the center and the party he represents within his absolute control. He should be credited for converting the BJP which is considered a cadre-based political party to a party governed by the culture of high command from New Delhi.

If there is one distinguish-

ing feature that characterized the last decade of the BJP government at the center, it is the polarization politics that had attained new heights in the country. Narendra Modi had successfully promoted an assertive and aggressive identity politics based on religion, so much so that the Hindu masses of India no longer see Modi as not just a poster boy of Hindutva ideology, which many Hindus have rejected as a diluted

sufficient enough to capture the social and political imagination of the people. Modi will always present himself to the people as someone who has worked his way up to the top. The "kamdar vs naamdard" and "hard work vs Harvard" propagandas makes Modi a common man who had derived his position not from the lobby or having a connection with the power-center in New Delhi or family raj/dynasty



version of the Hindu religion, but as a new powerful leader who represents the interest and welfare of the larger Hindu population. A popular narrative had been constructed identifying Hindu religion as the sole representative of the very idea of India and all other minority religions as subservient to it. For Modi's India, the greatness of India and reviving India's glorious past would be achieved only by making the Hindu religion a dominant social and political force in the country. This idea of India presented by the BJP is so thought-provoking that it not only polarizes the minds of the people but captures the emotions of the masses helping the saffron party reap a huge electoral dividend.

Narendra Modi's art of politics is what has set him apart from the rest of the politicians and political leaders in India. From Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 2002 to Narendra Modi in 2014 to Mahi Bhaishahji in 2019 and Modi ka Parivar in 2024, the Prime Minister has been evolving and rebranding himself while presenting himself to the people. This image rebranding is

but directly from the people and through sheer hard work, dedication and sense of duty and service to the people. By the time he led the BJP to win a record three consecutive terms in the state of Gujarat in December 2012, the party leaders in New Delhi were convinced that he was the leader who truly had a support base at the grass roots and was the right person to lead the party nationally. It means that the inevitability of Narendra Modi transitioning from state leader to national leader was facilitated by the popular support that he commands at the grassroots. Modi continues to be seen as a leader who is directly connected with the masses. This also makes him an outsider to the Lutyens-elite politics of New Delhi.

There is one marked difference between the year 2014 when the then UPA government led by Dr. Manmohan Singh faced a general election after ruling the country for one decade and the incumbent BJP-led NDA government in 2024 facing another general election after ruling the country for the

same period of time. And that difference is on the question of corruption. At the time of going to the polls in 2014, the UPA government was facing the wrath of a number of corruption charges against them like the scams relating to the 2-G program, the Coal auction and the Commonwealth Games. These multi-crore scams, where even Dr. Manmohan Singh has been named as accused in one of the scams, had affected the morale of the then UPA government while seeking the third term in power from the electorate while the then opposition BJP weaponized those scams to bring down the UPA government and make way for the arrival of Narendra Modi at the center stage of Indian politics. A decade later, at least there are no scams/corruption charges, in the scale that the UPA faced, against the incumbent BJP government. Narendra Modi will be facing the people this time with a "clean image" as a leader who has combated corruption aggressively and unapologetically.

Some of the populist projects that the BJP government had undertaken during the last decade have also gone down well for a large section of the people of the country. Poor families across India continue to receive 5 kg of food grains every month under the food security program initiated by the central government in April 2020. Over three crore houses have been constructed under the Housing for All scheme benefiting the poor and disadvantaged groups of people in the country. An estimated 10 crore toilets have been constructed under India's clean mission campaign making India more hygienic and cleaner.

All of these populist schemes of the BJP government have meant a lot for the people of India belonging to the middle and lower class, Below Poverty Line (BPL) and extreme poverty category. For the crores of Indians across the country who are daily struggling for their basic needs, this is what "life becoming better under the rule of Narendra Modi" is all about. And this relative content of the masses and their blessing could be well sufficient enough to safely hand Narendra Modi another Prime Ministerial term.

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

No Hot Water Sir!
Went out of the city two days ago, and as I entered the fancy hotel where I was staying, I was told by the manager, "Sir, you have been given a super deluxe room!"

"Thank you," I said, quite impressed by the way the "super" was stressed by the manager. I followed the bell-boy to my room. He opened the door with a flourish, drew the curtains and exclaimed, "Enjoy!" and I all but expected him to give me a bow or royal courtesy, which he nearly did, and I was quite pleased, as I got myself ready for a bath to take away the ache in my bones I felt with the long journey I'd had.

With a smile on my face and whistling my favourite tune, I turned the hot water on, and waited the required seconds to feel the gentle warmth that would take away my fatigue.

Ice cold water flowed out.

No, I did not stop whistling, a little forcibly now, as I imagined the hot water travelling all the way from the boiler on the roof, maybe stopping at a redlight, then slowly turning forward when the light turned green, and I waited while whistling an-

turn a tap, and put my fingers out and heavenly hot water flows, "Good!" I say in my imagination.

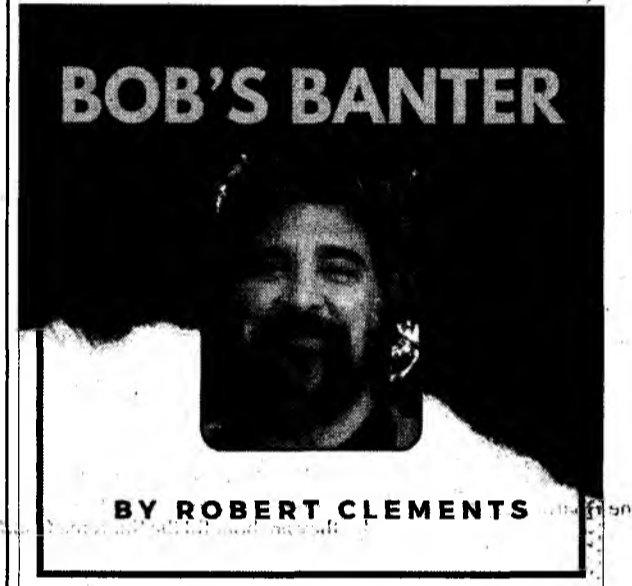
"Bad!" says the steel tap. "Why?" I ask.

"Because, we are not fancy looking like the ones in the super deluxe room," it says.

"Ah the ones with no hot water," I laugh and tell them a story, "So many of us go through life wondering why we didn't get great looks, good height or more colour. We look at others who we think are prettier or more handsome and sigh with envy; "If only..." we say to ourselves and look in the mirror sadly.

To you taps who think such, here's something to chew on: It's about a girl who grew up with a blind mother: "One day when that girl was standing in front of the bathroom mirror combing her hair, she asked her blind mother, "You really don't know what any of us look like, do you Mom?"

"Of course, I do," the blind mother answered, "I really know what you are like- what you are like inside. I know that you have a good nature because I hear you talk to the cat and to small children.



other tune, which slowly started dying on my lips as I realised that my fingertips which I'd put forward hopefully under the hot water tap, were still cold.

I rang the reception, and the manager hurried up, "Look at the silver fittings sir!" he said, "Just for you in your super deluxe room!"

"Thank you," I said, "I need hot water!"

"In the other rooms, we don't have such decorative fittings sir, only ordinary steel ones, and when you are having your bath and open your eyes, you will want to close them again! So bad! So bad!"

"I am sure!" I said patronisingly, as he continued turning the fancy fittings left and right, then up and down, then half one way, and half the other way, and yet in a steady flow of defiance only cold water gushed out.

"Did you see the view sir? Those windows are sound-proof, and even a bomb blast won't wake you up!"

I didn't care much for the idea of a bomb outside my room, and decided enough was enough, "Where's the hot water?" I asked a little rudely.

"I am afraid, there is no hot water sir!" he said, and without turning his back to me, slowly moved out of the bathroom, then out of the gilded room.

A little later as the ice-cold water made me spring around shivering and shivering, I looked at the fancy silver fittings and through clenched teeth muttered, "Many of us are like you!"

"How?" they seemed to cry out.

"Fancy suit, showy hairstyle, ornate gestures, or religious rituals! All fancy fittings! And when the hot water of spirituality, love and brotherhood is supposed to flow, there's none!"

And then in my mind I walk to the room which is not a 'super deluxe room' and go directly into the bathroom. The taps are ordinary steel. I

I know you are tender-hearted. I know you are vulnerable because I've seen your hurt reactions to someone's remarks. I know that you have character because you have the courage to stand up and defend your convictions.

I know that you have respect for human beings because of the way you treat me. I know that you have wisdom because you conduct yourself wisely for a girl your age. I also know that you have a will of your own because I've seen a hint of temper, which tells me that no one can dissuade you from doing the right things. I know that you have family devotion because I've heard you defending your brothers and sister. I know that you possess a great capacity for love because you've shown it to me and to your father many times and have never resented having a blind mother. So dear, and she drew her daughter closer to her, "I do see you and I know exactly what you look like, and to me you are beautiful!"

What meaningful words from a blind mother, who could see beyond the surface beauty of her child. "Now dear taps, let's pretend you're blind. Now look into yourself, what do you see?"

A person, hurt, resentful and angry?

Someone filled with envy, jealousy or an anger that is distorting your heart?

Or is there love and warmth, caring and compassion?

What you see is what you are. Fancy fittings when not giving hot water are like skirts that have faded and bodies shortened with age but that beauty which only the blind can see and feel, is the hot water that gushes out of you!

What matters is the beauty that comes from within...

(The Author conducts an Online Writers and Speakers Course. For more details send a thumbs-up to him on WhatsApp 9892572883 or bobsbanter@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

Political responsibility: Building Meghalaya's future

Editor,
In the verdant hills of Meghalaya, where the mist kisses the mountains and rivers sing a song of timeless beauty, lies a state brimming with potential. However, amidst the lush landscapes and vibrant culture, lies a pressing need for development. As Meghalaya heads towards another crucial electoral season, it is imperative to remind our politicians that the destiny of Meghalaya, and indeed the entire nation, rests in their hands.

Political campaigns often revolve around promises of progress, but true development transcends political affiliations. It is not about which party triumphs, but rather ensuring that the state emerges victorious, contributing meaningfully to the nation's growth. Education and infrastructure stand tall as the pillars upon which the edifice of progress is built.

Education is the cornerstone of societal advancement. It unlocks doors of opportunity, empowers individuals, and fuels economic growth. Every child in Meghalaya deserves access to quality education, irrespective of their background. As political leaders, it's impera-

tive to invest in educational institutions, promote skill development, and ensure equitable opportunities for all.

Infrastructure forms the backbone of development, facilitating connectivity, commerce, and communication. From robust road networks to reliable power supply, from modern healthcare facilities to efficient public transportation systems, infrastructure investments lay the groundwork for prosperity. Politicians must prioritize infrastructure development to propel Meghalaya towards a brighter future.

As the citizens of Meghalaya cast their votes, they do so with hopeful eyes, entrusting their future in the hands of their elected representatives. It is a solemn responsibility that demands unwavering dedication, integrity, and vision. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." True statesmanship lies in selflessly serving the people, rising above personal interests and political rivalries for the greater good. Similarly, Jawaharlal Nehru famously said, "A country is known by how it treats its weakest members." These words echo the fundamental ethos of governance - prioritizing the welfare of every citizen, irrespective of their background or status.

As we stand at the crossroads of history, let us heed

the call to political responsibility. Let us envision a Meghalaya where prosperity knows no bounds, where every child dreams of a brighter tomorrow, and where the spirit of unity propels us towards collective greatness. The developmental future of Meghalaya, and indeed the nation, lies in our hands. Let us rise to the occasion and build a future we can all be proud of.

Concluding with a line by the Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, "Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake." I am optimistic that the state will awaken to its fullest potential of development.

Yours etc.,
Kalparaj Chakraborty,
Tura, West Garo Hills

No one killed non-tribals in Meghalaya; they just died

Editor,
The arrest of two alleged suspects by Meghalaya Police in connection with recent killing of two innocent persons at Ichamati has raised serious question about the direction the police investigation is heading. It has been reported that after the anti-CAA protestors dispersed some miscreants allegedly attacked the victims leading to their death. (ST dated 27th March, 2024).

Is it believable that from a volley of protestors only two persons were involved in the killings whom Police have swiftly identified and arrested? Or those two persons have been arrested as 'soft targets' without much credible evidence in order to shield the actual perpetrators and conspirators of the crime? The sordid history of killings of innocent people in Meghalaya and zero conviction of the killers can be aptly termed as "No one Killed Non-Tribals in Meghalaya" taking a cue from one famous Bollywood movie titled "No One Killed Jessica."

Yours etc.,
N.K. Kehar
Shillong-3

Rupee on the downslide

Editor,
The rupee has rapidly been going down against the dollar for the last ten years. While Rs 59.44 could get one dollar on May 15, 2014, now one has to spend as much as Rs 83.45 to get one dollar. The ruling party at the Centre needs to pay heed to the real issues instead of escaping from them. Moreover, the growth in GDP cannot improve a common man's lot in a country where inequality is widening day by day. The glaring inequality needs to be bridged by inclusive growth, developing social sectors, adopting

labour intensive technology and ensuring social security for the needy.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Why promote only cricket?

Editor,
Cricket's dominance in India is undeniable both culturally and financially. Its popularity has indeed overshadowed other sports to a large extent. This is largely due to factors such as historical success, extensive media coverage and lucrative sponsorship (Women's cricket, an aberration in my personal opinion). As a result, resources, attention and infrastructure tend to gravitate towards cricket, leaving other sports at a disadvantage.

However, it is essential to recognize efforts being made to promote other sports, by increased funding, grass-root initiatives, and the rise of alternative leagues like the football Indian Super League. While cricket's prominence may pose challenges for other sports, it also serves as a testament to the power of sports in India where passion and enthusiasm drive participation and support. Balancing cricket's influence with development of other sports remains a crucial endeavour for India's sporting landscape to thrive holistically.

Yours etc.,
Anjan Kumar Das,
Shillong - 6

Traffic menace in our city

Editor,
Adding to Louis Pynogre's letter on the traffic issue, it reminds us of the 1990's song 'Traffic jam roz ye bigade mere sare kaam,' sung by Devang Patel, and guess what? It's the reality and precisely relevant today for our city's traffic jam scenario. Government after government with their empty and vague promises have brought about a stressful situation for the general public at large. It's like clogged veins in our hearts, where the public finds it tough for huge expenses or transplant. But it's an easy affair for VIP'S, since their clogged hearts/ways are easily cleared by escorts and mind you, it's never an expensive or stressful affair, while they are on their way to the greatest invention ever. In democracy, our repetitive error is that we believed in a system that works. Alas! Nothing works in Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
Joydeep Sharma
Shillong-2

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"If we would have new knowledge, we must get a whole world of new questions."

—Susanne Langer

The Shillong Times

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Modi, Vande Bharat

THE Vande Bharat trains are a metaphor to the modest progress that India has achieved in the last 10 years of the Narendra Modi-led NDA rule -- when the BJP-RSS ran the affairs of the nation. At present, a trial is on to run it at a speed of 160 km per hour. Modi started with a promise of Bullet trains 10 years ago. Today, it is a, "work in progress." The average speed of the much-hailed Vande Bharat now is less than 100 km per hour. When trains in other Asian countries like China and Japan run at super high speeds, this is what we have been able to achieve so far -- against a speed of 430 km per hour for China's maglev (magnetic levitation) trains, and Japan's bullet trains that run at 320 km per hour speed.

Vande Bharat, admittedly, is Made In India and hence India's very own. We had been having coach factories in the initial phase of India's Independence; namely the Chittaranjan Locomotives in Kolkata started in 1950, the Integral Coach Factory in Perambur, Chennai, set up as early as in 1955, and the Rail Coach Factory in Kapurthala set up in 1985. So, this is nothing new. What's special about Vande Bharat is its modern look, nice feel and its ability to attain a relatively high speed. Speed, as such, is more linked to the strength of the rail tracks. Modernization of tracks too is a work in progress. The Modi era saw improvements in the operations of the railways, but all at a modest scale. What could have been done or achieved in 10 years is largely a work in progress, not just in the railways sector but in all other sectors too.

When Modi started his innings in 2014, he promised bullet trains as in China and Japan. The Japanese technology was requisitioned for India's first bullet train project conceived between Mumbai and Ahmedabad. The inter-state project faced several odds. All these are usual with the way this nation has been functions for decades. As such, this is not a Modi legacy. Now when Modi seeks a third term, he hides the fact that in 2014, he had sought 10 years to "change India for the better." At this election hour, it is worth a debate as to how much change he has been able to bring about for this nation, as to boldly stake his claim to rule India for another five years. This is not to undermine the positive feel he created such as political stability that he guaranteed for the nation, or in checking terrorism, and in offering a slew of welfare steps to benefit the lower rungs of the society. However, India still has a long way to go to catch up even with China and Japan.

2024 MP Election: A contest of high stakes

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Every election is important, and the upcoming 2024 parliamentary election is no different. The BJP-led NDA government is going for a third consecutive term with the added goal of getting to the 400-seat mark, which will give it unprecedented leeway to push through its agenda. Even if it gets those numbers, they will not include the two seats from Meghalaya, which it has forfeited by pledging to support their senior partner in the state, the NPP. Realizing it had no chance of winning the election, the BJP decided instead to pin its hope on a quid pro quo arrangement in the future, despite claiming in public that the support was unconditional. There is a feeling that BJP pledging its support to the NPP will help the Congress, which will want to bank on the anti-minority perception of the BJP by projecting the NPP as nothing but a BJP-B team and presenting themselves as the only viable alternative. But will that allegation stick, and how will the electorate on the ground react to such a narrative? This is where the story gets a little complicated, and the final voting outcome may throw up a surprise.

A few months ago I was doing my fieldwork in a village that falls in a constituency that voted for a non-BJP and non-NPP candidate. My colleague, who had accompanied me, was talking to one of the residents of the village about the newly constructed school building, which was coming up quite well. They acknowledged that funds for infrastructural development had been quite forthcoming in the last few years, and both were in agreement that it helps if the same party is ruling both at the state and in the center. Considering that there is the BJP in the center and the NPP in the state, the implication would be that the people would vote for either party. However, the assembly election results showed that the combined vote share of the two parties in that constituency did not even cross 10%. How does one explain that paradox? It's quite simple, actually, and something that has been observed at the national level as well: people vote differently depending on the type of election. For national elections, people prefer a national party or one that has a link to one they feel will be able to better represent their interests, i.e., bring more funds for the state, rather than a regional party. So contrary to what many may claim that people who vote for national parties vote for money, it is only half true. People do vote for money, but money that they believe will help improve their lives. But what about the allegation that the NPP is a BJP-B team and voting for it could jeopardize the interests of the indigenous communities of the state and the North

East? That is a much more serious allegation and could actually go against the party. Let us look at some of the moves made by the BJP that directly threaten the rights of the indigenous people.

To begin with, the most obvious issue is the CAA, which is still a thorny issue for the indigenous communities in the state. Although almost all of Meghalaya and tribal (indigenous)-dominated territories elsewhere in the region have been exempted from the Act, the fact that a large number of illegal immigrants, 3-6 lakhs, might get citizenship still poses a big danger. This is more so for Meghalaya, which shares a highly volatile border with Assam, which can be used by the Assam government to settle the illegal immigrants in an effort to assert their claims over disputed borders.

Himanta Biswa Sarma, the Assam Chief Minister, has already stated that the definition of Assamese must change, which suggests that the possibility of non-indigenous communities capturing power in the state is very much a possibility in the near future. In fact, according to him, when the latest Census report comes out, Assamese people will be only about 40 percent of the population in the state, which, excluding the indigenous tribals, will come down to only 28-30%. This, if accurate, is a potentially explosive situation that could plunge the region into turmoil for many more years to come. By introducing the CAA and supporting the increase of non-indigenous people, especially illegal immigrants, the BJP has only further endangered the indigenous communities of the North East and Meghalaya.

There's also an attempt to bring about a Uniform Civil Code (UCC), seen by indigenous tribal communities all over the country as a threat to their way of life. However, with the governments of Uttarakhand and Assam exempting tribals from the UCC, it is highly likely that this will happen at the national level as well. There is, though, another more subtle move that has taken shape in recent times. Although not confirmed as an official policy, there have been statements made by individuals associated with the BJP or groups supported by it demanding to take away the benefits of indigenous peoples who have converted to Christianity and Islam. Such demands are, on the other hand, silent on indigenous peoples who identify as Hindu, which reeks of double standards considering Hinduism is as foreign as Christianity and Islam, having its roots outside the sub-continent, arriving with Indo-Aryan-speaking Central Asian migrants much after

the indigenous peoples had already settled in the region. What will happen if the demand is accepted?

In Meghalaya, where more than 70% of the population is Christian and more than 80% of the population will be able to enjoy the benefits provided for tribals by the Constitution. This will also mean that Meghalaya will no longer be a tribal-dominated state. Under this circumstance, what happens to the protection that the indigenous communities enjoy in terms of preventing land alienation and becoming a minority in their own territory? Will the provisions of the Sixth Schedule still be applicable if Meghalaya is no longer a tribal majority state? For this reason, there is a demand for the Sixth Schedule in Ladakh because the people are well aware of the dangers if they are left to fend for themselves without constitutional protection. The removal of special protection might benefit some business houses and individuals who might look at cashing in on the new capital that will flow into the state in the name of investment. However, for the rest, including those who still practice the traditional faith, that will be a great catastrophe. So, the combination of CAA and derecognition of those who have converted from their traditional faith will threaten the rights and very survival of the indigenous peoples in the state and the region.

In such a situation, official steps taken by the BJP or instigated by those associated with it are very much against the interests of the indigenous peoples. Aware of this, Conrad Sangma recently announced in Arunachal Pradesh that although his party is a partner of the NDA, when it comes to the issues of the Northeast people, particularly the indigenous communities, it will always be the first to stand up for their rights. The fact that despite the NPP not contesting in Arunachal Pradesh (it is supporting the two BJP candidates), he had to give such a clarification speaks to the possible worry and repercussions Conrad Sangma fears of being associated with the saffron party in places where they are contesting, i.e., Meghalaya.

At the same time, Conrad Sangma is known to be quite close to Pradyot Bikram Manikya Deb Barma, the current chairman of the Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance, also known as TIPRA Motha. Recently, Pradyot Deb Barma threatened fast-unto-death demanding rights for the indigenous peoples in Tripura who have been made a minority in their own homeland. Having seen what has befallen his fellow

Kok-Borok brethren (Tripuri, along with Garo, and Bodo, are part of the larger Kok-Borok language group which is also related to the Kachin and Konyak groups), it is highly unlikely that Conrad Sangma would wish the same fate for his people. After all, it could be his own loved ones who may have to undergo the humiliation Pradyot Deb Barma must have endured for so many years in his fight for the rights of his people. But as it stands right now, the BJP's announcement to publicly support the NPP could prove a liability for Conrad Sangma. In such a situation, it appears that Congress stands to benefit from this narrative, unless the NPP finds a way to change it.

The fact that Congress is a national party and the direct ideological adversary of the BJP gives it an edge over the other contenders. However, the Congress-NPP alliance in the District Council creates an impression that the state leaders are not in sync with the national leadership which does not want anything to do with BJP or affiliated parties. Can the state congress leadership be trusted then? The RDA is a regional alliance, and as discussed above, this could prove to be a liability for it. VPP, which is also a regional party, and another Jaidbyrniew party, has not completely quashed the possibility of aligning with the BJP. It has also tried to make an outreach to the non-Khasi voters, but will that be enough to convince them that it will not be, as Albert Thymiang terms it, the Christian version of the BJP or the Khasi Christian-BJP, i.e., anti-minority, but this time against the non-Khasis and the non-Christians? In fact, for a party that flaunts its love for the Jaidbyrniew, not respecting the matrilineal tradition and being blamed for trying to weaken the district councils, it appears that, like the BJP, which actually doesn't want to protect Hinduism but remove it to suit their Hindutva agenda, the VPP is trying to change the Jaidbyrniew to suit what it believes it should be, not what it is. So, while the NPP is being accused of being a BJP-B team, the VPP is very much the mirror image of the BJP. On the other hand, RDA has promised to make efforts to facilitate the accordance of minority status to the practitioners of indigenous faiths, something which VPP has not done in its manifesto.

Every election, it is the silent voters who make the difference. This time also, it will be no different, and time will tell what the decision of those who are silent will be. Whatever it is, we will learn to live with it one way or another.

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

Little outburst against CAA notification in Assam on eve of Lok Sabha Polls

CM Himanta Biswa Sarma exudes confidence at BJP's success

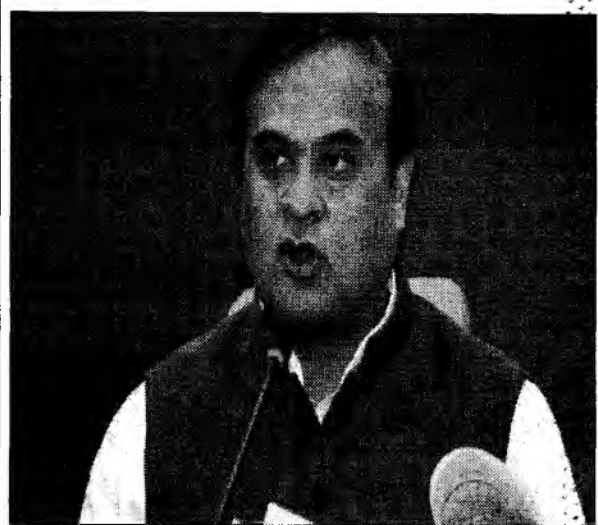
By Ashis Biswas

Assam Chief Minister Mr Himanta Biswa Sarma leads a charmed life, confounding his numerous opponents. The operationalisation of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has hardly raised a ripple in the state so far. Preliminary reports may not be conclusive, but latest Assam media accounts suggest that the number of people seeking confirmation of Indian citizenship has not reached even a double digit level!

Yet, the much dreaded spectre of lakhs of people (including suspected 'foreigners') lining up in long queues to register themselves

ing Hindus and Muslims) and Asomiyas. Still, over the past decades, it needs stressing that generally life in general has been orderly and peaceful in Assam, regardless of underlying ethnic tensions -- surely a major achievement in the volatile NE region.

A major problem for Census operation enumerators as well as political parties/leaders is how to work out the exact number of non Asomiyas speakers in the state. It is common knowledge that many Bengali speaking Muslims (Miyans) as well as some Hindus, declare them-



under the new rules and become Indians finally, was precisely the biggest fear among non-BJP opposition parties/leaders. Most political parties as well as powerful Assam-based socio-cultural organisations had unitedly opposed the CAA.

They had subjected the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and its state leaders to a scathing political campaign in recent times. Their main grouse: a dominant national party was about to endanger the future of Asomiyas culture and traditions. Mr Sarma, who vigorously supported the CAA, naturally attracted much of the flak, which often got personal.

The general apprehension was that in the post CAA period, the floodgates would open for large numbers of

selves as Asomiyas speaking citizens during the decadal census operations. Once the CAA becomes fully operative, Asomiyas naturally fear that this may change for good.

However, Mr Sarma, who makes no secret of his preference for Bengali Hindus in contrast to his hardline approach to the 'Miyans' population, has all along insisted in his present poll campaign that the former group need not be treated as aliens. Their figures too, are not much, most estimates putting the present number of Bengali Hindus at around 3 million or thereabout -- hardly a challenge to other major ethnic groups/communities.

Even prior to the present campaign, Mr Sarma has

Even prior to the present campaign, Mr Sarma has regularly visited that the three Bengali-dominated Barak valley districts, addressing meetings in Bengali at times, unlike most other Asomiyas leaders. The state BJP claims that there have been more investments/economic development in the Barak valley region in recent times.

Bengali-speaking Hindu residents in Assam to take advantage of the Centre's move and secure their long waited civic rights. In the process, the majority of native Asomiyas - speaking population would be threatened, leading to a possible crisis for the state's distinct homegrown culture and ethnic character.

No wonder, in the election season, Mr Sarma has lost little time to go on the attack against the opposition. Mocking at the claims made by prominent opposition figures that 'trucksloads of applicants would turn up for days' claiming the benefits of citizenship, Mr Sarma has challenged his tormentors to explain how they could be so wide off the mark, not to mention their apparent failure to assess prevailing ground situation/realities in Assam!

Unlike other states (barring West Bengal and Tripura) ethnicity, religion and language have always been politically important factors for Assam, an area that has seen much migration from neighbouring states/countries since the British rule. Over the decades the percentage of native Asomiyas-speaking people has dwindled within the increasingly mixed local population -- current figure -- 32 million.

There have been sporadic incidents of mass violence involving old settled tribes, migrating Bengalis (includ-

regularly visited that the three Bengali-dominated Barak valley districts, addressing meetings in Bengali at times, unlike most other Asomiyas leaders. The state BJP claims that there have been more investments/economic development in the Barak valley region in recent times.

Sarma's critics however remain unimpressed. As a self-attested hard Hindutva follower, Sarma's tactics divide the Bengali-speaking community in Assam sharply, with Muslims remaining sidelined. Further, recent delimitation proceedings carried out by the ruling BJP government effectively reduced the number of state Assembly/Parliament constituencies in Assam, while the numerical superiority of Asomiyas and tribal communities was ensured.

Protests mainly from Bengali-dominated groups/parties in the Barak valley against the new delimitation alignments addressed to various authorities elicited little response. Mr Sarma on the contrary openly declared that it was the state government's intention to preserve the essential ethnic and cultural character of Assam. Nevertheless, state BJP leaders expect strong support from the Barak valley districts now that the CAA has become operational. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

A murder is a murder: Whoever commits it is a murderer

Editor,
I write to express my deep concern and dismay over the recent increase in cold-blooded killings in Shillong and East Khasi Hills. The tragic incident involving the targeted killing of an innocent labourer in Mawlai Mawroh early this morning, (April 10, 2024), has further heightened the sense of insecurity and despair among the ordinary citizens, especially the poor and daily wage earners.

Let us for a moment think and imagine that every morning wives or mothers prepare breakfast for their husbands or sons, sending them off to work with the hope that they will return home safely and provide for their families. Perhaps many labourers have left their children at school, unaware that they might never see their parents again. It is heartbreaking to think that such innocent lives are being cut short by senseless acts of violence.

As the situation worsens, it seems that the police are struggling to cope and bring justice to the victims. This has led to a growing sense of helplessness and frustration among the residents of Shillong. It is high time that we, as a society, take a stand against this targeted violence and demand peace, justice, and solidarity with the victims.

I strongly believe that we must boycott all election meetings until the candidates and parties commit to taking an honest stand against such targeted violence. It is crucial that they prioritize the safety and well-being of the people they aim to represent. We must come together as a united front to voice our concerns and demand action from those who have the power.

A murder is a murder and who ever commits it is a murderer and their hands are stained with blood of innocents. Let us not remain silent in the face of such injustice. It is our responsibility to ensure that our voices are heard, and that the perpetrators of these heinous crimes

are brought to justice.

Also we must stand up and challenge hate speeches which are rife in multi social media platforms which also act as breeding ground for such violence. Together, we can create a safer and more peaceful environment for our families and communities.

Yours etc.,
Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh
Via email

'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere'

Editor,
The above is a quote by Martin Luther King Jr. which should now be seen as severely relevant in the light of killings at Mawlai Mawroh and in Ichamati. A crime as heinous as murder cannot be justified in any court of law or in the court of God.

Let's get to the crux of the matter and address the elephant in the room. Have we as a society become so insecure about our culture that

at the drop of a hat, we are ready to accept the narrative of the 'us versus them'?

It absolutely disgusts me to read some of the comments on social media where our own people are defending the killings and justifying murder in the name of the Jaitbyrniew. Such people are a blot in the name of being 'sons of the soil.' What kind of an image are they trying to create for our society and the state? Can they deny the role of 'them' in our society?

Who are the tourists who come to our state? Who are the ones that are investing in businesses here? Are we labelling them and painting them with a communal colour? Do we want to remain isolated when our surrounding seven sisters are galloping towards achieving newer heights and welcoming everyone?

Jaitbyrniew is a term of reference to our people which comes with the added expectation that each 'son of the soil' will dedicate themselves to the uplift of the native society to achieve prosperity and growth, and thrive as a community, but with inclusivity.

Such petty-minded justifications of heinous crimes in the name of Jaitbyrniew -- perhaps by the meanest-minded people who deserve to be identified and openly called out -- is simply tainting our society and brainwashing our youths.

This is not the kind of picture we want to give and therefore it is high time we speak up and show absolute disregard for such acts openly. It is the 21st century and we definitely have better issues to deal with at a socio-economic level. The othering of communities is a classic page out of the play-book of fundamentalism and we should not fall prey to it, as we have been so far. This helps no one.

Today it is our non-indigenous brothers, tomorrow it will be us. Such aggressors do not understand community, creed or religion. Even now, they extort money out of our businesses as free will. They threaten our families whenever they are called out. They mistreat our women and children. They burn vehicles and riot to cause civic disturbances. They do not bat

an eye for the uplift of our poor and desolate. But, we stay quiet.

Let us not be naive enough to be so blind to suffering that we think it is okay to stay zipped whenever our non-indigenous brothers are attacked and nothing will ever happen to us. We must speak up for injustice and communal colours have no role here. Silence regarding an issue does not mean it is non-existent.

To conclude, I think it is highly pertinent to end with two quotes which will resonate with everyone:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." -- Galatians 3:28

"For God shows no partiality." -- Romans 2:11

Yours etc.,
Patrick Kurbah (legal consultant)
Via Email

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"The most violent element in society is ignorance."
— Emma Goldman

The Shillong Times

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Private sainiks

WHEN it comes to the policies of the Modi government, there exists a crisis of confidence on multiple fronts. For instance, the intent behind the privatization of Sainik Schools. The Congress party has sought withdrawal of the decision after it noticed that over 60 per cent of the private Sainik Schools have been launched by the BJP-RSS-linked entities. Notably, the minorities always have their misgivings about the RSS drills, in military mode, against an invisible 'enemy'. For the RSS, the enemy is domestically the Muslims just as the nations like Pakistan are for the nation and, by extension, to the Hindutva forces. In a nation where communities co-exist, questions often arose as to why the RSS is bent on having such 'armed' drills when the police and security forces are already taking care of law and order and related problems. True, the RSS and its affiliates have, alongside their religious obsessions, engaged in social and community service. The RSS, no doubt, projects itself as a volunteer force. But, there's more than what meets the eye.

The 10 years of the Modi rule has been a period of massive growth to the RSS that propped him up as Prime Minister. Having functioned as an RSS pracharak, Modi is duty-bound to promote this ideology and its obsessions. Many are convinced that it's the RSS that runs the nation behind the scenes. The RSS is guided by a spirit of nation-building based on its Hindutva concept. This splits the society vertically, which is the difference between the BJP and the Congress. The Congress sees the people as a unified whole and promotes a secular ideology that appealed to a wider spectrum of the well-informed. The undoing for the Congress was its corrupt core, which floored it in 2014. It is a moot point whether the Congress can ever take on the BJP or the Hindutva forces with a renewed vigour.

The present condition suits the BJP and the RSS to push their agenda on several 'obscurantist' fronts. The privatization of the system of Sainik Schools, a well-reputed entity, may be viewed as part of the RSS' obsession to strengthen a parallel militant cadre even as education is materially different from military training. What's done might not be undone under pressure from the Congress. This might be a fait accompli. Notably, what marked out the Modi government's 10 years is its failure to address several of the nation's serious ills. Modi slept over matters that were not part of the limited RSS agenda. Corruption, for instance, as is evident also from the near total paralysis and inaction of the ED and other central investigating agencies, in the past 10 years.

Mindless killing and Khasi society's response

By Patricia Mukhim

Why is there a sudden spurt of violence in society? What does violence achieve? What do the groups committing violence actually want? What is society's response to the cycle of violence? And who are the patrons of the perpetrators of violence? These are questions that are hammering at our doorsteps because they need to be answered and answered without hedging. First, two nondescript people "the dispensable other" were killed in Ichamati following an anti-CAA protest. Then a labourer working in an under construction house in Mawlai Mawroh is killed simply because he is also "the dispensable other" simply because the construct is that he has replaced a tribal labourer who could have worked in his place. This despite the fact that the deceased is a resident of Shillong and has a labour license. So the logic seems to be, "kill first, check license later." In all of this the dispensable other is seen as the intruder into the Hynniewtrep territory (which in the mind of the killers is not part of India).

The sudden spurt of violence according to some seems to be linked to the Citizenship Amendment Act and the repercussions for states bordering Assam. The assumption is that there is a long queue of Hindus/Christians/Buddhists/Jains and Parsis who are persecuted in Bangladesh/Afghanistan/Pakistan and have been in India up to December 2014 - the cut off year and are in Assam awaiting citizenship have not even reached the double-digit figure. So why the furore? There are other fears awaiting the indigenous tribes of India's north east such as the loss of the Sixth Schedule status or the abrogation of Article 371-A in Nagaland. If it was done irrevocably for Jammu and Kashmir it could be done elsewhere too. That is the fear and the fear is genuine. But such fears cannot be dealt with the way some groups here are doing it which is to kill defenceless people. By doing so we are putting all the non-indigenous people here who are genuine Indian

citizens and have lived here for as long as we can recall, on the defensive. It's bad politics and it's an ignominious societal dysfunction. As of today all the Hynniewtrep people are being labelled as cold blooded killers and they include even pious church leaders whose propensity to remain silent at such critical junctures is disgraceful to say the least.

The groups committing violence might have been paid to do so or are bigoted members of some pressure groups who feel they alone are custodians of the Hynniewtrep legacy and all others are opportunists waiting to sell off this state to the highest bidder. That idea has been planted in their irrational heads by some extreme right wingers who are now selling themselves as the only protectors of the Hynniewtrep race. The idea is to use fear psychosis as a stratagem to drive out the non-indigenous people from Meghalaya as if this state is some kind of island surviving on its own resources. The hot-heads should be told that the crores coming here are from taxes paid by ordinary Indians, excluding the tribes. When a person who dares to kill is hailed as a 'patriot' there is no stopping him from repeating similar crimes. More so when the law keepers are always but always on the backfoot - never once able to investigate crime in a manner that the killer is nailed. Now why does this happen? It's because these groups of criminals are actually patronised by politicians. The moment they are arrested the police are under pressure to release them on bail or on the plea that they were mere suspects taken for questioning. The society too is to blame when it prevents the law keepers from carrying out their tasks.

In 1979, when the first spell of violence broke out, Mr BB Lyngdoh was the Chief Minister and VS Jafa the Deputy Commissioner, East Khasi Hills and Mr KPS Gill was the IGP between 1980-81 when Meghalaya

was going through a period of turmoil. I recall how Mr Jafa would physically run after the trouble makers which included a person that later became an MLA and minister. Mr BB Lyngdoh also made full use of the CRPF and that was how violence was quelled albeit it resurfaced in 1987 and later years too. But the administration was never seen to have fallen short of its duties. As DC, Mr Jafa was always in the field and he had a very reliable grapevine that gave him the news he needed. If that level of violence were to erupt today I am unsure as to how the state police would handle it. It was good therefore to hear the CM, Conrad Sangma speaking about bringing in additional forces if needed to quell these serial killings and to increase vigilance by deploying the CRPF. I recall that there was a lot of murmuring about CRPF high-handedness because people expected to deal with arsonists and killers with kid gloves. I hope we have come a long way since then.

At the time there was no social media to give us a blow by blow account of the violence. Today the whole country knows that fellow Indians can be killed in Meghalaya just because they are not tribals and therefore not sons of the soil, even if they have lived there for decades. The poor are especially vulnerable. So on the one hand the state is hard-selling tourism and on the other, tourists are unsure if they will return alive. They could just be at the wrong place and at the wrong time. Now everyone wants to know if the killers of Arjun Rai have been apprehended. Over 24 hours have passed since the murder and police don't have any leads. Interestingly not a single political party has condemned the killing for fear of a backlash from their respective vote banks. Most political parties try to appease the voters who too are fed with the rationale that they are losing out to the non-indigenous people. Whether that is borne out by

hard data is immaterial.

It was the former CM, Mukul Sangma who had stated that in Meghalaya successive governments have been held to ransom by pressure groups and have succumbed to such pressures. Development too has been stalled by pressure groups who have fed the people of this state on an irrational fear psychosis which is the easiest way to control their minds.

In a study captioned "Does Violent Protest Backfire? Testing a Theory of Public Reactions to Activist Violence," by Brent Simpson, Robb Willer and Matthew Feinberg, the authors found that in the situations studied, violence led to perceptions of unreasonableness, which reduced identification with and support for the protest group. The authors claim that existing research generally finds that violence by protesters reduces public support for the protesters and can even erode support for the causes they support. Other studies have shown that public support for a movement wanes when it uses violent tactics, and that violence damages the perceived legitimacy of the group. In Meghalaya, this does not seem to be the case. Society continues to support violence because there is no organised protest against any or all forms of violence except when it happens to an in-group member.

If as a society we believe we can get away with killing defenceless people then we have got it wrong. For every action there is an equal reaction. This is the law of nature. Let's not forget that our people young and old are now scattered across the country and the world at large and anything happening in any corner of the world, in this case our distant corner is digitally transmitted. We are socially networked and images can trigger all kinds of reactions. The politicians elected to lead the state and its people have let it down repeatedly by treading on eggshells when it comes to being tough with criminals. This has got to end!

India-Greece Relations Bilateralism Vs Multilateralism

By Prof. (Dr.) D.K. Giri

India-Greece bilateralism received a new impetus in an international seminar, organised at Jawaharlal Nehru University early this week. The seminar was devoted to discussing various dimensions of India-Greece relations - history, tourism, culture, geo-politics, diplomacy, trade etc. In my presentation, while commending the initiative of augmenting bilateral relations, I raised the issue of the artificial dichotomy between bilateralism and multilateralism and the need to balance it.

Pointedly, I referred to the European Union (EU) as a multilateral regional organisation which is by far the best example of regional integration. Yet, the EU so far has failed in projecting its political personality to the world. The EU was created not only as an economic union, but a political player in promoting pluralism, democracy, human rights etc., the values the EU member countries clearly seek to adhere to. But there has certainly been a mismatch between these values and the trade policy they adopted. In particular, EU trade with China has been booming although the latter is universally considered to be an autocracy and a consistent violator of human rights.

Likewise, the other multilateral bodies have failed in their objectives. The biggest of them all, the United Nations, which was created after the horrendous Second World War, to prevent the recurrence of wars, becomes a helpless onlooker as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza rage unabated. The UN certainly has unequal structures, namely the Security Council which is immobilised by the pernicious Veto exercised at will by any of the Permanent Five. The reform of structures and functions of the United Nations is another debate we will not engage here.

The point to note is if multilateralism is being infructuous, it is advisable to focus on bilateralism. At any rate, while multilateralism in a globalised and an interdependent world should be aspired for, bilateralism lays out the building blocks. What has been happening is that the quest for multilateralism has downplayed bilateralism. It is, using the popular metaphor, missing the trees for the forest. The India-Greece bilateral efforts should correct the fault line in contemporary geo-politics.

On India-Greece relations, Amrit Lugin, who served as Indian Ambassador to Greece, narrated the developments between the two countries from during his time and till today. He informed that the long historical link between two countries is reflected in the Greek psyche even today. The former Lt. General Philip Camposse, a strategic expert, made a meticulous presentation of the contours of bilateralism.

The bilateral relations got a shot in the arm in August 2023 when Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Greece. He was doing so after 40 years of visit by an Indian Head of Government to Greece. Also, significantly, the bilateral cooperation was elevated to a strategic partnership during this visit. Camposse attributes, this sudden shift to strategic partnership to a response to the growing trilateral relationship between Pakistan, Azerbaijan and Turkey. The strategic partnership is a logical extension to the said response as Greece has stood firmly with India on the Kashmir issue and countering Pakistan-sponsored terrorism.

The second push to India-Greece relations came from the visit of Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis early this year as the Chief Guest at the Republic Day Parade as well as the keynote speaker in the Raisina Dialogue. He made a strong case for deepening India-Greece relations. He said, "India could not find a better gateway than Greece

to Europe and Greece will have no better gateway to Asia than through India". He asked for work on the IMEC project - India-Middle East-Europe Corridor despite the war in Gaza. The Greek PM's attitude and statements pointed certainly to the acceleration of relations between India and Greece.

Building India-Greece relations should certainly invoke the rich legacy of history involving both countries. It goes back to 326 BC when Alexander invaded India. The historical anecdotes suggest that Alexander, a great fighter, had to retreat in the North-West of India when an Indian king paraded the elephants on the battlefield. The legend has it that an Indian king from Punjab offered his daughter in marriage to Alexander to buy peace. That sets a matrimonial relation between Greece and India. Likewise, many Greeks came to India as soldiers or traders and settled down forever in this country.

There is evidence of Greek art and architecture in Indian society and civilization. In India and ancient Greece, there were similar allegories and analogies, particularly in Plato's Phaedrus and the Katha Upanishad. The image of the chariot in Phaedrus portrayed the structure of an individual's soul whereas in Katha Upanishad, it is used in order to describe an individual's structure. There were also maritime trade contracts of the Graeco Roman world with South India. The Greek Indologist Dimitrios Galanos lived in India for 47 years and breathed his last in 1833 in Banaras. He translated Indian Vedic texts into Greek language and produced a Sanskrit-English-Greek dictionary of 9000 words.

Currently, India and Greece need each other in their mutual interests. Greece is a high-income economy and India is a growing economy with a huge workforce and potentially the largest market in the world. The bilateral trade is low at the moment but has the potential of growing manifold. Greece is a member of the European Union and NATO, two powerful bodies, economically and militarily, while India is the most populous country in the world and is spearheading the Global South. India would need Greece to counter China's influence in the Mediterranean region, for access to her port and shipping industry and a market, both Greece and EU for its exports.

Likewise, Greece would need India for its tourism sector, expertise of Indian companies, investment in privatisation of public assets and a market for goods produced in Greece. The future road map for bilateral relations should consist of cooperation on defence and security issues, connectivity between two countries, cooperation in ecological security, skilled manpower migration, joint training by army, navy, air force and special forces and developing inter-operationality and cooperation in key areas of special interest to both countries.

That said, the elephant in the room is, as usual, China. One of the Greek participants asked for India's reaction to China having a port in Greece, Port of Piraeus, as India is also in the process of acquiring a port. The answer to that question is, it is for Greece to decide whether it would open its strategic space to an autocrat like China "posing a systemic threat to the world" (Germany's stated view). The West - America and the European Union - have created China almost like a Frankenstein. It is time they decide whether they should neutralise the Frankenstein or feed it to become stronger. India will inevitably counter China, Greece and the European Union have to decide whether they will correct the mistakes of the past or continue with it in regard to dealing with China. —INFA

(The writer is Secretary General, Assn for Democratic Socialism)

Letters to the Editor

Non-tribals - victims of racial prejudice

Editor, The unending saga of racial killing of non-tribals in Meghalaya took its latest toll at Mawroh, Shillong with the death of a daily wage worker whose only crime was his 'race' and nothing else. Going by the history of Meghalaya, it is irrefutable that the State Government, law enforcement agencies as well as civil-society of Meghalaya are equal stake holders and active partners in diligently pursuing the agenda of ethnically cleansing the State since its formation and they have till date succeeded to achieve their goal to a large extent. Instead of grieving and expecting any action from the state machinery, the non-tribals should ponder whether it is worth residing in an uncivil and lawless state which is in the lowest rung of education, health care, employment, human rights, sports, basic infrastructure (potable water, electricity, roads, sanitation) and other development indices. In fact, the smart and erudite sections of non-tribal populace had understood many years back this devious design and rightly moved out of Meghalaya to civilized parts of the country and globe where justice, equality and fraternity takes precedence over their race and ethnicity.

Non tribals of Meghalaya should realize unequivocally that such racial killings had never shaken the conscience of the State machinery and civil society in the last fifty years nor it is expected to be aroused this time or in the future as well. As such, the

residual non-tribal citizens should seriously introspect and decide their future in this hill state without pleading for equality and justice which are nothing but voices in the wilderness. Yours etc., D. Bhattacharjee Shillong-1

No words to condemn the heinous crime

Editor, No amount of condemnation can bring back to life the labourer who was mercilessly killed on April 10 and unless the perpetrators of the heinous act of murdering the innocent labourer are caught and brought to trial, this will persist. As a concerned citizen who often travels outside the state it is really becoming embarrassing to name the state and place I come from, and this is obviously faced by those who stay and study outside this godforsaken state where avenues are limited. Such acts of violence are perplexing and hard to comprehend as to what joy such rascals get from tormenting families. So, all this statement that we often hear in public gatherings that we are, "Ka Ri Tip Brierw Tip Blei" is becoming more like a scam rather than a reflection of the ground reality just like those who misuse every issue in the name of the "Jaitbyriew". Justice should be brought to families facing such injustices be they tribal or non-tribal. Perhaps the State Government should read the Constitution once again to remind itself that it has a solemn duty to protect the life and liberty of all citizens. What is shocking is the silence of political parties, except for the BJP Minister Alexander L. Hek. Enough

of this; we cannot continue to live in the dark ages.

Yours etc., Dominic S. Wankhar, Via email

Crime must be condemned

Editor, I agree with the views of Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh expressed in his letter to the editor (ST April 11, 2024) captioned: "A Murder is a murder: Whoever commits it is a murderer". We must take heed of his advice. Concerned with the increasing spread and deepening crisis of climate change, the United Nations, during the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, affirmed that food systems hold the power to significantly manage climate change by moving to nature-based food systems. Current chemical-dependent and industrialised agriculture consumes 70% of global freshwater and is responsible for 80% of deforestation and 80% of biodiversity loss.

I am currently leading and coordinating an international study to assess the performance of Indigenous Peoples Food Systems in 4 countries (Meghalaya, Northern Thailand, Kenya and Mexico) as sustainable and nature-based food systems. We used a UN (FAO) methodology called Tools for Performance Evaluation Assessment (TAPE) to assess the performance of these food systems. The results convincingly confirmed that Indigenous Peoples Food Systems across these countries demonstrated very high scores on most agroecology indicators. One very interesting and important result showed that these high agroecology performances are the result of the high human

and social values of caring and sharing of participating communities (Tip Brierw Tip Blei).

We will be presenting this Report to several international audiences including the 2025 Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, New York. The killing in Mawlai Mawroh will unfortunately damage our emerging international reputation as a tribe and could pour cold water on attempts to highlight that our values can indeed be important global game changers to meet current climate and food challenges.

I therefore call upon Churches of various denominations, social and political organizations to condemn and stand up against such senseless and targeted violence. This is not part of our culture.

Yours etc., Phrang Roy, Coordinator Indigenous Partnership for Agrobiodiversity and Food Sovereignty, Rome, Italy, Via email

Tasks before the candidates & electorate

Editor, The editorial "Needed a questioning electorate" and the special article "Through the lens of the Shillong Parliamentary Seat" by Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh (ST April 9, 2024) both made interesting reading. Knowledgeable people in India know that this country's democratic status has been a topic of debate and assessment by various organisations. The US-based non-profit Freedom House downgraded India from a free democracy to a "partially free democracy," in its annual report on global

political rights and liberties. It cited increased pressure on human rights groups, intimidation of journalists and activists, and attacks, especially against Muslims. Civil liberties are on the decline. The Swedish based V-Dem Institute went further, labelling India as an "electoral autocracy." Democracy Index by The Economist Intelligence Unit shows that India slipped two places to 53rd position in the latest Democracy Index. It attributes this decline to democratic backsliding by authorities and crackdown on civil liberties damaging the country's political fabric. But the government has defended its democratic credentials. The foreign ministry emphasised India's robust institutions and well-established democratic practices. However, critics argue that erosion of democratic norms remains a concern. While India remains a vibrant democracy, recent assessments highlight challenges related to civil liberties, freedom of media and minority rights.

The editorial has raised an important point on the Electoral Bonds pertaining to pharmaceutical companies as well as the issue of MUDA being raked up in a national election which is not at all relevant to the general election to the 18th Lok Sabha. As to songs and noise and switched off reason and logic as pointed out in the editorial, one need not wonder why it happens. When the electorate are ill-informed, they will be captivated by songs and noise and sway according to their emotions, as emotional appeals are more effective than real messages, but by focussing on rational appeals they are likely to inhibit their chances of success. Ultimately, they

(political parties) will also be producing less efficient communication because the objective is to influence people how to feel, not how to think. The problem in Meghalaya is that the electorate never questions but goes by their emotions and feelings. Social media has made things worse that even the Union Finance Minister observed that it is a waste of precious time to respond to social media. Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh rightly observed in his article that, "long pending and vexed political issues of the indigenous community cannot be resolved during elections, rather it requires consistent deliberative and participatory exercise." The last paragraph of his article is very rational and one must not forget that it is the Lok Sabha with 543 Members who decides this vital issue and I am certain that if Narendra Modi returns as Prime Minister of India for the third time there is no reason for him to disagree on the inclusion of the Khasi language or for that matter the Garo language in the 8th Schedule when Parliament gives a nod, given the fact that there is no fixed formula for such an inclusion, as the inclusion of a language in the said schedule considers historical significance, literary heritage, and cultural distinctiveness. We must not lose sight that each language's journey to official recognition is unique and reflects India's rich linguistic diversity.

Yours etc., VK Lyngdoh, Via email

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"From the deepest desires often come
the deadliest hate."

— Socrates

The Shillong Times

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Right to life & liberty impounded

WHEN a group of persons that are masked can enter the premises of a private home that is under construction and attack the labourers there before they can show their labour licenses, it shows that there is serious lapse in police intelligence. The police are the principle custodians of the rule of law but over the years what is observed in Meghalaya is that it's the rulers who are more protected by a retinue of security guards while ordinary citizens are left to fend for themselves. Indeed, a sense of helplessness, voicelessness and powerlessness has engulfed a section of the population of Meghalaya and that has happened about five decades ago. In Meghalaya, Article 21 of the Constitution which guarantees to each citizen the right to life and liberty has been violated time and again. Interestingly, the Supreme Court of India has described Article 21 as the 'heart of fundamental rights' and this right is available to every person, citizen and foreigners alike. Perhaps the Constitution is not read and discussed in educational institutions hence many pass out without understanding this important document on which our lives and liberties hinge.

In Meghalaya any individual and group appears to have the license to decide they can kill or maim any person because he/she is the "other." What does the word "other" imply? It means the person carries cultural and ethnic markers that are different from that of the majority in Meghalaya and also speaks a language that is not understood by the ethnic majority. The societal construction of the 'other' is such that the person carries all the negative characteristics. In other words, the 'other' can do no good. This hatred and contempt for the other starts early in life with the use of words that caricature the "other" to be the cause of all the problems in the lives of the 'sons of the soil.' There is no introspection as to the reasons why unemployment is rife; why poverty is growing and is affecting people across communities. There is no reflection as to whether the 'sons of the soil' can fill the vacuum that requires expertise to undertake every kind of occupation that requires specialised skills.

Everywhere in this state, those desirous of constructing state of the art home-stays, hotels or private residences and find they need experts hands have had to keep their projects on hold because pressure groups insist that they take only local labourers. The question is who is running the state and why are personal liberties being curbed? Who will take action against groups that usurp the personal liberties of citizens? Will a complaint to the police or the village headman yield any results? When such groups pose as custodians of the rights of the locals over that of others and assume illegitimate powers to impose their diktat on citizens, what is the redressal mechanism available? If these same groups can violate the rule of law with impunity why should other citizens obey the law?

Letters to the Editor

VPP vs NPP: Who's playing this dirty game?

Editor,
I refer to the news report titled "NPP to file complaint with ECI against VPP nuisance" (ST April 10, 2024), wherein the State President and the spokesperson of the NPP demanded that the VPP leadership take full responsibility for the disturbance and nuisance caused during the public meetings at Umsning and Jaiaw. One cannot ignore the signs on news and social media platforms that the VPP is garnering much support from different parts of the BriU Hynniewtrep and other political parties are feeling the heat and intimidated by this growing support for the VPP, especially from people living in the suburbs and

rural areas. It is understandable that of all the political parties in the state, the NPP is feeling weary, and one can say, to some extent, that they smell defeat in the upcoming MP elections from the Shillong seat. Similar to the common use of tactics and strategies during battles, political battles also involve the application of these tactics and strategies. One such tactic, propounded by the famous military strategist Sun Tzu, was to use the enemy's weakness to one's own advantage by wearing down the will of the other side to fight.

When one views and reads the latest political tussle within Meghalaya on social media, including the Shillong Times, a couple of questions crop up in one's mind. Has the accusing political party done enough investigation to determine that the hooligans causing

Restore the Republic

By Kitdor H. Blah

India is often called the world's largest democracy. We never hear it being said that India is the world's largest Republic. And that is part of the problem that has led to our current political situation. The problem lies in the political thought that emphasizes India as a Democracy, rather than a Republic. Fundamentally, what differentiates a Republic from a Democracy is the securitisation of the rights of the Individual. And what this means for India as a Constitutional Republic is that the rights of the individual should form the basic structure of the Constitution, and thus the rights of the individual is the chief principle that should effectually reign over the Legislative, the Executive and the Judiciary.

In a Democracy, the authority of law reigns over the rights of the individual through the mandate of the people. The democratic process, by the will of the majority, gives the elected representatives the mandate to rule and this mandate gives them absolute power to make laws or amend and repeal existing laws, even if it dilutes the rights of the individual. In reality, the chief governing principle in a Democracy is not even the will of the majority but simply the mandate to make laws.

This problem of emphasizing India as a Democracy, rather than a Republic, is not perceived by the common citizen, nor is it addressed by the members of Parliament, nor does it make it to the ideologies of the political parties that span this nation. Yet, the word 'Republic' is paid homage to every year on the occasion of Republic Day, which marks the anniversary of that historic day on 26th January, 1950 when the Constitution of India effectually became the governing document over all the political affairs of the nation, defining and governing the Legislative, the Executive and the Judicial.

It is this political thought, emphasizing India as a Democracy that has marred our Republic, and this problem has persisted in both the Congress party and the Bharatiya Janata Party, right from Indira Gandhi to Narendra Modi. Case in point, the Janata government under Morarji Desai abrogated our Fundamental Right to Property in Articles 19(1)(f) to a mere Constitutional Right in Article 300A through the 44th Constitution Amendment Act, 1978, as well as removing the subheading 'Right to Property' from Article 30 and the provisions of Article 31 for the compulsory acquisition of property. This disdain for the Fundamental Rights is what can be justified in a Democracy where the mandate to rule or the authority of Law reigns over individual rights. The Morarji Desai government removed our Fundamental Right to Property as private land owners were litigating against the

government over acquisition of land for infrastructure projects and land reforms. The socialist policy of the government was at odds with the Fundamental Right to Property. But it was this abrogation of the Fundamental Right to Property that ultimately empowered the BJP government under Narendra Modi to implement Demonetization on 9th November, 2016 and the subsequent regulation and control of our bank accounts. The Fundamental Right to Property secured the individual's right over his money and bank accounts as well. As a mere Constitutional Right, our Right to Property can now be overruled by authority of law without challenge.

But this kind of political thought that allowed for Demonetization under Narendra Modi and for the abrogation of our Fundamental Right under Morarji Desai, can be traced back to the policies of the Congress government under Indira Gandhi, that favoured authority of Law over the Constitution, and government policies over Fundamental Rights. The permanency of our Fundamental Rights and other similar sections of the Constitution was forever violated by the 24th Constitution Amendment Act, 1971 which gave Parliament the power to amend any provision of the Constitution, including those protected by Article 13 which are our Fundamental Rights, and made it mandatory for the President to assent to any amendment made under Article 368. The most ridiculous aspect of this Act is that it not only exempts future amendments from the provisions of Article 13, but it also exempts itself from the same, by appealing to no other provision or rule, but itself. The 25th Constitution Amendment Act, 1971, gave the Directive Principles of State Policy precedence over our Fundamental Rights, further diluting the nature of India as a Republic. The effect was that this changed the way that political parties look at the Constitution. The Constitution was now a "living, breathing document" that is subject to the authority of law rather than being the very governing principle of the law. The Constitution was now governed by those who have the mandate to rule, rather than it governing them. But this political thought is rooted in the socialist policies of Jawaharlal Nehru himself, whose government was the first to dilute our Fundamental Rights through the very first Constitution Amendment Act, which allowed State acquisition to unconditionally take precedence over any individual right to property.

The Judiciary has not helped the case of individual rights or the idea of the Republic either. In Shankari Prasad vs Union of India (1951), the Supreme Court upheld the power of Parliament to amend any part of the Constitution under Article 368. But this was overturned in 1967 when the Court held that Article 368 does not give absolute power to the Parliament to amend any part of the Constitution, and asserted the precedence of our Fundamental Rights over authority of law. But following the 24th Amendment, the Court again upheld the power of Parliament to amend any part of the Constitution, but subjected it to judicial review and the basic structure of the Constitution. The Indira Gandhi government responded to this judicial ruling with the 42nd Amendment Act, 1976 which sought to exempt any amendment under Article 368 from judicial review. However, in 1980, the Court upheld judicial review of Constitutional Amendments as a part of the basic structure of the Constitution. Then, in Indira Sawhney vs Union of India (1992), the Court declared Rule of Law as the basic structure of the Constitution. What all of this means to us as citizens, and what the reader can take away from this is that there is now no limitation to the power of Parliament to amend any part of the Constitution, including our Fundamental Rights; or any other provisions, if the rule of law permits it. And the rule of law means the common law and the body of case laws and court rulings.

In conclusion, we have moved away from the reality of a Constitutional Republic to a Democracy, where the authority of law of the Legislature, and the rule of law of the Judiciary, take precedence over any provision of the Constitution, including any of the Fundamental Rights, and Special Provisions. We moved away from the reality of a Constitutional Republic to a Democracy, because our political thought moved away from the idea of a Republic to this idea of a Democracy. And this political thought is rooted in the socialist policies of the Jawaharlal Nehru government, and has persisted through every government, from Indira Gandhi to Narendra Modi. It is often said by people on the Left that Democracy is under threat in the current political climate, to which this writer would only respond that the real threat came about decades ago, and whatever threats we may perceive today is nothing but the result of living in the aftermath of having moved away from the idea of a Republic and having violated the permanency of our Fundamental Rights and the permanency of certain provisions in the Constitution. In its place, we have embraced the idea of a Democracy, where the mandate to rule and the rule of law govern

the Constitution. Regionalism is the final solution: Neither the Congress Party nor the BJP will restore the Republic. The sanctity of the Constitution as the governing document has been violated. The Congress party does not feel the effects of this problem as deeply as the common citizen, even if he cannot understand it, and not as deeply as the minorities and other backward classes. With calls for a Hindu state, with calls for regulation of religious conversion and proselytization, with threat of restoring of anti-national provisions in the Constitution, with the abrogation of article 370, and the threat posed to other special provisions for other minorities and backward classes, with the rise of the corporate media, this dilution of the most sacred features of the Constitutional Republic is most deeply felt by minorities, other backward classes, individual states and autonomous regions. And thus, the final solution is Regionalism.

The Constitutional Republic of India has as its salient features not only the Fundamental Rights of the individuals, but also the special provisions related to minorities, backward classes and autonomous regions. It is the sanctity of these provisions that define India as a Republic. The violation of the permanency and precedence of Fundamental Rights also poses a threat to every other provision related to minorities, backward classes and autonomous regions. Thus, if at all, this great Republic is to be restored, it will not be by the Congress party, or the BJP or any national party, but by regional politics. And since the 42nd Amendment was enacted to combat the rise of regional politics throughout the country, it is only the reemergence of a strong regional politics throughout the country that will restore our Constitutional Republic.

The Fundamental Rights need to be restored to their preminent status. The duty of the President as the First Citizen, to stand between the Legislature and the citizens, must be emphasized, and his/her power to withhold assent to any bill that would violate the rights of individuals must be restored. The provisions relating to minorities, backward classes and autonomous regions must be strengthened. We need a Member of Parliament who will not only fight for current regional issues like inclusion of Khasi language in the Eight Schedule, Inner Line Permit, strengthening of Sixth Schedule, but also for the future of the Constitutional Republic, and for the rights of every citizen throughout the country, who are being fooled by the corporate media and the political parties.

Vote on April 19th, and vote well.

India Bloc Unity MVA pact for better or worse?

Is it 'one step forward, two steps back' for Maharashtra's MVA? After months of negotiations, the three partners finally made progress and sealed a seat-sharing pact on Tuesday. The INDIA bloc should be relieved with at least this united step forward, in the crucial state. But will it help achieve the cause -- of defeating the common enemy, BJP, or will it put the partnership further behind in the numbers game they thought they had made progress? Notably, Congress 'strategically stepped back' and dropped its claims on a few 'winning' seats and went along with Shiv Sena-Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray reasoning of the need to be 'magnanimous.' Of the 48 Lok Sabha constituencies, SS-UBT managed the biggest slice with 21 seats, Congress 17 seats, and NCP-Sharadchandra Pawar 10 seats. While Congress has assured supporting MVA candidates, it must be keeping fingers crossed no rebellion takes shape in Mumbai, Sangli and Bhiwandi as discontent is said to be brewing among local leaders. Besides,

over elections in conflict-ridden Manipur, particularly among the 50,000 internally displaced people in relief camps, of which 24,500 are voters. The N-E state which has boasted of 82% plus polling in 2019 elections, has several civil society groups asking the relevance of these elections and some even advocating a boycott. A common refrain being if the government can conduct polls during such times, surely it can find ways to bring peace and address people's concerns, as the state continues to simmer after 11 months of the ethnic crisis. Reports originating say there's 'conspicuous absence of posters of political parties, mega rallies, and visible movement of leaders' with elections next week (April 19) and 26. So far, only hoardings put up by local election authorities, urging citizens to exercise their franchise are visible. Will the State election office's security arrangements with 200 companies of paramilitary forces, setting up of 94 special polling stations in relief camps and engaging in confidence building measures, change the mood and help heal wounds.

TDP No To Telangana

BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh failed to play spoilsport for a prayer meeting of Christian community, thanks to the Supreme Court. The event in Indore under 'National Prayer and Ministry Alliance', had got initial permission but the administration revoked it after some Hindu outfits sought its cancellation.

Delhi's 'Agnipariksha'

The Delhi high political drama continues to hit front pages. Other than High Court upholding AAP Chief Minister Kejriwal's arrest in liquor excise scam saying ED was left with "little option" after he skipped repeated summons, 24 hours later, his minister Raaj Kumar Anand resigned from both Cabinet and party. He alleged: 'party is mired in graft and has no moral right to continue in government, and Dalits have no place in the party and feel cheated.' Instead of rubbishing it, AAP reacted: his action has 'vindicated' our stand that Kejriwal's arrest was aimed at 'finishing the party' and BJP was using ED and CBI to "break our ministers and MLAs" (though Anand denies any ED pressure). Indeed, it's 'agnipariksha' for the AAP flock. Kejriwal has approached the Supreme Court pleading for urgent hearing for his release by declaring the case against him 'illegal,' claiming his arrest is 'an unprecedented assault on tenets of democracy, free and fair elections and federalism, both of which form significant constituents of the basic structure of the Constitution.' Convincing or not?

Manipur mood in camps

A big question mark hangs

Round The States

By Insaf

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The grand old party decided it was time to stop the back and forth and get down to campaigning as elections, in five phases, begin next week, April 19 till May 20. How it pans out is worth a watch as 'entertainment' is assured, not between breakaway SS and NCP groups (such as Ajit Pawar seeking support for his wife, against senior Pawar's MP daughter in Baranati), but with MNS chief Raj Thackeray announcing his unconditional support for BJP-led 'Mahayuti' alliance, will address rallies in Modi's support! While the alliance is happy as it lessens 'possibility' of vote cutting, MNS cadres are seeing red. Many have resigned in protest questioning Raj saheb's U-turn after 2019 (a bitter critic of Modi since). Though the party hasn't made a mark, Uddhav group takes an interesting dig saying an outfit 'formed to safeguard Maharashtra pride backs its enemies.' Applicable to it too, perhaps, but in the end it's the voter who shall give the verdict as to who is their enemy.

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VPP vs NPP: Who's playing this dirty game?

Editor,
I refer to the news report titled "NPP to file complaint with ECI against VPP nuisance" (ST April 10, 2024), wherein the State President and the spokesperson of the NPP demanded that the VPP leadership take full responsibility for the disturbance and nuisance caused during the public meetings at Umsning and Jaiaw. One cannot ignore the signs on news and social media platforms that the VPP is garnering much support from different parts of the BriU Hynniewtrep and other political parties are feeling the heat and intimidated by this growing support for the VPP, especially from people living in the suburbs and

rural areas. It is understandable that of all the political parties in the state, the NPP is feeling weary, and one can say, to some extent, that they smell defeat in the upcoming MP elections from the Shillong seat. Similar to the common use of tactics and strategies during battles, political battles also involve the application of these tactics and strategies. One such tactic, propounded by the famous military strategist Sun Tzu, was to use the enemy's weakness to one's own advantage by wearing down the will of the other side to fight.

When one views and reads the latest political tussle within Meghalaya on social media, including the Shillong Times, a couple of questions crop up in one's mind. Has the accusing political party done enough investigation to determine that the hooligans causing

nuisance during the meetings belong to the VPP? Is it plausible that such hooligans have been hired to impersonate as VPP supporters by those who are now playing the victim card? Furthermore, one cannot ignore the fact that there are so many unemployed youth, and this makes it easier for politicians wielding money power to engage such youth with ulterior motives. One is also suspicious about the timing at which such incidents have taken place. Such unprecedented incidents during elections are highly undesirable, and one hopes that the Election Commission of India, through the Meghalaya Police, can prevent such ugly incidents from happening in the future.

Is it therefore not in the best interests of everyone that the political parties leave the investigation of such incidents to the law enforce-

ment agencies and stop the unsubstantiated accusations against the VPP?

Yours etc.,
Samborlang Dikhar
Shillong-10

North East India still digitally divided

Editor,
Through this letter I want to voice my concern regarding the use of the cellular providers "International Roaming Services." I am in possession of two sim cards of which one is postpaid and the other is pre-paid. On reaching a certain destination, only my postpaid sim was able to connect to or latch to a cellular network; whereas my prepaid sim was not connected to any cellular network and was totally use-

less at that point in time. Nevertheless, I contacted customer care services and complained about the same with the hope of resolving my issue, but their reply was that "International Roaming Services are not permitted on Prepaid Sims of the North East. I was dumbfounded by this answer.

In a world where obtaining OTPs is always necessary for each financial transaction, particularly while traveling abroad, it really is a major hassle and problematic for mobile phone owners to make digital payments. Prepaid users have a larger market share than postpaid customers, according to government data.

With the exception of Jammu & Kashmir, other prepaid consumers from the rest of Indian states are welcome and allowed to utilize this service. I felt that this was unjustifiable and

unfair to us. Is this benefit or perk available solely to postpaid consumers due to the higher rental plans and tariffs? I believe that there is still a line drawn by dividing us digitally from the entire country.

I implore upon the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) and the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) to pay heed to this request and take up this matter with urgency so as to enable all prepaid users in the North East to benefit from this service for hassle-free connectivity anywhere in the world.

Yours etc.,
Chanmiki Laloo,
Shillong 02

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

Climate engineering and the serious national security risks it carries

The historic Paris climate agreement started a mantra from developing countries: "1.5 to stay alive." It refers to the international aim to keep global warming under 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.8 Fahrenheit) compared with preindustrial times. But the world will likely pass that threshold within a decade, and global warming is showing little sign of slowing.

The world is already facing natural disasters of epic proportions as temperatures rise. Heat records are routinely broken. Wildfire seasons are more extreme. Hurricane strength is increasing. Sea level rise is slowly submerging small island nations and coastal areas.

The only known method able to quickly arrest this temperature rise is climate engineering. (It's sometimes called geoengineering, sunlight reduction methods or solar climate intervention.) This is a set of proposed actions to deliberately alter the climate.

These actions include mimicking the cooling effects of large volcanic eruptions by putting large amounts of reflective particles in the atmosphere, or making low clouds over the ocean brighter. Both strategies would reflect a small amount of sunlight back to space to cool the planet.

There are many unanswered questions, however, about the effects of deliberately altering the climate, and there is no consensus about whether it is even a good idea to find out.

One of the largest concerns for many countries when it comes to climate change is national security. That doesn't just mean wars. Risks to food, energy and water supplies are national security issues, as is climate-induced migration.

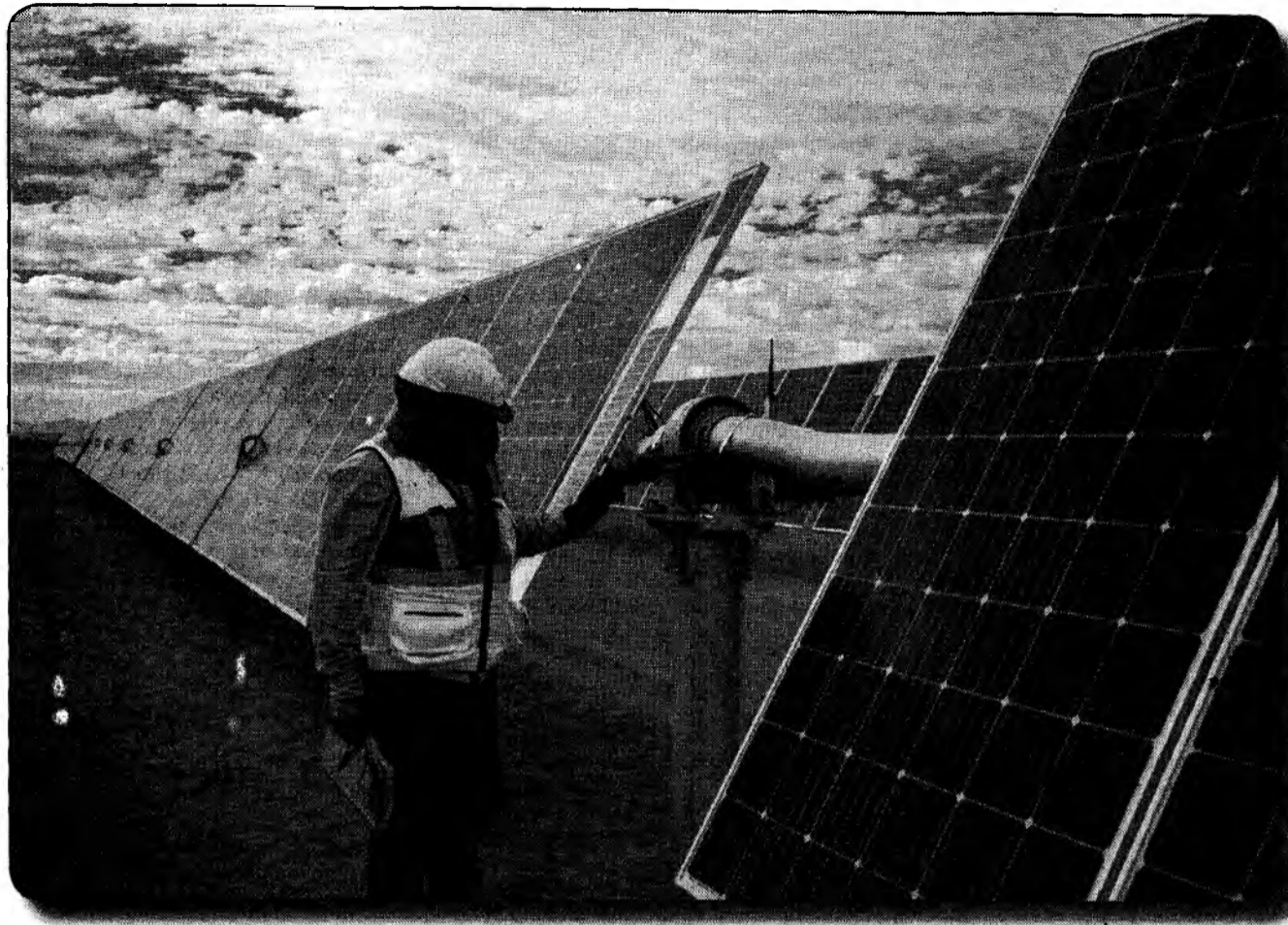
Could climate engineering help reduce the national security risks of climate change, or would it make things worse? Answering that question is not simple, but researchers who study climate change and national security like we do have some idea of the risks ahead.

The massive problem of climate change

To understand what climate engineering might look like in the future, let's first talk about why a country might want to try it.

Since the industrial revolution, humans have put about 1.74 trillion tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, largely by burning fossil fuels. That carbon dioxide traps heat, warming the planet.

One of the most important things we can do is to stop putting carbon into the atmosphere. But that won't make the situation better quickly, because carbon stays in the atmosphere for centuries. Reducing emissions will just keep things from getting worse.



Countries could pull carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and lock it away, a process called carbon dioxide removal. Right now, carbon dioxide removal projects, including growing trees and direct air capture devices, pull about 2 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere per year.

However, humans are currently putting over 37 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere annually through fossil fuel use and industry. As long as the amount added is larger than the amount removed, droughts, floods, hurricanes, heat waves and sea level rise, among numerous other consequences of climate change, will keep getting worse.

It may take a long time to get to "net-zero" emissions, the point at which humans aren't increasing greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere. Climate engineering might help in the interim.

Who might try climate engineering and how?

Various government research arms are already gaming out scenarios, looking at who might decide to carry out climate engineering and how.

Climate engineering is expected to be cheap relative to the cost of ending greenhouse gas emissions. But it would still cost billions of dollars and take years to develop and build a fleet of airplanes to carry megatons

of reflective particles into the stratosphere each year. Any billionaire considering such a venture would run out of money quickly, despite what science fiction might suggest.

However, a single country or coalition of countries witnessing the harms of climate change could make a cost and geopolitical calculation and decide to begin climate engineering on its own.

This is the so-called "free driver" problem, meaning that one country or at least medium wealth could unilaterally affect the world's climate.

For example, countries with increasingly dangerous heat waves may want to cause cooling, or countries that depend on monsoon precipitation may want to restore some dependability that climate change has disrupted. Australia is currently exploring the feasibility of rapidly cooling the Great Barrier Reef to prevent its demise.

Creating risks for neighbours raises conflict alarm

The climate doesn't respect national borders. So, a climate engineering project in one country is likely to affect temperature and rainfall in neighboring countries. That could be good or bad for crops, water supplies and flood risk. It could also have widespread unintended consequences.

Some studies show that a moderate amount of climate engineering would likely have widespread benefits compared with climate change. But not every country would be affected in the same way.

Once climate engineering is deployed, countries may be more likely to blame climate engineering for extreme events such as hurricanes, floods and droughts, regardless of the evidence.

Climate engineering may spark conflicts among countries, leading to sanctions and demands for compensation. Climate change can leave the poorest regions most vulnerable to harm, and climate engineering should not exacerbate that harm. Some countries would benefit from climate engineering and thus be more resilient to geopolitical strife, and some would be harmed and thus left more vulnerable.

While small experiments have been carried out, nobody has conducted large-scale climate engineering yet. That means that a lot of information about its effects relies on climate models. But while these models are excellent tools for studying the climate system, they're not good at answering questions about geopolitics and conflict. On top of that, the physical effects of climate engineering depend on who is doing it and what they're doing.

What's next?

For now, there are more questions about climate engineering than answers. It's hard to say whether climate engineering would create more conflict, or if it could defuse international tensions by reducing climate change.

But international decisions on climate engineering are likely coming soon. At the United Nations Environment Assembly in March 2024, African countries called for a moratorium on climate engineering, urging all precaution. Other nations, including the United States, pressed for a formal scientific group to study the risks and benefits before making any decisions.

Climate engineering could be part of an equitable solution to climate change. But it also carries risks. Put simply, climate engineering is a technology that can't be ignored, but more research is needed so policymakers can make informed decisions. *(The Conversation)*

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, APRIL 14, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'
A good year with positive developments gives you courage and energy as Moon semi-square Jupiter on your solar return chart. It's time to give up obsolete patterns and monotonous routines and have new vision about life. This is a year which supports your instinct to realize your dream. Financially it's a productive phase but expenses would remain on higher side. You could see wavering energy levels at times and so need to take concrete steps to deal with the situation.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) It is time to concentrate on your career prospects and professional skills as a promotion or lucrative business opportunity is likely to emerge consequent to your efforts. You successfully perform tasks that involve cooperation and team harmony. Your tendency to control your life through some form of manipulation is strong. This is a phase that highlights romance and love in your family life. You may also experience some tangles in your close personal relationships. You're at your best when you are showing the world your practical, competent, and responsible side..

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You would adapt to new circumstances with ease opening yourself to positive events. You are able to find creative solutions to problems now. You put in a lot of effort and find this has established a strong professional base and it brings in desired and even unexpected gains. Money issues pop up now—the discovery of a way to increase your income, an unexpected gift or reward, or a brief financial crisis that motivates you to find new ways to make money is possible.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You may especially enjoy experiencing different cultures and styles. Your ideas and goals are higher than usual, teaching and mentoring may be part of the whole picture. Your cultural and spiritual awareness increases. You are ready to make new beginnings and invest in new business and relationships. It is a good time to put your needs first, but doing so with respect for others will take you further. Whether you can succeed as a leader is tested right now. Spending time in solitude among natural surroundings is therapeutic.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You are presented with an opportunity to get rid of what doesn't work in your life, while also discovering what does. You are highly motivated to make money and this enhances quite a bit of energy for new moneymaking projects. You are sorting through the experiences of the last several months, separating the worthwhile from the worthless. You may be drawn into some form of service that will bring deep personal satisfaction. At this time, you seek perfection and distinction in your work and this quality takes you to a more responsible position.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You are more aware than before of your mental and physical health, daily routine, everyday working life, and your working methods. Now is the time to realize your own potential through your significant other. You focus on balancing your personal interests and objectives with your social life, or with those of a partner. Circumstances are such that your diplomacy skills are required. Your popularity is increasing, and is reinforced by your own ability to cooperate and harmonize. You would be able to make an impact on people with innovative ideas and work.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) You would be successful in creative writing and in the entertainment industry. Your ego and pride are tied up in how you relate to others now. This may be an especially busy time for people who consult or work with clients one-on-one. Relationships are dynamic-full of conflicts and resolutions. You tend to take things quite personally now, and something that someone says or does now can easily rile you. Extra care should be exercised when it comes to work, health matters, and daily routines.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) It would be wise to be especially clear when it comes to communicating with co-workers. Re-thinking the suitability of your job is possible now, but you should avoid jumping to any premature decisions. Take this time to re-examine issues rather than communicating about them prematurely. A positive and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining the cooperation of important people. You move on the path of betterment in terms of better financial stability, emotional and mental satisfaction and intellectual growth.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) A new set-up in an existing relation or a new love affair may be formed. Your professional life brings rewards and recognition now. You are working hard and inclined towards more detailed work. An opportunity to expand business arrives now. Increased connections and experiences come into the picture. This is a period of growth as well as some form of blossoming. This is a very fortunate time to arrange get-togethers, parties and events. Increased public recognition and professional success characterizes this week. You would become more particular about your health and diet.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) This time takes some kind of pressure on professional and personal aspects. You may begin to take on more responsibilities on the job or in another capacity. Your job could become rather tedious or boring, or working conditions may be tiring and frustrating. You find yourself more accountable than ever when it comes to your work and output. You may have to draw some boundaries with friends and the demands placed on you. You would attach yourself to unusual, more spiritual activities. This is an excellent period for starting new regimens to improve your health and wellbeing, such as regular exercise and a more structured and productive use of your time.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) It would be wiser to face difficult people and situations rather than escape, as there would be victory and success in professional ventures. Don't take the one you love for granted but show your love and appreciation. Financial transactions and professional projects go ahead smoothly with goodwill and they would be profitable. Your professional skills wisdom and craft is appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Personal relationships gain a romantic and exciting quality. Tackle sensitive subjects and difficult people head on and get your point across. Business projects and associations are opening up and widening your horizons so you need to think expansively from now onwards.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You would achieve a lot in business and professional aspects by combining creativity and practicality. You take on a more mature role in the family and in personal situations by taking on extra responsibility and giving direction. You can expect seniors to support you and stand up for you in tough situations. You can trust your intuition about people and situations when called upon to mediate in conflicts and collaborations. A new work opportunity can change the way you work and relate with people professionally. How willing you are to experiment and explore new approaches will determine your success at this time. You will be considerably more productive, healthy, and focused.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This is a favorable phase for people in sports, competition, game shows and other related fields. You have been more determined and hard working and this brings fulfillment of desires particularly in competitive examinations. This is a good time to be with a friend or get associated with a group with whom you can share your own ideas and thoughts. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting as business opportunities are extended to you. You are physically energetic and enjoy the feeling of wellbeing and confidence.

Lifestyle diseases wreaking havoc

In an explosive revelation from GOQii's India Fit Report 2024 titled *Thriving at Any Age: The Blueprint for Healthy Longevity*, a shocking 45 percent of India's population hovers dangerously close to being classified as Unhealthy. This alarming statistic underscores a nation on the cusp of a health emergency, juxtaposed with a glimmer of hope for a monumental shift towards collective wellness. The data, derived from over 6 million users, serves as a dramatic wake-up call, signalling an urgent need for transformative action in India's health and wellness trajectory.

The data indicates a stark health divide. In 2023, a staggering 59 percent of women were categorised as unhealthy, contrasting with the 40 percent of men, unveiling a significant health outcome disparity with a particularly distressing spotlight on the wide health gap between genders. The report also showed that 16 percent of women fell into the obese category.

The health gender gap transcends mere numbers; it urgently highlights the necessity for targeted health interventions tailored for women. This underscores a compelling need to actively work towards closing this unjust gap.

"GOQii's 2023-24 India Fit Report unveils a critical juncture for our nation's health, with nearly half of our population teetering on the edge of a health catastrophe. This report serves as a dire warning, especially for the women of India, who are facing an escalating health crisis, evidenced by a 35 percent spike in stress levels. The pervasiveness of work-related anxiety and lifestyle diseases, with high blood pressure affecting 23 percent of our citizens, calls for an immediate, unified response. It's time we prioritise and implement comprehensive health interventions to safeguard our nation's future," says Vishal Gondal, Founder & CEO, of GOQii.

"The ageing Indian population faces the most significant impact from lifestyle diseases, with seniors grappling predominantly with cognitive issues, high blood pressure, diabetes, and cholesterol. The report is a clarion call to action for sweeping changes in India's approach to health and longevity."

Indians continued to be plagued by stress

Adding to the grave health situation is the fact that Indians continued to be plagued by stress, affecting the physical and mental well-being of individuals across all walks of life. The study exposes a grim reality where 26 percent of Indians report being trapped in the throes of work-related stress, while financial instability plagues 17 percent of the population.

An even more concerning trend is the sharp rise in stress levels among women, skyrocketing from 25 percent in 2021 to an alarming 35 percent in 2023.

The alarming rise in mental health concerns is closely connected to intense performance demands and high expectations common in numerous professional sectors.

The ramifications of enduring such high stress are profound, adversely affecting not only individual mental and physical well-being but also diminishing workplace productivity and impairing personal rela-

tionships. **Lifestyle diseases wreaking havoc: 23 percent of Indians suffer from high blood pressure**

In addition to stress, lifestyle diseases significantly impact Indians. According to the latest GOQii India Fit Report 23-24, such conditions remain a critical health concern, with high blood pressure affecting 23 percent of the population. The report indicates that there has been no respite from lifestyle illnesses. Over the last 3 years, they have been consistently there with Diabetes, High Cholesterol, High Blood Pressure and Thyroid being the four most common lifestyle problems among people in India.

The World Health Organisation estimates that these lifestyle diseases are responsible for 80 percent of all deaths worldwide. They are the leading cause of death in the developed world, and the numbers are increasing. Poor lifestyle choices are the main reason for these lifestyle illnesses, which in turn result in the majority of these deaths.

Lifestyle diseases impact people of all ages and from all walks of life. These conditions affect children, adults, and the elderly, however, they are most commonly linked with those in their later years. The senior age group suffers the most from lifestyle-related ailments.

Blood pressure is the most common condition in this age group with almost 48 percent of the population having high blood pressure, followed by diabetes at 38 percent and cholesterol at 30 percent.

This report is a clarion call for a sweeping transformation in India's approach to health and longevity. It's not just an analysis; it's a battle plan aimed at guiding the nation towards an era where optimum health and wellness are accessible to all citizens, transforming lofty ideals into tangible realities.

Kicking off with the first chapter can only be described as a wake-up call, *The Secret to Longevity*, the report shatters the illusion of complacency by confronting us with a stark reality: the secret to extending our lifespan and enhancing our quality of life lies in the seemingly mundane choices we make every day. This simple yet powerful truth has the potential to radically increase life expectancy across India.

However, it brings to light the urgent challenges posed by our rapidly ageing society and the consequent strain on socioeconomic structures.

The first chapter is not just an exploration but a rallying cry for immediate, strategic action to ensure our ageing population can enjoy their later years with dignity and independence. It's a poignant reminder that the health decisions we make today are directly linked to a more fulfilling, healthier life for everyone, tomorrow.

Amidst this concerning scenario, the report makes a powerful plea for the adoption of preventive healthcare measures, underlining lifestyle changes and increased awareness of health as critical levers for improving the quality of life and ensuring longer, healthier lives for all citizens. *(ANSLife)*

"There are no secrets that time does not reveal."

—Jean Racine

The Shillong Times

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Manifesto as old hat

THE BJP manifesto released on Sunday fails to impress. On the positive side, it was conceived on a realistic platform; and it did not go overboard in offering baits to the voters. To that extent, it lacks any surprises. Rather, the ruling party's attempt to seek votes for a third consecutive term is tempered by a sense of care for the nation's coffers. At the same time, the party failed to come up with a new agenda. The promises are mostly along the beaten tracks, as in the offers to implement the One Nation One Poll plan, the Uniform Civil Code and Citizenship Amendment Act. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been saying these since the first term of his governance.

The manifesto styled as Sankalp Patra claims the aim is to empower all four strong pillars of developed India — youth, women, poor and farmers. This classification itself is old hat. From Independence, this has been the refrain of successive governments and parties. The poor are mostly where they were; and the farmers' real problems have not been addressed to a large extent in the past 10 years of the Modi government. Even crop insurance against natural calamities is more on paper; leave alone remunerative prices for farm produce. The offer to provide free ration to BPL families for five more years too is rather a "promise" that the existing system will not be discontinued. What's new is a promise to provide free electricity to poor households. When India lavishes itself on multiple fronts, lighting a bulb or a tube free at home must be the minimum that's on offer to the hapless poor. Some state governments are already doing this. As for the North East, the BJP government would "continue to address" issues of the disturbed areas, aim to remove AFSPA in a phased manner and attempts will be made to resolve interstate border disputes among the NE states.

An offer is for continued efforts to strengthen the foundations of India through Social Infrastructure, Digital Infrastructure and Physical Infrastructure. Under social infra, more educational institutions; under physical infra, modernization of highways, railways, airways and waterways; under digital, expansion of the 5G network and progress on 6G. These are all works that are already in progress. There's less on industrial development, a requirement for job creations on a large scale. A promise is that the loan amount under Mudra Yojana would be raised from ₹10 lakh to ₹20 lakh. And, a bait to the elderly — that those above age 75 will be brought under the purview of the Ayushman Bharat Scheme; and this for transgender community too. Question is, why have these segments been excluded from the scheme so far.

A Decade of NDA Rule and the Battle for India

By H H Mohrmen

In this general election, the campaign of the NDA, in general, and the BJP, in particular, is more defensive than aggressive. Just three months ago, the BJP and its allies targeted winning more than 400 seats, but today, one no longer sees the overconfident party led by its leader, Narendra Modi. The disclosure of the electoral bond scheme has perhaps caught the BJP on the wrong foot, hence the defensive campaign. The BJP's campaign is somewhat low-key, and the opposition is not doing any better. The fact that the BJP is giving so much importance to its partners, avoiding confrontation even in states like Meghalaya and voluntarily giving away seats to its NDA partners, is an indication of careful calculation behind this arrangement. The situation in the current scenario is a contest between a bewildered NDA versus a weak Opposition, which is divided rather than united.

Swachh Bharat Mission
Looking back, the NDA government led by the BJP has initiated many schemes and projects, but whether the projects or schemes bear fruit or have the much-needed impact on the ground is another question. It may be reminded that before the end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019, at the entry of all villages in the country, or at least in Meghalaya, one would see Swachh Bharat signboards. The boards are visible signs that the village is under the Swachh Bharat Mission and has achieved an open defecation-free (ODF) status. The sanitation initiative, launched by the Prime Minister of India in 2014, was hailed as the world's largest sanitation program, but the question is how sustainable is the initiative. The goal is to achieve an Open Defecation Free India by October 2, 2019, as a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi by constructing over 10 crore toilets. The goal may have been achieved, but are the toilets being used? The immediate complaint was the lack of water, especially during the lean season, which renders the toilets rather useless.

Swachh Bharat Mission - 2
In February 2020, the Government of India approved Phase-II of the SBM-G with a total outlay of Rs. 1,40,881 crores to focus on the sustainability of the ODF status and to cover the villages with

Solid and Liquid Waste Management (SLWM) that would transform villages from ODF to ODF Plus by 2024-25. To achieve the goal of ODF Plus villages, the aim is to engage in biodegradable waste management through composting and setting up of Biogas plants; collection, segregation, and storage facilities for plastic waste management; construction of soak pits, waste stabilization ponds for greywater management; and Faecal Sludge Management and a host of other activities. While a village that sustains its ODF status and has arrangements for Solid Waste Management or Liquid Waste Management is considered an ODF Plus Aspiring village; a village that sustains its ODF status and has arrangements for both Solid Waste Management or Liquid Waste Management is an ODF Plus Rising village.

It was stated in October 2023, that over 78 per cent of the villages have declared themselves ODF Plus, by implementing various innovative campaigns to accelerate momentum, which would lead to a cleaner, greener, and healthier nation. It was planned that community participation should be integral to the success of the campaign. It was reported that in the Swachhata Hi Seva 2023, more than 109 crore individuals and 71 Ministries and Departments of GOI participated in the nationwide campaign over an 18-day period, averaging around 6 crore people's participation per day across the country. Sadly, we have completed a quarter of 2024, but there is no sign of any of the activities on the ground. One would expect that villages in the country will be clean, but unfortunately, in most of the villages, there is no waste management system in place, and waste can be seen everywhere.

The NDA Government Initiatives

Much of the government initiative left much to be desired hence a very important question that one needs to ask is, will history forgive the Prime Minister for the blunders he made with demonetization? Did the masterstroke achieve the much-anticipated goal, and how much black money has been recovered? The Ujjala Scheme was praised by

many, and the victory of the NDA in the last election was also credited to the Ujjala scheme, but with the benefit of hindsight, the scheme is not as rosy as it was made out to be. The high cost of an LPG cylinder compelled most of the women in the village to go back to the use of firewood. Perhaps demonetization, Ujjala, or even the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic are old issues that will not have any impact on the election now, but the new schemes have not had any impact despite the end of the five-year term.

The smart city project is another project that did not achieve its goal, as cities like Shillong, which have been part of the project, have not seen much change. Of the many recent schemes that the central government has initiated, the Jal Jeevan Mission is expected to bring much relief to the citizens of the country, particularly the women who engage in the collection of water. But it remains to be seen how successfully the project is being implemented. In the state of Meghalaya, the government claimed that the implementation of the mission was successful, but how many villages have received potable water in their households? The reality that this project is not going to be a success will be out in the open if a proper audit is done in the state. The action of the NDA government, which makes non-Hindi speakers feel neglected and left out, is the naming of all the schemes and projects. The schemes do not even have an English translation of the name, which would have at least helped non-Hindi speakers understand the name.

The Electoral Bond

The electoral bond, which has exposed the disparity in the amount of money donated to different political parties in the country and the unfair advantage that the ruling dispensation has over the Opposition, is a huge blow to the BJP. The question remains whether this will have any impact on the way people vote. The Opposition alleges that it is the biggest scam in the country, and the SBI's attempt to not disclose the information has made common people suspicious. But can the opposition capitalize on the electoral bond scam?

Another issue that might become an election issue is the alleged misuse of government machinery against the Opposition. This has not only given people a bad impression of the way the Government targeted the Opposition, but it has also invited criticism from foreign governments.

The Farmers, the Constitution, and Democracy Factor

The NDA Government under the leadership of Modi has never really had a good relationship with the farmers, and their long-drawn-out protest was not taken seriously by the Government. When they tried to organize a protest again, the NDA government scuttled their plans, and they were not able to protest. The big deciding factor in this election is if the farmers in the northern states decide to vote en bloc, and if that happens, it will be a big challenge for the NDA. The Opposition is also campaigning that another term for the BJP will only help it fulfill its agenda of "one nation, one language, and one culture" (Hindutva) agenda. This is a big threat to the Constitution and Democracy hence, the call to vote the NDA out is also seen as the only way to save both.

Opposition Disunity and the Challenge to Modi

The Opposition is not doing the nation or their respective parties a favour either. At one point, it looked like they were able to cobble together a unity of the Opposition parties in the country under the umbrella INDIA alliance, but just before the election, some parties decided to go their own way. The reason is every leader of the Opposition party is seeing himself or herself as the principal opposition to Modi; everybody is eyeing for the seat at the head of the table. Is it going to be Rahul Gandhi, Arvind Kejriwal, or Mamata Banerjee? The Opposition has too many contenders for the prime ministerial position.

The big question is, can a divided Opposition pose a challenge to Modi? In the last election, despite the controversy over the Rafal deal, the BJP and its allies still soared through and won the election with a thumping majority. This time they have Ram temple to their advantage, so can the BJP and its allies pull off the same trick this time around? Or can the Opposition put a stop to the BJP's march to the historic three consecutive wins in the battle for India?

U Kiang Nangbah's Meghalaya doomed under Anarchy

By Dr. Shubhro Chakrabarty

Meghalaya, one of the Seven Sister States of north-east India, boasts of mountainous terrain interspersed with valleys and highland plateaus, rich in geological diversity, particularly composed of Archean rock formations. Within these formations lie valuable mineral deposits including coal, limestone, uranium, and sillimanite. Notable figures, such as Nobel laureate Kabi Guru Shri Rabindra Nath Thakur, have been drawn to Meghalaya's charm, with historical accounts marking his presence for 20 days at a bungalow known as Brookside. Brookside is now a heritage bungalow at the Riblong locality in Shillong in the East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya. Currently, the Meghalaya government actively utilizes tourism as a vital component of its economic strategy, with an anticipated annual revenue of roughly INR 1,600 crore. This revenue is generated from a diverse array of tourism offerings within the state, ranging from its stunning natural landscapes to its rich cultural heritage and adventurous activities. To maximize the potential of this sector, the government likely allocates resources

tions, marked a significant milestone, yet it also ushered in a period of unrest. Anjum Hasan's novel "The Lunatic in My Head," situated in her native Shillong, exemplifies literature's reflection of the socio-political landscape. Within the narrative, characters like Firdaus, Aman, and Sophie are bound together by their shared identity as "outsiders." Instances of violence, such as the brutal gang rape and lynching of pregnant woman Mrs. Gauri Dey in 1979, expose the darker underbelly of societal tensions, rooted in ethnic and cultural differences.

The paradox of historical heroes turning into contemporary perpetrators reflects a disconcerting reality. Individuals who once fought for India's freedom are now inciting discord, demanding an Inner Line Permit (ILP) and resorting to violence against non-tribal residents. The recent spate of killings, including that of Mr. Arjun Rai, underscores the urgency for governmental intervention. The analogy drawn between non-tribals in Meghalaya and Kashmiri Pandits highlights the gravity of the situation, empha-

"The analogy drawn between non-tribals in Meghalaya and Kashmiri Pandits highlights the gravity of the situation, emphasizing the vulnerability of marginalized communities amidst escalating tensions. Questions linger regarding the government's efficacy in addressing such atrocities. Calls for the removal of special permissions and stringent measures against perpetrators echo sentiments for peace and justice."

towards infrastructure development, marketing initiatives, and sustainable tourism practices. The substantial revenue forecast underscores the significance of tourism in driving economic growth and development in Meghalaya, highlighting the government's commitment to nurturing this key industry.

The state of Meghalaya boasts not only of a breathtaking natural beauty but also a rich historical legacy intertwined with India's freedom movement. This connection is exemplified by prominent figures such as U Kiang Nangbah in the Jaintia Hills, U Tirot Sing in the Khasi Hills, and Pa Togan Sangma in the Garo Hills. Among them, U Kiang Nangbah stands out as a revolutionary figure who courageously opposed British rule. In 1857, during the First War of Indian Independence, he led an uprising against the British forces, symbolizing the resilience and determination of the people of Meghalaya in their struggle for freedom. His ultimate sacrifice was to be publicly hanged by the British and signifies the fervour for independence that echoed across Meghalaya.

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's connection with Shillong, the former capital of Assam, was deeply profound, resonating with the hearts of its people across various social strata. Regardless of tribe, caste, or religion, Netaji's presence in Shillong sparked a surge of admiration and respect among its residents. His charisma and unwavering dedication to the cause of Indian independence inspired a sense of fervent patriotism among the youth of Shillong. Netaji's influence was not merely confined to rhetoric; it instilled a tangible desire for action and participation in the struggle for freedom. His impassioned speeches and resolute leadership captivated the imagination of the youth, compelling many to heed the call to join the fight for India's liberation.

The emergence of Meghalaya as a state in 1972, following lengthy negotia-

sizing the vulnerability of marginalized communities amidst escalating tensions. Questions linger regarding the government's efficacy in addressing such atrocities. Calls for the removal of special permissions and stringent measures against perpetrators echo sentiments for peace and justice. The need for swift and decisive action to quell unrest and uphold the principles of inclusivity and harmony remains paramount.

Meghalaya's journey, marred by periods of turbulence and conflict, underscores the complexities of identity, politics, and power dynamics. Ensuring a harmonious and equitable future for all residents of Meghalaya requires a concerted effort from both governmental and societal stakeholders. Dialogue, empathy, and collective action are essential in achieving this goal. Failure to prioritize these principles could have significant repercussions, particularly in the tourism sector. The state's appeal to visitors hinges not only on its natural beauty but also on its reputation for inclusivity and social harmony. Moreover, neglecting these values not only affects tourism but also has broader implications for humanity.

In a diverse society like Meghalaya, fostering understanding and unity among different communities is crucial for social cohesion and progress. Furthermore, there's a moral imperative to protect and support the marginalized communities within Meghalaya. Failure to do so not only undermines the concept of Vasudeva Kutumbakam (the world is one family) but also tarnishes the pride of Bharat (India) in the eyes of others. It's incumbent upon the more populous communities in Meghalaya to safeguard the rights and well-being of their fellow residents, reflecting the true spirit of unity and compassion.

(The writer is a Scientist, Social Worker and General Secretary, Bongo Bhaski Mahasabha Foundation)

Letters to the Editor

Stinging rebuke

Editor

A non-tribal citizen residing in our state, D. Bhat-tacharjee, has delivered a stinging rebuke to the tribal people of Meghalaya (Shillong Times, Apr 12, 2024). While we go about the routines of our mundane existence, unspeakable crimes are being committed in the name of tribals.

Hardly have I heard a mention of this bloodthirsty murder. We seem oblivious to, or we have become shamelessly insensitive to the minorities that live within our state. All of us tribals are complicit in this ethnic killing, heedless of the plight of the poorest of our society, uncaring of their undignified existence, and averting our eyes even when they are murdered in broad daylight in our neighbourhoods.

There are only feeble murmurs from the government and law enforcement. The church is silent, like the priest in the story of the Good Samaritan, who hid his face in the folds of his cowl and hurried past the fallen man. The clergy of Meghalaya is no better. But what about the rest of us. There is hardly a mention in civil society; academia has seemingly renounced the world, cocooned in their ivory tower.

Meanwhile, every index of human development remains abysmally low in this blighted state of ours. As Bhat-tacharjee has candidly pointed out, our state is paralyzed on "the lowest rung of education, health care,

employment, human rights, sports, basic infrastructure, and other development indices."

Our self-delusional exceptionalism will come back to haunt us. The country and other state governments are waking up to our lawless misdeeds. The UP government is monitoring the Ichamati murder case, and the Punjab government will intercede on behalf of the Sikhs in Sweepers Colony. Can our lightweight state stand up to enmity with these powerful mainland states?

Given the political dispensation in the country and likely outcome of the general elections, be very sure that a searchlight will soon be cast on Meghalaya, a so-called Christian state. One of these days, these atrocities will be considered as communal killings, murders of innocent Hindus by rampaging Christian mobs. Once a communal colour is ascribed to these atrocities, we will reap the whirlwind.

Yours etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor,
Via email

Rule of law absent

Editor,

After reading the special article "Mindless killing and Khasi society's response" by Patricia Mukhim (ST 12th April 2024) I have to say that it is rational and the daughter of a mother (Ka khun kynthei ka Kmie) calls a spade a spade. The author has rightly said "that the hotheads should be told that the crores coming here are from taxes paid by ordinary Indians". She has

also correctly pointed out that "Society continues to support violence because there is no organised protest against any or all forms of violence except when it happens to an in-group member".

"Those who wield the blade shall meet their fate upon its edge". This ancient wisdom reminds us that actions have consequences. When we choose to use a weapon, whether physical or metaphorical, we must be prepared for the repercussions. The sword, once unsheathed, becomes a double-edged instrument—one that can both defend and destroy. In life's battles, we must weigh our choices carefully. The power we yield can shape destinies, and the path we tread may lead to triumph or tragedy. So let us wield our swords with honour, knowing that their impact echoes far beyond the clash of steel. And perhaps, in the quiet moments before battle, we can reflect on the wisdom of those who came before us. For they understood that the blade, like life itself, demands respect and discernment.

When faced with a sword, Jesus responded with compassion and wisdom. In the Gospel of Matthew, during the arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, one of Jesus' disciples drew a sword to defend him. Peter the disciple of Jesus impulsively unsheathed his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Jesus swiftly intervened and said to him: "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword." (Matthew 26:52, NIV). This

moment exemplifies Jesus' commitment to nonviolence and his understanding that violence begets more violence. He urged his followers to seek peace and love even in the face of danger.

Peace is the need of the hour when our country, a land of diverse cultures and traditions, grapples with increasing political polarisation. The proliferation of fake news and disinformation via social media platforms through fake accounts and bots has fuelled mistrust and division. Echo chambers reinforce pre-existing beliefs, hindering meaningful discourse. Escalating religious intolerance and communal violence have tarnished India's image. Poisonous rhetoric and ideological clashes have widened chasms within society. Political parties increasingly align along opposing lines, eroding cross-party collaboration. Political polarization threatens India's religious tolerance and social fabric. Bridging these divides is crucial for maintaining harmony in this culturally diverse nation. In navigating these challenges, India must strive for unity, dialogue, and understanding. Only then can it transcend polarization and uphold its cherished values of tolerance and coexistence. It is good that the custodian of the law is working on leads in the labourer's murder case and we look forward to taking it to the logical conclusion so as to demonstrate that there is a such a thing called the "rule of law".

Yours etc,
VK Lyngdoh
Via email

A weak state gets away with blaming "miscreants"

Editor,

The recent resurgence of racial murders in Meghalaya is truly unfortunate, but far from unprecedented (and not surprising). For most of the state's existence since its formation in 1972, the atmosphere has generally been one of violence and racial tension; it is the relatively peaceful periods that were aberrations. And be it 1979 or 2024, no matter how the outside world has changed, this characteristic of Meghalaya remains virtually identical: at any time, at any place, an "unknown miscreant," may murder a non-tribal and suffer no consequences.

I think, at this point, the non-tribals of Meghalaya and the well-meaning (but sadly ineffective) civil society members ought to recalibrate their ideas about the state. No, this is not a place where the rights of all citizens are upheld: no matter what the Constitution or the law say, rules written on paper are irrelevant in front of 45 years of cold, hard evidence that mocks them. No, the vast majority of society does not stand against the groups which murder freely: if they did, these groups would not be so prominent and powerful, and they certainly wouldn't keep replenishing their ranks (and kill count) over generations and generations.

No, non-tribals are not

"equal stakeholders," in the state: they are simply unfortunate enough to be living here. No, the Church and other entities are not being hypocritical when they stay silent in the light of such incidents: after all, they have never claimed that non-tribal lives have value in the state. Their lack of outrage makes their stance clear, no matter what we may want to believe. And finally, no, the politicians are not to blame for these issues: the ordinary citizens have long made it clear they hold no opposition to such acts (and many, in fact, support them). We should stop using scapegoats and recognize that the cause of this problem is the common citizen, no one else.

Lastly, we should all hope for a future where all non-tribals have left Meghalaya. It will be the best outcome for everyone: the non-tribals will finally experience life in civilized society, the "unknown miscreants," will no longer be inconvenienced by the offensive sight of "outsiders" existing, and the kind-hearted civil society members will no longer have to exert effort in well-intentioned but ineffective condemnations. It may take a while, but such a future will definitely come to pass, and it will be far better than the present we live in.

Yours etc.,
NK Kehar,
Shillong-3

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

"Minds that are ill at ease are agitated by both hope and fear."

—Ovid

The Shillong Times

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Need for Solidarity

THE BJP is gearing up for its third term and in all likelihood it could return but not with the 400 mark that it envisages. The main problem in India today is lack of Opposition unity. The INDIA bloc led by the Congress that was supposed to give the BJP a run for its money has failed to get its act together. There are too many over-ambitious regional satraps that are hell bent on projecting themselves as the next prime minister of India, although their commitment to that arduous task is suspect. If at all they want to be at the helm it is mainly the lure for power and pelf. The INDIA bloc has not charted out a common goal that they have outlined for the country and its hapless citizens. All that they are riding on today is the electoral bond scam and the ED, CBI being used as tools of the ruling party to hound opposition leaders. This negative campaign is not enough to win elections. There is need for a positive note which the electorate can pin their hopes on. The problem with the Congress and other parties is that they have a record of corruption that cannot be wiped off public memory. The public need to see if the Congress has done better to curb corruption and provide good governance in the states it is ruling in so that it can pitch that as a model of what voting for the Party can do for the electorate.

The Congress Party's own track record as far as securing the citizens' liberties is also not unblemished. The Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi is a black mark on the Party's political journey. There was entrenched corruption during the UPA 1 & 2 tenures which the Congress did nothing to even put up a façade of going after the corrupt. Hence it is difficult for the Congress now to get back to a point where it can claim to having a clean record. The other regional parties don't have much to show to their credit as having done much in the task of nation-building. Many have been busy nurturing their pocket boroughs to spare any thought for the country.

The BJP on the contrary in its 9-year plus journey has taken up several issues that ostensibly afflict the country and had remained on track as far as corruption goes, barring the electoral bond scheme and crony-capitalism which has been overtly and covertly promoted. If the BJP clears the decks this time there will be far-reaching consequences for religious and other minorities such as tribals, Dalits etc. Against this, it is important for political parties in small states like Meghalaya to desist from playing divisive politics because what is crucial now is for parties that don't want a rewriting of the Constitutional to dumb down the principles enunciated by the founding fathers with a stress on diversity and secularism, to come together and build solidarity so as to unitedly push back the BJP's gameplan. But can we expect political parties in Meghalaya to rise above their petty politics?

Khasi victimhood: Is it based on facts?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

As of the writing of this article, no arrest has been made for the killing of a daily wage labourer at Mawlai Mawroh. I am not trying to be cynical here, but I don't see any arrest happening before the voting is over. The government might fear that if the people arrested were to belong to a pressure group or even some local boys, this could create an anti-government sentiment in the local populace, which could play a decisive role in the voting that is going to take place in a few days. But why would taking action against a heinous crime be something that should have such huge political implications? The answer lies in the 'Khasi victimhood' mentality that is rife among a large section of the Khasi populace, which claims that the law is harsher on the local indigenous population but more lenient on the non-indigenous population. That sentiment is very widespread, and it can be observed in everyday conversation.

The night after the killing of a daily wage labourer, there was a video circulating of Brightstarwell Marbaning, the MLA of Mawlai, who was seen stating in a public meeting that when unsavoury elements chant Jai Shree Ram in front of churches with the intention to create mischief, they are never apprehended. But when someone shouts Ha U Prah, the administration is quick to arrest them. The particular incident mentioned by Brightstarwell was a VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) rally held on April 2, 2023. In this rally, a group of people in two-wheelers, cars, and buses stopped outside Laban Presbyterian Church around 1 p.m. when the church was having its service and chanted slogans like "Jai Sree Ram." It is also claimed that passersby also heard people who were part of the rally shouting that they would turn "Meghalaya into a Hindu State, and the situation of Gujarat riots will take place in Meghalaya soon." These kinds of scenes and reports on them are quite common in the mainland, where such groups are known to go to minority areas, like those of Muslims, with the intention of instigating trouble. Other minority groups are also targeted during such occasions. For example, in September 2020, there was news from Jharkhand that indigenous tribal Christians were beaten and forced to chant "Jai Sree Ram." Brightstarwell claims that no one was arrested for making this provocation. I cannot verify that claim, but I believe him. But, conveniently, he seems to omit the many instances when local pressure groups have also created disturbances in the state and little or no action is taken against them.

In his 2023 article, 'Meghalaya: Does Police use 'brutal force' as often as Opposition claims?' Larry Sohtun questioned whether the opposition's attack on the

government regarding police brutality in the last autumn session of the Meghalaya Assembly was justified. According to him, the data stands in stark contrast to the claims of police insensitivity. A starred question to the Home Department (Police) revealed that in the last year, there have been 33 violations of CrPC Section 144, with three turning violent and warranting police intervention. This reveals, according to Larry Sohtun, an alarming pattern where certain groups seem to hold sway, effectively handcuffing the police from performing their duty. Were the people who violated CrPC Section 144 and engaged in violence arrested and prosecuted? I don't know, but I think we all can guess the answer to that question. Though the video clip of Brightstarwell claiming partiality in treatment was only a few minutes long, I am not sure he mentioned these instances as well. But maybe if someone has the entire video, they can upload it, and we can verify if my assumption is wrong. So if 'Khasi victimhood' is because of the VHP incident, I feel it is misplaced as the administration does not take action even when local groups are the ones who foment trouble in the state. However, is the rally by VHP the source of 'Khasi victimhood'? Not entirely.

Another 'Khasi victimhood' trope is regarding the killing of Lurshai Hynniewta in Ichamati during the anti-CAA protest. There is a widespread feeling that his killers have not been brought to justice even after more than four years have passed. Actually, after the killing and the resultant violence, 24 people were arrested and around 70 were charged. The main accused, from what I remember from newspaper reports, however, had fled to Bangladesh. Unless the Indian government has an extradition treaty, it will be difficult to apprehend him. Also I am not sure that those arrested have been convicted of the murder of Lurshai Hynniewta, which could mean that his killers have not been brought to justice. So, yes, there is a travesty of justice for Lurshai Hynniewta and his family. But has there been justice for Uphas Uddin, who was killed in Shella after the violence broke out? What about Akash Ali, Ajay Kuri, Rikesh Das, Satya Modak, Deepak Kumar, Pradeep Kuri, Aman Kr Shah, Jadur Choudhury, and Rupsang Dewan, who were stabbed in Shillong, with the last one dying from his wounds? In 2013, three people were burnt alive in Shillong after miscreants hurled petrol bombs at three shops in Motphran, Bishnupur, and Police Bazar during protests over the implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP). Have the people responsible for these

crimes been arrested and prosecuted? If anyone has been prosecuted for all the other murders, someone can write a rejoinder that there is no failure of justice, and I will apologize and take back my article. But till then, it seems clear that denial of justice is not just for Lurshai Hynniewta but for Uphas Uddin, Rupsang Dewan, and many others. So, where is this 'Khasi victimhood' coming from?

A recent opinion poll conducted by 4Front Media in Pynursla showed people's disillusionment with the whole Jaidbynriew claim. According to some of the people interviewed, everyone claims to love the Jaidbynriew, but when it comes to serving the people, they are nowhere to be found. Some lamented that the poor are always neglected, with the 'High Level' people only interested in furthering their own personal gains. 'High Level' is a pejorative term used for people in power who are engaged in corruption and amassing wealth at the expense of common citizens. Most of the time, they are associated with the coal mafia.

The insidious impact of this group was felt in 2015 when Sub-Inspector Pearlystone Joshua Marbaning died of suicide after he seized 32 illegal coal-laden trucks in Patharkhmah, Ri-Bhoi. Granville Hardy Passah, the Block Development Officer of Jirang in Ri-Bhoi district, and four others were arrested for abetting the suicide. The other four were Centerwell Doloi, a Sordar (headman) of Sohkyrbam-Domphlang village; Federation of Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo People (FKJGP) president-in-charge (western zone) Shemphang Nongtri; FKJGP member Lawyer Syngkli; and contractor Comingstar Kharbani. All these names belong to members of the indigenous community, which means that the people who are exploiting the local indigenous population are from their own community. The case of Pearlystone Joshua Marbaning is quite personal for me because he was my immediate senior at the university. I didn't talk to him much, but I remember him walking through the corridor and taking part in games held at the university. His death is a personal loss.

There are a lot of complaints about widespread corruption and the denial of basic services to the common citizens in the state. When one looks at those who control the government and make all the decisions, barring a couple, they all belong to the indigenous communities of the state. So, if there is someone who has to be blamed for turning Meghalaya into one of the poorest states in the country, the blame lies with the indigenous communities themselves. But

the perception on the ground and the hatred towards the non-indigenous community appears to suggest that there is a deliberate attempt to pin the blame on an easy target. For many years, there has been a persistent attempt to demand ILP in the state, citing increased immigration into the state. However, the data does not support such a claim. The Census reports have clearly shown that the non-tribal/non-indigenous population of the state has declined from 19.52% in 1971 to 13.85% in 2011. Shillong City has been the epicenter of the claims of increasing immigration, but here as well, the data does not support such a claim. The population of indigenous communities in the Shillong Urban Agglomeration has also increased from 42% in 1971 to more than 60% in 2011. So, where is the fear of being swamped by immigrants, which fuels this hatred, coming from? It is important to remember that the violence against the non-indigenous population in the state predates the CAA, which does pose a genuine threat.

The 'Khasi victimhood' appears to be a false one, especially when it is used to target the non-indigenous population. Instead, it is fuelled by a fear that is unfounded and seems to have been planted to blind people from the looting that is taking place, perpetrated by the members of their own community. This allows Jaidbynriew politics to stay alive and enables people to build political careers based on claims of being the protectors of the community. When Brightstarwell talks about the partiality of the administration in relation to the action taken against those who support the VPP as compared to the lack of action taken against the VHP members, it emerges from that 'Khasi victimhood' mentality where, despite being the majority, the local indigenous population is always the victim.

But in fairness, it is also to be acknowledged that among all the parties in the fray, the VPP are the only ones (barring the government and the BJP) who have condemned the violence in Ichamati and Mawlai Mawroh. They were also in Laitumkhrah, claiming that the party was created not to harm the non-indigenous population but to fight against corruption. But they cannot deny that many of the people who support them carry that 'Khasi victimhood' mentality, which only deepens the divide between the communities in the state. Unless that is dismantled, their claim of bringing about clean governance and destroying corruption will always be thwarted. In the process, the common citizens of Meghalaya will continue to suffer from poor governance and live in fear and uncertainty.

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

Women in Parliament

By VK Lyngdoh

The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Bill, 2023 was introduced in Lok Sabha on September 19, 2023. The Bill seeks to reserve one-third of all seats for women in Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. A similar Bill had been introduced in Rajya Sabha in 2008, and was passed by the House two years later. It lapsed after the dissolution of the 15th Lok Sabha in 2014.

According to PRS Legislative Research, women representation in Lok Sabha has increased from 5% in the first Lok Sabha to 15% in the current Lok Sabha. Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Norway, and South Africa have more than 45% women representation in their national legislatures. Japan at 10%, lags behind India. Currently, 15% of Lok Sabha MPs and 13% of Rajya Sabha MPs are women. Among parties with more than 10 seats in Lok Sabha, 42% of Biju Janata Dal MPs and 39% of TMC MPs are women. In Rajya Sabha, 17% of INC MPs are women. TMC and BJD fielded the highest proportion of women candidates. Across parties with 10 or more MPs,

seats include those vacated by two women MPs, Sonia Gandhi (Rae Bareilly, as she joined the Rajya Sabha) and Mahua Moitra (Krishnagar, who was expelled).

Education Levels
According to a non-profit PRS Legislative Research there is no significant difference in the educational qualifications of men and women Members of Parliament in the 17th Lok Sabha. While 48% of male MPs are graduates, the number is 43% among women. Twenty-eight percent of women MPs are postgraduates against 23% of their male counterparts. At 7%, the number of doctorate-holders is the same among men and women. The research also points out that women's attendance – a mark of parliamentary participation – is slightly lower (77%) than that for men (80%).

Lok Sabha elections in Meghalaya
Since the general election to the Lok Sabha in 1977, Meghalaya has never elected a woman as a Member of Parliament to the Lok Sabha, except in 2019 from 2 Tura Parliamentary Constituency when Agatha Sangma was elected as a National Peo-

"The lone MPs for Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu as well as Chandigarh are both women. There's one woman MP each for Meghalaya and Tripura, which overall have 2 Lok Sabha members. Meanwhile, the number is 1 out of 7 for national capital Delhi (14%)."

women were as likely to win as men.

According to the ABP News Bureau in the 17th Lok Sabha, smaller states as well as Union territories, which account for fewer MPs, account for a better representation of women. The lone MPs for Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu as well as Chandigarh are both women. There's one woman MP each for Meghalaya and Tripura, which overall have 2 Lok Sabha members. Meanwhile, the number is 1 out of 7 for national capital Delhi (14%). Among the bigger states, Odisha has the highest share of women MPs, at 7 out of 21 (33 percent). In the states that send the highest number of MPs to the Lok Sabha, the share is much lower: Only 11 of Uttar Pradesh's 80 MPs are women (14%), while the number is 3 out of 39 for Tamil Nadu (8%).

This time the matrilineal Meghalaya is having two women candidates contesting the 18th Lok Sabha on 19th April 2024. Dr M Ampareen Lyngdoh from 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency, a constituency which has more than 6 Lakhs female voters and sitting MP, Agatha K Sangma from 2 Tura Parliamentary Constituency, a constituency which has around 4 lakhs female voters. It could be anybody's game in both the constituencies but both women are campaigning vigorously.

ple's Party candidate scoring 3,04,455 votes defeating Dr Mukul Sangma of the Indian National Congress by a margin of 64,030 votes. 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency never saw a woman contesting the Lok Sabha since 1977 except Dr Elizabeth Laitflang who in 1998 contested from the Bharatiya Janata Party and she came fifth by scoring 33,557 votes while Anilla D Shira of the BJP contested twice from 2 Tura Parliamentary constituency in 1996 and 1998 and was the runners up in both the years scoring 35,634 votes and 42,061 votes respectively. She was defeated by (Late) Purno Agitok Sangma of the Indian National Congress in both the years by a margin of 1,84,790 and 1,77,659 votes respectively.

Whether they are citizens of a country or not after being elected by the votes including the votes of those voters?
How could a government challenge the way it had been elected while completing its term of five years? Moreover, the CAA has gone against the secular character of the Constitution by removing one particular religion from the selection process.
Anything that can increase the divide between different communities and create fear psychosis in the minds of the voters of our country should be avoided. It could spell disaster in our country which has achieved unity by accepting its rich diversity.

Letters to the Editor

Can we take a pledge for peace?

Editor,
The harrowing news of the brutal broad daylight murder of a non-tribal labourer at Mawroh, serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need for empathy and compassion in our society. It compels us to reevaluate how we perceive and interact with one another, urging us to view our fellow human beings not through the lens of superficial differences such as community, race, religion, or caste, but as beings united by our common humanity.

In the wake of such a tragic and senseless crime, it is imperative that we ask these probing questions: Why was the victim singled out as the target of such unwarranted aggression? What led the perpetrators to harbour such hatred and animosity towards him? And what transgressions, real or

perceived, did they believe justified their actions? Who granted these individuals the audacity to take the law into their own hands and mete out vigilante justice? Covering their faces only implies their awareness of the illegality of their deeds. Their action was an exhibition of a disregard of the sanctity of human life. Who granted them the power to destroy that which they cannot create?

As a society, we must confront these uncomfortable truths and hold those responsible for such heinous acts accountable. We must demand justice for the innocent victim whose life was unjustly cut short, and we must work tirelessly to dismantle the system of oppression and prejudice that breeds such violence.

The brutal murder reveals a disturbing truth: that some individuals feel entitled to mete out violence against those they view as outsiders or inferior. The victim's crime, in their eyes, was simply being a non-tribal individual seeking work to

support his family. His status as a petty worker made him vulnerable to the monstrous cruelty inflicted upon him. The fact that they targeted the non-tribals while spared one of their own is violence borne out of an ideology of being communal. The perpetrators were well aware of the illegality and immorality of their actions hence conceal their identities by covering their faces. Can they be allowed to go scot-free? Will the perpetrators of crime be punished? Will the victim and his grieving family ever get justice? These are questions that weigh heavy in our hearts, and the uncertainty surrounding their answers only deepens our sense of despair.

This incident serves as a poignant reminder of our increasing unwillingness to coexist in peace and harmony. In a world marked by rapid development and transformation, we appear to have taken a turn for the worse. The mindset of intolerance has reached such heights that it seems to overshadow the

greater good that a human being is born with. It is time we pause and reflect if this is the legacy we wish to impart to future generations? Do we want our children to inherit a world where divisiveness and conflict prevail over cooperation and understanding? We must strive for a more compassionate and inclusive society, one where empathy and respect guide our interactions with one another and not one that will only kill and murder. Can't we cultivate empathy, foster understanding, and pledge peace, for the good of our children and generations to come? A world where harmony and unity reign supreme will be a world we must live in.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

Intolerance and hatred on the rise

Editor,
Intolerance and hatred are

destructive forces that undermine the fabric of societies, erode human rights and fuel conflict and violence. Intolerance refers to the unwillingness or refusal to accept or respect beliefs, opinions or practices that differ from one's own. It can manifest in different forms, including racism, religious bigotry and discrimination based on nationality, ethnicity or social status.

Hatred on the other hand, is a deep and intense feeling of hostility, animosity, or aversion towards individuals or groups perceived as different or inferior to one's own. It often stems from ignorance, prejudice, or a sense of superiority and can lead to acts of violence, discrimination and dehumanization. One of the most significant consequences of intolerance and hatred is violation of human rights. When individuals and communities are marginalized, discriminated against or denied equal opportunities because of their race,

religion, their fundamental rights to freedom, dignity and equality are compromised.

Intolerance and hatred have led to some of the darkest chapters in human history. Can we forget the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Rwanda? Ultimately, creating a world free from intolerance and hatred requires a collective commitment from authorities, civil society, religious leaders and individuals alike. We can build societies that embrace the richness of human differences and thrive on the principles of equality, justice and peace.

Yours etc.,
Anjan Kumar Das,
Shillong-6

Why the need for CAA & NRC?

Editor,
Patricia Mukhim rightly expressed her apprehension about the possible link between the sudden spurt of

violence in Meghalaya and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA) in the article, "Mindless killing and Khasi society's response" (ST, April 12, 2024).

Sujit Dutta and Esan Singh were found dead at Ichamati in Meghalaya's East Khasi Hills district on March 27, hours after an organisation took out a protest against the CAA. Recently, a local non-tribal labourer was killed in Meghalaya in spite of his having a labour licence. It appears that the CAA has increased the divide between tribal and non-tribal people of Meghalaya.

The NRC-CAA combination and the non-acceptance of a voter-ID as a sufficient document for citizenship have raised more questions than they could answer. Given the Members of the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha are directly elected by the voters, it is akin to putting a big question mark behind all of them. Should a government ask some voters to prove

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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**"Bashfulness is an ornament to youth,
but a reproach to old age."**

—Aristotle

The Shillong Times

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Inside West Asia

FEARS of a full-scale war persists in West Asia – after Iran fired missiles and attempted bombing of Israel in coordinated hits on Saturday. This was in retaliation to an Israeli airstrike on a consular building in Damascus, Syria, killing two military generals and five more of the Revolutionary Guards on April 1. The Jewish state, with its superior war technology, thwarted the rush of these missiles inside its territory for most part, and no serious harm was caused. The situation is tailor-made for a major escalation as Israel sees sufficient grounds for 'retaliation', possibly targeting Teheran's well-guarded nuclear installations.

Israel's war cabinet, meeting on Tuesday for the third time since the Iranian counter-offensive, is unlikely to let things pass. The Israeli defence chief has affirmed that this raining of missiles "will be met with a response." The question is when. Iran's president Ebrahim Raisi has warned that even the smallest action against Iranian interests "will certainly be met with a severe, widespread and painful response." The retaliation, Iran said, "would be in a matter of seconds." The intervention of the US, a close ally of Israel, is expected, for good or for worse. The US lawmakers are currently in the process of granting more aid to Israel, which could include military and monetary assistance. On its part, the UN has certified that Israel violated international law by bombing the Iranian consular office in Damascus, which, anyway, is clear as sunlight.

It is likely, as is alleged by Jordan, that Israel's abrupt strike on Iranian military guards was prompted by a crude intent to shift international focus from the six-months-old war in the Gaza Strip, where Palestinians are at the receiving end of Israel's aerial bombings and bloodshed. Israel has also been attempting to block supply of humanitarian aid to the hapless people of Gaza, Muslims, torn by the long-held war. The offensive started on October 7 last, Israel on one side and Hezbollah and other militants on the other, with both sides exchanging fire across the UN-designated Blue Line that separates Lebanon and Israel. Nearly 34,000 Palestinians were killed and more than double that number wounded by Israeli offensive in the past six months. Nearly 50 Palestinians died a day ago as Israel continued its aerial bombardment. The West Asian crisis has defied a solution after Israel occupied land it seized from Syria in 1967. While the US keeps expressing its sympathy to the suffering Palestinians, its commitment for support is to Israel. Many see Israel as an outpost of the US, considering the way the two jell. Iranian rulers' aggressive styles and their alleged promotion of international terrorism are also worsening the West Asia scenario.

Development under NDA: Claims and Reality

By H. Srikanth

Every day, the electronic media bombards us with claims about India making rapid strides in the economic sphere under the NDA regime. Fed with visuals of industries, roads, airports, trains, digital and space technologies, efforts are on to make people believe India is marching towards a \$5 trillion economy, and emerging as a global power. The blitzkrieg publicity given to state sponsored development and welfare programs gives the impression that all problems of poverty, unemployment, etc., are things of the past, and that India is now entering a brave new world of progress and hope. It's time we interject the government claims and see how much of them are true.

India's Growth Rate Story: The NDA wants us to feel proud that under Modi, India has surpassed the UK to occupy a fifth position in the world ranking of GDP. But is this some new development? In 2011 itself, the IMF claimed India had attained a third position in the GDP. The NDA's claim hides the fact that India's per capita income in 2022 was US \$2393, whereas the per capita income of the UK stood at US \$45,544. India's per capita income is less than 5% of the UK's per capita. Even in Asia, many countries have better per capita income compared to India. Further, India's growth rate under the NDA rule stagnated after demonetization. India experienced a negative growth rate (minus 5.8%) during 2020-21. The next year the government claimed 9 percent growth, which actually meant only a positive growth of only 3.2 percent. India could never attain pre-pandemic growth rate. The average annual growth rate under Congress led government (2004-14) was 6.8 percent, whereas under the NDA government, it is only 5.9 percent.

Widening Economic Inequalities: India's growth story under the Modi regime is marked by increasing economic inequalities in the country. Total number of billionaires in India increased to 166 in 2022. The meteoric rise of India's rich was made possible by the NDA government, which openly chanted the LPG (Liberalisation-Globalization-Privatization) mantra. Now, the Indian monopolies are finding a foothold in every business—airways, shipping, railways, defense, space research, mines, and oil and

gas. The rapid growth of the rich was accompanied by the widening economic inequalities. According to the Oxfam report, the top 5% Indians hold 60% of national wealth, whereas the bottom 50% hardly owns 3% of the national wealth. India's top 57 billionaires own as much as what the bottom 90% of Indians own.

The NDA government claims that its policies have drastically reduced poverty in the country from 24.8% in 2015-16 to 11.28% in 2022-23. But many economists and activists doubt the figures, and attribute the poverty figures to the changes in the definition and methodologies of identifying the poor. The government's claims contradict with other reliable data of reputed international and national agencies. National Health Survey Report in 2017 stated that 19 crore people in the country were compelled to sleep on an empty stomach every night. Nearly 4500 children below the age of five die every day out of hunger. According to the Food & Agriculture report of 2018, the number of undernourished people in India is 14.8% more than the global and Asian average. According to recent reports, India occupies 134th position out of 193 countries in global HDI index and is placed at 111th position among 125 countries in Global Hunger Index. In its recent election manifesto, in the name of Modi's guarantee, BJP promises free ration to 80 crore population for the next five years. Why should the government provide free ration to over 50 percent of the Indian population, if the government really believes that only 20 crore Indians are poor? The government knows its poverty figures are fudged.

Growing Unemployment: Modi's government rejects the NSSO and the ILO's figures on growing unemployment in India, and argues that its economic policies have addressed the problem of unemployment. But the facts tell a different story. Privatization, demonetization, moratorium on filling of the vacant posts in the PSUs, the effects of the Covid pandemic, and the decline of labour-intensive industries have drastically reduced employment opportunities in the country and India has been experiencing jobless growth. Ag-

nipath scheme enforced by Modi's government denies permanent employment in defense forces to the aspiring youth. The intensity of unemployment can be understood from the recent incidents. When the Indian Railways advertised for 90 thousand non-technical posts, one crore fifty lakh unemployed people applied for it. 255 among them are Ph.D. holders. In UP, for 60 thousand constable jobs, 48 lakh people applied. Even after knowing the dangers of working in war-torn countries, thousands of unemployed Indians have registered their names for jobs in Israel.

Rise in prices of essential commodities: The NDA government has been claiming that the inflation rate in the country is under control. Whatever be the government figures, the citizens through their lived experience know how the prices of all essential commodities—cereals, dal, cooking oil, sugar, vegetables and medicines have skyrocketed in recent years. In 2011 when international crude oil prices reached US \$115 dollars, Manmohan Singh government increased the gas cylinder price to over Rs. 400. BJP leaders then created ruckus both inside and outside the parliament. But, after Modi came to power international crude prices fell down to \$20 per barrel in 2016. Even then, Modi government did not reduce the oil and gas prices. Today the barrel price is around \$86 per barrel, still less than what it was in 2011. Yet, the prices of gas, petrol and diesel are more than double the price of what it was during the Congress regime. Only because of the Lok Sabha elections, the prices of petrol, diesel and cooking gas are reduced a little. Everyone knows the prices will again go up once the elections are over.

Agriculture, Education and Health: According to official reports, around half of the agricultural households (50.2%) were in debt in 2019. Outstanding agriculture loans from the commercial banks stood at 18.4 lakh crores in 2020-21. The average earnings of an Indian farmer are only ten thousand rupees. In some states like Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal, the income is just around Rs. 4,800. Even to this day, the farmers' suicide cases continue. The number of farmers

who died by suicide in 2022 stood at 11,290, an increase of over 3.75% compared to the previous year's figure. The NDA government proposed the farm laws promising multi-fold increase in the agriculture income. But the farmers rejected them as they viewed the farm laws enables the corporate to control agriculture. Under pressure, Modi government was forced to withdraw the farm laws. However, it is still silent on the farmers' demand for the MSP.

The NDA government introduced the NEP 2020 and promised quality education that meets international standards. But the government does not allocate adequate funds for education. Health sector is no better. The government gives so much publicity about Ayushman Bharat, and such schemes, but the allocation for the health sector remains marginal. In the last few years, even the budget estimates for education and health are considerably reduced while doing the revised estimates. In absolute terms, the budget allocations look substantial but if we look at them as a percentage of the total annual budget, it becomes apparent that the allocation for education and health is marginal and also diminishing. For example, the budgetary allocation for education was reduced from 2.64% in 2020 to 2.5% in 2023. Similarly, the budgetary allocation for health, which accounted for only 2.2% of the total central budget in 2022, reduced further to 1.97% in 2023. In the recent budget (2024-25) the government reduced the allocation for the UGC to Rs. 2500 crores, a drastic decline from the previous year's revised estimate of Rs. 6409 crores. What would be the quality of public education and public health in the country with such meager allocation is anybody's guess.

Other Economic Indicators: As on 31st March 2023, India's national debt is placed at Rs. 155 lakh crores. The national debt nearly tripled under the Modi government. According to an estimate, India borrows Rs. 4 lakhs every second. Forty percent of central revenue goes towards payment of interest for debts taken. Every Indian citizen carries a debt burden of Rs. 1.2 lakhs. In 2014, the fiscal deficit was 4.5%; now it is 5.6%. It is a pity that barring a few exceptions, the national media never presents an objective account of the national economy.

VPP is overselling and NPP clutching at straws

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

The fight for the Shillong Lok Sabha seat has surpassed expectations in terms of interest shown by the voters and the efforts being put forth by political parties. Meghalaya politics has migrated to a different level. In the past, the nature of debates and arguments in its MDC, MLA and MP elections was better than in most Indian states. The voters always viewed the political arguments intellectually and the political parties took a moderate line while presenting their case. Now, the gloves are off and punching below the waist is becoming the norm. The personal political attacks are on the rise. This change started in MLA election 2023 and by all indications things are only going to get more politically nasty in the coming years. The reason for this is twofold – the sudden and stormy entry of Voice of the People Party (VPP) and the positioning of National People's Party (NPP) as the only party which can govern Meghalaya.

The VPP has the advantage of freshness and newness in the current MP election and this will continue till at least the coming Autonomous District Council elections. Whatever they say and claim from the election platforms is appealing to the voters as the truth. This is the sole reason for the enormous support it is receiving. However, even the truth has to be tested. The testing of a political truth is most unpredictable as in the end every politician would like to be in power. It is easy for VPP to make tall claims as it is not in government. The real test of the ability and capability of a political party is when it has the responsibility to govern. It would be fascinating to see VPP govern so as to prove if they are for real or just a puff of smoke? On the other hand, the conundrum and desperation of the NPP is understood. Politics is about voters' perception and the underprivileged voter who earns from hand to mouth has turned away from the NPP. This can be gauged from the attendances in their meetings particularly in the rural hamlets. Amidst the decline, it is only recently that NPP has really gone in aggressively against the VPP in its campaigns with Deputy CM Prestone Tynsong being the spearhead. There is an air of desperation in NPP campaigns and if Amparen Lyngdoh were to win it would entirely be due to Prestone Tynsong's solo charge.

The VPP is for local consumption only. Even if it wins the Shillong seat it will be of little significance in terms of challenging legislations that would adversely impact upon Meghalaya. The most that it can do is dissent at the national level and sell it locally for even more electoral gains. This intended or unintended political approach of VPP is playing out well to its advantage. In the grand scheme of things, whatever the result for VPP in the Shillong seat it can leverage on it for immediate gains in the ADC elections. The thrust of VPP in the MP election is a vehicle to help them do well and carry through in MDC and MLA elections.

These developments present a concern for NPP. Desperate times calls for desperate measures. This explains the aggression and the emotion with which the NPP has been campaigning vigorously. At an election meeting at Mawlai, Prestone Tynsong projected the constituency as the roads infrastructural link between old Shillong and new Shillong. How that would work out geographically is anybody's guess. It is a perfect example of clutching at straws. But, that is not the end of NPP desperation.

CM Conrad Sangma recently said that NPP is a part of NDA but north-east India comes first. Interesting, as Assam the economic power house of north-east India is saffron through and through. The biggest problem for the NPP is that it is being viewed as a core group partner of the BJP.

VPP is riding high on the back of some intelligent and well-meaning teachers. VPP would not have been so popular with enormous degree of acceptance and support if it were not because of the teachers in its fold. This explains why the NPP has been trying to ban teachers from political participation to the extent of presently taking the matter to the Supreme Court. If the ruling were to go against the teachers then the VPP backbone would be broken and the Party too would come crashing down. The hopes and dreams of the underprivileged voter might just come to an untimely and heartbreaking end. It is basically for such reasons that overselling is best avoided.

While VPP continues to oversell itself, the NPP situation in the immediate future is troubling. BJP did not give up the Shillong and Tura seats out of love for NPP. It is a give and take political arrangement. Expect some plump and high positions for Meghalaya BJP in MDA 2.0 after the results are declared on June 4, 2024. Further, NPP will be forced to push the BJP's agenda in Meghalaya. These include issues like one nation, one election, CAA and UCC, etc. How CM Conrad Sangma would be balancing these issues would be intriguing. Would he buckle under pressure or fight?

The VPP is clear with its vision and mission. It continuously talks about a better, new and sustainable Meghalaya. It projects itself as the hero of the Khasi-Pnar community. However, how it would attain its vision is not clear. Deputy CM Prestone Tynsong asked VPP about its blueprint. The VPP replied to this by saying that its blueprint is the rule of law and justice, etc., while even quoting the United Nations. It is to be noted that what VPP projected as its blueprint was actually not so, rather, it was a statement of values that they uphold. In actuality, a blueprint basically refers to a plan of action or strategy or framework on how the vision would be achieved. Interestingly, after the blueprint reply of VPP, NPP did not raise the issue anymore. Did Prestone Tynsong also mistake values for a blueprint? Is NPP so poor in understanding and differentiation of terms? At least VPP has stated its values as rule of law, etc. NPP finds it difficult to even state its values with so many political appointees under its fold and acquiescing with the BJP ideology, etc. Otherwise why would the two parties stand on the same platform? However, credit must be given where due. The NPP is very good at marketing and presenting a feel good factor to the voters.

In the final analysis, the most important day for Meghalaya vis a vis the 18th Lok Sabha election is not April 19, 2024. The actual red-letter day is June 4, 2024. For on that day the political scenario of Meghalaya would change drastically. The VPP would have to deliver on its tall claims and promises and the NPP would have to deal with a very uncomfortable relationship with the BJP. Meghalaya politics has never been this interesting and intriguing. Further, it is bound to continue that way for at least into the foreseeable future. (The writer teaches at NEHU; email: blyngdoh@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

Excuses for violence

Editor,
The theory propounded by some readers linking CAA (and fictitious NRC) as the cause of recent spate of racial killings of innocent persons in Meghalaya exposes their vicious mindset. Why then Meghalaya witnessed most of the racial killings in the pre-CAA era right from 1979? In West Bengal too, violence and killings are intrinsic part of their political culture for over half century which also predates CAA. The reason for so much violence particularly in West Bengal is nothing but the continuity of tradition of violence that has been accepted by the general people since 1960s. Although the actors and directors have changed with the passage of time, but the script has remained almost the same in any violence prone state like West Bengal and Meghalaya. Right thinking people instead of justifying killings should endeavour to raise their voice against all forms of violence in order to break the chain so that no more innocent lives are lost.

Yours etc.,
NK Kechar
Shillong-3

A genetic analysis of Aryan invasion theory

Editor,
What we encounter in textbooks often shapes our beliefs. Having grown up reading about the 'Aryan Invasion Theory' from my early school days, I too continued to believe that Hinduism was foreign to India, as also suggested in a recent article by Bhogtoram Mawroh (ST, Dated April 11). This belief I carried along until I came across works about the ancient treatises authored by Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo, as well as the influential writings of prominent Western intellectuals such as Voltaire and Schopenhauer. However, after much effort and critical study, I eventually came to understand a deeper, more accurate truth.

Vivekananda saw the idea of "Aryan Invasion Theory" as nothing more than colonial tall tales, conveniently spun to justify Western supremacy over Eastern civilizations – sort of like giving a scholarly veneer to cover up their intrinsic notoriety and imperialistic ambition. Sri

Aurobindo in his writings, logically emphasized the continuity and depth of Indian civilization, suggesting that its spiritual and cultural traditions developed locally over millennia. He viewed the idea of an Aryan invasion as part of a colonial narrative that undermined and misrepresented the ancient history of India and its civilization. Not only did the aforementioned spiritual leaders reject the hypothetical AIT outright, but so did Mahatma Gandhi, Lala Lajpat Rai, and Rabindranath Thakur.

Nevertheless, with major breakthroughs in "genetic science," many aspects previously considered "unknowable" have become quite clear. Yes, genetic studies have over the years gained the ability to understand "human history," and mass population migration by simply studying microscopic DNA. Here, I wish to reiterate that the successive findings from genetic researchers in the late 20th century dealt a significant blow to the 'Aryan Invasion Theory'.

Studies of DNA samples from ancient skeletons in the region have revealed a lack of gene flow from outside populations into India in the last 10,000 to 15,000

years, which would suggest a large-scale migration or invasion was more fiction than fact. The eminent French archaeologist and author, Jean-Paul Demoule, has underscored the complete lack of archaeological evidence for any abrupt invasion. He argued that the available evidence completely fails to substantiate the historical narrative of a sudden incursion by Indo-Aryan groups.

What is no less astonishing is that the idea of the Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT) was proposed as recently as the 19th century by our colonial masters and was 'absolutely unknown' to anyone before then. Well, the prime motive of the British was to "sow" the seeds of discord and antagonism between the Aryan and Dravidian groups in order to prevent them from uniting and standing together on a common platform. It was a devious mission towards a divide and rule policy. However, regrettably, even after being thoroughly discredited by the aforementioned modern thinkers and leaders, Indian academia continued to propagate AIT as true, as if clinging to a sinking ship!

Very importantly, nowhere in the extensive an-

cient scriptures, including the Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Yoga Vasishta, nor in the voluminous mythical folklore and tales, is there any mention of Aryans invading or migrating to India from the West. These ancient treatises elaborately discuss the now-defunct Saraswati River, where the Vedic civilization flourished.

However, we have nothing to say if some people still hold 'Aryan Invasion Theory' close to their chests, as advanced by the likes of Max Mueller and celebrated by intellectuals with a specific ideology.

Very interestingly, after serious studies of the ancient literature and history of the East, Francois Voltaire proclaimed: "I am convinced that everything has come down to us from the banks of the Ganges – astronomy, astrology, metempsychosis, etc. It is very important to note that some 2,500 years ago at the least, Pythagoras went from Samos to the Ganges to learn geometry....."

Furthermore, the eminent American historian and philosopher Will Durant, praised the ancientness of India with great admiration by saying: "India was the motherland of our race, and Sanskrit

the mother of Europe's languages. India was the mother of our philosophy, of much of our mathematics, of self-government and democracy. In many ways, Mother India is the mother of us all." It is immature to doubt the scholarship of the world-acclaimed researcher who was credited with the 11-volume series – 'The Story of Civilization'.

While Mark Twain was fascinated by the Indian system of knowledge that he visited India and called it 'the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech,' should we still doubt the land that we stand on, the land that nourished us?"

Come what may, the truth should not be smothered by false speculation and false narratives spread by those with devious motives to hurt the nation. Indeed, the DNA of lies has already been decoded. The erroneous notion should not become the opium of the learned!

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwalli,
Via email

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

"Doubt whom you will, but never yourself."

— Christian Nestell Bovee

The Shillong Times

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Election sound and fury climaxes

AT no time in the past have two political parties been at each other's throats as this time. While there are four political parties in the fray and one Independent candidate. The Congress campaign was largely subdued. The UDP candidate contesting under the RDA alliance also was not much heard. This time around candidates seem to rely a lot on social media messaging than on constituency visits as this takes a huge toll on candidates and their parties. In fact, political parties organised parallel meetings at several places and leaders spoke on behalf of the candidates who are probably speaking at another venue. Technology has taken us by storm but political parties still rely on the tried and tested public meetings where they mobilise volunteers and even transport them from different places as a show of strength. At every public meeting political parties boast of the physical presence of supporters they managed to garner. In most cases it is only the hardcore supporters of the party that would brave the night and cold and sit through hours of political bickering.

Judging by the sound and fury at every public meeting for the Shillong Parliamentary seat, it would seem that the fight is between the NPP and VPP. The Congress, UDP and Independent candidates had low key meetings that were relatively decent and refrained from name calling. The candidates explained their party position vis a vis the Lok Sabha election and what stances they would take if they are elected. All the parties however took a pot shot at the NPP for being the doppelganger of the BJP at a time when there was need to resist the attempt by the saffron party to consolidate its position to effect constitutional changes that are far reaching. The NPP is being taunted as the enabler for such a vile objective of the BJP. Further, the NPP had to counter allegations of corruption from its first tenure (2018-23) of running the state government. There were threats and counter threats of filing FIRs for disruption of public meetings by supporters of the VPP at meetings of the NPP at some venues. The VPP vehemently denied that the disruptors were its supporters.

In all there was a lot of sound and fury and what remains to be seen is whether the political parties are able to mobilise their supporters to come to the polling station. This time around there has been robust mobilisation of voters by the State Election Department. Chief Electoral Officer, BDR Tiwari has expressed hope that the voter turn-out would go up to 80% from 71.42% in 2019. It is commonplace for people in Meghalaya to drag their feet when it comes to the Lok Sabha election. Also, the only party that places much score on booth level mobilisation of voters is the BJP whose karyakartas make sure they bring voters to the polling booth. This level of dedication is lacking in other parties when in fact this is the critical part of an election. Herein lies the crucial point between winning and losing an election.

Kudos to the VPP but who should Meghalaya prefer?

By Albert Thyriang

The Voice of the Peoples' Party (VPP) is quite a sensation. The leaders of the party have drawn huge and passionate crowds in their campaigns in the Shillong seat. The shouts 'Ha u Prah' have struck a chord with rural voters. The party has become the darling of You-Tubers and social media content creators. Popularity-wise the VPP could win hands down. However, skeptics say money could still play a decisive role. The illegal coal cash could flow to every nook and corner of the state tells its own story. More than one crore has even reached Arunachal Pradesh.

Irrespective of the voting pattern on April 19 and the results on June 4, the VPP has made massive gains. If it pulls off the impossible the next KHADC and JHADC elections are a foregone conclusion. Even if the November 2021 established party comes second or third, the trick of the government to unjustifiably delay the council's polls. But it won't save the inevitable. It will be a telling humiliation if in Nartiang and Pynursla the NPP lose. It will be an embarrassment if MLAs trail to the VPP in their home turfs. NPP and UDP will feel the heat if they are relegated behind their most hated rival. The Congress at least will have the anti-incumbency excuse. We have to congratulate the party for managing to pull crowds without offering money, free rides, food and drink. Kudos for the relentless focus on clean politics! We need to pat the back of Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit and other leaders for the conviction that elections can be won without money. It appears the public has believed in the philosophy. It looks like the electorate has finally understood the negative impact of money power. It seems a large section has decided not to cast their votes for the candidate who distributes the highest amount. In particular, we could see the youths stay away from the rich candidates and parties. If the VPP does emerge victorious it will be historic. Even if it falls short the beginning has arrived. Positive development will take place. The change of mentality is here.

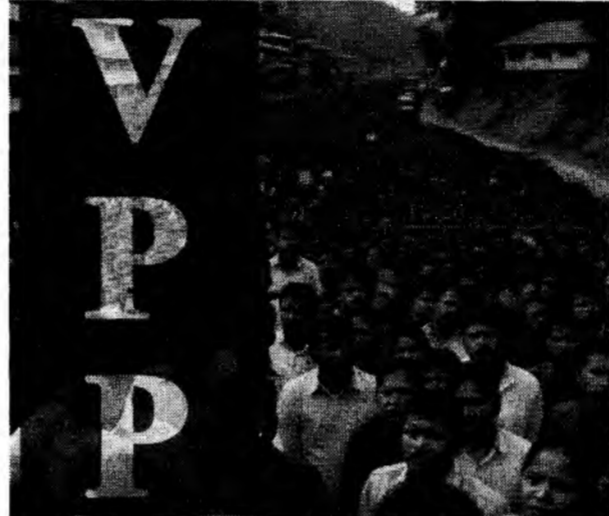
The NPP has denied the existence of corrupt practices under its regime. The NPP does not agree that Meghalaya is part of India which is ranked 78th out of 180 corrupt countries. The state's rulers do not believe that Meghalayans are among the 62 percent who have paid a bribe to a public official at some time. The MDA-II government does not go with the report that half of Indians had first-hand experience with paying bribes or using contacts to get services from government agencies. For

the NPP and company the VPP need not talk of clean politics because it is leading a corruption-free government.

This author tested it himself. Recently I was at home (Mawkyrat constituency) due to the demise of my mother. The noble soul was hardly literate but did all she could to educate her children. She used to say, 'We will not hesitate even if we have to sell the ancestral property for your education.' We return to the point. A day after the funeral this writer talked to three LP teachers who got their jobs recently. All the three had to pay more than five lakhs to finally receive the appointment letters. One of them had to sell her paddy field. When asked 'why' the reply was, 'Te hap ai bad iawe bad iawe' (We have to pay underhand to different people). They also stated that they did not think they would have been selected

the tanks and pipes still lay dry. So also the surrounding villages! Hope the people of the state are wise and give the VPP a chance to clean up the mess. There is no harm in beginning with this MP election.

The illegal coal mining and transportation scam is unparalleled. The beneficiaries could include ministers, MLAs, MDCs, other politicians close to the current dispensation, bureaucrats and police personnel. The utter wasteful expenditure on the 178 political appointees is an open loot from the tiny treasury of the state. The government has no credibility in saying that its mind and hands are beyond reproach. The founders of the VPP have long studied people's predicaments and have decided to take the plunge prominently forcing clean politics to be a subject in public discourses. The electorate should wholeheartedly stand by this party



had they not paid the money. They confessed that all candidates paid money to the officials. Here we see that bribes are normalised. They are accepted as a normal practice. To get a government job one has to pay bribes. The government knows it. But it closes its eyes. We hope the VPP will tackle this menace when it comes to power.

The government is turning a blind eye to tyrannical practices because there is corruption at the highest levels. The implementation of Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) projects is under the scanner. We need not repeat the observations of the Controller and Auditor General of (CAG). A bit of reality check is sufficient to doubt the success of the scheme. On paper the water connection scheme may be top class but on the ground it is an evident failure, probably due to corruption. When this author inquired from villagers along the Nongstoin-Rangblang road, none said water had come to their courtyard. In Rangblang, a village of more than 300 households,

which dares to catch the bull by its horns.

Other motivations for voters in this election are for democracy and secularism. Another win for the BJP and for Narendra Modi is certainly bad for the country. We could see the country taking an anti-democratic and anti-secular path. Many believe Modi is already 80 per cent a dictator. The arrest of Arvind Kejriwal and the freezing of the Congress' accounts are examples. The misuse of democratic agencies and institutions to tame opponents are other indicators. The accumulation of powers under the Prime Minister is another compelling pointer. The 'purchase' of the mainstream media turning them into Modi's propagandist tools is a serious red flag. If unchecked the BJP could move us to a 'one nation one party' nation. We could be bracketed along with North Korea and Russia where the citizens are forced to vote only for one official party. Many already believe that elections in India are no longer free and fair. Results are

of the two states. There is a need to resolve the issue as soon as possible, so that such conflicts and loss of lives can be avoided. All these areas pointed above are in dire need of attention and improvement because they will help the state and its residents. However, what is more important currently is the need to vote wisely. The residents of Meghalaya must take the right to vote as not just a right but a duty. Since its inception, it was only in the year 1998, where the voter turnout of the state was more than 70%. Therefore, there is a need to encourage voters to come out and vote. They should not take this day as a holiday but as a day to be responsible citizens of the country and exercise their rights dutifully, because it is only when people vote, that actual change can happen.

Yours etc.,
Reakor Shisha Kharkrang
Upper Shillong.

'Third class mindless politics'

Editor,
Opposition parties such as the Indian National Congress (INC) are harping on

manipulated. The Chandigarh mayor election recently is a clear instance.

For millions Modi is a deity. They worship him. They mistake him for an infallible god. This is what the BJP loves, for in his name they win election. The BJP's mixing of politics with religion is a deadly cocktail. Candidates' campaigns are accompanied by 'Jai Shri Ram' chants. Communalisation and polarisation is where the BJP excels. The Prime Minister has already dragged Opposition leaders accusing them of cherishing non-vegetarian food (read Muslims) during the Hindu festivities.

Meghalaya should vote to contribute towards saving democracy and secularism in the country. In fact voters should place these two above the 'clean politics' push of the VPP for the simple reason that this is a national and not a state election. Besides, transparency is possible only in a democratic and secular set up. In a dictatorship there is no accountability. At the present juncture democracy and secularism are the most valuable assets. Meghalaya should add to the numbers that oppose the BJP even if we think that the saffron party is coming back to power for the third time.

Now, in Meghalaya which are the democratic and secular parties? The BJP is automatically out. The NPP too excluded for the two are now one and the same. Conrad himself has appealed to voters to go for Modi under the NPP's banner. The UDP and HSPDP are part of the MDA-II in Meghalaya and NDA in Delhi. That leaves only Congress and the VPP. The Congress is part of the NPP at KHADC but it is undeniable that at the national level, it is the strongest opponent of the BJP's Hindutva ideology. The VPP has exhibited religious fanaticism. Hope they learn with time. If the state sends the Congress or the VPP to Delhi it would be great for democracy and secularism. Even in Garo Hills Saleng Sagma could surprise Agatha because of the NPP's nexus with the BJP.

The NPP has vowed to oppose the Uniform Civil Code (UCC). This was what the party said exactly on CAB but its MP ended up helping CAB turn CAA. Agatha's explanation that she voted for the 'controversial bill' because the Sixth Schedule areas are exempted confirms NPP's policy on UCC. If UCC is made to be inapplicable in tribal areas of the state the NPP will vote for it. Just as for CAA, the UDP and HSPDP would not snap ties with their senior partners. So the option for Meghalayans is amply clear.

Yours etc.,
Dr H S Ranhotra,
Shillong

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

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Handling Hurtful Words..!

"Miss," says the little fellow running after his class teacher. "He called me a bad word!"

The wise teacher looks at her young student, "And what did you do to provoke him to say that?"

No, I'm not defending the boy or girl who said an ugly word, but very often we forget the provocation as we punish an offender who reacted. But the situation doesn't rest there. In quarrels between a husband and wife, the husband or wife next day remembers the words thrown at him or her, but forget what got the other to say them.

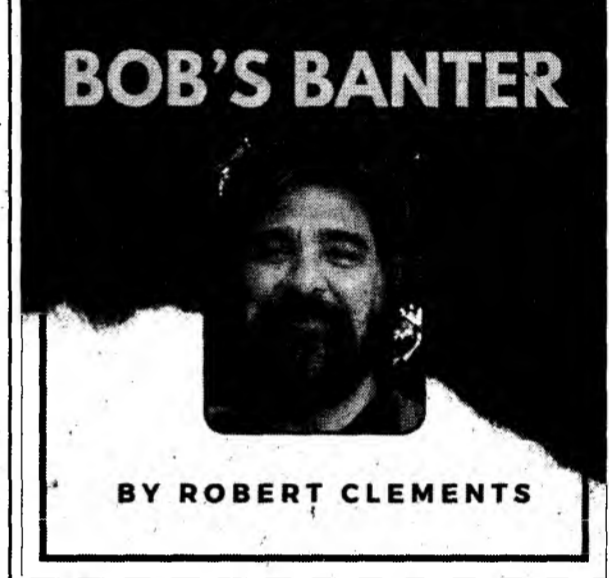
It's time we started putting angry words back in context.

Many years ago, I remember a casual worker in my business, who was trying to form a union in my company by sending me a lawyer's notice. I took it to my lawyer, and pointing the harsh sentences out to him said, "Look what he's calling me!" The lawyer nodded, and said, "You want to hit him back?" "Yes," I said, "The audacity of that man, he's just a labourer

Instead of taking these words to heart and internalizing them as truth, try to detach yourself emotionally and focus on the fact that this is just someone else's opinion.

Next, look for perspective. Realise that one key way to lessen the impact of hurtful words is by looking at them within a broader context. Ask yourself questions like: - Why did this person say what they said? - What might be going on in their life that caused them to speak this way? - Is their opinion valid? Or are they speaking out of ignorance? Thinking through these questions can help you gain perspective on the situation, which can make it feel less personal and allow you to approach things more objectively. Then start setting boundaries: It's important not to let others dictate how we feel about ourselves. By setting our own personal boundaries and communicating them when necessary, we can prevent others from having too much power over our emotions.

This might involve telling someone that their words are not helpful or that you



in my company and he needs to be taught a lesson!" "And that's exactly what he wants you to do," said my lawyer, "He has no facts to attack you with, so with these name calling words he expects you

don't appreciate their input. Or it could be something as simple as walking away from a conversation if it's starting to feel toxic.

Also learn to practice self-care. Start realising that hurt-

When people throw words at us in anger, it's not our job to catch those words and hurl them back with more vigour, but here's some advice: go deep into what caused them to say what they said, and proceed with your response accordingly.

to get so riled up, that you will respond violently, and with your response, he will build his case." "So, what do I do?" I asked. "Don't respond to them," said the lawyer with a chuckle, "Just react to the facts!"

Needless to say, we won the case, and I've always remembered my lawyer's advice. When people throw words at us in anger, it's not our job to catch those words and hurl them back with more vigour, but here's some advice: go deep into what caused them to say what they said, and proceed with your response accordingly.

A loving father took a doll away from his toddler daughter. The little one threw a tantrum and then in a fit of rage slapped her father. The father, reacting to the sudden pain and without thinking slapped her back, stunning the little one. It took many days for his daughter to come back to him, without being afraid.

That's what we do, when we hold onto angry words and react to them. Our spontaneous and unthinking reaction to them causes unnecessary and sometimes irreversible damage. Instead, understand the context, look deep into the provocation, then wisely decide how you will handle the words, but the situation. If the words were said out of despair, handle the feeling, if frustration, look into what the cause and reason is, and suddenly life will become all the easier in the living, and many a relationship, saved!

Here are some more very practical steps to help you understand and deal with hurtful words:

The first step is not to take it personally. The first step in dealing with hurtful words is to remember that they are often coming from a place of insecurity or negativity within the person saying them. In other words, it's not necessarily about you - it's about them.

ful words can take a toll on us emotionally, so it's important to practice self-care in the aftermath of these experiences. This could mean doing something kind for yourself like taking a bubble bath or spending time with people who lift your spirits.

Another effective way to cope is by journaling or talking through your feelings with someone you trust. Venting about what happened can help release some of the pent-up emotions associated with hurtful words and provide an outlet for processing the experience.

Finally, learn to let go by remembering that holding onto hurtful words only gives people more power over you. It's important to acknowledge what was said and how it made you feel, but then let go of any attachment to those comments. This might mean forgiving the person who said those things or simply choosing not to dwell on them any longer. Instead, focus on positive self-talk and affirmations that build up your confidence and resilience in the face of adversity.

To conclude, while hurtful words can be painful and difficult to deal with, they don't have to control our lives or define who we are. By practicing self-awareness, setting boundaries, practicing self-care, gaining perspective and letting go when necessary - we can empower ourselves to move forward confidently in the face of negativity and maintain our emotional well-being in spite of any adversity life may bring!

Like I said earlier, practise these simple methods and life will become all the easier in the living, and many a relationship will be saved..!

The Author conducts an Online Writers and Speakers Course. For more details send a thumbs-up to him on WhatsApp 9892572883 or bobsbanter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Right to vote is a huge responsibility

Editor,
The election is just a few days away and it seems like this year the competition is tougher than before with stronger candidates and a new party - the VPP that's gaining popularity and momentum with each passing day. All the parties have made their promises in their respective manifestos. It is however our responsibility as citizens of the state and the country to choose who amongst them will be the best to represent us and our problems. One must not vote for a party solely based on the identity of the party or the popularity of the candidate but the work that has been promised to be fulfilled by them. Meghalaya is a state that is lagging behind on so many levels and development on is a goal that must be met by the party that will emerge victorious.

There are several grounds that as residents of Meghalaya we must analyse before we cast our votes. Education is a sector where Meghalaya still is trailing. According to the Survey conducted by the National Statistical Office (NSO) in the year 2023,

Meghalaya's current literacy rate stands at 75.48% which is an improvement of a little over 1% since the last survey conducted in the year 2011, so the sector needs a major overhaul. The Party that comes to power must focus on making education more accessible to children. They must also look into the cause of number of school drop-outs as according to the UDISE (Unified District Information for Education) plus data published by the Union Education Ministry the dropout rate for Meghalaya has increased from 7.4% in 2020-21 to 9.8% in 2021-22. There is also a need to put more focus on Higher Education. The state as of now is lacking quality colleges. As of the latest information by edurank.com for the year 2024, North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) is the only Education Institution from the state that ranks under the top 100 position, while the next closest rank goes to NIT (Meghalaya) which currently ranks at 400th position. Therefore, the new MP ought to make Education as one of his/her primary focus.

Another sector where Meghalaya is lagging behind is the Health Sector. Although the State has a three tier health care delivery system in the rural areas, that is a

Community Health Centre (CHC) for a population of approximately 80,000, a Primary Health Centre (PHC) for every 20,000 people and a Sub-Centre for every 3000 people, accessibility and availability of doctor is still a problem. The state also has Civil hospitals established at Shillong, Tura, Jowai, Nongpoh, Williamnagar, Baghmara, Ampati, Khliehriat, Nongstoin and Mairang. It also has a mental health hospital and a T.B. hospital, namely, MIMHANS and R.P. Chest hospital. There are also three Maternal and Child Health hospitals i.e. Ganesh Das Govt MCH hospital at Shillong, District MCH hospital at Tura and MCH Hospital at Panaliar, Jowai. Despite having these health institutions, many people prefer getting treatment from Medical Institutions outside the state, The State Health Department itself has stated that there is a lack of specialist doctors in the state and that the gap between availability and requirement of specialist physicians continues to be a challenge for the State government.

It is also sad to see that the North Eastern Indira Gandhi Regional Institute of Health and Medical (NEIGRIHMS) is the only Government Medical Insti-

tution in the state and the only Institution offering the course of MBBS, which leads to students searching for institutions outside the state to complete their higher studies. There is therefore an urgent need of medical colleges which will encourage students of the state to complete their education in the state itself.

The third important sector that demands attention is the Employment sector. While Meghalaya is performing better than many states when it comes to Unemployment rate, at just 2.63%, there is still a need to improve the employment sector. According to the Glassdoor data in the year 2024, the average base pay in the state of Meghalaya is Rs. 16,260 which is barely enough to sustain a person living in an urban area. The Party that is elected must also look at making people not only qualified but employable as well.

One more area that needs solution is the boundary conflicts/dispute that are existing with Assam. The boundary dispute between the states have been existing since the time the state was formed and even after 50 years of statehood, there seems to be no end to this dispute which has led to numerous conflicts between the governments and people

"Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty."

— Mother Teresa

The Shillong Times

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Uninspiring season

ELECTION season is time for political stocktaking. Questions are increasingly asked – has India recorded any major feat under the 10 years of the Modi rule? Modi's two terms in power were, generally speaking, neither disastrous nor inspiring. India's achievements were 'modest' in these years while the political and economic stability was remarkable in a nation seen as a 'noisy democracy'. By his leadership aura, Modi silenced his detractors across the political spectrum. Yet, the positives thereof could not be effectively transformed into a leap forward for the nation on the economic or other fronts. This was unlike what China did in the first 10 years of this century and is still carrying forward with a new vigour after the Covid 19 disaster. On the doorsteps of the parliament polls, Modi as also the nation must ponder why.

Human resource of nearly 1.5 billion was the principal strength on which China built its might. India has as much of a population, yet tapping their energies required the eminent presence of good leadership. There was need to refine the systems. What the 10 years of Modi dispensation can claim, principal ly, was the rolling out of market reforms; the introduction of a unified market taxation system, which is helping the nation's coffers swell. This money has been put mainly into the infra development sector. This is appreciable if not for the apprehension that huge chunks of cuts went into the BJP kitty from this funding. Hints were evident from a CAG report. Overall, the industrial sector failed to grow in substantive ways due largely to the play of bureaucratic and political corruption via the licence raj. This undercut the cause of job creations. If courts were expected to deliver justice in legal matters across the spectrum, it remains in a hopeless state for most part and only very important cases are being attended to in the normal course. Cases drag on for decades. Justice delayed means justice denied. Modi slept over such matters. He showed a lack of nerve to change the decadent and corrupt systems, evident also in the near-total ineffectiveness of the central investigation agencies like ED and CBI, other than in fixing Modi's political rivals like Arvind Kejriwal. Their officials too are making hay.

When neighbours like Pakistan and Sri Lanka are in an economic mess, the Indian economy is doing relatively better and exports went up, thanks to the favourable monsoons helping the farm sector perform impressively. The government's contribution in this is nominal. Modi's farm reforms were abandoned midway for fear that powerful sections of farmers in the North would undercut BJP's electoral prospects. Overall, under Modi, things have not turned from bad to worse, but there also has not been a quantum jump in the ease of living of the Indian population with inflation touching the ceiling. Whether the electorate will weigh the pros and cons of the Modi rule with pragmatism is another matter.

Divided by politics, religion, education, economics

By Patricia Mukhim

Those who revel in the use of the word "jaitbynriew" carelessly have hardly delved into its intrinsic meaning. Jaitbynriew would mean a conglomeration of clans that make up the Khasi community. It is a word that suggests inclusion and oneness. Perhaps when that word was coined the world we lived in was simple; our worldviews were unpretentious and not as complicated as it is today and there was little to divide us. At the time there were no elections, only selection of who would lead the tribes in every village so that the leader would show the way. Hence, he had to have better insights into things and also have the personality to lead. And when we talk of leaders at the time, it had to be a male person because women were too tied to their kitchens, their fields; their child-bearing obligations and their caring responsibilities – caring for the elderly; for their children; their husbands but not themselves. It was considered selfish to look after oneself. Hence the woman of the house would only complain of ill-health when she could no longer get up and work in the house or the field.

However, since the gender division of labour was not as austere as today, a man could take on the task of cooking and looking after the kids as much as the woman did. Also, there were other family members in and out of the house. We were a real community then. Each one lent a helping hand. At that time Khasi society was indeed egalitarian. Today we are torn apart by politics; by religion; by disparities in wealth distribution; by the billionaire tribals flaunting over the top, luxury vehicles and driving over pot-holed roads. There are the millionaire tribals who have the best of everything – a good, cushy government job and money to be stolen from every project they handle; the business class tribal that has learnt to tailor the system to its needs. These types are friendly with every government that comes in since the system is so well-oiled. They get all the contract works on a quid pro quo basis. Then there are other ordinary tribals who

eke out a living through hard labour and others who spread their wares and hawk them from morning to evening – go back home buy food along the way and cook it on reaching home. They are all Khasi (I am not going to split hairs and go into the sub-strata), but their aspirations are different. The Khasi that has benefited from the crony-capitalist system will support a government that facilitates its unhindered wealth creation project. Those that are unable to find a footing in the economic ladder which in this state is a pyramid that gets broader at the bottom and sharper at the top, now want change. They don't understand the larger picture that this time the voting is for forming a government at the centre. All they want is to punish the present state government which they conclude is serving the affluent while kicking them on their stomachs.

Hence there is a sharp polarisation of political ideals – the poor and downtrodden seem to favour the VPP because of its promise to root out corruption which in other words means that the poor too will have some space for their dreams and aspirations to blossom. Whether that will really happen if the VPP rides to power in 2028 is too distant a dream to even consider now. Besides, we are in a state where the VPP has a following only in the Khasi Hills while its beta noire the NPP is a national party and is present across the state of Meghalaya. It would be tough for a party that is Khasi-centric to dream of ruling the state. Let's also admit that the Garo people are smarter, more united and vote more strategically than the Khasis do. Isn't that the reason why Meghalaya has had 5 Garo Chief Ministers whose tenures were longer than the Khasis have had 7 chief ministers with short tenures. BB Lyngdoh had the shortest tenure of 29 days between March 3- 31, 1983. Captain William Sangma had the longest collective tenure of almost 13 years between 1972 to February 1988. PA Sangma could only be CM for 2yrs 47 days in 1988; Salseng Marak was CM for 5 years and 19 days from 1983-1988 followed by Mukul Sangma who was

CM for 7 years and 320 days from April 2010 to March 2013. And finally Conrad Sangma is the CM for 6 years running. The longest tenure that a Khasi CM had was when DD Lapang held office for 3 years and 103 days between March 4 2003 to June 15, 2006. Does this tell us anything about politics in Meghalaya?

Instability seems to run in our genes and that instability is caused not by the desire to govern the state better or to chart out a more progressive roadmap for Meghalaya but by the sole desire to be the CM because of the perks that go with the office. Thankfully now the era of 'iaknieh shuki' (musical chairs) is over. It used to be a characteristic of the Congress regime then. Congress MLAs with chief ministerial ambitions would take their case to the High Command in Delhi and as one chief ministerial candidate once confided it depended on how much money an aspirant could offer the High Command. One wonders if the Congress High Command has learnt any lessons from these shenanigans which it will not repeat in the future. With the BJP at the Centre we haven't heard of too many musical chairs being played in BJP ruled states.

When it comes to politics no political party can lay claims to sainthood. All have their well-hidden or whitewashed acts of omission and commission. The BJP's outright attack on CMs of opposition ruled states and of taking into its fold tainted former Congressmen is disgusting to say the least. Apart from this the BJP government using the Enforcement Directorate and the CBI to get after anyone with even a faint taint of corruption and to then woo them into the BJP fold is scandalous. Like they say anyone who enters the bathing space (read politics) is naked.

Right now the people in rural areas are in a mood to punish the NPP-led government because they feel that life has become very burdensome in the past six years. They realise that education is beyond their reach. In Syntung village for instance, the community are mobilising funds from each household to be able to pay the teachers of Class 9 and 10. Some households pay cash; others pay in

kind. The reason they are doing so is because if they don't have Classes 9 & 10 within the village they would have to send their kids to Shillong which means having to rent a house and also pay for education. Alternatively, they would have to send their kids to Jongksha which has a higher secondary school but which is 36 kms away and takes 1 hour 18 minutes to commute. The MLAs they have elected have done hardly anything to improve the educational and health care facilities and these take a huge financial toll on them. Mind you, this is the story of just one village. The story is repeated at every village one travels to. Only villages closer to the state capital or the district headquarters have some semblance of governance which includes good educational and health facilities.

Looking at the villages of Meghalaya, nothing much has changed in 50 years. The roads built are very narrow and designed to last one season only. Two vehicles can hardly pass each other on these roads. One wonders what specifications the PWD uses. But more on that in another article. For now, we are all geared up for the MP elections. Today the deal will be sealed and we will have an MP who will represent the Shillong Parliamentary seat. I intentionally don't wish to dwell on Garo Hills because we vote differently and I am now quite sure that there is an inherent difference in the psyche of the Mon Khmer group of people and the Tibeto-Burmans. Am I being divisive? As if we ever felt a sense of kinship!

And last but not least, in recent times with the rise of a renaissance in Khasi indigenous faith, religion has become a sword that goes right through the heart of Khasi society. Politics has used religion to create fissures among us and religion has lent itself to politics rather incongruously. There are those who believe that religion is the key that unlocks the doors to culture and others who believe that religion is a spiritual path and culture is what we follow as Khasis. The debate continues even as we find more and more reasons to divide us.

It is on this hugely polarised climate and divisive mindsets that we go to vote for an MP. May the least factional and discordant political party carry the day.

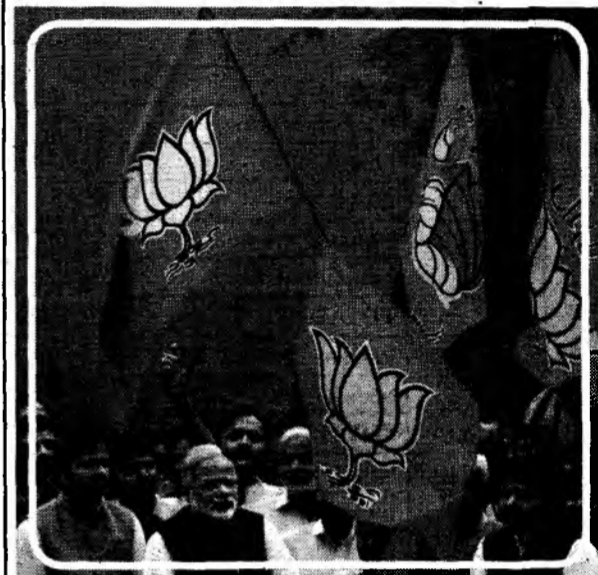
Critical analysis of the BJP's 9-year tenure

By VK Lyngdoh

The editorial, "Need for solidarity (ST April 16, 2024) takes a wide angle of the scenario that would emerge post June 4, 2024 when the Lok Sabha results are announced.

It is not only that, "in all likelihood the BJP could return," but it is certain that the BJP will return. The latest CSDS pre-poll survey indicates a possible vote share of the BJP at 40% plus its partners 6% equals 46% while the INC is estimated to have a vote share of 21% plus its partners 13% that makes 34% and others are estimated at 20%. The estimated seat share for the BJP is 315 seats and that of its NDA partners is 46 seats which makes up to 361 seats. The seat share of the Congress is estimated at 62 and that of its partner at 49 that makes a total of 111 seats for INDI Alliance and others at 71 seats.

The Modi government has prioritized infrastructure development across various sectors. As far as Roads and Highways is concerned, the Bharatmala Pariyojana aims to construct and upgrade over 34,800 km of highways across India. This project is expected to enhance connectivity, boost trade, and facilitate economic growth. Railways, the Dedicated Freight Corridors (DFC) are being developed to improve freight movement. The Bullet Train Project (Mumbai-Ahmedabad High Speed Rail) is also underway. Urban Infrastructure initiatives like the Smart Cities Mission focus on transforming urban centres by improving infrastructure, transportation, and public services. The Digital India campaign aims to enhance digital connectivity, promote e-governance, and provide broadband access to rural



The editorial is right in saying that the "main problem in India today is lack of Opposition unity". I agree that "negative campaigning is not enough to win elections." Why most of the leaders in the BJP are against the Congress is because they will never ever forget how their leaders were treated and endured pain during the Emergency. Similarly, there was much pain for the leaders of the Jana Sangh when they had only 3 Members of Parliament in the first general election to the Lok Sabha. The recent story related by Rajnath Singh, the Raksha Mantri (Defence Minister) is a very painful one as to how during the emergency he was not given parole in order to perform the last rites of his mother. Suspending citizens rights was the biggest mistake that the Congress under the leadership of Indira Gandhi committed.

The editorial has also rightly stated that the, "regional parties don't have much to show to their credit as having done much in the task of nation-building." Since the editorial has briefly touched upon the 9 years of BJP rule, here is my assessment based on facts as to how the BJP performed in the last nine years. **Political landscape transformation:** In the last nine years the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has achieved many feats. When the Modi government first came to power in 2014, the BJP had governments in 7 states. Today, the BJP is either in power on its own or part of the ruling alliance in 15 states/ Union territories. The party has made significant inroads into the North Eastern Region of India, where it had zero presence prior to 2014. **Economic growth and inflation control:** India's economy has witnessed remarkable growth during this period. From being the 10th largest economy in 2014, India is now the 5th largest economy in terms of Gross Domestic Product. It has surpassed countries like the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Canada and Brazil. Inflation, based on Consumer Price Index (CPI), stabilized and fell within the Reserve Bank of India's comfort zone during Modi's tenure. When the government came to power in 2014, India's inflation rate was around 8.33 percent, significantly higher than the RBI's tolerance band. Since then, inflation has remained relatively stable. **Infrastructure development and expenditure:** areas. The government has allocated substantial funds for infrastructure development. In the 2021-22 Union Budget, Rs 5.54 lakh crore was allocated for capital expenditure, including infrastructure projects. The National Infrastructure Pipeline envisions Rs 111 lakh crore worth of infrastructure investment over the next few years. Expenditure has been directed towards sectors like roads, railways, airports, ports and digital infrastructure. However, there are challenges and criticism. While progress has been made, challenges remain. Some projects face delays due to land acquisition issues, bureaucratic hurdles, and environmental concerns. Despite ambitious plans, funding constraints can impact the pace of execution. Ensuring high-quality infrastructure remains crucial. The BJP government has made significant strides in infrastructure development which is visible but there are ongoing challenges that need attention. Public scrutiny and continuous improvement are essential for sustainable progress. **Social Welfare Schemes:** The Modi government has sanctioned more than four crore houses under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY). Over 48.9 crore Jan Dhan accounts have been opened, promoting financial inclusion. About Rs 34 lakh crore has been directly transferred to beneficiaries' bank accounts under the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) scheme. **Historical electoral wins:** Prime Minister Modi's popularity has translated into major electoral gains for the BJP. The party has managed to win the politically crucial state of Uttar Pradesh twice, the state which sends 80 Members of Parliament to the Lok Sabha. From 2 seats in 1984 the BJP today has 303 seats in Lok Sabha. The entire North Eastern Region of India is now part of the BJP-led government, except for Mizoram and Meghalaya where the BJP is a partner of the MDA government. **From "Fragile 5" to "Top 5"** Prime Minister Modi has emphasized India's economic progress, moving from being among the "fragile 5" economies to becoming the fifth largest economy globally. Summing up, the BJP government's tenure has seen significant strides in economic growth, political influence, and social welfare but much remains to be done on the employment front. However, opinions on these achievements may vary, and it is essential to consider multiple perspectives when evaluating any government's performance.

Letters to the Editor

Dialogue, debate, dissent - the lifeblood of democracy

Editor, The edit page of a newspaper is an essential platform in a democracy where views are expressed and exchanged in a peaceful and civilised manner. As a matter of fact, ballot and such platforms have given peace a chance. Democracy is an institution where the people should engage in peaceful dialogue and debate. They must express their dissent but without resorting to violence or verbal abuse.

Democracy is a constant attempt not to get into the trap of 'might is right' machismo raj. I have high regards for the edit page of The Shillong Times for its excellent editorials, articles and letters. Unfortunately, a few letter writers sometimes resort to verbal violence by using such words about the author of an editorial/ article/ letter like "their vicious mindsets," "their agenda," etc., interestingly even when they write against violence! Without dialogue, discussion, debate and dissent, a democracy cannot survive. Also, without logical argument, we cannot progress and come closer to the truth. However, we need to be cautious about falling into the trap of logical fallacies. Ad hominem fallacy is one of the nastiest traps. This fallacy occurs when, instead of addressing someone's argument or position, a person irrelevantly attacks the person or some aspect of the person who is making the

argument. Ad hominem is Latin for "against the man." An ad hominem is more than just an insult. Here, insulting comments are used as arguments to counter the logic. This is not only a trap of logical fallacy but also a trap of undemocratic violent behaviour which must be avoided. Yours etc., Sujit De Kolkata

BJP vs Congress - A comparative analysis

Editor, In the run-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the battleground of Indian politics is once again adorned with promises and pledges encapsulated within the manifestos of the two major political players: the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC). As the electorate eagerly evaluates their choices, the manifestos serve as roadmaps outlining each party's vision, priorities, and commitments. In this comparative analysis, we delve into the key features of the BJP's "Modi Ki Guarantee" manifesto and the Congress's "Nyay Patra" manifesto, assessing their respective strengths, impacts, and potential implications for the nation. **Development Pillars:** The BJP's manifesto centers around four pillars of national development: women, youth, the underprivileged, and farmers. Contrastingly, the Congress's manifesto emphasizes justice pillars,

including Yuva Nyay, Naari Nyay, Kisaan Nyay, Shramik Nyay, and Hissedari Nyay. While both parties aim to address socio-economic disparities, the BJP's focus on specific demographic groups offers a more streamlined approach. **Youth Empowerment:** Both parties recognize the importance of youth empowerment, with distinct strategies to tackle unemployment and enhance opportunities. While the BJP pledges to continue filling government vacancies, support startups, and expand employment in key sectors, the Congress proposes comprehensive programs like Yuva Nyay and Right to Apprenticeship Act, catering to the diverse needs of young Indians. **Senior Citizens and Farmers:** Both manifestos promise initiatives for senior citizens and farmers, crucial vote banks in Indian politics. The BJP focuses on healthcare expansion and facilitating pilgrimage for seniors, alongside strengthening agricultural insurance and increasing MSP. In contrast, the Congress proposes measures such as higher pension contributions and legal guarantees for MSP, demonstrating a commitment to social welfare and agricultural reform. **Women Empowerment:** Empowering women emerges as a prominent theme in both manifestos, with varied approaches. While the BJP aims to economically empower rural women, improve healthcare, and promote political representation through the Women's Reservation Bill, the Congress introduces innovative schemes like the

Mahalakshmi scheme and job reservations, signalling a progressive stance on gender equality. **Healthcare and Education:** Healthcare and education, fundamental pillars of development, receive attention in both manifestos. The BJP emphasizes strengthening existing healthcare infrastructure and expanding access to low-cost medicines, aligning with its track record of healthcare initiatives. On the other hand, the Congress proposes ambitious plans for universal healthcare and educational reforms, prioritizing accessibility and quality. **Economic Growth and National Security:** Economic growth and national security, pivotal for India's progress and stability, feature prominently in both manifestos. While the BJP guarantees India's economic prowess and outlines measures for infrastructure development and modernization of armed forces, the Congress sets ambitious targets for GDP growth and proposes comprehensive strategies for national security, including institutional reforms and border infrastructure enhancement. **Environmental Preservation:** In the wake of growing environmental concerns, both parties pledge to address environmental challenges. The BJP focuses on achieving clean air standards and improving river health through targeted interventions, while the Congress proposes strengthening existing environmental frameworks and establishing an independent authority to enforce environmental standards. In conclusion, both the

BJP's "Modi Ki Guarantee" and the Congress's "Nyay Patra" manifestos present an ambitious agenda aimed at addressing diverse socio-economic challenges facing India. While the BJP's manifesto showcases a pragmatic approach with a focus on specific development pillars, the Congress's manifesto offers comprehensive programs and innovative schemes targeting key constituencies. Ultimately, the impact and effectiveness of these manifestos will depend on their implementation, highlighting the importance of informed electoral decision-making and robust governance frameworks. As India stands at the cusp of a transformative electoral process, the manifestos serve as guiding beacons, shaping the nation's trajectory in the years to come. Yours etc., A Sarki Shillong

Aadhaar not applicable in Meghalaya

Editor, In my last letter that appeared in these columns under the caption, 'CAA exempted from Meghalaya' (ST March 22, 2024) I had unreservedly expressed that on the premise of the Central government circular vide Notification No.37/2017F No.370133/6/2017-TPL dated 11.5.2017, the indigenous citizens of Meghalaya are exempted from the purview of the controversial Aadhaar registration. Oddly, even after over 20 days of my letter being published no

rejoinder of any kind has appeared in this newspaper. Neither the State Government nor conscious citizens have countered what appeared in the letter to the editor. Hence it implies that the aforementioned Notification is inarguably true in letter and spirit and conclusively Aadhaar is not applicable in Meghalaya as such! Paradoxically, till date all the established institutions like the commercial banks, educational centers, the public utility service hubs and much else are virtually compelling citizens to produce the Aadhaar card as a compulsion. Such unsolicited pestering on the commoners is a veritable act of non-compliance and insubordination to the central government Notification by willfully adopting a couldn't care less attitude against the latter. It therefore, literally implies that for any non-observance of any statutory Order/Notification endorsed by the competent authorities, the defaulters may perhaps be subject to action in the court of law by way of public interest litigation (PIL). In a nutshell therefore, it may be assuredly asserted that Aadhaar inscription in the state is beside the point and there is no kidding about that! When all is said and done, if any institution henceforth insists on Aadhaar identity, that institution could refer to the Notification in question. Yours etc., Jerome K Diengdoh, Shillong-2

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"The stalwart soul has the will to live
and is eager for the race."

— Taylor Caldwell

The Shillong Times

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Election done and dusted in Meghalaya
ELECTIONS to the two parliamentary constituencies - Shillong and Tura were over on Friday, April 19 even as the last voting date for other states in the rest of the country would be June 1. Elections are termed as the greatest festival of democracy since there is always an air of expectation that things would change for the better. Whether that change is ultimately for the better is debatable. In fifty plus years of Meghalaya's statehood there are still many governance challenges to overcome. Even as basic a necessity as water remains out of reach for many residents within the city of Shillong, leave alone the villages, many of them so far flung that providing electricity, water, health and education - the basic needs of any family continue to remain a work in progress.

In Meghalaya, the state assembly election has always been much more exciting and noisy as far as voters are concerned. Polling booths are spaces where people hang out and discuss who is likely to win or lose. There is an air of festivity in the MLA elections perhaps because an MLA is someone a constituent can turn to in times of need. The voting is more personal and there is a fervour in the manner in which people vote. Lok Sabha elections on the contrary are somewhat only remotely connected to constituents who often cannot envisage the bigger picture about the role of an MP in charting out the course that the country takes in the next five years. On March 16 last when the Chief Election Commissioner of India, Rajeev Kumar announced the election dates he also stated that over 97 crore (970 million) people are eligible to vote in the Lok Sabha elections with over 10.5 lakh polling stations manned by 1.5 crore personnel, and 55 lakh EVMs. Of the 97 crore voters, 49.72 crore are men and 47.1 crore women. This itself makes elections a huge exercise requiring trained human resources and reliable electronic voting machines that register the right vote and do not misfire. This time voters were able to see their vote registered for the person they voted for although there is no paper trail for the voter.

In Meghalaya by and large women more than men seem to be enthusiastic voters. In nearly all polling booths in the city of Shillong, more women had lined up as early as 6.30 am. Probably women want to finish off their voting responsibilities before they take on household talks or attend to their respective duties. The queue for men was relatively shorter everywhere. However, in some polling stations in Jaintia Hills male voters had to queue up for over two hours before they could cast their votes. These long queues need to be addressed by the State Election Department as they are deterrents to a smooth voting experience. The die is cast and the results will be out in 45 days. Matrilineal Meghalaya is being keenly watched to see if the two women candidates fielded would carry the day.

Letters to the Editor

Citizens have a right to regular water supply

Editor,
I am writing in a very distressed state of mind. For two weeks, Nongrimma Block C has not been getting water due to some work at Mawphlang. As consumers we understand that, but what we fail to understand is why the rest of the residents of Block C are not getting water while only two pipes have running water every day for 4 hours a day. The main culprit is not the PHE; it's the plumber who is responsible for all the skulduggery that goes on with the water supply here. It's a known fact among everyone in Nongrimma that if you want water, you get it from this person. If he is paid a fee he provides water.

On April 18, 2024, this person came at 10 AM, opened the supply, and sat there for 1.5 hours and then turned off the supply. He returned about 15 minutes

later and opened up our supply again, but this time water only flowed into the two pipes. This does not surprise anyone, but it creates a lot of anger and frustration amongst us living in Nongrimma Block C because we end up having to buy water, and water is not cheap.

Seeing this, a woman went and called the person in charge of water supply but he did not pick up the phone, so she called the Rangbah Dong, and he advised her to call the man responsible for the supply. Another neighbour came in, saw and left to inform the plumber concerned who brought 6 engineers with him. They spoke to the woman who called them, and instead of listening to her, they laughed saying, "It was just for a test round for water because there is no water coming in from Mawphlang."

To think that even in 2024 we are still having to deal with patriarchy in a state that is matrilineal is insufferable. Just because a woman is speaking up for the rights of

History of the sub-continent and the place of the Khasis in it

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

In a response to one of my previous articles, Salil Gwali (letter dated 17 April 2024) has termed my claim that Hinduism is foreign to India a false speculation and accused me of spreading a false narrative. I am not surprised by the reaction, but my claim is not based on personal opinion but on work that others have done on linguistics, genetics, and archaeology in relation to the history of the subcontinent. What I will do is to share the chronology as given in the 2018 book 'Early Indians: The Story of Our Ancestors and Where We Came From' by Tony Joseph. I have taken it verbatim from the book while adding a few extra findings on the Khasis based on some recent work.

300,000 years: The age of the earliest remains of a modern human, Homo sapiens (they were one of the many species that had evolved from a common ancestor), ever found - in a cave in Jebel Irhoud, about fifty kilometres from the city of Safi in Morocco.

180,000 years: The age of the earliest modern human fossil found outside of Africa - at a rock shelter in Misliya in north Israel (undivided Palestine).

70,000 years ago: Geneticists calculate that the earliest successful Out of Africa (OoA) migration happened around this time. This migration was termed 'successful' because these migrants are the ancestors of all of today's non-African populations (Earlier modern humans outside of Africa have not left a lineage that is detectable today.) The Out of Africa migrants 70,000 years ago are likely to have taken the Southern Route that would have brought them from Africa (specifically, from modern-day Eritrea and Djibouti) into Asia (modern-day Yemen) through Bab el Mandeb at the southern tip of the Red Sea.

65,000 years ago: The OoA migrants reached India and are faced with a robust population of archaic humans. They perhaps take both an inland sub-Himalayan route and a coastal route, to keep themselves out of the way of other Homo species in the subcontinent who dominated central and southern India, and then move across the Indian subcontinent into southeast Asia, east Asia and Australia.

60,000-40,000 years ago: The descendants of the OoA migrants populate central Asia and Europe over this period. 40,000 years ago: Neanderthals go extinct in Europe, with the Iberian peninsula in south-western Europe (modern-day Portugal and Spain) being their last refuge and stand. Modern humans still carry some amount of Neanderthal DNA in them suggesting that there must have been interbreeding between the different Homo species in the past.

45,000-20,000 years ago: The First Indians (identified today with the Onge tribe found in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands), the descendants of the OoA migrants in the subcontinent, started using Microlithic technol-

ogy, and their population increased dramatically in central and eastern India. South Asia becomes the place where 'most of humanity' lives. Modern humans move into what would have been long-established refuges of other Homo species in southern and central India.

16,000 years ago (14,000 BCE): Modern humans reach the Americas, the last major continent to be settled in by modern humans, after crossing Beringia, the land bridge between Siberia and Alaska. This migration gave birth to the present Native American population found in the Americas.

7000 BCE: In a village that is today called Mehrgarh, at the foot of the Bolan Hills in Balochistan (present day Pakistan), a new agricultural settlement begins that would ultimately become one of the largest habitations of its period between the Indus and the Mediterranean.

7000-3000 BCE: Migration of Iranian agriculturists from the Zagros region to south Asia leads to their mixing with the descendants of the First Indians sometime during this period. Geneticists estimate the mixing to have taken place at least by 4700 BCE to 3000 BCE. These Iranian agriculturists are said to have spoken a language that is closely related to modern-day Dravidian languages. They are also the people who will later go on and establish the Indus Valley Civilization.

7000-2600 BCE: The Mehrgarh site shows evidence for cultivation of barley and wheat, and increasing consumption of domesticated animals. The site was abandoned somewhere between 2600 BCE and 2000 BCE. By then agricultural settlements had spread all across north-western India - in the Indus and Ghaggar-Hakra river valleys and in Gujarat.

7000 BCE: From around this period there is evidence for rice harvesting and sedentary settlement at Lahuradewa in the Sant Kabir Nagar district of Uttar Pradesh in the Upper Ganga plain. The chronology of transition from harvesting wild rice to cultivating domesticated rice is not yet certain, but Lahuradewa indicates experiments in agriculture were taking place at several places in south Asia around the same time and that Mehrgarh was not an isolated case.

5500-2600 BCE: The Early Harappan era, which witnesses early agricultural settlements growing into towns with their own unique styles, such as Kalibangan and Rakhigarhi in India and Banawali and Rahman Dheri in Pakistan.

3700-1500 BCE: Evidence of early agriculture starts to appear in different parts of India - eastern Rajasthan, southern India, the Vindhya region of central India, eastern India and the Swat valley of Kashmir.

2600-1900 BCE: The Mature Harappan period, which sees many sites being newly built or rebuilt, and many existing sites being

abandoned. There is also a visible and higher level of standardization across the region, with a common script, seals, motifs and weights. The transition from the Early Harappan to the Mature Harappan phase happened over four or five generations, or 100 to 150 years.

2300-1700 BCE: The period of the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC), a civilization centred on the Oxus river (also called Amu Darya) and covering today's northern Afghanistan, southern Uzbekistan and western Tajikistan. The BMAC had close trade and cultural relations with the Harappan Civilization.

2100 BCE: A southward migration of pastoralists from the Kazakh Steppe, towards the southern central Asian regions that would today be called Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The migrants make an impact on the BMAC, but mostly bypass it and move towards south Asia throughout the second millennium BCE, as listed below (2000-1000 BCE). These are the migrants who later will be known as the Aryans.

2000 BCE: Two major waves of migrations with their origin in China - after it had gone through the farming revolution and the resultant population surge - reshaped south-east Asia. The first one brings Austroasiatic languages, new plants and a new variety of rice to India after 2000 BCE. The Khasis belong to this group, and based on recent research, they must have arrived in the North East around 5000-6000 years ago, which is earlier than this date. Linguistic evidence also suggests the War Amwi, the oldest Khasi language from which other Khasi languages emerged, separated from Palaung (the most closely related group of Austroasiatic languages found in today Myanmar) more than 4000 years ago. This means that the separation of the group today known as Khasi from the Palaung must have happened before 2000 BCE, giving it time to emerge as a distinct group. But the 2000 BCE date matches with the emergence of Munda, who are a mixed population of an earlier group already residing in the sub-continent, descendants of the Harappan population (Dravidian), closely connected to the First Indians, and the new arrivals from Southeast Asia, i.e., groups that are related to the Khasis. This explains the genetic and linguistic connection between the Khasis and the Munda. Since the Austroasiatic migration took place from the east, this lag in time between the Khasi and Munda makes sense, as the Khasis would have arrived first in the North East and then in central India, where, after centuries, if not more, of mixing with the local population, a distinct Munda population emerged. The current President, Droupadi Murmu, is from a particular clan of the Sathal, a central Indian tribe, who are

part of the large Munda family. Some of the important individuals in this group also include Jaipal Singh Munda, who, along with Rev. JIM Nichols Roy, was the architect of the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. The contribution of the Khasis is not limited to the modern period. As mentioned earlier, domestication of rice had been attempted at Lahuradewa around 7000 BCE. This rice belongs to the indica subspecies of *Oryza sativa*, while another subspecies that was domesticated in the Yangtze Valley of China is japonica. The unlocking of the full potential of rice cultivation in India, however, required hybridization of indica with japonica, and it appears to have happened around 2000 BCE, which is the same as the period of arrival of Austroasiatic-language speakers from Southeast Asia. This means a group whose descendants today can be identified with the Khasi and Munda must have brought the japonica subspecies from their original home in southern China and mixed it with the variety found in Lahuradewa, creating the modern indica subspecies, which today is the staple food of the entire sub-continent.

2000-1000 BCE: Multiple waves of Steppé pastoralist migrants from central Asia into south Asia, bringing Indo-European languages and new religious and cultural practices. The language brought was an early version of Sanskrit, and the new religion was an early form of Hinduism with gods like Indra, Agni, Varuna, and the Asvins, as well as cultural practices like the social divisions of classes, which later morphed into the varna system.

1900-1300 BCE: The Late Harappan period that sees the decline and eventual disappearance of the Harappan Civilization, primarily due to the effects of a long drought that affected civilizations in west Asia, Egypt and China as well. This period of great drought has become an important point in the geological history of Earth and is known as the Meghalayan Age, named after Meghalaya where the stalagmite was found, which is used to mark out its years. And now here we are. I would suggest the readers buy the book and read the details of the chronology described above. While reading the book, note down the sources that Tony Joseph uses for his arguments. If possible, please go and read the original sources as well. Also, if you have friends or family who are working in the field of ancient history, archeology, or linguistics, discuss with them the current consensus to judge claims being made by me, Salil Gwali, or anyone else. Ultimately, in the end, it doesn't matter what our personal beliefs are; facts are facts. In the meantime, don't believe me or anyone, but make up your own mind. Happy reading.

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

What else will an Aam Aadmi Chief Minister want if not mangoes?

ED indicts diabetic Arvind Kejriwal in mangoes for bail scam

By Sushil Kutty

Diabetic Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal is feasting on mangoes is an Enforcement Directorate discovery. Call it investigation. The ED has the reputation of a high rate of conviction and Kejriwal carries high levels of blood sugar. The Enforcement Directorate has been snooping into Kejriwal's tiffin box and a special judge is now hearing the case. Not the money laundering charge, but the culinary outrage being linked to Delhi's mango-man.

What sumptuous dishes does Kejriwal's wife, while allegedly eyeing his chief ministerial chair, send him in his lunch-box? Know that Kejriwal has been permitted 'GharKaKhana' by the court, food cooked by his "homemaker" wife. The ED investigation reveals that the AAP Convenor's eating habits, his culinary preferences, and his food orientation, are not of its standards. Chief

ing sweet food which is not permitted for any diabetic patient."

That last sentence, "He was particularly consuming sweet food which is not permitted for any diabetic patient" should be scrapped clean of motive. There is no such thing as "sweet food is not permitted for any diabetic patient". No doctor with a Hippocratic oath under his belt has a carte blanche to stop a diabetic from eating mangoes. The doctor will have knowledge and the meds to control blood sugar levels; beat the sugar in its game.

And aloo-poori. Hell, don't the ED sleuths know "you live only once" and "aloo-poori is a life-saver for both aam aadmi and aam aadmi chief minister. What's the Enforcement Directorate doing checking tiffin, lunch and dinner? If the Aam Aadmi Party is complaining that Kejriwal's blood sugar level is shooting



Minister Arvind Kejriwal is a glutton for mangoes, and he is addicted to sweets.

Also, Sunitha Kejriwal is cooking a damn good fare, rich food that hubby Arvind Kejriwal cannot resist. The gut-less Enforcement Directorate will not give Kejriwal the pleasure of his wife's

through the Tihar roof for lack of insulin injections, get insulin through the Tihar gates. Insulin is not cocaine.

Also, AAP leaders like Atishi Marlena should give up playingact. Marlena's allegation of a "conspiracy to kill Arvind in Tihar" is not in the menu just like the ED's

The special judge has a tough call to make.

Food cannot be denied to the AAP leader and Kejriwal belongs to the "Agarwal clan".

Agarwals have their own cuisine and taste-buds, with "sweets" a big part of the Agarwal's daily fare.

The court cannot skirt around this aspect and the ED cannot dictate, and enforce.

Kejriwal is behind bars and the court has given him certain privileges.

cooking. Especially the food with alleged high sugar content. Could it be that the ED sleuths, assigned to cook Kejriwal's goose, are boring bachelors on a 2-minute noodles diet.

So, the AAP national convenor stands accused of digging canine and molar into mangoes, the unchallenged 'King of Fruits'. Kejriwal also has a sweet tooth, maybe even two, says the ED's tasteful band of investigators even if no man should be held to account for a sweet tooth. Endocrinologists and diabetologists now man the ED desk probing the Delhi Excise Policy Ghotala?

The charge against Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal is "he is deliberately eating mangoes to increase his sugar level" so as to land in the "mohalla clinic" and be given medical bail. A "sugar-for-bail" scam? But what is "deliberately" doing in the charge? How did the ED arrive at "deliberately"? Detecting "deliberately" requires a special divine level of investigative skill.

"The cause of concern is that he was prescribed home cooked food because he claimed he has high diabetes. Kejriwal is eating high sugar content food despite having type 2 diabetes. He is consuming 'aloo poori', mango, and sweets. This is being done to make grounds for medical bail," ED told the court. "He was particularly consum-

ing complaints of the woman and said she didn't know what she was talking about. Well, whatever it is we have a right to regular water supply and it is the duty of the PHE to ensure we get that water. Why play with people's lives? And why allow plumbers to make money on the sly? What a disgusting state of affairs!

Yours etc.,
Shailin H Lyngdoh,
Shillong-3

We need to stand up against corruption!

Editor,
Albert Thyrnning's write-ups have always been insightful and thought provoking. In his most recent article (ST April 18, 2024), Thyrnning brought out glaring revelations that have been normalised and are therefore not spoken of in the open. One important insight in his article is about

the need to bribe in order to get a job. This is a phenomenon that is common these days. It informs us that nothing works without money changing hands. The situation is alarming because life will continue with the next generation too. Our children who are our future generation will carry on the beacon of light and hope that they receive from us. The question is what light are we using to help them see the road ahead? As of now it certainly is light filled with filth and profanity. There are all forms of vices prevalent in our society and corruption is one of them. Corruption rules every aspect of life and we are either dumb spectators or participants. One way or the other we are party to this malicious act. If this vice remains unchecked and uncontrolled and is allowed to take root, life will be debilitating for all, especially our children. There are reasons galore for corruption. Greed tops the chart followed by low wages and lack of opportunities; absence of severe punishment; complete lack

of ethics, to name a few.

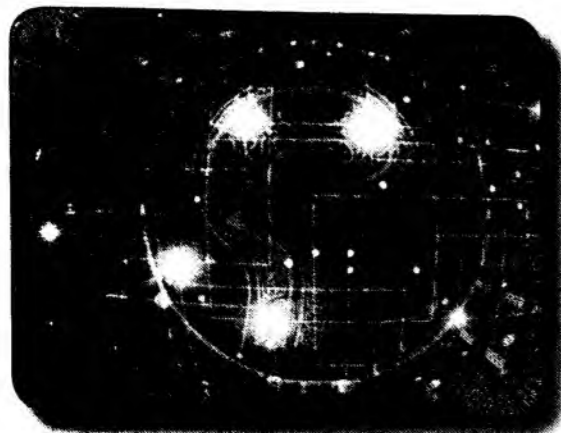
The primary reason for corruption is because conscience no longer plays a role in our lives. Humans are supposed to be guided by that still, small voice of conscience to help them judge between right and wrong. This voice within us cannot be extinguished. It has to be kept alive and nurtured from childhood. It is part of our value system.

However, we need to fight corruption not by conscience alone but by strengthening the law and ensuring that the corrupt are punished according to the law of the land. We need a transparent governance across all departments and we need a vibrant civil society that will call out the blatant corruption prevailing in Meghalaya today.

Yours etc.,
Jenniefer Dkhar,
Via email

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

CAN AI READ OUR MINDS?



Earlier this year, Neuralink implanted a chip inside the brain of 29-year-old US man Noland Arbaugh, who is paralysed from the shoulders down. The chip has enabled Arbaugh to move a mouse pointer on a screen just by imagining it moving.

In May 2023, US researchers also announced a non-invasive way to "decode" the words someone is thinking from brain scans in combination with generative AI. A similar project sparked headlines about a "mind-reading AI hat".

Can neural implants and generative AI really "read minds"? Is the day coming when computers can spit out accurate real-time transcripts of our thoughts for anyone to read?

Such technology might have some benefits - particularly for advertisers looking for new sources of customer targeting data - but it would demolish the last bastion of privacy: the seclusion of our own minds. Before we panic, though, we should stop to ask: is what neural implants and generative AI can do really "reading minds"?

The brain and the mind

As far as we know, conscious experience arises from the activity of the brain. This means any conscious mental state should have what philosophers and cognitive scientists call a "neural correlate": a particular pattern of nerve cells (neurons) firing in the brain.

So, for each conscious mental state you can be in - whether it's thinking about the Roman Empire, or imagining a cursor moving - there is some corresponding pattern of activity in your brain.

So, clearly, if a device can track our brain states, it should be able to simply read our minds. Right?

Well, for real-time AI-powered mind-reading to be possible, we need to be able to identify precise, one-to-one correspondences between

particular conscious mental states and brain states. And this may not be possible.

Rough matches

To read a mind from brain activity, one must know precisely which brain states correspond to particular mental states. This means, for example, one needs to distinguish the brain states that correspond to seeing a red rose from the ones that correspond to smelling a red rose, or touching a red rose, or imagining a red rose, or thinking that red roses are your mother's favourite.

One must also distinguish all of those brain states from the brain states that correspond to seeing, smelling, touching, imagining or thinking about some other thing, like a ripe lemon. And so on, for everything else you can perceive, imagine or have thoughts about.

To say this is difficult would be an understatement.

Take face perception as an example. The conscious perception of a face involves all sorts of neural activity.

But a great deal of this activity seems to relate to processes that come before or after the conscious perception of the face - things like working memory, selective attention, self-monitoring, task planning and reporting.

Winnowing out those neural processes that are solely and specifically responsible for the conscious perception of a face is a herculean task, and one that current neuroscience is not close to solving.

Even if this task were accomplished, neuroscientists would still only have found the neural correlates of a certain type of conscious experience: namely, the general experience of a face. They wouldn't thereby have found the neural correlates of the experiences of particular faces.

So, even if astonishing advances were to happen in neuroscience, the would-be mind-reader still wouldn't necessarily be able to tell from a brain scan whether you are seeing Barack Obama, your mother, or a face you don't recognise.

That wouldn't be much to write home about, as far as mind-reading is concerned.

But what about AI?

But don't recent headlines involving neural implants and AI show some mental states can be read, like imagining cursors move and engaging in inner speech? Not necessarily. Take the neural implants first.

Neural implants are typically designed to help a patient perform a particular task: moving a cursor on a screen, for example. To do that, they don't have to be able to identify exactly

the neural processes that are correlated with the intention to move the cursor. They just need to get an approximate fix on the neural processes that tend to go along with those intentions, some of which might actually be underpinning other, related mental acts like task-planning, memory and so on.

Thus, although the success of neural implants is certainly impressive - and future implants are likely to collect more detailed information about brain activity - it doesn't show that precise one-to-one mappings between particular mental states and particular brain states have been identified. And so, it doesn't make genuine mind-reading any more likely.

Now take the "decoding" of inner speech by a system comprised of a non-invasive brain scan plus generative AI, as reported in this study. This system was designed to "decode" the contents of continuous narratives from brain scans, when participants were either listening to podcasts, reciting stories in their heads, or watching films. The system isn't very accurate - but still, the fact it did better than random chance at predicting these mental contents is seriously impressive.

So, let's imagine the system could predict continuous narratives from brain scans with total accuracy. Like the neural implant, the system would only be optimised for that task: it wouldn't be effective at tracking any other mental activity.

How much mental activity could this system monitor? That depends: what proportion of our mental lives consists of imagining, perceiving or otherwise thinking about continuous, well-formed narratives that can be expressed in straightforward language?

Our mental lives are flickering, lightning-fast, multiple-stream affairs, involving real-time perceptions, memories, expectations and imaginings, all at once. It's hard to see how a transcript produced by even the most fine-tuned brain scanner, coupled to the smartest AI, could capture all of that faithfully.

The future of mind reading

In the past few years, AI development has shown a tendency to vault over seemingly insurmountable hurdles. So it's unwise to rule out the possibility of AI-powered mind-reading entirely.

But given the complexity of our mental lives, and how little we know about the brain - neuroscience is still in its infancy, after all - confident predictions about AI-powered mind-reading should be taken with a grain of salt. (*The Conversation*)

Stuck in fight-or-flight mode?



Can you remember a time when you felt stressed leading up to a big life event and then afterwards felt like a weight had been lifted? This process - the ramping up of the stress response and then feeling this settle back down - shows completion of the "stress cycle".

Some stress in daily life is unavoidable. But remaining stressed is unhealthy. Chronic stress increases chronic health conditions, including heart disease and stroke and diabetes. It can also lead to burnout or depression.

Exercise, cognitive, creative, social and self-soothing activities help us process stress in healthier ways and complete the stress cycle.

What does the stress cycle look like?

Scientists and researchers refer to the "stress response", often with a focus on the fight-or-flight reactions. The phrase the "stress cycle" has been made popular by self-help experts but it does have a scientific basis.

The stress cycle is our body's response to a stressful event, whether real or perceived, physical or psychological. It could be being chased by a vicious dog, an upcoming exam or a difficult conversation.

The stress cycle has three stages:

- stage 1 is perceiving the threat
- stage 2 is the fight-or-flight response, driven by our stress hormones: adrenaline and cortisol
- stage 3 is relief, including physiological and psychological relief. This completes the stress cycle.

Different people will respond to stress differently based on their life experiences and genetics.

Unfortunately, many people experience multiple and ongoing stressors out of their control, including the cost-of-living crisis, extreme weather events and domestic violence.

Remaining in stage 2 (the fight-or-flight response), can lead to chronic stress. Chronic stress and high cortisol can increase inflammation, which damages our brain and other organs.

When you are stuck in chronic fight-or-flight mode, you don't think clearly and are more easily distracted. Activities that provide temporary pleasure, such as eating junk food or drinking alcohol are unhelpful strategies that do not reduce the stress effects on our brain and body. Scrolling through social media is also not an effective way to complete the stress cycle. In fact, this is associated with an increased stress response.

Stress and the brain

In the brain, chronic high cortisol can shrink the hippocampus. This can impair a person's memory and their capacity to think and concentrate.

Chronic high cortisol also reduces activity in the prefrontal cortex but increases activity in the amygdala.

The prefrontal cortex is responsible for higher-order control of our thoughts, behaviours and emotions, and is goal-directed and rational. The amygdala is involved in reflexive and emotional responses. Higher amygdala activity and lower prefrontal cortex activity explains why we are less rational and more emotional and reactive when we are stressed.

There are five types of activities that can help our brains complete the stress cycle.

1. Exercise - its own complete stress cycle: When we exercise we get a short-term spike in cortisol, followed by a healthy reduction in cortisol and adrenaline.

Exercise also increases endorphins and serotonin, which improve mood. Endorphins cause an elated feeling often called "runner's high" and have anti-inflammatory ef-

fects: When you exercise, there is more blood flow to the brain and higher activity in the prefrontal cortex. This is why you can often think more clearly after a walk or run. Exercise can be a helpful way to relieve feelings of stress.

Exercise can also increase the volume of the hippocampus. This is linked to better short-term and long-term memory processing, as well as reduced stress, depression and anxiety.

2. Cognitive activities - reduce negative thinking: Overly negative thinking can trigger or extend the stress response. In our 2019 research, we found the relationship between stress and cortisol was stronger in people with more negative thinking.

Higher amygdala activity and less rational thinking when you are stressed can lead to distorted thinking such as focusing on negatives and rigid "black-and-white" thinking.

Activities to reduce negative thinking and promote a more realistic view can reduce the stress response. In clinical settings this is usually called cognitive behaviour therapy.

At home, this could be journaling or writing down worries. This engages the logical and rational parts of our brain and helps us think more realistically. Finding evidence to challenge negative thoughts ("I've prepared well for the exam, so I can do my best") can help to complete the stress cycle.

3. Getting creative - a pathway out of 'fight or flight': Creative activities can be art, craft, gardening, cooking or other activities such as doing a puzzle, juggling, music, theatre, dancing or simply being absorbed in enjoyable work.

Such pursuits increase prefrontal cortex activity and promote flow and focus.

Flow is a state of full engagement in an activity you enjoy. It lowers high-stress levels of noradrenaline, the brain's adrenaline. When you are focussed like this, the brain only processes information relevant to the task and ignores non-relevant information, including stresses.

4. Getting social and releasing feel-good hormones: Talking with someone else, physical affection with a person or pet and laughing can all increase oxytocin. This is a chemical messenger in the brain that increases social bonding and makes us feel connected and safe.

Laughing is also a social activity that activates parts of the limbic system - the part of the brain involved in emotional and behavioural responses. This increases endorphins and serotonin and improves our mood.

5. Self-soothing: Breathing exercises and meditation stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system (which calms down our stress responses so we can "reset") via the vagus nerves, and reduce cortisol. A good cry can help too by releasing stress energy and increasing oxytocin and endorphins.

Emotional tears also remove cortisol and the hormone prolactin from the body. Our prior research showed cortisol and prolactin were associated with depression, anxiety and hostility.

Action beats distraction

Whether it's watching a funny or sad movie, exercising, journaling, gardening or doing a puzzle, there is science behind why you should complete the stress cycle.

Doing at least one positive activity every day can also reduce our baseline stress level and is beneficial for good mental health and wellbeing.

Importantly, chronic stress and burnout can also indicate the need for change, such as in our workplaces.

However, not all stressful circumstances can be easily changed. Remember help is always available. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajal Bhambi

Sunday, APRIL 21, 2024

Birthdate Forecast

Moon is forming an angle of 150 degrees with Sun on your solar return chart which will bring mixed fortunes for you. You will be made to work hard and will be tested to the fullest. Government related work will be done after putting lot of efforts. Tax disputes with authorities may arise and you may settle to pay a huge amount. You will meet new challenges at your workplace. Enemies will have an upper edge for the time being. Bosses will keep putting pressure. But you will come out of all difficult situations that you will face. Tide will turn gradually in your favour. Your financial will get better. You will get full support from life partner and children. Siblings will also remain on your side. Friends will provide financial support. Your faith in God will help you in overcoming all problems you face. You will make plans to buy a new house in some posh locality and will get success.

This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) The planetary configuration brings good results for you. Increased involvement with siblings, students, classmates, or neighbors may also figure at this time. This could also be a time of mental restlessness. The pace of your life may be a bit hectic now, and if you're not used to it, it could make you a tad nervous. You are more inclined to seek a broad understanding of people around. Concentrating on listening, connecting, communicating, and learning is highlighted. Your attention to the logical world of reason has also been a focus.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This phase highlights friendship, love, romance and children in your life. Your home life is especially busy and sometimes hectic. Arguments with, or on behalf of, family members cannot be avoided but conflict resolution is bound to be quick and relatively easy. Excess energy is best channelled into constructive home improvement projects. You are slightly more defensive and certainly more protective than usual during this period. There may be the need to revisit old, nagging issues regarding personal finances.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Communication, creativity and authority are highlighted. You are eager to investigate new things, whether scientific or technical. This is a phase of completion and transition. Social interaction is also emphasized. Give other people a little extra time and attention, notice their efforts on your behalf, and strengthen your connections. You are more curious and alert than usual, and you could be quite busy with errands, paperwork and phone calls. Much energy is expended in understanding and adapting to your immediate environment.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Your need for a little attention and career matters come to a head. You're called to perform, perhaps on a moment's notice, and it's best to keep your cool and do whatever you can to show your competence. A sudden job opportunity, or some form of assistance with regard to career, home, or property matters, could be part of the picture. This can also produce an event that requires you to take charge and show your responsible side. Your mind is especially inquisitive and learning, short trips, and other forms of communication and making connections appeal strongly.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You are especially fond of the life of the home and family, as their entertainment and pleasure are on your main agenda. There is ample support and unconditional love from your partner. Take this time to re-budget instead of making premature purchases. Hold off on decision-making regarding money. Instead, take the time to re-think your sources of income and how you spend your cash during this period. Put off finalizing anything important for the time being. In fact, some money-making ideas or ventures may be put on hold due to circumstances beyond your control.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) You may be involved in lectures, debates and discussions. You are looking to expand your activities, and you may find that you have a lot of energy for higher studies, travel, or new subjects. You are quite pre-

occupied with feelings of security and your inner experiences. This is a time when you find your roots and seek a feeling of belonging. Besides spending more time tending to domestic affairs, the focus can be on cultivating and nourishing your inner foundations that support you and your growth. You might also enjoy analyzing different health or nutrition programs. It's an excellent time for entertainment, and fun.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This period brings good-luck for love and romance. More loving and appreciative relationships with your children may also figure now. Your power of attraction skyrockets during this phase. Yet, you are not aggressive in your approach to love. Instead, you attract more if you allow yourself to be pursued. Creative self-expression of any kind is favored. At this time, you instinctively know how to place yourself in the best light in order to make a good impression on others.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) People at work might find you less sociable, as you are busier than ever and you focus on your activities and your needs. You might have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions symbolic of status. You're called to take on an assignment, perhaps on a moment's notice, and it's best to keep your cool and do whatever you can to show your competence. A sudden job opportunity, or some form of assistance with regards to home or property matters, could be part of the picture.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) This week brings new horizons in your romantic and love life. Your mind is especially inquisitive, when learning. Short trips, and other forms of communication and making connections, appeal strongly. You enjoy the challenge of tackling a variety of subjects. Talking, writing, and studying can be good ways to handle stress. It's a good time for rethinking and revising educational plans, paperwork, mental projects, and communications. Now you need a little attention, and career matters come to the fore. It's an excellent time to further your hobbies and interests.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) The stars promote your luck in service and work related areas. Your mind is especially sharp and you are quick on the uptake as additional work comes your way. You enjoy the challenge of tackling a variety of subjects. Expressing yourself using your writing skills, through the medium of arts or talking to a confidante are ways to handle stress. It's a good time for rethinking and revising educational plans, paperwork, mental projects, and communications. You are most likely to express your social, romantic, and artistic qualities through an intellectual appreciation of art, cultural pursuits, and literature.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) In addition to your efforts and hard work pay close attention to performance metrics. Your efforts will be rewarded and continuity to perform work would be visible to senior colleagues and people in authority. You are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort, and luxury. Romantic matters are usually from within the local environment close to home, although many romantic short trips may be undertaken for pleasure.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This phase brings in happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening your social circle, increasing travel opportunities, and connections to people of a different cultural background than yours is indicated. You desire to learn and improve your practical skills. You are especially drawn to family life where your affections find expression. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental or nostalgic now. You may now particularly value the aesthetics in and around your home. If things are out of sync on the home front, you will do whatever you can to re-create a peaceful and stable atmosphere.

In search of Indianness

India's cultural consciousness is embedded with pearls of heritage carried forward through generations in the form of folk art. Stories from epics such as Mahabharata, Ramayana and Panchatantra are prominently illustrated and propagated by Patuas (Pattachitra artists) and Sutradhars. We may exist as an individual with personal ambitions, goals, and vision but together we occur within the society as an Indian.

"In Search of Indianness" is an artistic odyssey by Santanu Nandan Dinda and Sunita Dinda curated with meticulous care and passion by Hem Rana. The exhibition is scheduled to be held at the Open Palm Court Art Gallery from 24 - 28 April 2024 from 11 am - 7 pm.

Today, India is a cosmopolitan nation inhabiting people with different food habits, languages, customs, traditions, religious beliefs, and many more things. In this abstract, artists Santanu Nandan Dinda and Sunita Dinda through their paintings seek Indianness.

Indianness is a conscious approach to implanting values and history that has originated, evolved, and transformed on Indian soil.

Santanu and Sunita's paintings are a homage to their cultural identity. Both artists have worked together in the same studio for a long time and their paintings are inspired to tell their shared perspectives and mutual stories. Canvases drenched with bold lines and folk motifs express the beauty and serenity of an earthy India. Their creativity is rooted in the city of Jamshedpur, where they both grew up surrounded by tribal life.

India's national personification is a woman - Bharat Mata. She is seen as a goddess that rages ferociously to protect her people and she is also seen as a mother that many Indian freedom fighters had fought for. Female deities are also deeply rooted in scriptures and holy books. Henceforth, both Sunita and Santanu have expressed their love for their nation through their paintings where a female entity takes center stage. Women are depicted as protagonists in their everyday lives. (*LANSLife*)

"Peace is not absence of conflict, it is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means."

—Ronald Reagan

The Shillong Times

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Silence of voters

WITH the first phase of polling over on Friday and campaigning being on for six more rounds until June 1, the electoral scene across the country is active. Yet, there is no wave – and, rather, a palpable disinterest is evident among the ordinary folks. Top leaders from rival sides are drawing crowds that are organised and ferried to meeting grounds by resourceful parties. However, unlike in the previous general elections, the mood this time is less energetic. The reasons are worth an analysis.

Leading the charge, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the bevy of other BJP leaders are crisscrossing the country, addressing election meetings. The Congress party's election campaign is powered as usual by Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi, while other Congress leaders are drawing less crowds. Notably, the Prime Minister, known for his oratory skills, is failing to work the crowds to a frenzy. Neither is Rahul Gandhi, and much less Priyanka Gandhi, able to majorly enthrall the crowds. Regional satraps are drawing large crowds especially in states where there are the assembly elections too, and the mass responses there appear to be a shade stronger for the reason that local politics and issues are being raised or discussed. The calm on the surface is more in relation to the national mood. Clearly, there are no major issues that divide the nation today other than the issue of secularism that the Opposition uses against the BJP as a stick to beat it with – and rightly too. This was unlike the 2019 scenario, when Modi had a larger mass appeal, strengthened also by the IAF fighter jet offensives into the Pakistani territory of Balakot, close to the military headquarters of Rawalpindi. Modi is perhaps less of a hero in the present electoral settings.

The palpable disinterest among the voters is bound to have its echo on the June 4 results, which are generally believed to hand over power to the BJP and Modi on a platter for the third consecutive time. Modi expected around 380 seats for his party and over 400 seats for the NDA. As the campaign progressed, analysts are wondering whether this is possible at all. Tougher contests compared to 2019 are unfolding in many states even as the Opposition is still fragmented and the INDIA alliance could not whip the mood of the voters up to substantial levels. This time, it could rather be that the voters would decide matters by themselves. In the case of a hung house, the BJP still may have the option to widen the NDA with more parties and retain power. In the absence of a wave, and the disinterest among the masses being palpable, anything is possible.

An Election Unlike Any Other

By HH Mohrmen

The Shillong Parliamentary Constituency has never experienced an election campaign as exciting as the recent one. Some suggest that the election became electrifying since the entry of the Voice of the Peoples' Party (VPP), a new political outfit in the state which identifies itself as a party with a difference. Other reasons that made it the most popular parliamentary election in the state were the different social media platforms. Thanks to the internet, the campaign became a level playing field for all, as people could access all they needed to know about the election to make an informed decision.

Ruling dispensation caught napping
The MDA partners, particularly the NPP, did not see this coming; they did not treat the VPP as a challenger to the mighty party and were not prepared for the contest. What can a party which is only four years old and with four MLAs do? How can they be a challenge to the NPP or the UDP for that matter, which has existed in the state and has a strong network of grassroots workers? Indeed, the party has no presence in many of the 36 constituencies, but what makes the people connect with the party? The question that was not asked was how a party with little or no funds can even contest in the election to the Parliament. So, how did the VPP become popular with the common people on the ground? How can an emerging party with no funds give the old parties in the state a run for their money?

What makes VPP click with the people?
What makes people connect with the VPP? From the speeches of the Party President, one gets the idea that there are three prominent issues that make up the party's ideology. From day one, the Party President had reiterated that the party was formed to fight against rampant corruption in the state. That was the main agenda of the party, and the voters are not fools; they read in the news about the collapsed infrastructure in the State Assembly building, the ISBT leakage, the substandard construction of roads and buildings, and more importantly, the political appointees that have eaten up the vitals of the state exchequer. Clean

politics is the main agenda of the new party, and this has been its leader's focus since 2010 when he first launched his clean politics campaign, which died a natural death because of the lack of public support. Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit has been consistent in his call for a clean politics campaign.

The party also calls to fight against nepotism, where only members of the family of those in power or the party's supporters get preference for government jobs or contract work. Appointments in the government offices have been made without interviews, as the vacancies, particularly those at the district level, were not even informed to the respective District Selection Committees since the posts had been filled by the supporters of the MLAs. The people are not blind to these sort of unfair practices, and the coming of the VPP, which called to fight against nepotism, is like rain after a dry spell. The third important issue mentioned by Basaiawmoit during the election campaign was to fight against poverty and work to improve the economy of the state. The call on these issues seems to resonate with the people and common man who with no monetary enticement or without even giving them a cup of tea, attend VPP meetings in hordes.

A video that circulated on social media shows our Brightstarwell Marbaniang, MLA of Mawlai constituency, after the big election campaign for the party's candidate at Mawlai, was seen picking up litter from the road. The prominent leaders of the VPP dress casually, and they do not seem to be interested in the VIP culture. Compare this with what is being promoted by this Government, where chairpersons, members of different Committees and Commissions and even the leaders of the party, indulge in VIP culture. This Government has even provided top security cover to contractors who are from their parties, even if there is no threat perception to their lives. Defying court orders, one would find the leaders of the ruling party have their expensive cars with black tinted windows and even sirens. The public connects this government, particularly

the NPP, as promoters of the high-level culture where only those close to the powerful benefited from government works and contracts. However, the VPP leaders walk the talk, and they have revealed their true selves that they are servant leaders.

This makes people connect with the party, its ideology, and follow its leaders because everything they offer is new and refreshing.

NPP shooting itself in the foot

The campaign was not constructive, as there were more entertainers than campaigners in the recent election. The campaign was also very ugly, as there was mudslinging from every direction, but in the entire episode, Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong, the star campaigner of the NPP, will go down in the history as the greatest entertainer during this election. He already made a name for himself from his own statements like, "ngi pynbiej ia ki paidbah man ka 5 nsem... ki paidbah ki pynbor ia ngi ban tuh... ngin pynshong ia ki ha tum bus... ngin iatreilang bad ki ksuid ruh..." we fool them every 5 years and they succumb to our trick every 5 years; it is the public that force us to become corrupt – if they ask us for one hundred rupees we steal two hundred from the state coffers. Tynsong even ridiculed the political partners, particularly the UDP when he said, "After the election they will come begging to us. Since the bus is full we will make them sit on the roof and they will be happy about it." And to the party's embarrassment that really happened. Now the UDP is known as "ka seng shong tum bus" the party that is happy even if it has to sit on the roof of the bus.

A battle for votes, hits, likes and views
Social media played a very important role in helping the VPP gain the much-needed popularity, and the credit goes to YouTubers. Common folks such as labourers, drivers to the hawkers in the street own a Smartphone now, and they made the best use of it during the election. More than the registered media houses and networks, it is the YouTubers who help popularize the party. They cover the campaign out of their love for the party, and VPP does not have to pay for their coverage, not even their conveyance. The YouTubers may have also gained from the likes, subscribers, shares, and views that the people made after viewing the content, but at the end of the day, the party gets its message across; the public becomes aware, and the YouTubers have their likes, subscribers, shares, and views. For the VPP, like the Bard of Avon said, "all's well that ends well."

Tynsong's much-talked-about statement was when asked about possible alliances that NPP will make after the election. He said that his Party will work even with the devil if the situation demands.

Tynsong and his ilk derive happiness from making fun of others from the election platform. They may have this false sense of pride because it amuses their supporters and makes them laugh, but the public is not pleased with it. The saying by Abraham Lincoln, which was made

popular by Bob Marley in his song, "Get Up, Stand Up," says, "You can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all of the time," is very apt here. The public is not stupid anymore, and on the other hand, another different approach that the new party ushers is that its president reiterated every time is that the party came to educate and not to fool the public.

The public is also not foolish to the extent of not being able to connect the dots when more than one crore rupees were seized by the police in Arunachal Pradesh from a vehicle which was part of the Chief Minister and Party's President cavalcade. That the vehicle belongs to a businessman who has business interests in Meghalaya is too obvious for the public to miss the wood for the trees.

The last nail in the NPP coffin, at least in the current election, is when the BJP decided not to contest from the Shillong parliamentary seat and instead supports its NDA partner. That this is a blunder of Himalayan proportion for the NPP will be obvious when the election results are declared. The BJP has its own calculation to withdraw from the race, but this will backfire for the NDA and its partner both at the state and the national level.

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For India, any escalation of Israel-Iran war is bad for country's economy

Modi faces uphill task in protecting New Delhi's interest in uncertain times

By Girish Linganna

As the polling for the 18th Indian Lok Sabha elections began on April 19, New Delhi is closely monitoring the growing conflict between Iran and Israel. The situation in the Middle East is creating risks for energy, security, and trade that could affect India, now the world's most populous country.

Harsh V Pant, vice-president of studies and foreign policy at the Observer Research Foundation, told SCMP that India faces significant consequences depending on how the situation develops, which might compel the country to make some tough decisions. Pant cautioned that trade and energy security are crucial concerns. He warned that if the conflict escalates, it could impact the well-being and economic stability of Indian citizens.

US officials reported on Friday that Israel attacked Iran as a response to Tehran's drone strikes on April 12. The drone strikes were retaliation for an earlier Israeli attack on a diplomatic location in Syria. Analysts note that India's quick calls for calm after the drone strikes, along with Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar's conversations with both his Iranian and Israeli counterparts, show New Delhi's deep concern about the situation.

At a public event on Monday, Jaishankar emphasized

The situation became more pressing when Iran's Revolutionary Guards captured a cargo ship with Indian sailors near the Strait of Hormuz on April 13, highlighting the direct impact on India.

Iranian forces released a female crew member, Ann Tessa Joseph, who returned home on Thursday. Diplomatic efforts continue to ensure the safe return of the other 16 crew members. About 100,000 Indians live in Israel, and 4,000 in Iran. A recent agreement that made it easier for Indian construction workers to go to Israel is now uncertain. The first group of workers travelled to Israel in early April.

According to SCMP, Talmiz Ahmad, a former Indian diplomat with extensive experience in West Asia, said that a full-scale war between Israel and Iran is still unlikely. If a full-scale war were to happen, it would not only affect India but would also have serious repercussions for the entire world, said Talmiz Ahmad, a former Indian diplomat who has served as ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UAE.

According to Talmiz Ahmad in an interview with This Week in Asia on Friday, as reported by SCMP, Israel's response was quick and forceful, primarily to protect its interests and maintain its

"India relies heavily on the Middle East for its energy requirements, primarily for oil and natural gas. These resources are crucial for powering the country's vehicles, generating electricity, and supplying energy to various industries. The Middle East is a key supplier due to its vast oil reserves, making it essential for India to maintain stable relations with countries in this region to secure its energy needs."

the government's worry about a "highly sensitive area" and called for peace. He added, "For the rest of the world and especially for India, we are looking for ways to reduce the tension."

India, with a population of 1.4 billion and as the third-largest oil consumer globally, imports more than 80% of its oil from the Middle East to satisfy its domestic needs. With strategic oil reserves only sufficient for one to three months, India's need for energy imports is both significant and immediate.

India relies heavily on the Middle East for its energy requirements, primarily for oil and natural gas. These resources are crucial for powering the country's vehicles, generating electricity, and supplying energy to various industries. The Middle East is a key supplier due to its vast oil reserves, making it essential for India to maintain stable relations with countries in this region to secure its energy needs.

Natural gas is a type of fossil fuel primarily composed of methane. It's found underground and is used as a source of energy for heating, cooking, and electricity generation. It's also used as a fuel for vehicles and as a raw material in the manufacture of plastics and other commercially important organic chemicals. Natural gas is valued for its efficiency and clean burning compared to other fossil fuels, producing fewer pollutants and greenhouse gases.

India's trade ministry has decided not to take any immediate policy actions regarding the Israel-Iran conflict, choosing instead to monitor the situation further before making any decisions. Analysts say that if the conflict worsens, many of India's interests could be at risk, especially with potential instability in the Red Sea.

image. He mentioned that this action is unlikely to have a significant impact beyond Israel and Iran. India's main concern would be if the conflict spreads across the region. However, if the conflict remains between Iran and Israel, it will likely be minor.

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, India has significantly deepened its strategic relationships with Israel in areas such as defence, agriculture, and technology. In 2017, Prime Minister Modi made a landmark visit to Israel, the first by any Indian prime minister. This trip set the stage for a dramatic increase in trade between the two countries, with bilateral trade nearly doubling from \$5.56 billion in 2018-19 to \$10.7 billion in 2022-23.

Jon Alterman, Senior Vice-President and Director of the Middle East Program at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, noted in a report by SCMP that trade between India and Iran has decreased over the past decade. The relationship has become less strategic compared to when Iran was a key supplier of crude oil to India. Over 9 million Indians reside across various countries in the Middle East. India has maintained a careful balance in its relations with both Israel and Iran, avoiding taking sides for many years.

According to Alterman, a major conflict in the Middle East could significantly threaten the safety of millions of Indians working there and disrupt India's trade. Alterman further explained that New Delhi should concentrate on India's global position. As major powers are more driven by competition, how India positions itself while maintaining flexibility is becoming more complicated. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Meghalaya an unsafe place

Editor,
It is disheartening that this Government or rather the Police Department of our State seem to have forgotten the recent deaths in Ichamatid and Mawlai Mawroh. It's a damn care attitude in many aspects. Take for instance the tragic loss of a precious life of a poor labourer at Mawroh at the hands of bloody murderers on the April 10 last. Ten days have passed yet it seems that the Government and its investigating agencies have washed their hands off this case. Suspects/accused are given freedom to return to their normal lives without any fear of punishment from the law. Now they can live and plan their next steps to lay their hands on the next vulnerable targets. Perhaps the case is already closed for want of evidence.

The family of the deceased who have lost a husband, a father, a son, an uncle and a brother etc., are left to fend for themselves emotionally and financially without any hope that they will get justice in the court of law. The poor labourers death is relegated to that of an animal although the man was faultless. Everyone has forgotten about the death. There were no protests either from any quarters to urge the Government machinery to follow up/investigate the case until justice is delivered. We are now entering that phase in life where unless something happens to us personally, we couldn't care a damn about others. We have no time, no remorse, no feelings and no

regret about what happens outside our inner circle. We have lost all empathy for the sufferings of others. We have become a pathetic and numb community! Sometimes, it becomes difficult to live in this present scenario. We have lost the sense of closeness towards fellow human beings especially towards people from outside our society and community as if we can survive in insularity and live as an island. We have lost sight of the fact that we are inter-dependent and cannot progress without the live and let live philosophy. The food we eat; the clothes to cover our chastity; our smallest needs all come from outside the State as Meghalaya has very little internal resource..

Coming back to the role of the Government, the less said the better. The perpetrators of crimes are never apprehended and brought to book especially when victims are the poor and down trodden. It seems that the authorities will sink in their teeth only if the crimes pertain to the higher echelons of society. Our ministers, our administrative officials, etc., have not done justice to their duties and seem to have lost the work ethics entrusted on them. I will not be wrong in saying that in our State, the various pressure groups seem to have hijacked the entire Government machinery be it the Police Department, Education, Roads & Transport, Trade and Commerce P.W.D, Health etc. Meghalaya is turning into an unsafe place where some citizens have forfeited the right to life.

Yours etc.,
Helen Dkhar,
Via email

Attacks in Meghalaya of communal nature

Editor,
In his letter "Stinging Rebuke," (ST April 17, 2024), Glenn Kharkongor has pointed out a characteristic of Meghalaya's violence against non-tribals that is very significant but does not get discussed: that the killings and pogroms in the state can easily be viewed as a case of Christian zealots killing defenceless Hindus. And if we analyse the facts, one can see that such an inference would be based on facts.

For one, the history of violence in this state began in 1979 with vandalism of a statue of Maa Kali, a revered Hindu goddess. The pogrom that followed killed almost entirely Bengali Hindus who are worshippers of Goddess Kali. Next, the pogrom and expulsion of 1987 targeted almost exclusively Nepali Hindus and the violence in 1992 again largely targeted Bengali Hindus. This is not to mention the smaller incidents of violence that have been a constant feature of the state, and in most of these cases, the victims "happened" to be Hindu.

There are also additional experiences that support the conclusion that this violence has a large religious angle. Non-tribal residents of the state can attest how, during the darkest periods of violence, Christian holidays such as Christmas were the most dangerous nights for them. There are also accounts of how attacks often reached a crescendo on Sundays, right around the time church

services ended.

Of course, non-Hindus have also suffered sporadic violence by radical tribal bigots over the years, most prominent being the attacks against the Sikh community. As such, I do not argue that the violence perpetrated by these elements is not racial; rather, it is both racial as well as communal. The communal angle of the violence in Meghalaya has already been picked up by some organizations and groups in the mainland, and although it is clear we as a state are in a class of our own when it comes to petty bigotry, there is always a chance (however remote it may be) of retaliatory consequences. Unless Meghalaya cleans up its act (which is extremely unlikely, going by history and present), we may live to see the truly unfortunate day when its violence causes sufferings and misery even outside its borders.

Yours etc.,
N.K. Kehar
Shillong-3

Meghalaya Elections: Navigating political debates amidst partisan noise

Editor,
As India has braced itself for the general elections, the political landscape is marred by the cacophony of partisan rhetoric and the relentless clamour of competing narratives. Amidst this tumult, one aspect that has garnered significant attention is the role of certain news networks in shaping public discourse, purportedly fostering meaningful debates but

often descending into chaotic shouting matches.

Across the airwaves, anchors of these networks claim to strive for constructive dialogue and informed discussion, yet viewers are all too familiar with the spectacle that ensues, a far cry from the reasoned exchange of ideas promised. Instead of fostering understanding and enlightenment, these debates often devolve into partisan bickering and personal attacks, leaving viewers disillusioned and disenchanted with the democratic process.

Behind the facade of impartiality, there lurks a subtle bias, with anchors covertly voicing their support for their preferred political parties through tactical speech and selective framing of issues. While ostensibly presenting a balanced view, their allegiance to a particular ideology becomes evident through the subtle nuances of their commentary and the guests they choose to feature.

This insidious partisanship not only undermines the credibility of the media but also distorts public perception and erodes trust in the democratic process. Instead of serving as impartial arbiters of truth, these news networks become conduits for the propagation of partisan agendas, perpetuating polarization and divisiveness within society.

Furthermore, amidst the fervour of election season, it is imperative for voters to exercise discernment and critical thinking, resisting the temptation to be swayed by catchy party songs, slogans, or purported past accomplishments. While these may serve as effective marketing tools,

they often serve to obfuscate substantive issues and distract from the real concerns facing the electorate.

In the midst of this media maelstrom, it is incumbent upon citizens to seek out reliable sources of information, engage in independent research, and demand accountability from both politicians and the media. Rather than succumbing to the allure of sensationalism and spectacle, voters must prioritize substance over style, holding candidates and news networks alike to a higher standard of integrity and transparency.

As the electoral battle heats up, let us not be swayed by the cacophony of partisan noise or the allure of superficial promises. Instead, let us uphold the principles of democracy by engaging in informed debate, exercising our right to vote judiciously, and holding our elected representatives accountable for their actions.

In conclusion, the general elections present an opportunity for citizens to reclaim the narrative from the clutches of partisan propaganda and media sensationalism. By remaining vigilant and discerning, we can ensure that our democracy remains vibrant, resilient, and true to the principles of transparency, accountability, and informed decision-making.

Yours etc.,
Maven Nongrum,
Shillong

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

"There is a sufficiency in the world for man's need but not for man's greed."

— Mahatma Gandhi

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Sexual crimes on the rise

THE report of sexual assaults on two minors in South West Garo Hills sends a chill up the spine. Safety of women and minor girls is hugely compromised in this matrilineal society. Young girls have never felt so unsafe. No matter who the perpetrators of the crime are, gang-raping minor girls is something that will leave a perpetual scar on them and their families. That such vile men get away with impunity is what is frightening. Sometimes even when the rapists are arrested it takes years for the courts to decide the cases and mete out exemplary punishment such that similar crimes against women and girls are not repeated. In this case since both the girls are minors the case would fall under the Prevention of Child Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act. In India, only 3% of Child Sexual Abuse related offenses were reported to the police. This is due to the social stigma associated with such abuse. Unfortunately, the minor girls carry this stigma for the rest of their lives and would require regular counselling to get out of the trauma. It is for this reason that the State Commission for the Protection of Child Rights has been created across states. The Commission is meant to create awareness about POCSO and also to teach young girls how to keep themselves safe from sexual assaults or rape.

Sexual abuse of minors can and has happened within families. Most rapes are committed by known persons and not by complete strangers. Hence for a young girl even the family with its extended connections is not a safe space. When sexual assaults happen within families the case is hushed up to protect the family honour. Instead of looking for justice, families clamp up and the girl lives a nightmare for the rest of her life. Sadly, the criminal justice system has consistently failed to address the needs of children who have experienced sexual assault and to monitor their mental and physical well-being. In India, more often than not it is the victim of sexual abuse who is taunted or looked at askance instead of society standing with the survivor and her family and assist them in approaching the courts of law.

It is hoped that police will be able to identify the rapists and arrest them because if they get away scot-free they will repeat their crimes. It is time that NGOs working in the area of women and child rights help the survivors of such crimes to report the matter and also follow up the matter regularly. To leave the entire matter only to the family might be too burdensome since most survivors of sexual assaults come from poor families. At this juncture it must also be stated that the State Commission for Women should immediately have a person at the helm to address these growing atrocities against women and the girl-child. It is not understood as to why the Government should allow this post to remain vacant for so long when other superfluous appointments are made post haste.

Meghalaya and UPSC Civil Services Exams

By Rudi Warjri

Meghalaya?

The value system
Start with the thought processes and ideas embedded in traditional cultures or the traditional values. The wise homilies of elders exhort us to earn an honest living by one's own sweat or earning righteously; conducting oneself with honour and respect etc. Are these values even existential in the radar of consciousness or just read in text books and forgotten? Preparing for the UPSC

People." It embodied the sense of a separate entity and identity. A separate state meant the devolution of power and self-governance to protect and promote one's interest, culture and customs. It is an opportunity to create more opportunities, develop and optimize one's potential, given the physical, material, natural and intellectual resources we have. It was an opportunity to catch up with the rest of the advanced States in India and indeed

the masses. For the sake of brevity allow me to take the KSU (Khasi Students Union) as an epitome of what essentially means a student centric group. The motto of the KSU is "strive forward children of the soil." Very profound indeed! A perfect beau ideal for a UPSC civil services indigenous aspirant. Why then has this motto failed to influence young achievers to scale the UPSC exams? It's amusing when I read discourses by these pressure groups about having more indigenous civil services bureaucrats when I don't know how many of them have ever gone closer to attempting the UPSC exams. The other is the insular mindset. The hindering fear and paranoia of the outsider - an incompatible mindset for a UPSC aspirant. This river metaphor of poet Khalil Gibran is so apt. "The river needs to take the risk of entering the ocean because only then will fear disappear because that's where the river will know it's not about disappearing into the ocean but of becoming the ocean." Political mobilization needs to give space to intellectual mobilization.

Building an intellectually mobilized society also means reading. Reading books in general and not just text books. And even more pernicious is the dependence on the social media university. Most youth now don't even read the newspapers! How many visit the library in their school, college, university or the State Central Library? Book therapy is an imperative.

Some commentaries and suggestions have raised the issue or availability of coaching. Coaching does help in honing and organizing the preparation in a systematic manner. The key however is again the mindset that allows coaching itself so that it acquires a base to take more advantage of institutional coaching.

Resistance to change
Charles Darwin says, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, it is one most adaptable to change." Artificial Intelligence (AI) is now the dominant game changer for the future. Do the youth in Meghalaya even know what AI is beyond AI in the smartphone? Youth of Meghalaya, wake up!

(The writer is a retired diplomat and can be reached at rwarjri@gmail.com)



exams means intellectually appreciating and digesting these very traditional value systems.

Then the practice of the aforesaid revered value system within the political and societal conduct currently. Today, mostly, charlatans are occupying positions of political leadership. The key qualification for contesting elections is Money. And ruefully the majority within the society among the electorate has also accepted it as normal. Besides, one wonders what work do the 175 plus retainers appointed by the Government in bodies with superlative nomenclatures like Economic Task Force, Economic Council, Resource Mobilization, et al do? A more qualified civil servant having to serve these semiliterate or quasi-educated types would be a fatuity. In other words a demotivation to the youth.

The Golden Jubilee and the celebration of 50 years of Meghalaya's statehood took place only three years ago. Statehood signified the attainment of what the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi described, "to fulfil the aspirations of the Hill

with the rest of the world. Does that collective sense of destiny exist among the youth of Meghalaya?

Political activism
History is replete with illustrations about the role of political activism in bringing change and transformation in society such as the ending of slavery, the movement against racism, against dictatorship, women's empowerment etc. Political activism also takes the form of political parties or as mass movements and pressure groups for a cause.

In Meghalaya the leading pressure groups as far as I'm aware are the KSU, FKJGP, HYC, HNYE, HANM, HITO, JSU, GSU, etc. Pardon me in case I missed out any other prominent group. The bottom-line declared goal of practically all these groups is 'safeguard and protection of the rights of the indigenous peoples.' This is in line with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted in September 2007 and India also voted in its favour.

One asset which the pressure groups have is social capital and political mobilization and support among

A BJP slide is not unlikely

By Jagdish Rattanani

It is never easy or safe to read the mood of the nation, particularly in the midst of a national election that is well spread out, this one running over 40 days and in seven phases. With that caveat, it must still be said that there is more than a whiff beginning to gather against the BJP, light to moderate in intensity at best, depending on who is making the analysis. At this stage though, with one phase of the election behind us, it is difficult to say if and how this sentiment may build, or if the party can grow to become a gathering storm against giving Narendra Modi a straight third term.

for his back-and-forth into the BJP fold. It is difficult to see how the JD(U)-BJP-LJP troika of the NDA can deliver 39 of the 40 seats they bagged in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. Tejashwi Yadav of the RJD is leading an energetic campaign, directing his fire not plainly at Nitish Kumar, who Yadav refers to as the "respected" Chief Minister, but at his inner circle that the RJD says has used the Chief Minister for their narrow ends. This lends itself to the unstated suggestion that Nitish Kumar has become a pawn, is not in control and is being manipulated by the BJP, which has failed to meet



The sentiment, if it is to gather, will have to stand against the overwhelming money power and consequent reach and impact of the BJP campaign. The BJP's visibly heavy spends border on the vulgar, the Rs.8,250 crore it got from the now-declared illegal electoral bonds scheme finding its way to overwhelm the electorate. Yet, this heavily slanted money power can also harm because while it enables unparalleled reach on the one hand, it serves to highlight the BJP's huge negatives on the other hand - a loud, overbearing, cocky persona that may not help during a time of seeking votes. The BJP has the largest share of private helicopter bookings for its leaders, not counting the travel of the Prime Minister. The party has outspent the Congress four-to-one on Google search ads and three-to-one on Facebook ads, according to Reuters. It uses this as part of psychological warfare to plug its surface narrative, which is that the BJP will improve its tally of 303 seats from 2019.

It is difficult to see how this might be possible unless the ruling alliance holds old ground and covers new ground in areas it did not do well the last time, say the entire Southern region or parts of the Eastern region. In the South, the NDA alliance in 2019 won 30 out of 130 seats in the five states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Telangana, but 25 of them came from Karnataka. Karnataka now has a Congress State government noted for progressive initiatives, boosting its standing and campaign energy, and so it is highly unlikely that the BJP will reach its 2019 tally of 25 out of the 28 Lok Sabha seats in the State.

There is a BJP-led hype of the party doing well in Tamil Nadu, where it drew a plank the last time and is now putting up a stiff fight in the urban areas. But the BJP campaign positioned as an ideological challenge to the Dravidian movement is unlikely to find resonance in the State where all regional parties trace their origins and ideologies directly or indirectly to the Dravidian movement of Periyar. The DMK has also been able to put up a strong campaign targeting the Prime Minister in particular and calling him out repeatedly for having institutionalised corruption. The BJP may well draw a blank here. Thus, with no scope of growing in the Northern region, where the BJP maxed out in 2019, and no new ground from elsewhere, it becomes almost impossible for the BJP to improve its overall 2019 tally. In fact, the party can slide significantly from its self-stated benchmarks given the new realities in States like Bihar and Maharashtra.

In Bihar, the moniker of "paltu ram" appears to have latched on to Chief Minister Nitish Kumar of the JD(U)

Bihar's demand for a "special status" - a consistent ask of the Centre and a demand that has disappeared from Nitish Kumar's vocabulary since he returned to the BJP fold.

In Maharashtra, the forced splitting of the Shiv Sena and the NCP has hurt Maharashtra pride and built a strong undercurrent of anger against the BJP, whose actions acquired the colour of Gujarat being used to manipulate an elected government in Maharashtra. The BJP leadership used Surat in Gujarat (and later Guwahati) as a safety city to whisk away MLAs while it engineered the split. Maharashtra and Gujarat were one State till an agitation gave birth to Maharashtra with Mumbai as its capital. Downtown Mumbai has a hutamra chowk, a martyrs' memorial in memory of those who died in the struggle for a separate Marathi-speaking Maharashtra State when Morarji Desai was the Chief Minister of the then Bombay-Gujarat combine called Bombay State. In the 2019 and 2014 Lok Sabha polls, the BJP and the Shiv Sena fighting in an alliance got 41 of the 48 Maharashtra seats. Expect the BJP to pay a heavy price here against a united opposition of the Congress, Sharad Pawar's NCP and the original Uddhav Thackeray part of the Shiv Sena. The BJP MP from Amravati Navneet Rana openly said at a public rally that there is no Modi wave at work this time.

There are also reports of the Congress receiving an enthusiastic response in several other States, but the downside is the negative impact of the ugly CPI-Congress spat over Wayanad and the uncertainty over Amethi, the seat which Robert Vadra has claimed by speaking apparently out of turn to queer the Congress pitch.

On the other side, the BJP's prime face, the Prime Minister, too, looks tired and lacklustre. Like a fish that you need more of over time, he has begun overusing (even by the BJP standards!) religion with calls and cries that border on the vaudevillian. At one meeting, he asked his audience to put on their mobile torches during the day to send light at a time the sun's rays were being mirrored on the idol of Lord Ram on his "birthday" being celebrated in the temple at Ayodhya. At the same meeting, he offered this triple slip: 'Modi ki guarantee yani guarantee pura hone ki guarantee' (Modi's guarantee means the guarantee of fulfilling the guarantee).

But we can let that pass - call it stress, fatigue or a theatre of the absurd in the midst of a festival of democracy that we hope India will continue to celebrate in the future.

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

Letters to the Editor

Ethnic origins: staying with the science

Editor,
The article by Bhogtoram Mawroh, "History of the subcontinent and the place of the Khasis in it" in the Shillong Times, Apr 20, 2024, makes interesting reading. He also provides a timeline, which is useful to an extent. The reader should keep in mind that such constructions, while acceptable, invariably contain some speculative elements.

He seems to rely heavily on Tony Joseph's book, "Early Indians". This is a good book, but Tony is a journalist who merely puts scientific material together, in a layman's way. The scientific articles that he quotes are written in abstruse scientific terms that few of us can understand. These studies are cautious in their conclusions, and rightly mention alternative conclusions.

The article seems to make the categorical statement that, "the Austroasiatic migration took place from the east", dating it to around 2000 BCE. There are genetic studies indicating that the earliest Austroasiatic tribes, Munda and Khasi came from the west and much earlier. Bhogtoram himself says, "65,000 years ago: The Out of Africa migrants reached India...and then moved across the Indian subcontinent into southeast Asia, east Asia and Australia." He neglects to identify

them. They were probably the proto-Munda, the first settlers in India, from whom the Khasis later arose, about 10,000 years later. These Austroasiatic languages are the oldest languages in India.

One of my siblings sent a saliva sample to the National Geographic genographic project. A Khasi friend who lives in the UK also sent me his report from the same project. The DNA report that both of them received showed that their ancestral DNA originated from the west. Of course, just because a few studies and a couple of DNA reports indicate a western origin for the Khasis, one cannot be definite about it since there is some evidence to an eastern origin, though these may indicate a 'return' migration, since it is dated much later.

I recommend Romila Thapar's book, "Which of us are Aryan?". She brings together the fields of historiography, archaeology, linguistics, mythology, anthropology and genetics. Each of these chapters is written by an expert in the field. But both Joseph and Thapar say very little about the autochthonous tribals of India. As for rice, that's a story for another time.

The letter from Salil Gwali, in the Shillong Times, Apr 17, 2024, it is only an ideological rant. The writer goes to great lengths to debunk the Aryan Invasion Theory, which no one believes any longer. The Aryans, for whom the correct term is Indo-European,

came to the subcontinent as migrant pastoralists, not invaders. The mis-spelling of the names of eminent Indians as Mahatma Gandhi, and Rabindranath Thakur, reduces the credibility of this letter.

But the letter highlights the political hijacking of the science of origins. A great article in Scroll describes this phenomenon well. You may read it at <https://scroll.in/article/882497/do-rakhigarhi-dna-findings-debunk-the-aryan-invasion-theory-or-give-it-more-credence>

Yours etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor,
Via email

"The demagogue in a democracy"

Editor,
The article, 'An Election Unlike Any Other,' by HH Mohrmen has hyped up certain aspects of the Voice of the People's Party (VPP) and portrayed it as the party that 'clicked with the people. This is somewhat misconstrued. The VPP has, instead more than often, been playing the part of the demagogue. A demagogue is a popular leader of a mob who gains popularity by arousing the common people, kindling their sentiments, whipping up their passions and appealing to their emotions through oratory skills. Many demagogues have demonstrated remarkable skills at moving audiences to great emotional depths and heights. With their silver-tongued

speeches they make a show of appearing to be down to earth ordinary citizens and treat complex problems which require patient and thorough analysis as if they can be solved in a jiffy.

The most common methods used by demagogues are: (1) scapegoating, that is, blaming the in-group's troubles on an out-group usually of a different ethnicity, religion or social class, (2) fear mongering or by evoking fear to stir them to action, (3) lying without regard for factual truth and (4) promising the impossible and hoodwinking the ignorant masses without thinking how their promises will be accomplished. We have to be vigilant against demagoguery and not blindly follow those who claim to be able to take us back to better times and in turn promote their own personal agenda. The secret of the demagogue is to appear as dumb as his audience and make the common people believe themselves to be as smart as them.

Yours etc.,
C. Lyngdoh
Shillong -3

Clarification

Editor,
Please refer to my article, "Kudos to the VPP but to who should Meghalaya prefer" (ST April 18, 2024) where I stated that after the funeral of my mother I talked to three lower primary school teachers who allegedly paid money to get their jobs recently. Let me

state very clearly that those three teachers are not from Rangblang village. I did not meet any of them. Those who came for the funeral were also from Mawkyrwat, Nongstoin, Sonaparhar, Shillong, Garo Hills and other places. These three could be from anywhere in the state. I also did not mention whether the teachers are from Government Lower Primary Schools, or Deficit Schools, Ad-hoc or any category for I don't even know which category they belong to. So let us not presume that these three teachers are all only from Rangblang village.

Secondly, the term 'recently' may not mean this year or last year or the year before. In fact, I am not sure when they were appointed. Thirdly I mentioned three. There could be even more having been made aware of more cases. Lastly, when I said 'I talked to' it does not mean I talked to them personally. It could have been over the phone or on social media.

Yours etc.,
Albert Thyriang,
Via email

Candidates & political parties, don't jump to conclusions

Editor,
Apropos of the news item "Political parties dissect

performance after polls" and "NPP awaits report VPP brims with confidence" (ST 21st April 2024) made interesting reading. There is a thing called, "hope for the best and prepare for the worst to come." When the fate of the contestants is sealed in the EVMs it is next to impossible to say you are winning. My advice to all the parties is to revisit the data of 2023 and see what your strength was and then work your math at the booth level and then come out with the probable numbers. Words can lie but numbers do not lie. Data shows that a nascent regional party won 9 votes out of 100 votes from 18 segments that contested the election in 2023 securing one lakh plus votes. Let us assume that the party increases its vote share by one hundred percent on June 4, 2024 over 2023. One can work out the math and get a figure. It is a pipe dream to win an MP election with two lakh votes given the high percentage of voting of 73.78 percent in the just concluded 1st Phase of the election to the 18th Lok Sabha from 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency. The best thing is to keep your fingers crossed and relax till the June 4, 2024.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh
Via email

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"The only thing that overcomes hard luck is hard work."

— Harry Golden

The Shillong Times

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PM as polarizer

THE clearest indication yet of Prime Minister Narendra Modi losing his confidence to sweep this parliament poll came on Sunday, when he threw caution to the winds and indulged in what many saw as a "hate speech" — targeting the 20 crore Muslims of this nation directly. Consider the fact that Modi had never spoken out against Muslims in the past 10 years of his governance though such sentiments always pervaded the BJP's governing establishment and organisational set-up across the board. It would appear that the PM has taken out the "last weapon" in his armour to win this election for himself and his party — via a fresh communal polarization. His warning to his Hindu brethren, divided as they were, was that Muslim "infiltrators" would take India's wealth away if the Congress party returned to power. The Congress, he said, would distribute the nation's wealth to "those who have more children, to the infiltrators."

The PM was obviously talking through his hat. But there was a method in the madness. His last ditch attempt, obviously, was to unify the Hindus against the "invisible enemy" — the Muslims — and polarise the society during the poll season. This is clear as sunlight; and it is equally well-understood that Modi is turning desperate to win the elections even as the Opposition is not yet showing any signs of waging a strong battle at the hustings in several states, principally the Hindi belt which is where the BJP pins its main hopes on.

Dividing the society vertically was what the BJP always took a special interest in and reaped rewards. The Modi establishment did attempt a polarization on communal lines a while before the polls by asserting that it would implement the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). This, even as it was a foregone conclusion that the BJP was all for driving out the illegal Muslim migrants from Bangladesh and other neighbouring countries. The Congress party proved smarter and it refused to catch the bait. Obviously, the BJP was crestfallen, also for the reason that the party or Modi could not come up with a new agenda for the nation. Instead, they harped on the familiar themes, trumpeted the "development" that the Modi government brought to the nation in the past 10 years, highlighted the "temples" push in Ayodhya and even abroad, and the government's achievement in Kashmir vis-a-vis the nullification of the special status. To the voters, obviously, all these no longer made sense. In fact, this is a rare situation in which the nation is facing the polls without a special agenda. Modi's listing of his achievements, it might seem, is failing to click with the electorate. From a vantage point, Modi understands as much.

Need to integrate local history and knowledge in school education

By Melari Shisha Nongrum

In the past few days, we were sitting as a family and talking about 'history' and how the East India Company had come to the Khasi Hills. My children were very intrigued by the events that I narrated. I realized that my children and many others in our state may not know nor have ever read anything about the history of tribal communities. This kept me thinking. The Meghalaya State Education Policy's vision is, "to provide stimulating and equitable education of the highest quality that will foster innovation, transformation, and facilitate inclusive growth and development in the State." To attain this vision, one of its objectives in the mission is, "Local human and physical resources will be identified to ensure the effective participation of indigenous and local communities in decision-making and to preserve, maintain, and promote traditional knowledge."

Countries around the world, especially those which have been colonized, are reexamining their curriculum in the process of decolonizing their education. There seems to be a common thread emerging; their heritage and knowledge of tribal/indigenous communities have been rejected, suppressed, and ignored by the education system. Is this true of our education system too? From my experience and I believe many will agree with me, this is true. I read about the history of how the British came into contact with the tribal communities in Meghalaya and other states because of my own interest as an adult. Was any of it included in our history books? Even in science subjects, we parroted the examples of herbs and trees like 'neem' or 'banyan' that we have never seen. What about geography? Nothing of local geography is included. However, my mother told me that local geography was included in their books, in the 1950's. In health education, are the locally available high nutrient vegetables and fruits

included? In a globalized world, how important is local knowledge for our children and adolescents?

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in its document on indigenous education, states that when children's learning processes are detached from their context, they are in danger of losing part of their identity, their connection with their predecessors, and the land they belong to. Reflecting on this statement, let's look around and see the destructive ways we have allowed human activities to mercilessly destroy our heritage, our mother earth, our state. Two to three generations of formal education seem to have erased all the rich heritage so integral to our existence. We have allowed this to happen because maybe we have lost the understanding of the 'connectedness to mother earth', the 'ecological balance' that we proclaim to be 'guardians' of.

Research by Garnett et al., (2018) in Nature Sustainability indicates that indigenous people around the world have access to over a quarter of the world's land surface and intersect about 40% of all terrestrial protected areas and ecologically intact landscapes (for example, boreal and tropical primary forests, savannas, and marshes). Are we part of this narrative? We have forgotten this intricate relationship we have with 'mother earth'; we have used the capitalist lens of using 'it' as a resource only. Where is the gap? How is this 'interconnectedness with nature' that we boast of slipping away? I believe it is our mindset (which assumes the pivotal role of shaping the narrative, influences every decision, every action), which has been shaped by the education we received. An education that has been devoid of any discussion, discourse on 'our history', 'our heritage', 'connectedness to nature', 'our responsibility towards the sustainable use

of natural resources'.

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues nearly 20 years ago discussed and recognized the importance of inclusion of indigenous education in children's cultural understanding, their connection to their stated environment, and the values of sustainable development ingrained in traditional knowledge systems. There are varying efforts around the world to include indigenous education in mainstream education. A few examples are the state of Oregon in the US, the Amara region of Ethiopia, Canada, Australia, to name a few.

If we were to accomplish the vision and mission of the State's Education Policy, we need to initiate talks, discussions, and hold consultations to include our local history, geography, agrobiodiversity, culture, values, traditional governance, traditional ecological knowledge etc., into school curriculum. We already have a State Education Commission with very accomplished educationists from the tribal communities who could play a lead role. There is an enormous amount of indigenous literature that has already been published from various fields. However, we must also recognize the fact that traditional knowledge varies from one region to another. I remember a conversation I had with a Kong Thei (name changed), a wise lady from Ri Bhoi last year. She told me that there is a type of bamboo used for construction. She added that one should know which type of bamboo, when to harvest the bamboo, and at which stage of its maturity it should be, otherwise, the bamboo does not last long and the rampant harvesting of bamboo also affects its propagation 'ktah pat ia ka jingroi, hynrei u lah ban duh noh'. Similar knowledge was shared with me when I spoke to basket weavers from Wahsohra. The bamboo is not

the same, but the principles are the same. So, instead of dwelling too much on what should be included in the textbooks, the thrust should be to develop pedagogies that promote learning from elders in their homes, neighbourhoods and communities. Part of the process of decolonizing education is re-establishing links to the community. Education should not occur in a vacuum, and these links are essential for contextualizing knowledge, deepening understanding, encouraging community involvement, and reconnecting students with our vital support system, our land and community.

Since efforts are ongoing, there is no conclusive evidence of the benefits of integrating the history, culture, and traditions of tribal communities into education though there are some testimonies indicating active engagement into one's learning which was seen among children in Oregon. From my personal journey, I've found that delving into the rich tapestry of tribal heritage instills a sense of pride in my own culture, values and systems thereof which has helped me to learn and practice within my own limitations. It has also helped me to appreciate the diversity and develop a greater understanding and respect for the traditions of others.

Therefore, I believe that initiatives to incorporate indigenous knowledge into education are not only about reconnecting tribal individuals with their culture and heritage but to also offer a valuable learning opportunity for all students, regardless of their background. By broadening the scope of education to include diverse cultural perspectives, we can promote empathy, cultural awareness, and a sense of 'connectedness with mother earth' which will hopefully translate into us becoming the real custodians of our land.

(The writer works at IIPH Shillong and can be contacted at melarisonongrum@gmail.com)

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Precise, Coloured and Detailed..!

As I see the stupid rebuilt flyover in Andheri, Mumbai, which is six feet higher than one of the arms leading to Juhu, and hear the ridicule the government has to face over it, I am also reminded of the time a few years ago when air-conditioned local trains were going to be introduced.

The day arrived, the show-piece train was put on the tracks and must have even started on its trial run, when the engine driver must have brought the train to a screeching halt screaming, "The train is too tall, it won't pass under that bridge!"

Yes the train built was 4.35 metres tall, whereas the bridges were as low as 4.27 metres! Not one bridge, not two, but most of the bridges on the route!

How could they have made such a terrible mistake?

Simple; in the haste of trying to fulfill a dream, they forgot to be precise with detail - the detail of doing their research.

Today, India is all alive with the idea of starting start-ups. But from what I've heard

lack of facts, spreading ourselves thin with engagements or relying too much on voice and delivery to fool audiences and participants.

As I study the scriptures, I find that God to the contrary is a God of detail. Just look at the way He explains the physical features of the Tabernacle, in which He wants the traveling Israelites to worship Him in. "Make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with cherubim woven into it by a skilled worker. Hang it with gold hooks on four posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold and standing on four silver bases.

"Make the tabernacle with ten curtains of finely twisted linen and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, with cherubim woven into them by a skilled worker. All the curtains are to be the same size—twenty-eight cubits long and four cubits wide. Join five of the curtains together, and do the same with the other five. Make loops of blue material along the edge of the end curtain in one set, and do the same with the end curtain in the other set. Make fifty loops



more than ninety percent of these start-ups fail. They fail because they have not spent time and a little money to go into the details of their idea.

All of us feel any new idea is a brilliant idea. I am sure the team which designed the air-conditioned train in Chennai, thought that having a taller train with more height for the passengers was the best thing they could do. "Mumbai people need more air, more head room!" must have been how they would have whispered to each other as the train was built. "Mumbai commuters will thank us!" they must have said, and today because of the lack of research, because they have to start from the drawing board again, the people of Mumbai are angry.

How simple it would have been for a team of engineers to have checked the train route, measured the height of the old British built bridges and built a prototype of the correct measurements.

Research is often simple, but quite painstaking. Because it is laborious and a bit slow, and because we are impatient trying to fulfill a dream, we tend to bypass it. That's like attempting suicide!

There may be many of you with fantasies of a new venture, a brilliant idea for a startup, but before doing anything, painstakingly go into details, find out whether it will work on a big scale, where it will work, and whether people are ready for your idea.

If any of you plan to start a new business, are filled with excitement over a brand-new dream. If any of you see yourself as the next Bill Gates, don't build a train that won't go under bridges, just do your research first, go into intricate details, otherwise like the Andheri flyover that has caused the present government much embarrassment, you may become, like them, the laughing stock of the world! Something that saddens me no end, is how speakers, writers, preachers and so-called life coaches try to get by without in-depth knowledge and with just superficial rhetoric. Either it's because of

on one curtain and fifty loops on the end curtain of the other set, with the loops opposite each other.

And that's just the beginning, as God gives detailed and precise instructions of every square inch and cubic feet of the tabernacle.

Study how He does not leave the coming of Jesus to chance, but there are actually 574 verses in the Old Testament that somehow point to or describe or reference the coming Messiah. And all the prophecies were fulfilled, why? So that you and I can know without a shadow of a doubt who Jesus is.

And then let's look at the boring genealogy or the 'begats' that line both the Old and New Testament, showing a very thorough God, painstakingly fitting each Biblical character into his historical slot to give absolute authenticity and legitimacy to the events.

How do you and I preach or teach or speak? Do we cut and paste sermons, use voice and fancy gestures, or do we who have been made in the image of God, use those same powers to dig deep, think deep and construct fortified unbeatable talk or articles?

God loved colour too, "Make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with cherubim woven into it by a skilled worker. Hang it with gold hooks on four posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold and standing on four silver bases."

Start creating powerful talk, far reaching, exhaustive and comprehensive writing, with precise details, all founded on well researched facts.

And don't forget, the blue, the purple, the scarlet and gold; colours that enrich the words you say or write!

You want to do well in life, be precise, coloured and detailed..!

The Author conducts an Online Writers and Speakers Course. For more details send a thumbs-up to him on WhatsApp 9892572883 or bobsbanter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Dangers of demagoguery

Editor, The letter to the editor captioned, "The demagogue in a democracy" (ST 23rd April 2024) by C Lyngdoh made interesting reading. Throughout history, there have been several notable demagogues—individuals who appealed to emotions and prejudices to further their own political ends. Some classical demagogues include Cleon of Athens who nearly brought the city's democracy to its knees and earned him the reputation of being the most brutal demagogues in history. Cleon advocated for executing not only the rebels but every male citizen of Mytilene. He argued that leniency would be a sign of weakness and that intellectuals lacked the practical common sense needed for such decisions. Fortunately, his opponent, Diodotus encouraged self-restraint among the Athenians and improved their democracy. Another demagogue in the US named Lewis Charles Levin stirred up the masses, sowed divisions, and distorted logic and truth. Demagoguery has been a societal staple since ancient times, and wherever there are segments of society that can be riled up, there will be demagogues.

We also have modern demagogues like Vladimir Putin the Russian President who has skillfully used nationalist sentiments, anti-western rhetoric, and a strong man image to consolidate his power. His ability to manipulate public opinion through emotional appeals and propaganda is a classic example of modern demagoguery. There's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Head of State of Turkey

whose speeches often rely on emotional language, portraying opponents as enemies of the nation. His crackdown on dissent, control over media, and appeals to religious identity demonstrate demagogic behaviour. We also have Nigel Farage of the Brexit Movement, who used anti-immigrant sentiments and fear of globalisation to rally support for leaving the European Union. His fiery speeches and provocative statements tapped into public frustration, making him a key demagogue during the Brexit campaign. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro is known for his controversial statements, including misogynistic, homophobic, and authoritarian remarks.

The characterization of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi as a demagogue is a topic of much debate and discussion. Historian, Ramachandra Guha considers Modi to be a demagogue, placing him alongside other notable figures like the former US President Donald Trump and former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson. Guha describes Modi as a politician who believes he is larger than his party and government. He accuses Modi of using deceit and falsehood to consolidate his power. Guha's assessment highlights Modi's approach to governance, emphasizing self-promotion and a tendency to prioritize personal interests over democratic norms.

Beyond individual opinions, it is essential to consider the broader context because demagoguery is a complex phenomenon, and its assessment can vary based on political leanings, historical context, and personal biases. Some argue that Modi's charismatic leadership and ability to connect with the

masses are not inherently negative. They view him as a strong leader who has implemented significant policy changes. Others point to instances of divisive rhetoric, suppression of dissent, and an emphasis on personality cult, which align with demagogic tendencies. It is crucial to critically evaluate Modi's actions, policies, and impact on democratic institutions. Democracy thrives when citizens engage in informed discussion and hold leaders accountable.

Since demagogues can emerge in various contexts, exploiting societal divisions and emotions to further their agenda, vigilance and critical thinking are essential to safeguard democracy from their influence. C Lyngdoh has rightly called on the people of Meghalaya to be vigilant against demagoguery because it poses significant dangers in today's world, impacting societies, politics, and individual well-being. These demagogues undermine critical thinking and informed decision-making, so that citizens become susceptible to simplistic solutions, ignoring complex realities. They exploit existing divisions along political, ethnic, or religious lines, fragmenting society and hindering cooperation and progress. Demagogues attack democratic norms, institutions, and check and balances. They label independent media, judiciary, and opposition as enemies, weakening the democratic fabric. They curtail free speech, dissent and individual rights; fuel prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion and they are a threat to civil liberties.

Demagogues prioritize popularity over evidence-based policies which in turn harms economies, the environment, and social welfare. Their nationalist rhetoric can

strain international relations and makes cooperation difficult, leading to conflicts.

Demagogues exploit fear, anger and frustration that compels citizens to act against their own interests due to emotional manipulation. And yes, they shift the Overton window, making extreme views more acceptable, so that their radical ideologies gain ground. Lastly, they can escalate tensions, affecting peace and security. Vigilance, media literacy and promoting rational discourse are crucial to counter these dangers..

Yours etc; VK Lyngdoh, Via email

Ten years of PM Modi

Editor,

India is "the largest democracy in the world," but now democracy is regressing and its economy is also slowing. What has PM Modi's ten years in power brought us?

Unemployment remains high. Joblessness is particularly high among India's youth - with those aged 15 to 29 making up a staggering 83% of all unemployed people in India, according to the "India Employment Report 2024", published last month by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Institute of Human Development (IHD). The BJP-led government did not provide jobs to two crore youth in a year as was promised by Modi in the run up to the 2014 general elections.

Dictatorship : In order to successfully win votes, PM Modi froze the bank accounts of the Congress Party due to tax disputes before the national elections, preventing the Congress Party from carrying out normal

campaign activities, thereby stifling democracy and weakening the party. Later, Arvind Kejriwal, Delhi's CM and chairman of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), was detained on corruption charges. BJP expelled KS Eshwarappa from the party for 6 years for embarrassing the party by contesting as an Independent from Shivamogga constituency, says Karnataka BJP. Reports have emerged of opposition party members being coerced into joining the BJP with the threat of arrest, while they were under-investigation by state agencies. Other reports suggest politicians have had their probes dropped after switching sides.

Inciting hatred : The Citizenship Amendment Act provides a fast track to naturalization for Hindus, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and Christians who fled to Hindu-majority India from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan before Dec. 31, 2014. But the law excludes Muslims. In his campaign speech on April 21, 2024, PM Modi referred to Muslims as "infiltrators" and those who have "more children" who would steal national wealth, deliberately inciting hatred between Hindus and Muslims. The "deeply objectionable" statement violated sections of the law that prohibit candidates from asking people to vote or refrain from voting for anyone on the grounds of "religion", "community" or "religious symbols", but he didn't receive warning or punishment.

Corruption is rife : The BJP led by Modi has promised to eliminate corruption, but the CMS-India Corruption Study 2018 conducted by CMS in 13 states (including 6 states and 11 public services ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party)

shows that corruption has not only increased during Modi's tenure, but Indians also believe the PM is not serious about fighting corruption. On February 15, an opaque system of political financing introduced under the Modi government in 2017 was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. In the "electoral bonds" system, individuals and companies were permitted to make unlimited and anonymous donations to political parties through the purchase of bonds from the State Bank of India. These data revealed Modi's BJP as the prime beneficiary of hundreds of millions of dollars of donations by corporations and individuals since 2019.

Democracy in retreat : Following a declining trend that emerged in 2017, India's press freedom rank dropped further to 161 out of 180 countries surveyed in the World Press Freedom Index released by Reporters Without Borders in 2023. As the "largest democracy in the world", media reporting in India should also be free, fair, objective and not threatened by parties. However, during the elections BJP plans to release at least ten movies to "clearly" focus on the "key policies and talking points" of the BJP.

Further, the BJP government has invited Delhi-based think tank Observer Research Foundation to develop a "homegrown democracy ratings index" to counter "Western-based rankings".

Yours etc., Avyaan Sharma, Via email

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"The worst form of inequality is to try to make unequal things equal."

—Aristotle

The Shillong Times

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VPP's expulsion overdrive

THREE former members of the Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) who evidently resigned from the Party some months ago but refrained from making public their resignations since the Lok Sabha election was in the offing and they did not wish to create controversies, are now being expelled immediately after the elections were done and dusted. The right thing to do would have been for the VPP to accept their resignations graciously. Any political party that does not accommodate dissenting voices and whose leaders believe they must have the last word will reach a point when they must bend or break. It is possible that some members feel a sense of claustrophobia by certain stances taken by the Party such as an overt reference to religion at all public meetings which in many ways mimics the BJP's Hindutva position. The dangers of using a particular religion in a country as diverse as India and even in a State like Meghalaya is fraught since there are people of different beliefs who feel excluded when a political party uses religion as a bait.

In a multi-party democracy that India is, politicians are constantly looking for a party that best represents their interests and those of their vote banks. When they feel that a political party they belong to tends to alienate their voters then they shift to a party that is more accommodating of differences. Also, politicians by and large have accepted the fact that 'clean politics' is a mirage since political parties invariably need to spend to accommodate people's needs, especially those of the poor who come to them with request for medical assistance, sometimes even for a mortuary van or an ambulance because they do not have the reach to avail these basic necessities. If an MLA claims that he/she is pursuing the path of clean politics and therefore does not have the means to assist his/her constituents unless he/she steals public money, which is a fact then in the circumstances we are in today where patronage democracy is embedded in the system, that MLA may not return for a second term.

While it is important to work at better governance and call out corruption and also reduce the dependence on patronage democracy the reality is also that in every constituency there are some very poor folks that need instant help when there is a health emergency or a death in the family. Clean politics is to be balanced with pragmatism and members of the VPP who have resigned perhaps feel that this extreme position taken by the Party vis a vis religion and distancing itself from extending personal help to needy constituents is what troubles some of its members. While inner party discipline is desirable it is also important for political parties to allow members to vent their frustrations and differences and to resolve those amicably instead of adhering to strict principles. After all, politics is the art of the possible.

The election that was and wasn't

By Albert Thyrniang

The high voltage MP electioneering in the state has eclipsed the lukewarm campaigns of other years. Even as the month-long festival of democracy is done and dusted many have fond memories while others display a sense of disappointment for very few 'real issues' were actually raised or discussed. This is a relook of the election that was and wasn't.

The party that was the talk of the town was the Voice of the People's Party (VPP). Without the nascent party the elections would have been even more boring. The signs were clear from the last Assembly elections that the 'Nongkrem originated movement' was going to galvanize the masses. Other established parties scorn the penniless party. The ruling partners might have thought that their deep pockets would do the usual trick in camouflaging failures with cash prior to and on the polling date. The political naivety could see them in peril.

The reason why the VPP captured the imagination of the voters is apparently clean politics. The current government is seen as corrupt, accused with nepotism and hell bent on privileging the ruling class. On its final rally in its stronghold, Nongkrem the Party came up with the catchy slogan, 'No clean politics no rest'.

A closer look, however, reveals that the VPP's campaigns were an emotional and angry outburst against the rulers rather a well-crafted political vision. The shrill rhetoric made people emotionally charged. In Khasi the terms to describe the atmosphere are, 'shongshit, shithrem and khluud.' At the end probably people voted with their hearts rather with their heads. The VPP is on a high but what rises up quickly might also come down at the same rate.

The VPP never presented the mechanism/s to tackle corruption. Prestone Tynsong poked fun saying his main adversary, Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit did not answer a questioner whether the cleaning act should begin from the head or the bottom. Big mouths against corruption akin to styles adopted by pressure groups is like drinking cold water on a sunny day but eliminating it needs a thoughtful strategy. We didn't see that being articulated in the VPP leaders' speeches even till the very climax.

Henceforth it will be a constant test for VPP's 'righteous' leaders. Towards the end of the bitter marathon

allegations of fund embezzlement came out against the VPP protagonist, Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit himself. According to the accuser, Basaiawmoit had allegedly withdrawn ₹ 30.25 lakhs from the KHADC account as CEM and a land deal was struck on a Rs 10 non-judicial stamped paper shown as money paid to the land owner in Mawkyrwat. FIRs were filed and counter filed. If there is any truth in then it could signal the premature end of VPP.

Besides being fanatical, along the lines of the BJP, the VPP bears another resemblance to the saffron brigade. It has become arrogant. The party has already summarily dismissed three functionaries even without a hearing. Just as in the BJP, absolute and unquestioning obedience is demanded. In the BJP the supreme leader is Narendra Modi. In the VPP the counterpart is Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit. Anyone who manifests any degree of dissent will be shown the door. Batting clean politics was refreshing but the VPP clearly possesses dictatorial attributes.

The NPP has ruled the state for five years but there was no talk of development, achievements, implementation of central programs and initiatives for the rural populace. Deputy chief minister, Prestone Tynsong had proudly announced that when NPP embarked on its mission the chief minister decided to give priority to the rural areas. To him positive changes are already visible. Then why stay silent on this front? The reason is because villages have remained poor with no water, no good roads and no education. All what the NPP did was attack the charismatic VPP supremo. No wonder Prestone Tynsong, the NPP candidate, Ampareen Lyngdoh, Bajjor Pyngrope, Banteidor Lyngdoh and others ended up in online memes.

Ampareen Lyngdoh carried the baggage of the 'white ink' episode. The court is still to clear her name. Any way she is now a senior politician. She has held various portfolios, including education, but clearly she knows very little about the state. It is obvious she hardly ventured outside Shillong as education minister. She is not aware of the pathetic education scenario in rural areas and the general backwardness of the state. Even though

she is qualified to be called veteran, she looked shocked at the pitiable condition in Umsiang. To impress voters all she could promise was to come back to the border village after the election for a night or two (please laugh). In Garo Hills the party ended up defending CAA and BJP's voluntary support. Overall, the NPP's campaign was bereft of substance.

With little manoeuvring space the 'bus roof riders' UDP turned good boys. The candidate, Robertjune Kharjahnin offered to set up a monitoring body for MP schemes but with the three-time parliamentarian, Vincent Pala facing no malpractice charges the proposal found no takers. The 'Drum' party then tried to rake up the Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit's and VPP's candidate Ricky Syngkon's father's surname issue. However, it was quickly blunted by the retort that JJM Nichols Roy, considered the pioneer of the Sixth Schedule and the architect of the autonomous district councils, included his wife's surname along with his own.

One disagrees with 'Bah' Ardent but at least his children are Basaiawmoit. In the 'Jaithynriew' (Khasi society) we have clan names such as 'Chyne', 'Cajee', 'Conjee', 'Cunville', 'Fanco', 'Decruz', 'Sootinck' and what have you. How on earth is 'Chyne' equivalent to 'Khain', 'Cajee' to Khaji, 'Conjee' to 'Khongji', 'Cunville' to 'Khongwir', 'Fanco' to 'Phankon', 'Decruz' to 'Dohkrut', 'Sootinck' to 'Suting'? What are the 'Seng Kur' (clan safeguarding organisations) doing? What has the UDP to say on this? Its own MDC, till a while ago the CEM, is a Chyne. This is highly irresponsible. If everyone has the liberty then 'Casee' can be written for 'Khasi', 'cublei' for 'khublei', 'kyrcu' for 'kyrkhu', 'camtam' for 'khamtam'. A new dictionary could be compiled.

The Congress stayed calmed in the Shillong seat. It should have been more aggressive given the reality that it is the only alternative to the NDA and the BJP in particular. Congressmen and women did not exploit the need of the hour forcefully. They relied mainly on the silent voters. The Garo Hills colleagues did a better job. Saleng Sangma and company used the anti-BJP sentiments to good effect. From a weak opponent the grand old party

emerged a potential winner.

After all the parties and candidates had their say, the public has still not understood the role of a Member of Parliament. None of the two constituencies in the state saw a common platform for their candidates: For the one in Shillong only two independent candidates turned up. MPs though are the highest elected members with no executive powers. The executive is in the hands of a few of them - that too if an MP belongs to the ruling party. Even the MP schemes are allotted by the central government and executed by the state government. They go through the Blocks. So per se an MP has little to do with development. The first and foremost duty of an MP is to legislate for the whole country. He/she can introduce private bills in parliament. This is rare. But an MP's most important and visible role is to support or oppose a bill that would become law. Similarly MPs support or oppose the current government's policies and actions in and outside parliament.

It is along these lines that the electorate in Meghalaya too should have voted. Being alarmed at the BJP's divisive laws, its communalized and polarized politics etc., appropriate MPs should represent Meghalaya either as part of a ruling or opposing alliance. Was this made sufficiently clear to the 22,17,100 voters? Were the 81.37 percent Tura electors and 73.78 percent Shillong voters adequately informed of the most important responsibility of an MP when they lined up before the EVMs?

The new spice in the election, social media was misused this time too. Fake news came to the fore. The TMC and the VPP were targets. Another element was the abuse of a couple of clergymen. Enthusiastic partymen rushed to condemn the offence. They did not do so for any love of the clergy but to appease the church members. Without justifying the uncivilised comments, the church and the leaders need not be holy cows. They are not above criticism. The public need not think that in spite of mistakes and misdeeds the church should never be criticised. Priests and pastors, who decide to talk to the press must be prepared to get some sticks too. They are capable of defending themselves. Politicians need not feel obliged to protect them.

Look at from any prism the elections in the state were educative in some ways.

'An enemy is just a person whose story you haven't heard yet'

(Old Jewish adage quoted by Palestinian Food Writer Yasmin Khan)

By Janet Hujon

It is evidently clear that 'passing the buck' and 'scapegoating' count as favourite pastimes in Meghalaya government circles. Following the unprovoked murder of Arjun Rai, cabinet minister A L Hek is reported to have said that 'criminal activities [are] giving the state a bad name... and promised to write to Union Home Minister Amit Shah to "do something about"'. (ST April 11th 2024). Now wouldn't that be an interesting conversation? Doesn't Meghalaya already have a bad name trashed by none other than Amit Shah himself who called the state the most corrupt in India? After that kind of condemnation anyone would hesitate to draw the same man's attention to a crime fuelled by blind racial bigotry, but not our representatives. Oh no, they are made of sterner stuff because surprise, surprise Sanbor Shullai also promised to do the same.

Then just to make sure the positive message is not lost on us, on April 16 the Shillong Times reports that Himalaya Shangliang claims 'the law-and-order situation is quite good despite the unnatural death of three non-tribal people in less than a month [and] he termed the murder of a labourer in Shillong as unfortunate' (italics mine). Unfortunate? Really? Do these people who speak on behalf of the government listen to themselves and actually think about the meaning of the words they use? A brutal act that can only be termed barbaric has deprived a family of a beloved husband and father. Surely that cannot be explained away as 'unfortunate'. It can only be described as tragic and unthinkable and should be condemned by any society calling itself civilised.

The word unfortunate smacks of condescension and cold indifference. Arjun Rai was a human being whose right to live as one was cruelly taken away from him. But because he was not a member of the tribal population and obviously in need of work which Meghalaya was able to offer - factors which must have made him feel insecure anyway - his death can be brushed off as unfortunate. Not that the hardships of our own people keep those elected to high office awake. The death of a rag picker buried under an avalanche of rubbish would probably, if noticed, be considered unfortunate. Maybe we can shrug that one off as being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

'Money makes the world go round... the world go round, if you happen to be rich [but] when you haven't any coal in the stove and you freeze in the winter... then life sucks. The disconnect between the rich and the poor - read the political class and the people - wryly captured in the old song, has long been obvious. Why else would we have to live with unreliable electricity and water provision, pot-holed roads, poisoned and 'disappeared' rivers, shrinking forests, rapacious mining, stinking drains that were once pristine streams? You name it we've got it. A regional government that does not look after its own should not be tolerated or respected by the Centre controlling the cashflow. Yet the unholy alliance prevails because of mutual back-scratching. No marks for guessing how the story ends - the fortunate get richer while the unfortunate pay dearly in hardship and with their lives. But what will happen when the Centre feels secure enough not to need the 'cooperation' of our representatives? Frightening thought indeed.

Yet after so many decades of self-serving government theft, the people of Meghalaya have become so used to this moral decline that they regard it as the norm which is an infuriating response. Accepting dishonesty and duplicity merely reinforces the government's disdainful belief that it is above the law and we are powerless. We take comfort in platitudes like 'Go with the flow,' de-

luding ourselves that we are wise and philosophical, but in effect admitting that we are onlookers and not participants in the public life of the state. We have surrendered even before the war has started. Note that those who fall back on these comforting words are usually not the ones struggling financially.

Sadly, there has only been the sludge of corruption and no flow. When the 'tyrannical practices' of bribery and bullying (Albert Thyrniang: ST April 18) flourish at all levels of administration then does that not encourage even more criminal elements to feel that the state is the perfect nursery for their growth? For can the pot call the kettle black if the body meant to establish law and order has also got its own hands in the till? It is a government's sense of right and wrong, its intolerance and punishment of wrongdoing that deters criminals, not some pie-in-the-sky \$10 billion economy. Who are you kidding Mr Conrad Sangma?

Today it is the hapless outsider who is intimidated and erased, who will it be tomorrow? Suspected extrajudicial killings carried out within the Khasi community have left behind rancorous and smarting hearts growing plump on communal arguments. This does not augur well for the state. How long can this hostility be contained? I know I am being unusually morbid but crimes like these, if left to fester and not brought to trial, will turn our beautiful Meghalaya into a Haiti of which it has been said that, 'The vacuum of democratically accountable political authority has created space for the gangs to expand their influence in the capital'... (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/08/haiti-crisis-gang-jailbreak-explained) Corrupt ministers, officials, businessmen intent only on personal gain currently share the spoils of racketeering while the state is left in tatters and uneasy (See CSWO's appeal: ST April 18th). One day other puppeteers all claiming to have their finger on the pulse of the jaithynriew will pull the strings, and who knows the chilling viciousness with which history will repeat itself. Haiti was once a favourite tourist destination - it is now a no-go area.

At this moment, I think of all who love these hills: the friends who have now left - Assamese, Bengalis, Punjabis, Tamils, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh; and those who chose to stay - the teachers who saw me through school, the college professors, the lawyers, the civil servants, all of whom contributed and still contribute to the intellectual and cultural life of this state by widening our horizons. Equally important to me were the Nepalis who were part of our Khasi household whose love, loyalty and hard work educated me in the meaning of trust and care. 'Sngewshngai' is a rich Khasi word which denotes feeling safe, accompanied and not alone. And that is how I felt with these kind people who were present throughout my childhood and beyond, who made easy the daily task of living. Their intangible gifts sustain me to this day. Can we say we 'sngewshngai' today? I wonder.

How and why have we lost sight of the greater good, of our need for one another, where difference does not lead to building walls of suspicion and contempt but to a recognition of the other in ourselves. Meghalaya will always be my homeland and I want no other. But while the natural beauty of our landscapes never fails to move me, while indigenous knowledge of the natural world is humbling, while I am reduced to delirious excitement every time a Khasi word reveals insights into Khasi thought and sensibility, I remain grateful that other languages, cultures and peoples have enabled this understanding. I would indeed be a poorer person if I failed to recognise that.

Letters to the Editor

Arrogance of the NPP

Editor,
The one thing that stood out during this Parliamentary election was the arrogance shown by the NPP and its government. When the NPP-led government was first formed in the last term, people, by and large, were happy with the alliance and expected changes to take place for the better. However, within a year, the public, including myself, became disillusioned! Now this government is corrupt to such an extent that the ill-gotten wealth accumulated by the politicians (and many bureaucrats) is no longer hidden but flaunted in grabbing prime estates, purchasing fancy cars and hosting out of this world wedding receptions, among others! But this time around, this government has gone a step further and added arrogance to corruption and general non-performance.

For decades we have observed the sudden spurt of road repairs in the major towns of the state in the months leading up to any Legislative or Parliamentary elections. But this time, this was starkly absent. The roads in most parts of Shillong were in a deplorable condition and remained so. Even the ones that were being repaired were left unfinished for weeks on end! The power supply remains erratic with power outages left unattended for hours on end (never happened like

this before). This only shows that the Government has not even bothered to cover up its non-performance in the earlier years - it has become so arrogant that it believes that its candidates will still win despite everything. Or is it that they were banking on their money power? Further, the tone of the speeches made by some of their top leaders was so slanderous and outright third class and smacked of arrogance.

The Congress (INC) party at the national level lost power not only on the plank of corruption but also because of the arrogance of many of its top leaders. The same was the fate at the state level, and I believe, for the same reasons.

I may be wrong, but I feel that the NPP is clinging on to straws in this election. It appears it has no chance in the Shillong Parliamentary seat. Its next biggest partner in the government, the UDP, is nowhere in the picture. Its turncoat behaviour just after the last Legislative elections (with whatever justifications) and its association with the NPP has left many disillusioned with it. It has again proved what I had publicly said before - it is a parasite party! It appears that the VPP will capture this seat and then it remains to be seen how this new party performs. Reports also suggest that the NPP will lose the Tura parliamentary seat.

People everywhere are gradually turning away from the NPP, not only because of its close association with the BJP, not only because of its

corruption, but because its leaders have become arrogant by their show of power and the damn-care attitude to its government's non-performance!

May I quote from proverbs 16:18 in the Bible: Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall!

Yours etc.,
Eugene D. Thomas
Shillong - 6

Understanding the roots of Hindu religion

Editor,
This refers to an article by Bhogtoram Mawroh (ST April 11, 2024), where he stated that Hinduism is foreign to India. I vociferously disagree with him in this context and wish to share my personal views on why Hinduism is deeply rooted in the Indian subcontinent, as compared to other religions and their places of origin.

Hinduism is a religion or spiritual practice with its deities and epic stories, which are completely woven into the fabric of Indian culture and its geographical landscape. Two of Hinduism's principal God-incarnate deities, Lord Krishna and Lord Rama, are believed to have been born in India, in Mathura and Ayodhya, respectively. These cities are the most sacred pilgrimage sites long before the existence of other religions and are integral to the religious life of millions of Hindus. The argument that Hinduism is foreign to India

will only hurt the sentiments of Hindu believers.

To understand the inappropriateness of claiming Hinduism is foreign to India, one can look at similar hypothetical scenarios with other major religions. For instance, imagine the revolt and hue and cry if some group of intellectuals claim that Christianity originated in Vatican City rather than in Judea, where Jesus was actually born. Or consider the confusion if some third forces begin teaching that Buddhism originated in Japan, despite the well-known facts that Buddhism began in Nepal, where Gautam Buddha was born, or in India, where he attained enlightenment. Such misinformation could significantly mislead and upset the followers and spiritual leaders alike. Even Japanese people would not agree with this.

I agree with Salil Grewal, who emphasized in his letter 'A Genetic Analysis of Aryan Invasion Theory' (ST April 17, 2024), that there is no reference whatsoever in the extensive ancient scriptures - such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata, 18 Puranas, and Yoga Vasistha - or in the vast body of folklore and tales, of Aryans invading or migrating to India from the West, or to claims that Hinduism did not originate in India. I will be happy if Bhogtoram can name a few Hindu scriptures written by sages from outside India.

As Christians believe in the words of Jesus Christ, St. Matthew, St. Peter, St. Andrew, and St. Anthony, Hindus place their trust in the

teachings of Lord Krishna, Shankaracharya, Ramanuja, Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo, rather than in those of Max Mueller or Tony Joseph, as far as their belief systems are concerned. I hope my Christian friends also will agree with this view. The Aryan Invasion Theory or Aryan Migration Theory, proposed in the 19th century by Max Mueller and linguistic scholar Sir William Jones, was a recent development. Before this, no such ideas existed. Why so? Despite resistance from spiritual leaders, this theory was forcefully imposed. It is unacceptable for a third party to rewrite the history of any race's belief system by distorting the real history. These are my personal observations.

Yours etc.,
Homnath Gautam,
Shillong-2

Construction of a new motorable road through Brookside complex

Editor,
It is entertaining to know that a new motorable road is being constructed from Ribong via Zig-Zag road to facilitate people's movements and reduce traffic congestion etc. No doubt the plan is good and in public interest, but what is shocking to know is that the route of the new motorable road is planned through Brookside complex, a century old heritage complex bearing memory of the great poet Laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

Very recently Mr Paul Lyngdoh Minister Arts & Culture Govt of Meghalaya had laid the foundation stone of the 'Tagore Cultural Complex' at Brookside to commemorate Tagore's memorial here. It is worth mentioning that for the last many years Brookside complex is regarded as one of the tourist spots in Shillong. Tourists from far and wide visit the complex as a tribute to Tagore's stay here and greatly appreciate the maintenance of the calm and quiet atmosphere and serenity of the Brookside Complex of which Tagore himself was mesmerized. During a critical political situation in 1919, Tagore came to Shillong for the first time to spend a few days in peace and solitude. The placidity and serenity of Brookside charmed him.

It is evident that the new motorable road allowing free movements of vehicles through the complex will destroy the eternal solitude and serene atmosphere of the hermitage, and it will become part of this hustle and bustle of city life, which will hurt the visitors who visit Brookside to enjoy the peace and solitude of the heritage complex.

I earnestly appeal to the concerned authority to kindly rethink the matter and to alter the route to exclude Brookside complex. This will be deeply appreciated by all those who love and respect Tagore.

Yours etc.,
Uma Purkayastha,
Shillong - 4

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

— Mahatma Gandhi

The Shillong Times

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It's the economy, stupid

WHEN it comes to information dissemination, too much dependence on official channels is fraught with danger. What the government wants to let the people know could be materially different from what the people ought to know. Governments indulge in the whitewashing of their image. In India, there evidently is an increasing emphasis on official statements, also for the fact that those in the media are neither willing to dig deep into official claims nor in a mood to challenge the establishment's claims. They choose to course through placid waters. The result is the 'manufacture' of a feel-good environment. The opposition has not been showing the nerve to catch the government on the wrong foot. On election eve, the tall claims of the Modi government must, thus, be taken with a pinch of salt.

An instance is the national economy. The growth has been pegged at 6.5 per cent the previous fiscal — a far cry from the about nine per cent record during the Manmohan term. Ever since Modi took charge, India never achieved impressive growth. In between came the Covid-19, on which is placed the blame for the deceleration of the economy; and we keep harping on it even now. While the establishment cites the growth of the nation into the world's fifth largest economy, fact is also that the groundwork for this was laid since the early 1990s. Views are that Modi's second term from 2019 has seen the lowest period of GDP growth since the early 1990s. Per capita income over the past 10 years "grew half as fast" compared to the UPA era; stock market returns are lower than in the previous decade; FDI levels are "the lowest" since the turn of the century; private capital investments "remain low" while the economy is driven by huge government investment principally in the infrastructure sector. Industrialisation suffered and job-creations fell majorly. Faced with a tight economic burden; household savings are at a 47-year-low, and private consumption growth is at the slowest level compared to the past 20 years, as per recorded comments in international media.

In normal circumstances, the scenario would be tailor-made for disaster. But, curiously, the people's disenchantment with the government is hardly evident. The reasons are not hard to find. More than half the population is fed on free or subsidized food grains, keeping base poverty indicators at tolerable levels. That keeps tempers under control and the pain of the poor is not erupting into the streets. The real growth here is for the billionaires' club or the one-million-strong super-rich populace comprising also the greedy politicians and corrupt bureaucrats. Modi's agencies selectively targeted the errant, almost entirely his political rivals, and let others "indulge."

Letters to the Editor

Why harass citizens unnecessarily?

Editor,
Through this letter I wish to draw the attention of the government authorities and also to sensitise the general public at large on the double taxation imposed on us citizens, especially those of us residing in urban localities like Laitumkhrak, Laban and others. Being from a municipal administered area, house owners and tenants indirectly are paying taxes for services like solid waste management, sanitation, property tax etc. to the Shillong Municipal Board (SMB) although we are deprived of an elected body for municipal administration. Secondly, there are also the dorbars within these areas that collect monthly fees for the same civic purposes and whenever an attempt is made to question their authority in such collections the only answer we get is that it has been decided by the dorbar. But citizens are left to self-manage when water supply is inadequate or when any government services become ineffective.

I would like to reiterate my point and ask the district administration to come clean on its notification on illegal collection of money by unregistered organisations; doesn't the dorbar shnong or dorbar dong fall under the same ambit? Who authorises the dorbar in a municipal area to collect monthly fees for purpose of civic services in the name of 'u synniang' shnong? It is also learnt that

receipts are being issued for such collections. Don't they also come under the ambit of GST? Moreover there are also fees for sale of land or when a NOC is issued for certain requirements. So much for a voluntary office!

Knowing those who were born and brought up in and around the areas and personally belonging to a family that had resided in one of the localities in Laitumkhrak for the last many decades this new dikat of monthly collection was seldom heard before. Therefore it is expected from the state government and the district administration to stop this broad daylight extortion in the name of locality administration by certain dorbars, especially in municipal areas which is illegal and not at all mandated by law. Since those who refuse to pay such monthly fees especially the tenants face unnecessary harassment when a residential certificate is required, for which fees for such are also charged separately. Is there anyone even taking note of such happenings? Or are we citizens without rights and privileges in our own state.

Yours etc.,
Ibalamon Kharnaor,
Shillong-1

Responses to letters

Editor,
Homnath Gautam's response to my assertion that the origin of Hinduism lay outside the subcontinent clearly shows that it is a very emotional topic for many, especially Hindus.

Environment: No one's baby -Meghalaya stares at a bleak future

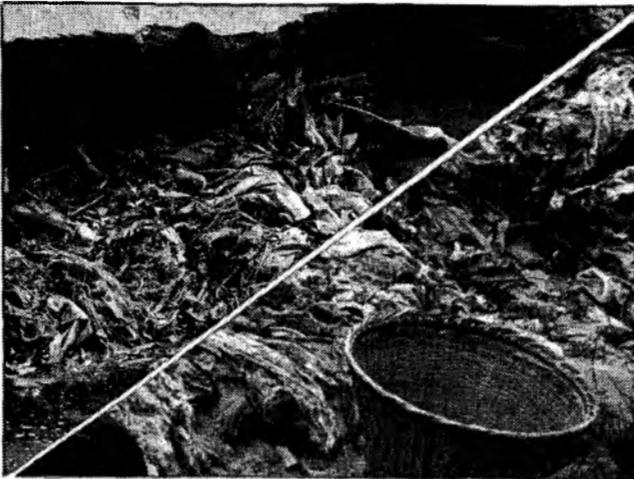
By Patricia Mukhim

The drum-beating and competition of who loves the jaitbynriew more is now over. In the month-long campaign for the Lok Sabha election not a single political party expressed any concern for the environment which is deteriorating by the day and all because of human activities caused by human greed and the absence of environmental governance. Sometimes one wonders what the Department of Environment and Forests actually does to conserve even the 4% of forests under its watch. Travel to any part of Meghalaya and you are greeted by trees being cut. During this season particularly, whole villages will cut down trees for firewood to last them a whole year. They however don't ever think of ever replacing one cut tree by planting another in its place. Their argument is that trees, especially pine will regenerate on their own. But even if they do grow back there is a cycle to their growth and if the rate of cutting down trees far exceeds their growing capacity then what we have is run-off of the top soil — a phenomenon common to Sohra where barren landscapes greet you.

What is worse however is the rampant quarrying that is creeping into hitherto virgin areas such as Mawkyntse and all the way to Syntung. The heavy trucks carrying boulders and sand have taken a toll on the road condition which is already sub-standard and constructed to last only one season. People see all this and they know that a few from among them are making a killing out of the quarrying and that the Dorbar Shnong has a hand in granting permission but they have been conditioned to look at themselves as powerless victims. Now let us see who are the actors in this environmental assault who are actually elected/selected to look after the greater good of the many and not assist in the personal wealth acquisition projects of a few. They are (1) the Government (both state and central) (2) the District Councils (3) the Dorbar Shnong (4) The Public

Role of the Government: The Government through the Department of Environment and Forests is supposed to enforce the rules that are intended to protect the environment. But there is scant concern shown to

the rampant deforestation even inside reserved forests. What's the point of those forest guards who are paid a salary? How many forest bandits have been arrested so far? Far from it. On the contrary even the reserved forests particularly in Garo Hills are being raided and trees felled and sold regularly without any fear of the law. Other than conserving forests the Department of Environment & Forests also



has a bounden duty to protect rivers since they are a critical eco-system of that environment which is all encompassing. But look at the state of our rivers today! They are in the worst mess we can think of. Those who don't see the state of the rivers are happy in their little artificial worlds. This writer belongs to the group Operation Clean-Up which has been consistently cleaning the Urukliar River near Nongmynsong every fortnight since 2019. Each time we enter the River we are greeted by mountains of garbage. There's no improvement at all and no one cares.

Role of the District Council: The District Councils are supposed to conserve our lands and forests and not just the customary practices. What is the point of the so-called "tradition" when the forests which are an integral part of that tradition and worship for the indigenous people are all but cleared off. The 10-year ban on tree felling from 1996-2006 imposed by the Supreme Court saw the forests of Meghalaya get a breather but now they are in a sorry state once the ban was lifted. Perhaps someone needs to take the case of

Meghalaya to the Supreme Court since the National Green Tribunal (NGT) seems to have failed miserably or allowed to fail. The District Councils have done precious little on anything to do with the environment, perhaps because they are more inclined to grant mining and quarrying permission on the plea that these are livelihoods. Do you create livelihoods by destroying the earth and poisoning even the air we

breath in because carbon dioxide can no longer be sequestered? The KHADC has seen the state of the rivers in Shillong city but has not lifted a finger to ensure that the shnongs which fall under their jurisdiction pull up their socks. Sometimes you are left to wonder as to the role of the ADCs and whether they have become an institution that is past its date.

The Dorbar Shnong: These are institutions that glorify tradition because it allows them the license to do whatever they want. These institutions function arbitrarily with each shnong having its own set of rules. You wonder what happened to the Village Administration Act. Since each shnong functions according to its own set of rules it is a laissez faire existence. They can grant quarrying and mining rights to whosoever pays them. They wield authority but don't demonstrate any responsibility at all. There are individuals who are self-appointed Rangbah Shnong functioning without any Sanad and right under the nose of the Syiem of Myliem and the KHADC. They grant licenses for opening up liquor shops right, left and

center and that is why Fourth Furlong has become an area where wine stores have proliferated — nearly 30 of them at last count in that small locality. But when it comes to keeping rivers and streams clean, no Dorbar Shnong shows any inclination to restrict garbage throwing into the rivers within their jurisdiction. Actually these Rangbah Shnong hardly show any concern for the state of the rivers flowing through their areas because they blame the other shnong for the garbage that floats into their territory. It is in view of this blame game that the Operation Clean-up group had suggested that wire meshes be placed across the rivers at the point where one locality ends and the other begins. This would then mean that each shnong would be responsible for keeping their part of the river clean. But one fails to understand why neither the KHADC nor the Government see reason in this proposal.

That said, what is going to befall us very soon is a catastrophe of landslides particularly along the Pynursla area.

The quarrying that is going on there to sell hundreds of truck-loads of boulders every single day is a warning that Meghalaya's hills are coming down one after another from one day to the next. Add to that the limestone mining right from the Nongtalang-Amlarem area where trucks loaded with limestone are parked by the side of the road — for several kilometres at a stretch awaiting their turn to enter the land customs station at Tamabil or Bholaganj. You begin to wonder 'how much is enough?' When will people realise that they are responsible for ushering in climate change faster than it could have happened if we didn't kill the forests and rivers through our greed and inhumanity?

And in a State whose forests are fast going to disappear we don't even have a single environment protection NGO. Everyone is busy protecting the jaitbynriew; let 'ka mariang' (environment) go to hell! As if the jaitbynriew can survive without ka mariang. Aren't humans part of the environment? Or are we a special species that will survive like some pygmies after Meghalaya turns into a desert?

Hinduism emerged and has attained its current shape after reacting to the other cultural movements around it that were taking place on the subcontinent. But its beginning lay elsewhere. Another analogy will suffice in this case. Today, Christianity is divided into two groups: Catholics and Protestants, the latter having originated during the 16th century in northern Europe. But that does not, again, mean that Christianity had its origins in Europe.

So what is to be done now? All of us in the subcontinent came from somewhere at some point in time. Some came early (like the Khasis), but some came later (Indo-Aryan-speaking people, the Mughals, etc.). Irrespective of our personal beliefs, these are well-established facts. As more research is done, we will get a clearer picture of our heritage. They will make the picture clearer, but they will not change it substantially. But now that we are all here, it is important that we think about how to build a more inclusive society where the rights of all religions, cultures, and traditions should be respected. After all, we cannot ask the Khasis to go back to East Asia or the Indo-Aryans to go back to Central Asia. That is not going to happen. But what can happen is to accept our past and try to build a better future.

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

with an overwhelming majority, will remain just that — dreams.

It is this disconcerting confrontation with popular discontent that seems to have goaded the prime minister into falling back on well-tested dog whistles against Muslims and those that he accuses of favouring them with an increased quotient of hate. In his speech in Banswara, Rajasthan, a state that gave the BJP a convincing victory in the assembly polls a few months ago but which seems to have cut them down to size in the April 19 round, he made the malicious allegation that the Congress was committed to giving a first share of national resources to Muslims whom he called 'infiltrators' and 'those who have more children'.

Quite untruthfully, he said that this had been promised by former Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh. He then went on to predict that if the Congress were voted to power, it would collect gold from the mangalsutras of Hindu women and give much of it to Muslims. Of course,

some Indian members of the corporate sector at home and abroad who welcome this clear enunciation by the BJP of its complete rejection of policies of redistribution of wealth and increased taxation of the rich to reduce inequality

and poverty. The CPI(M) and other opposition parties and concerned citizens have complained to the Election Commission of India about the prime minister's speeches which are violative of the Constitution, of laws against the promotion of enmity and hatred between groups of Indian citizens and of the model code of conduct currently in force. The EC's initial response was 'No comment' followed by a statement that it was 'studying' the complaints. Millions are watching the EC intently to see whether it will live up to its constitutional responsibilities. Indian democracy will be further weakened if it fails to do so. This is test case to see how far the Election Commission has been 'tamed'.

Will Modi's hate speeches bolster the falling fortunes of his party? Many election surveys have shown that Indian voters are extremely concerned about unemployment, poverty and corruption. If this is indeed so, his efforts will prove to be futile but condemnable nonetheless. (IPA Service)

PM's vicious speech against Muslims in poll campaign violates constitution

Democracy will be weakened if election commission fails to take any action against Modi

By P. Sudhir

The prime minister's vitriolic speech of April 21, delivered two days after the first phase of polling of the Lok Sabha elections, has been widely condemned both in India and abroad. The language and bigotry which he displayed to incite hatred against the Muslim community and the political parties whom he accused of favouring them were reminiscent of the rhetoric he employed in his speeches immediately after the Gujarat pogrom against Muslims that happened in 2002 when he was the chief minister. It is important to analyse why he has felt the need to revert to them once again so early in this election campaign.

102 seats went to the polls on April 19. Of these, 40 belong to Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry and the BJP will almost certainly draw a blank here. The rest of the seats are — 12 in Rajasthan, 8 in Uttar Pradesh, 6 in Madhya Pradesh, 5 each in Uttarakhand, Maharashtra and Assam, 4 in Bihar, 3 in West Bengal, 6 in North East, 1 in Chhattisgarh and 1 in Jammu & Kashmir. In the last election, the BJP swept to

victory in the states to which they belong. There are indications, however, that the BJP's performance this time in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Bihar was below par and, if this trend continues, BJP dreams of a third term

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"Our intention creates our reality."

— Wayne Dyer

The Shillong Times

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Weaponizing Grievance

TIME and again conflicts in Meghalaya and in Shillong city in particular have happened because some groups play on the emotions of people who feel cheated by the system and nurse a perpetual grouse against the government of the day. These grievance-soaked youth feel that they are losing the fight over unequal access to resources that are getting scarcer by the day even while the population of unemployed youth is growing phenomenally. Such youth can either grieve alone or join a group that speaks the same language of grievance and the overwhelming sense of deprivation, both of which need a bashing board. In the case of Meghalaya the non-tribal has been the convenient bashing board. The group that harnesses all those with grievances plays on the emotions of the youth and leverages their sense of powerlessness and inadequacy to compete on a level playing field, as a form of power.

So where is the emotion; the anger and the sense of helplessness directed at? As always that anger is directed at the weak and defenceless. And who are those wretched of the earth that bear the brunt of the misdirected grouse? They are the poor non-tribals who cannot pay for their safety. Non-tribals engaged in business are the cash cows that regularly pay these groups so that they are allowed to pursue their businesses unhindered. Those who pay the groups get back their money from the goods sold in Meghalaya to the ordinary citizen who in turn feels burdened by the cost of living in this state. No one dares to take the government which has failed to address unemployment and the poor educational outcomes in the state. Even those indulging in blatant corruption are allowed to do their dark deeds without hindrance. The groups also know that exercising their democratic right of putting the right sets of questions to those elected to resolve those grievances does not sell. Over decades the groups have learnt to mobilise the aggrieved to swell up their ranks. After all, there is strength in numbers. This cycle of violence has been allowed to carry on unabated like a torch handed down from one generation to the next.

The government has as always taken the easy way out and tread on eggshells as far as taking on these groups is concerned. Now they are so emboldened that even if a group member with criminal antecedents is arrested the government is told to back off. And the government is silently acquiescent. The question is when will this reign of terror end or will it ever end? Has the government constituted a team to study the composition of the groups; their sources of funding etc. Can any group take the law into their hands and continue to move around scot-free? What is the role of the State when the Constitution is being trampled ruthlessly?

Origins of the Khasis: The Puzzle Solved

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

I thank Glenn Kharkongor for his letter to the editor, for it allows us to discuss more about the Austro-asiatic speaking population to which the Khasi belong. Before we go into that, I would like to highlight a comment where he stated that I had said that "65,000 years ago, the Out of Africa migrants reached India... and then moved across the Indian subcontinent into southeast Asia, east Asia, and Australia," but I failed to identify them. He believes that they were probably the proto-Munda, the first settlers in India, from whom the Khasi later arose, about 10,000 years later. I am sorry to say, but I feel that Glenn Kharkongor hasn't read the book yet because that group, i.e., the Out of Africa migrants, has been identified with the Onge from Andaman and Nicobar Islands, who are what we can call the "First Indians". The following statement from the book has been reproduced for the benefit of all: We know that the Onge in the Andaman Islands are descendants of the original OoA (Out of Africa) migrants who may have mixed less with other groups.

Still, I do hope that Glenn Kharkongor reads the book because I believe it will answer many questions that will interest him. I do agree with him that these are complicated questions, but Tony Joseph has done a good job of trying to lucidly explain the history of the subcontinent in a manner that I feel would be really helpful to all. The book, however, did in fact acknowledge that more work needs to be done on the Austro-asiatic and Tibeto-Burma populations, more so on the latter. But there is no doubt that the argument made by Glenn Kharkongor about the westward origin of the Austroasiatic (including the Khasis) has been refuted, at least as evidence stands today. I am going to cite scientific articles published in peer-reviewed journals, one of which was actually cited in the book itself, but the others were not. Hopefully, this will help us understand something about our own history (i.e., the Khasis) and our impact on the subcontinent.

Austro-asiatic is the eighth largest language family in the world in terms of the number of native speakers and is spoken in southern parts of Asia—in Vietnam and Cambodia as the main official languages and in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Burma, Laos, Thailand, and Malaysia as the first language of many minority groups. Two major extant branches of the Austroasiatic language tree are Munda in eastern, northeastern, and central India and Khasi-Aslian, which

stretches from the Meghalaya in the northeast of the subcontinent to the Nicobars, Malay Peninsula, and Mekong Delta in Southeast Asia. For a long time, there was a debate about the origin of the language family: whether it arose in Southeast Asia and then spread to South Asia during the Neolithic period or whether it had pre-Neolithic origins in South Asia and then dispersed to the east.

Glenn Kharkongor argues for the second option, and it would be a reasonable position to take, but that has changed after Gyaneshwer Chaubey and his colleagues published their 2011 paper, "Population Genetic Structure in Indian Austroasiatic Speakers: The Role of Landscape Barriers and Sex-Specific Admixture" which finally laid the argument to rest. The paper found that the Indian Austroasiatic speakers have high frequencies of Y chromosome haplogroup O2a (occurs frequently both among Indian and southeast Asian Austroasiatic speakers), which was found to have significantly higher diversity and coalescent time (the time when the genetic lineages within a population shared a common ancestor) of 17–28 thousand years ago in Southeast Asia, strongly supporting Southeast Asian origin, followed by more recent dispersal(s) to India.

Then, in 2015, Xiaoming Zhang and his colleagues published their paper, "Y-chromosome diversity suggests southern origin and Paleolithic backwave migration of Austroasiatic speakers from eastern Asia to the Indian subcontinent", which built on the work done by Gyaneshwer Chaubey and colleagues in their 2011 paper. Their own analysis showed that the O2a1-M95 lineage (the genetic signature of the Austroasiatic population) initially originated in the southern part of eastern Asia (Southern China) among the Daic-speaking populations around 20–40 thousand years ago, followed by a southward dispersal to the heartland of Mainland Southeast Asia around 16 thousand years ago, and then a westward migration to India around 10 thousand years ago.

The paper by Xiaoming Zhang and colleagues also refers to the 2015 paper "A late Neolithic expansion of Y-chromosomal haplogroup O2a1-M95 from east to west" by Ganesh Prasad Arunkumar and colleagues, which also came to the same conclusion in that it also favored an east-to-west migration of Austroasiatic speakers. The only difference was the date

of the arrival of Austroasiatic speakers in India. Xiaoming Zhang and colleagues put that date at around 10,000 years ago, while Ganesh Prasad Arunkumar and colleagues have arrived at 5.7±0.3 thousand years ago for Laos, 5.2±0.6 thousand years ago for the North East (Khasi), and 4.3±0.2 thousand years ago for East India (Munda). Finally, there is the 2019 paper by Kai Kai Tette and colleagues, "The genetic legacy of continental scale admixture in Indian Austroasiatic speakers". They calculated the admixture between the South Asian (Dravidian speakers from Kerala) and South East Asian (Lao people from Laos) to be around 2000–3800 years ago, which is closer to the date given by Ganesh Prasad Arunkumar and colleagues. The admixture group here mentioned is the Munda.

The details are still being worked out, but there are certain points that have become very clear. Firstly, the debate regarding the origin of the Austroasiatic language family (along with its speakers) has been settled, with Southeast Asia being identified as the source from which the people and the language first arose. Secondly, following this, an east-west migration of the Austroasiatic language-speaking people has also been confirmed, with the date of arrival declining as one goes from east to west. Therefore, groups that are identified today with the Khasi would have arrived earlier, with some continuing into East India and coming into contact with the local native population (Dravidians), giving rise to the Munda population. The only issue that now remains is the dates, which ranged from 10,000 years ago to 6,000 years ago. Here, rice could play an important role in settling that debate.

Since rice cultivation has been closely associated with the Austroasiatic language, the dates must be connected to the arrival of the crop, particularly *Oryza sativa japonica*, into the subcontinent. On this point, there's a 2014 paper by Briana L. Gross and Zhijun Zhao titled "Archaeological and Genetic Insights into the Origins of Domesticated Rice" that argues that, while there seems to have been an independent origin for the cultivation of ancestral *Oryza sativa indica* or proto-*indica* rice taking place in the Ganges plains, the plant was completely domesticated only when the domesticated *japonica* arrived from China and hybridized with it around 4,000 years ago. The 2015 paper by Xiaoming Zhang and col-

leagues identified the original home of the Austroasiatic as southern China, which matches the drainage area of the Yangtze River, which was proposed by Briana L. Gross and Zhijun Zhao as being the location where domestication of *Oryza sativa japonica* happened around 8000 years ago. Rice has a very important ritual significance for the Khasi, and I recollect somewhere about a Pnar folktale of how rice was brought from the forest and domesticated. I will be grateful if any Pnar person were to confirm this folktale since I can't seem to find it anymore.

Here it will be useful to mention the 2013 paper "A Lexicostatistical Study of the Khasian Languages: Khasi, Pnar, Lynggam, and War" by K. S. Nagaraja, Paul Sidwell, and Simon Greenhill also give the date when War (the oldest of all Khasi languages) diverged from Palaung (closest relative to the Khasi language found today in Myanmar) to around 4000 years ago. These dates match those given by Ganesh Prasad Arunkumar and Kai Tette and the dates of hybridization of *Oryza sativa indica* with *Oryza sativa japonica* as given by Briana L. Gross and Zhijun Zhao. Tony Joseph also makes the same case in his book "The Early Indians: The Story of Our Ancestors and where they came from".

The search for more details about the story of the Austroasiatic people, i.e., Khasi and Munda, is not yet over. There is a need to understand more about how it happened and how it changed the subcontinent. What is clear, though, based on current evidence, is that they arrived quite early and much before the Indo-Aryan-speaking group from Central Asia, making them an indigenous group along with the Dravidians. The date is still important, though, because their arrival puts them very close to the mature period of the Harappan or Indus Valley civilization. It is interesting to imagine that some of the people (today identified with the Khasi and Munda) might have lived as residents in those urban centers or maybe stayed on the periphery, possibly trading with Harappans. It is such a fascinating speculation, and at the moment, it is only a speculation without any evidence. But what is clear is that when anyone in the subcontinent were to eat their rice as part of breakfast, lunch, and dinner, do remember to thank the Khasi and Munda for it.

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

Roles & Responsibilities of an MP

By VK Lyngdoh

In the article "The election that was and wasn't" by Albert Thyrniang (ST April 25, 2024) he mentioned that "Robertjune Kharjhrin offered to set up a monitoring body or MP Schemes and the proposal found no takers." He further stated, "After all the parties and candidates had their say, the public has still not understood the role of a Member of Parliament (MP)." I felt it important to explain the role and responsibilities of the MP in the Lok Sabha and the Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS).

Being an MP in India comes with several privileges and responsibilities. MPs actively participate in formulation and amendment of laws. They can propose bills, discuss them in Parliament, and contribute to shaping the legal framework of the country. MPs represent their constituencies in the Lok Sabha (House of the People). They voice concerns, aspirations, and needs of their constituents during parliamentary debates and discussions. MPs receive a salary, allowances, and other perks. The salary is subject to revision from time to time. Additionally, they have access to various allowances for travel, accommodation, and office expenses.

After serving a certain number of terms, MPs are eligible for pension. This ensures financial security after retirement. While performing their duties, MPs enjoy parliamentary immunity. This means they cannot be held legally accountable for their statements or actions within Parliament. MPs have access to government information, data, and reports. This keeps them informed about various issues affecting the nation. An MP can allocate funds from MPLADS which directly contributes to local development. Serving as an MP provides opportunities to network with other politicians, bureaucrats, and influential individuals. This enhances their influence and impact. MPs can use their position to advocate for specific causes, raise awareness, and drive positive change. They can champion issues related to education, healthcare, infrastructure and more. Being an MP brings social recognition and prestige. It is a position of authority and respect within the community but they also have significant responsibilities towards their constituents and the nation. They are accountable for their actions and decisions during their tenure in office.

The responsibilities of an MP are multifaceted. He/she actively engages in parliamentary debates on proposed bills, amendments, and other legislative matters. MPs vote on various issues, including budgetary allocations, constitutional amendments, and policy decisions. He/she represents the interests, concerns, and aspirations of the constituents in Lok Sabha. They advocate for policies and projects that benefit their constituencies. MPs scrutinize the functioning of the government, ensuring transparency and accountability. They can question ministers during Question Hour, seeking clarifications on government actions. They work to improve infrastructure, healthcare, education, and other essential services in their constituencies. MPs serve on various Committees, such as Standing Committee, Select Committees to examine bills, policies, and administrative matters. They raise awareness about social issues, promote public welfare, and address community concerns. They interact with constituents, attend public meetings, and address grievances, participate in budget discussions, ensuring that public funds are allocated appropriately. They scrutinize government spending and financial decisions. MPs contribute to policy formulation by suggesting reforms, improvements, and innovative solutions and discuss critical national issues affecting citizens. MPs engage in international forums, representing India's interests and building diplomatic ties. As far as constitutional duties are concerned, MPs participate in the electoral process in electing the President and Vice President of India. In

rare cases, MPs play a role in impeachment proceedings against constitutional functionaries. MPs must balance their duties to the nation, their party, and their constituents while upholding democratic values and principles.

The MPLADS formulated by the Government of India in December 1993, empowers MPs to 'recommend developmental work' in their constituencies. The focus is on "creating durable community assets" based on locally identified needs.

Initially, the MPLADS was administered by the Ministry of Rural Development. However, since October 1994 the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI) has overseen its functioning. Elected Members of Rajya Sabha representing an entire state can select works for implementation in one or more districts of their choice. Similarly, nominated Members of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha can also recommend works in any district across the country. MPs can recommend work up to Rs 25 lakh per year outside their constituency or state of election to promote national unity, harmony, and fraternity. Additionally, they can recommend funds for natural calamities up to Rs 25 lakhs within the state and up to Rs 1 crore nationally for severe calamities like tsunamis, major cyclones, and earthquakes. A State-level nodal department is chosen to supervise and monitor the scheme. This department coordinates with line departments and ensures effective implementation.

In implementation the district authorities play a crucial role. They sanction the works recommended by the MP and identify implementation agencies and user agencies. They oversee work on the ground, transfer assets to user agencies, and report back to the Ministry on the MPLADS status in the district. District Authorities are responsible for overall coordination and supervision of MPLADS projects at the district level. They inspect at least 10 percent of the work under implementation annually and involve MPs in project inspections where feasible. Since 2011-12 each MP is allocated Rs 5 crore per year, a significant increase from the initial allocation of Rs 5 lakhs in 1993-94 and Rs 2 crore in 1998-99. Funds are disbursed by the concerned Ministry; not directly to MPs. These funds are non-lapsable, meaning unutilized funds carry forward to the next year. MPs must allocate at least 15% of their funds for assets in areas inhabited by Scheduled Caste (SCs) and 7.5% for Scheduled Tribes (STs). Convergence with other schemes, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and the National Program for Development of Sports (KheLo India), is encouraged to create more durable assets.

Hence the MPLADS enables MPs to contribute to local development by recommending projects that address community needs and create lasting assets. There are specific restrictions on the types of projects that can be funded through MPLADS: MPs can recommend works such as infrastructure development, education, healthcare, sanitation, and other community-oriented projects. Funding for religious institutions is not permissible under MPLADS. Insofar as NGOs/Trusts/Societies is concerned, the recommending MP or their family members cannot hold office in the organisations receiving MPLADS funding. All infrastructure constructed with MPLADS funds becomes the property of the State/Union Territory Government. The beneficiary organisations are responsible for operating and maintaining the assets created. Using MPLADS for political mileage during elections is discouraged.

The MPLADS has a robust monitoring process to ensure effective utilization of funds and proper implementation of projects through the State-level Monitoring Committee which meets regularly with participation from MPs. During these meetings, the progress of MPLADS works is reviewed, and necessary action taken to address any issues.

Letters to the Editor

Playing with the law

Editor,
It is utterly disturbing to see the law and order situation in Shillong getting from bad to worse coupled with a faltering governance mechanism. In short, we are living in what could be best described as a failed state. The cycle of violence and selective targeting of unsuspecting innocent non-tribals is unjustified and violates the Constitutional guarantees of protection of human rights and human lives. The arrests of some members of the KSU is a good effort by the police department and they should be allowed to do their duty as mandated by the law without any political pressure. The audacity of the KSU to openly threaten an elected government amounts to playing with fire and contempt of the law. Had such threats to the government been issued in other states we all know what the consequences would be but here we should be ashamed that the state is so weak that it cannot even take any action. As legitimate citizens

we demand that the government brings in the rule of law and ensure that peace and development is ensured.

Yours etc.,
Emmanuel Warji
Shillong-3

BJP insulted the Lotus symbol

Editor,
The symbol of the BJP is the Lotus, which is regarded as a symbol of peace and prosperity. But the BJP does not have the qualities of the Lotus. It has also frequently incited violence in many states and used unfair coercion to harm other parties in exchange for votes.

On March 16, 2024, in Kalaktang constituency, West Kameng district, Arunachal Pradesh, large-scale group clashes broke out between supporters of the BJP's candidate and supporters of the sitting MP, and stones were thrown at each other, causing damage to many houses and vehicles and injuries to police officers. It was said that the local police would investigate the

matter, but later due to pressure from the BJP, the matter was dropped. On March 23, Nyabi Jini Dirchii, the candidate of the BJP in the Basar constituency of Arunachal Pradesh, publicly asked government officials to vote for her at an election meeting and threatened that, "BJP spies have been sent to identify those who disobey; please do not blame me if action is taken in the future." On April 8, when Lika Saya was campaigning in Piong Village, Namsai District, more than 30 of Lika Saya's cars were viciously attacked by the BJP and its supporters. Later, more than 200 people attacked them, causing vehicles to be damaged, people to be bleeding and injured, and tragic scenes to continue.

On April 20, the Congress Party accused the BJP of causing violence in the Bamon constituency, and the Arunachal Pradesh Democratic Party accused the Nari-Koyu Assembly constituency in Lower Siang District of being manipulated and occupied by BJP thugs. On April 21, the Election Commission of India suddenly announced that according to

reports submitted by election officials and the "Representation of the People Act" of 1951, eight polling stations in Arunachal Pradesh had to go for repoll because the ballot boxes were damaged or the venues were occupied. Why the sudden vote? What are the facts? Voters in the re-polling constituency gave us the answer: "Because the result of the voting indicated that the BJP candidate would not win so they smashed the ballot box that night." As a democratic country, voting should be free, fair and safe, and the voice of every voter should be heard. However, Arunachal Pradesh, which is ruled by the BJP, is not democratic.

Yours etc.,
Niten Munda,
E Sector, Itanagar

Religion as a political weapon

Editor,
When polarisation has become a political tool to be used as a red herring during the Lok Sabha election to take people's attention away

from the real issues, what Swami Gautamananda has said is timely and needs to be highlighted.

On Wednesday, after being anointed the 17th president of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, he said, "All religions are the same and God is one. People just call him by different names - Allah, Jesus, Bhagwan and Thakur. I believe I'm God's son, then automatically I will consider others my brothers and sisters. We will not consider anyone an outsider."

The monk rightly said, "That is what Thakur (Sri Ramakrishna) propagated through his life and teachings that the truth or ultimate reality is one." Sri Ramakrishna used to say, "Many opinions, many paths." This means that every religion has the same goal even though their paths are different. Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna practiced what he preached. He embraced Islam and religiously followed its path. Then again he embraced Christianity and did the same.

Those who have been suffering from religious paranoia need to understand that there will be no democracy without secularism. Secular-

ism prevents the conversion from a democracy into a theocracy.

Religion is a personal matter between God and a person. The path of secularism leads many countries to peace and prosperity. Whereas a number of countries, including some of our neighbours, have to suffer a lot for ignoring secularism. We must not deviate from such a proven path to success. Voters must ignore those political leaders who use religion to hide important issues like social security, employment, education and health care.

Hate not only makes voters oblivious to the real issues but also damages their health. Doctors say that those who indulge in hate can start to deal with some seriously negative effects in terms of their health and their social functioning.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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

Nature conservation works, we're getting better at it!

To work in nature conservation is to battle a headwind of bad news.

When the overwhelming picture indicates the natural world is in decline, is there any room for optimism? Well, our new global study has some good news: we provide the strongest evidence to date that nature conservation efforts are not only effective, but that when they do work, they often really work.

Trends in nature conservation tend to be measured in terms of "biodiversity" - that is, the variety among living organisms from genes to ecosystems. We treasure biodiversity not only for how it enriches society and culture, but also its underpinning of resilient, functioning ecosystems that are a foundation of the global economy.

However, it is well known that global biodiversity is decreasing, and has been for some time. Is anything we are doing to reverse this trend effective? As part of a team of researchers, we conducted the most comprehensive analysis yet of what happened when conservationists intervened in ecosystems. These were interventions of all types, all over the world. We found that conservation action is typically much better than doing nothing at all. The challenge now is to fund conservation on the scale needed to halt and reverse declines in biodiversity and give these proven methods the best chance of success.

First, the less good news

Globally, biodiversity is being depleted by human activities like habitat clearance, overharvesting, the introduction of invasive species and climate change.

To arrest its decline, people in various places have taken measures including creating protected areas, removing invasive species or restoring habitats, such as forests and wetlands. These efforts are interdependent with traditional stewardship of the world's richest biodiversity by indigenous people and local communities. And in 2022, governments adopted new global targets to halt and reverse biodiversity loss.

Our team, led by the conservation organisation Rewild, the universities of Oxford and Kent, and the International Union for the Conservation of

Nature, analysed the findings of 186 studies covering 665 trials of different conservation interventions globally over the course of a century.

We wanted to understand whether the outcomes of these conservation actions improved on what would have happened without any intervention.

Lots of studies have tried to compare the effects of conservation projects this way, but this is the first time such research has been combined in a single analysis to determine if conservation is working overall.

And now, the good news

What we found was extremely encouraging: conservation efforts work, and they work pretty much everywhere.

We found that conservation actions improved the state of biodiversity or slowed its decline in the majority of cases (66 per cent) compared with no action.

But more importantly, when conservation interventions work, we found that they are highly effective.

Examples from our far-reaching database included the management of invasive and problematic native predators on two of Florida's barrier islands, which resulted in an immediate and substantial improvement in the nesting success of loggerhead turtles and least terns.

In central African countries across the Congo basin, deforestation was 74 per cent lower in logging estates subject to a forest management plan versus those that weren't.

Protected areas and indigenous lands had significantly less deforestation and smaller fires in the Brazilian Amazon. Breeding Chinook salmon in captivity and releasing them boosted their natural population in the Salmon River basin of central Idaho with minimal side effects.

Where conservation actions did not recover or slow the decline of the species or ecosystems that they were targeting, there is an opportunity to learn why and refine the conservation methods. For example, in India, removing an invasive algae simply caused it to spread elsewhere. Conservationists can now try a different strategy that may be more successful, such as finding ways to halt the drift of fragments of algae.



In other cases, where conservation action did not clearly benefit the target, other native species benefited unintentionally. For example, seahorses were less numerous in protected sites off New South Wales in Australia because these marine protected areas increased the abundance of their predators, such as octopus. So, still a success of sorts. We also found that more recent conservation interventions tended to have more positive outcomes for biodiversity. This could mean modern conservation is getting more effective over time.

What comes next

If conservation generally works

but biodiversity is still declining, then simply put: we need to do more of it. Much more. While at the same time reducing the pressures we put on nature.

Over half of the world's GDP, almost USD 44 trillion (£35 trillion), is moderately or highly dependent on nature. According to previous studies, a comprehensive global conservation programme would require an investment of between USD 178 and USD 524 billion.

By comparison, in 2022 alone, subsidies for the production and use of fossil fuels - which are ultimately destructive to nature as fossil fuel burning is the leading cause of cli-

mate change - totalled USD 7 trillion globally. That is 13 times the upper estimate of what is needed annually to fund the protection and restoration of biodiversity. Today, just USD 121 billion is invested annually in conservation worldwide.

Potential funding priorities include more and better managed protected areas.

Consistent with other studies, we found that protected areas work very well on the whole; studies that highlight where protected areas are not working often cite ineffective management or inadequate resources. More large-scale investment in habitat restoration would also help according

to this new research.

Our study provides evidence that optimism for nature's recovery is not misplaced. Though biodiversity is declining, we have effective tools to conserve it - and they seem to be getting better over time.

The world's governments have committed to nature recovery. Now, we must invest in it. (*The Conversation*)

Authors are Joseph William Bull and Jake E. Bicknell, Associate Professor in Climate Change Biology, University of Oxford, and Senior Lecturer in Biodiversity Conservation, University of Kent respectively

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, APRIL 28, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'
Some mixed opportunities and developments would be there as Moon is forming an angle of 150 degrees with Jupiter on your solar return chart. You would be able to harness your abundant competency to take pioneering steps to advance your career. Your thought process can waver a little and lead to confusion in long term plans and may not give good results to the extent warranted. You can however establish some vital connections both professionally as well as in personally. A passing affair can be fortified and transformed into wedlock. You would see unexpected bonanza from past investments. There can be recovery of old dues as well. In general, you will relish good health during the period.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You express your social, romantic, and artistic qualities through an intellectual appreciation of art, cultural pursuits, and literature. Extra care should be exercised when it comes to writing letters, emails, making phone calls, and with communications in general. It would also be wise to double-check your work before finalizing it. You are slightly more defensive and certainly more protective than usual during this period. You might engage in arguments with someone close to you. Your attention to the logical world of reason will be a focus.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This phase brings love, harmony and entertainment in family and personal relations. You have the chance to shine, largely because you are projecting yourself with confidence and poise. You might explore various ways to increase personal funds, resulting in more than one avenue of monetary gain. Your mind is always active with new ideas for an increase of income. Communication and marketing may be a source of financial or material gain. It's a good time for rethinking and revising your personal goals and plans.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Your mind is especially inquisitive when learning or studying. Short trips, and other forms of communication and making connections, appeal strongly. You enjoy the challenge of tackling a variety of subjects. Talking, writing, and studying can be good ways to handle stress. It's a good time for rethinking and revising educational plans, paperwork, pending projects, and communications. You will be considerably more productive, healthy, and focused. You might be considering furthering your education and hobbies; it is a fabulous time to do so or to simply broaden your knowledge.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Romance and pleasure are highlighted right now. The flowing, expressive, and spontaneous energy surrounding you attracts like-minded people. You will have many ideas and plans and you might be inclined to scatter your energies as a result. Channelled well, this is a good time to sell your ideas to others, or to present your case. You may be especially busy running errands and communicating. More articulate than usual, you may also have a more assertive, self-centered, or provocative communication style at this time. As such, discussions may become heated, or they may escalate into arguments.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) The current planetary configuration helps to increase funds and bring monetary gains. You will have the ability to build up financial reserves and resources, for this placement can bring a good deal of success in all monetary pursuits. Your partnerships and relationships are also highlighted right now, and it's a time to compromise. Concentrate on truly listening to those close to you, and on playing a supportive role. Perhaps it's not a time to make a presentation or to come on strong to the world.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) An excellent week for money, career, and romance awaits you. Insecurities in your partnerships are brought to light now, and the best way to handle this is to understand that you need others instead of competing for the floor. You may be in a position wherein you are forced

to make a financial settlement or large outlay of cash and you may find that people lean on you for support, financial or otherwise. What makes you feel comfortable and secure needs to be balanced with attention to other people's needs and comfort levels.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This phase brings sincerity, cooperation and harmony in relationships. It's a great period for doing something entirely new and pioneering—to go solo in some area of your life. You are in a position to make an impression on others. You have presence and you project confidence. Your personal identity, appearance, outward behaviour, and self-expression come to the fore. Spontaneity of expression is what this transit is about. Increased energy and a renewed feeling of confidence is with you now, so take advantage.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) Responsibilities, seriousness and sensitivity in relations are the focus. There may be the need to revisit old, nagging issues regarding personal finances. Take this time to re-budget instead of making premature purchases. Hold off on decision-making regarding money. Instead, take the time to re-think your sources of income and how you spend. Put off finalizing anything important for the time being. You are most likely to express your social, romantic, and artistic qualities through an intellectual appreciation of art, cultural pursuits, and literature.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) There will be financial gains and profits from business. This can be a time of achievement, career advancement, and success in business. Your focus is on material affairs and comfort issues. Security is a driving force for you right now, and you might find that you are especially interested in accumulating possessions. What you have and what you don't have come into focus—what makes you feel comfortable, your sense of security, and what you value. This is a time of the year when personal finances and possessions receive maximum attention. Friends are there for you, and have your best interests at heart.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You have an increased interest in your own possessions. You are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort, status and luxury. Extra care should be exercised when it comes to writing letters, emails, making phone calls, and with all communications in general. Your mind is especially inquisitive, when learning. Short trips, and other forms of communication and making connections, appeal strongly. Romance is in the air and a joyous romantic affair is in the offing.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive pleasure from these activities. More professional freedom is likely to be experienced. This is a time of profitable productivity. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities in these areas of life. Your mind is especially inquisitive. Short trips and other forms of communication appeal strongly. You enjoy the challenge of tackling a variety of subjects. Talking, writing, and studying can be good ways to handle stress. It's a good time for rethinking and revising educational plans, paperwork, and ongoing projects.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) More loving and appreciative relationships with your children may also figure now. Your powers of attraction skyrocket. Yet, you are not aggressive in your approach to love. Instead, you attract more if you allow yourself to be pursued. Creative self-expression of any kind is favored at this time. You instinctively know how to place yourself in the best light in order to make a good impression on others. Any love affair begun now will be characterized by good cheer, having fun, and a fair share of emotions. You are patient, laborious and clever with material aspects and manage finances and business ventures with ingenuity and success.

Understanding childhood dementia

Childhood' and 'dementia' are two words we wish we didn't have to use together. But sadly, around 1,400 Australian children and young people live with currently untreatable childhood dementia.

Broadly speaking, childhood dementia is caused by any one of more than 100 rare genetic disorders. Although the causes differ from dementia acquired later in life, the progressive nature of the illness is the same.

Half of infants and children diagnosed with childhood dementia will not reach their tenth birthday, and most will die before turning 18.

Yet this devastating condition has lacked awareness, and importantly, the research attention needed to work towards treatments and a cure.

More about the causes

Most types of childhood dementia are caused by mutations (or mistakes) in our DNA. These mistakes lead to a range of rare genetic disorders, which in turn cause childhood dementia.

Two-thirds of childhood dementia disorders are caused by "inborn errors of metabolism". This means the metabolic pathways involved in the breakdown of carbohydrates, lipids, fatty acids and proteins in the body fail.

As a result, nerve pathways fail to function, neurons (nerve cells that send messages around the body) die, and progressive cognitive decline occurs.

What happens to children with childhood dementia?

Most children initially appear unaffected. But after a period of apparently normal development, children with childhood dementia progressively lose all previously acquired skills and abilities, such as talking, walking, learning, remembering and reasoning.

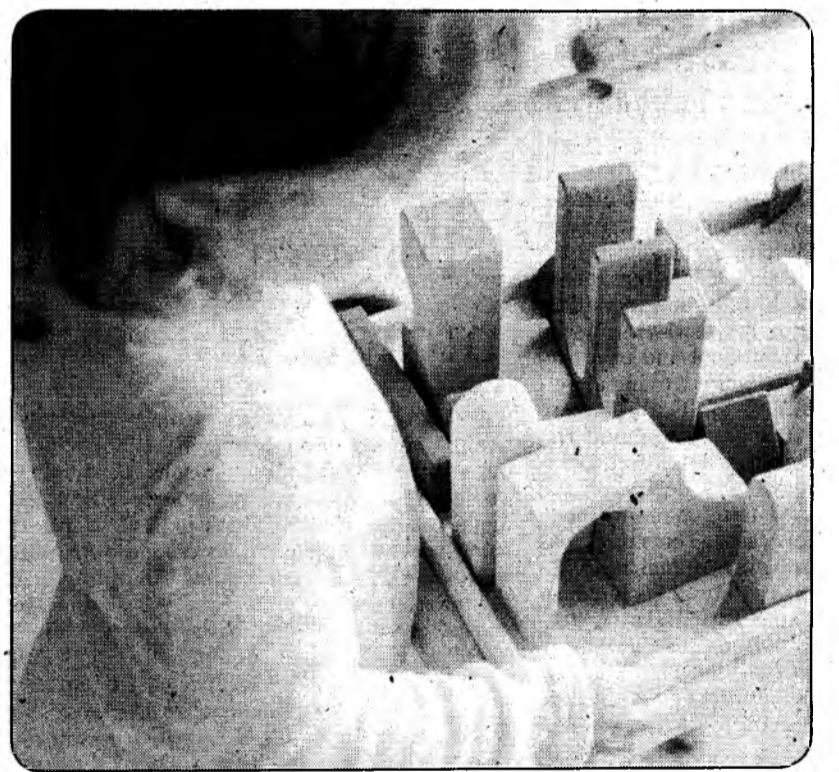
Childhood dementia also leads to significant changes in behaviour, such as aggression and hyperactivity.

Severe sleep disturbance is common and vision and hearing can also be affected. Many children have seizures.

The age when symptoms start can vary, depending partly on the particular genetic disorder causing the dementia, but the average is around two years old. The symptoms are caused by significant, progressive brain damage.

Are there any treatments available?

Childhood dementia treatments



currently under evaluation or approved are for a very limited number of disorders, and are only available in some parts of the world.

These include gene replacement, gene-modified cell therapy and protein or enzyme replacement therapy.

Enzyme replacement therapy is available in Australia for one form of childhood dementia. These therapies attempt to "fix" the problems causing the disease, and have shown promising results.

Other experimental therapies include ones that target faulty protein production or reduce inflammation in the brain.

Research attention is lacking

Death rates for Australian children with cancer nearly halved between 1997 and 2017 thanks to research that has enabled the development of multiple treatments. But over recent decades, nothing has changed for children with dementia.

In 2017-2023, research for childhood cancer received over four times more funding per patient compared to funding for childhood dementia. This is despite childhood dementia causing a similar number of deaths each year as childhood cancer.

The success for childhood cancer sufferers in recent decades demonstrates how adequately funding medical research can lead to improvements in patient outcomes.

Another bottleneck for childhood dementia patients in Australia is the lack of access to clinical trials. An analysis published in March this year showed that in December 2023, only two clinical trials were recruiting patients with childhood dementia in Australia.

Worldwide however, 54 trials were recruiting, meaning Australian patients and their families are left watching patients in other parts of the world receive potentially life-saving treatments, with no recourse themselves.

That said, we've seen a slowing in the establishment of clinical trials for childhood dementia across the world in recent years.

In addition, we know from consultation with families that current care and support systems are not meeting the needs of children with dementia and their families.

New research

Recently, we were awarded new funding for our research on childhood dementia.

This will help us continue and expand studies that seek to develop lifesaving treatments.

More broadly, we need to see increased funding in Australia and around the world for research to develop and translate treatments for the broad spectrum of childhood dementia conditions. (*The Conversation*)

"There is a joy in sorrow which none but a mourner can know."

—Jean Paul

The Shillong Times

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Role of regionalists

REGIONAL parties are overtly demonstrating their clout in the present parliament polls in several states, even as the larger Hindi belt states remain firmly with the BJP. Compared to 2019 when the last general elections were held, their sway has not been diminished. The southern states are either with the regional parties or the Congress. The eastern states are also with regional chieftains and so are the northeastern states for the most part. Put together, they can form a formidable combination and they are sure to win a substantial number of Lok Sabha seats. If the Congress manages to win around 100 seats, mainly from the South, most regional parties are more likely to ally with it, and not with the BJP, in case no party gets a majority in parliament. This is for the reason that the Congress will be more accommodating in the INDIA format, unlike the BJP that seeks to dominate the political spectrum at the expense of others.

Yet, fact is also that the BJP failed miserably in achieving its goal of a Congress-mukht Bharat. Examples are the way the tricolour party won assembly polls in Karnataka, where it ousted the BJP from power and in Telangana where it outwitted the BRS. The BJP is part of a coalition government in Maharashtra where it had earlier lost power and then allowed the rebel Shiv Sena to run the present government from the front. The saffron party allowed itself to play second fiddle to the Sena -- a far cry from the previous term when a BJP chief minister ran the state's affairs.

To the BJP's credit, it won back the support of Bihar's Nitish Kumar, but this in itself is no guarantee that it can sweep the polls in the state this time. In West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee remains a formidable figure and so is Naveen Patnaik in Odisha. In the national capital Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal has been jailed, but his AAP in alliance with the Congress is bound to give the BJP a run for its money. Among the regional satraps, MK Stalin is bound to stick with the INDIA alliance. In Kerala, the Congress is believed to do well in the polls just as it did in 2019. In the northeast, Assam may still be a safe bet for the BJP. The regional parties across the sister states have a history of allying with those in power in Delhi, so as to draw benefits for the region and for other reasons too. Neither the Congress nor the BJP can be sure of their support in a changed scenario. All of these would mean that the future post June 4 is unpredictable. It could be anybody's game.

U Ran Niangti and how Khanapara got its name

By HH Mohrmen

Recently, there arose a controversy over the name of a place located on the Meghalaya-Assam border. It was reported in the media that a certain organization submitted a memorandum to the Chief Executive Member of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council demanding the changing of the name of the town Khanapara. It was argued that since Khanapara is not a local name, the KHADC should change it to a local one. Fortunately, the Jaintias have a rich tradition of oral narratives, one of which connects with the name of this particular town.

The Jaintias have many stories about their royalty who once lived in the plains in a place called Jaftiapur and the wars they fought, and there's one about a man named U Ran Niangti. Interestingly, U Ran's story is a tragic one that later turned him into a hero of the time. U Ran Niangti was an ordinary man who worked as a porter, carrying commodities from the market in the plains to the villages located in the hills. He earned his livelihood delivering goods to and from Jowai to Jaftiapur, which was a very prominent market then, and the profession was known as "kit bhari." Jaftiapur was the most popular market at that time, connected to the hills by an old stone path known as the royal path. U Ran, along with other porters and traders, traversed from Jaftiapur to Jowai, deciding to take rest at a certain collection of monoliths called "Mawshong shongthait." After they had rested and relieved themselves, before they resumed their journey, it was found that a certain trader had lost his bag full of potatoes.

Ran, who carried other commodities, was part of the entourage and was accused of stealing the missing potatoes. He pleaded with all those present that he did not steal the consignment, but the owner of the potatoes was not convinced. He was taken to Jaftiapur and handed over to the officers in the royal court. He was arrested, and a trial was conducted and arrested for a crime he did not commit.

In prison, while serving his sentence, a war broke out, and the enemy attacked the Jaintia kingdom, putting the country in grave danger. The king was in trouble because he had lost almost all

his capable military officers, and he was about to be defeated. In such a situation, U Ran Niangti, from his prison cell, requested the king to allow him to fight against the enemy. But U Ran was just a common man, with no exposure to any kind of training.

How could the king trust a prisoner with no military experience to take on the enemy? At the same time, the king did not have many options as he continued to lose his military officers in the fight. The kingdom had reached such a point that whatever help came from whichever corner was welcomed with open arms. But U Ran had to prove himself, at least to the king, that he was capable of leading a military expedition. He could not just get out of prison, seize a sword, and take on the enemy; it just did not work like that.

"The king decided to offer three trials to see if U Ran was really fit and ready to go to war. The palace was situated near the market and was surrounded by a collection of huge monoliths. In front of the palace, there was an empty space used by the king and his subjects to offer sacrifices during Durga puja."

The king decided to conduct a trial to see if Ran really had the capability, as he claimed, to defeat the enemy. The king had to satisfy himself if this common man was really up to the mark and could take on the enemy and win the war for the country. The king decided to offer three trials to see if U Ran was really fit and ready to go to war. The palace was situated near the market and was surrounded by a collection of huge monoliths. In front of the palace, there was an empty space used by the king and his subjects to offer sacrifices during Durga puja. A big crowd had gathered around the ground to witness the trial of strength that the king had put to test U Ran.

In the first trial, he was given a sword and asked to cut a huge banana tree, and Ran did it with ease. The second trial of strength was when a large tree trunk was brought to the court, and he was able to cut it without much effort. Finally, the king asked his men to bring a banana tree to the court for

which translates to: "May it be known to all, or may we tell others, that the territory of the Jaintia kingdom extended to this point." Till today, the Pnar believe that Khanapara near Guwahati derived its name from this incident during the reign of the Jaftia king.

U Ran Niangti is the story of a common man whom circumstances compelled to request the king to allow him to serve his country, and in doing so, he not only helped win the battle for his country but also made a name for himself. But this is not the only important outcome of the unfortunate incident in the life of U Ran Niangti. Since he was arrested for stealing potatoes, a crime he did not commit, Ran swore that he and his descendants shall never eat potatoes again. Since then, it has been a taboo for anyone from the Niangti clan to eat potatoes, and the taboo continues among the members of the clan to this day.

Since Jaftiapur was the most popular market in the kingdom, there are many stories about people from the hills visiting Jaftiapur to trade as well as for buying essential commodities from the market. Jaftiapur was not only the most important trade center for the highlanders and people of the plain areas, but what is more important is that it was the seat of the kingdom then.

The Jaftia kingdom, with its capital in Jaftiapur, was once a very strong and flourishing kingdom which not only issued numerous coins but also had cannons as part of their armoury. Traditions are not clear if the battle that the Jaftias fought was against the Ahoms, but the Jaintia Buranji recorded that the two had a very good relationship with each other. In most of the letters exchanged between the Jaftia and the Ahoms, the expressions which states, "Gurgoan and Jayantia have existed not as two families but one. Even if the Sun rises in the west instead of the east, even if the Lohit flows towards the east, or even if the egret and the crow change their hues, our bond of friendship with your Swargadeo will never cease." Could the conflict have been between the Ahoms and the Jaintias? That is the question.

The story has it that U Ran's military expedition not only defeated the enemy but also forced them to retreat while he invaded their kingdom. While he won over territories, he also attached much of their territories to the Jaintia kingdom. By the time he reached a place near Guwahati, he was tired, and it is said that because of the sheer numbers of enemies he killed in the battlefield, his blood-stained sword stuck to his hand. He tried to remove it from his hand, but he was not successful. Finally, he saw a huge banyan tree and struck the sword as hard as he could on the tree trunk, and finally, he was able to free his hand from the sword. The sword was stuck so deep that it was fixed to the tree trunk. While releasing his hand from the sword, which was stuck to the tree, Ran uttered the famous words: "Iow ioh u khanapara wa u pud u sam ka ri Jaftia poi u hadooch heini,"

crowd cheered, and the king asked that he be armoured and allowed to lead the army against the enemy.

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(This story was taken from the columnist's thesis titled: "Cultural History of Jaintia Hills in Stories, Stones, and Traditions.")

What if BJP wins 370 and INDI-Alliance lodges 740 complaints...

After EVM verdict, parties can meddle with results process

By Sushil Kutty

"Supreme Court dismisses all petitions seeking 100% verification of VVPAT slip," did not come as a shock. By the time the top court declared the verdict "reserved", the jolt was a spent force. The big news was the Electronic Voting Machine was here to stay and the top court broke the pen on the ballot paper with a hanged till death verdict.

All petitions asking for 100 percent verification of votes cast on EVMs via Verifiable Paper Audit Trails were dismissed. The court noted that "blindly distrusting the poll process" was a fool's errand and would lead to "unwarranted suspicion."

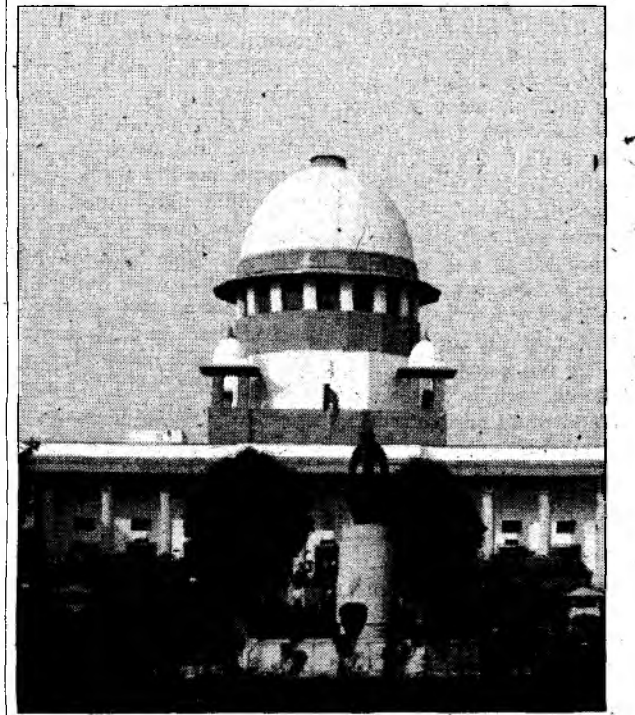
Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta pronounced judgment even as EVMs did yeomen service in the second phase of polling on April 26 across 88 parliamentary constituencies in 13 states.

Should we call this a triumph of democracy? Justice Khanna stood out. Against ballot paper voting. Against complete EVM-VVPAT

The Election Commission of India might have to wait for at least 7 days, the time given to register complaints, before stating emphatically if this or that party/formation won the elections.

Till then, the country will be on tenterhook and distrust will have a field day. Meaning if a big number of complaints are registered by 2nd and 3rd ranked candidates, the results declaration process will be derailed. And even after the engineers have checked the burnt memory, doubts will remain as to whether Modi won or Rahul Gandhi lost. The credibility of the results will be in tatters. All hypothetical, of course, but cannot be ruled out. Casting doubts on the EVM is not the only way to hijack the election process. Justices Dipankar Datta and Sanjiv Khanna have provided another means to question election results and persist with it.

If all the '370' seats that Modi's party BJP wins is disputed, the legitimacy of Modi's victory can be



questioned. All it requires is for a bunch of "candidates 2 and 3" to lodge complaints against dubious EVMs and demand they be checked by company engineers.

They can, if they want, ride roughshod over election results and Justices Khanna said Datta would be mute spectators. Expenses for verification, which have to be borne by the complaining candidate, would hardly be a deterrent as politicians are usually all well-off people.

Even erstwhile 'Chaiwala', Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is a 'crorepati' many times over, a rags-to-riches story nobody hardly talks about; his wardrobe itself costing a King's ransom. So funds will not be an excuse for not lodging complaints. And if checking reveals EVM tampering, the process worked.

So, once the symbol loading process in the EVM is completed, the Symbol loading units will be sealed and stored in containers. Candidates and representatives will sign on the sealed containers to be kept in store rooms with the EVMs at least for 45 days after the results are declared. In the meantime, 2nd and 3rd ranked candidates can have a go at the results declared if they or their parties want it.

The thing to note is if the Modi party BJP wins 370 seats, opposition INDI-Alliance will be able to lodge complaints and demand EVM checking, but, if INDI-Alliance wins 300 seats, Modi's party BJP will not be able to lodge complaints without facing credibility problems because the BJP has been all along saying that EVMs are flawless and should be trusted with Modi's life. (IPA Service)

On receiving a written complaint, the burnt memory in the microcontroller EVM will be scrutinized by company engineers if 2nd and 3rd ranked candidates demand this within 7 days of the declaration of results. It should be a written request, which shouldn't pose a problem. But problems will surface if losing candidates flood the Election Commission with complaints galore. When, if the BJP wins 370 seats, and 370 2nd ranking candidates, bolstered by 370 3rd ranking candidates, file individual complaints each and demand that the "culprit EVM" be checked and declared "clean".

The process will involve checking the burnt memory semicontroller in 5 percent of the EVMs. That is, the Control Unit, Ballot Unit, and the VVPAT per assembly constituency per parliamentary constituency, shall have to be checked and verified by engineers from the EVM manufacturing company.

Can this lead to delays in Lok Sabha and government formation? What if checking reveals numerous cases of EVM tampering?

Letters to the Editor

Faith imbued with scientific temper

Editor

The recent discourse (in your Letters section) on the Aryan invasion or migration theory (as an explanation of Hinduism's origin outside the Indian subcontinent) has been interesting -- with Dr Bhogtoram Mawroh supporting this theory, and practitioners, like Homnath Gautam and Salil Gwali objecting. To his credit, Dr Mawroh cited not just western scholars but those from other parts of the world as well. While I admire his scientific rigour -- and Mr. Gautam and Gwali for their loyalty to their faith -- both approaches merit scrutiny.

In Dr Mawroh's most recent letter (TST, Apr 25, 2024), he speaks of the influence of Buddhism on Hinduism. Indeed, Buddhism may have influenced and cleansed Hinduism. But surely such influence was mutual -- not one-sided? Religions often cleanse one another. This may have been the relationship between the ordinary levels of Hinduism and Buddhism. But at their highest levels of pure mysticism, no cleansing is ever necessary.

For, they are each as glorious, as is the summit of Christian mysticism.

Western intellectuals have long subordinated Hinduism to Buddhism, perhaps because Buddhist non-theism, although faith-based, matches their own cynical nihilism. But the prejudice against Hinduism is worse at the popular level, where the world's oldest religion is often reduced to just two things -- the caste system and the proverbial cow!

But that said, the problems lie on both sides (western and Indian) and the difference between the two perspectives lies in their different methods of knowing. While the west uses the scientific method, rooted in external, fact-based truth, Indians can sometimes veer to the other extreme of a subjective inwardness that neglects facts altogether. It is possible to be critical of both approaches. Facts, on their own, say little, until interpreted by reasoning. Already an imperfect science, history becomes even more fallible, when the historian projects his own mind onto the facts. Laden with a soul-searing cynicism, the western mind sees what it wants to see and interprets facts by projecting its own nihilism onto these facts. One example is the

Shiva Lingam, which western intellectuals interpreted as a phallic symbol. Swami Vivekananda protested and corrected this misperception -- but without calling it what it was -- insulting. This is just one example of objectionable subjectivity (disguised as objectivity) in the western scholar's approach to India. Yet, not for a minute does this mean that western scholarship and objectivity are irrelevant to India.

While I admire the west's scepticism, which stems from its scientific genius, I do not admire its cynicism. Almost the only way to overcome this cynicism is by returning to the higher faith that illumines reason -- because faith draws from interior Truth, which Gandhi and St. Augustine, both identified with God. This inner Truth is superior to fact-based exterior truth. A faith-based interpretation of historical facts could lead to a very different conclusion. Here I mean true faith in God -- not the blind faith that comes from a narcissistic love for one's own religious identity.

At the other extreme, we have the Indian tendency to neglect external truth and facts altogether -- by taking the Hindu scriptures literally. No scripture is meant

to be taken literally. As to the point (made by Salil Gwali and Homnath Gautam) -- that the great Hindu scriptures make no mention of the Aryan migration theory -- most likely this is so because scriptures like the Upanishads are laser-sharp in their unwavering focus on how to reach God and experience enlightenment. Hence, the running motif of the Upanishadic great sayings (Mahavakyas) is, "I am Brahman (God)" -- a triumphant cry that has long fascinated the west. Compared to this living and luminous mysticism, historical issues like whether or not the Aryan migration took place, pale into insignificance. What makes India unique is not whether or not Hinduism originated there, but that this ancient civilization has never swerved from its unwavering focus on self-realization. As if to prove this point, the highest India repeatedly gives birth to great sages, saints, and spiritual masters -- from all religious backgrounds (not just Hinduism).

This difference between western and Indian methods of knowing, gets elevated to the highest level, when comparing a scholar like Max Mueller, to a great master

like Swami Vivekananda. Max Mueller had a profound love for India -- an enviable love that impressed Swami Vivekananda, who met him in person. Yet, despite this love, Max Mueller may not have overcome the religious and theological cynicism so characteristic of modern western intellectuals (even theologians). If Max Mueller used research methods and facts, which he then interpreted -- Swami Vivekananda used meditation to derive his insight-laden deep and penetrating objectivity that far surpasses scientific objectivity. Unlike Max Mueller, Swami Vivekananda used yogic omniscience and divination to make his pronouncements on the historical past.

The relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism deserves a careful sifting of facts, to be interpreted by a most discerning, unbiased, and truthful eye. If Jesus was Jewish to start with, then the Buddha was Hindu. Both gave us great new religions, but without vilifying their roots in the older religions. Moreover, the theological contrast between Hinduism and Buddhism is a fascinating testament to the kind of religious plurality and democracy that must have

prevailed at the time of the Buddha. In a way, Buddhism is a total theological converse of Hinduism. Nevertheless, great Hindus have always admired the Buddha, quite as they have admired Christ. Thus, Swami Vivekananda was a great admirer of both the Buddha and Christ. But western scholars -- whether Christian or secular -- rarely understand this kind of noble catholicity and religious universalism, which can arise only from a genuine love for God.

If cynicism is the pitfall of the western mind, then religious credulity is that of the Indian mind. Indeed, the danger of taking the scriptures literally still lingers and almost the only way to fight this unhealthy inwardness, is to tie the Indian mind to external facts.

My larger point is this -- if the west needs India's glorious inwardness and faith, then India needs the scientific spirit and ordinary objectivity of the west.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

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

"No man is rich enough to buy back his past."

— Oscar Wilde

The Shillong Times

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Teachers in active politics

MEGHALAYA has a history of teachers from colleges and universities contesting elections, winning and then returning to teaching when they lose the next election. Debates on this issue are ongoing. If the goal of education is to build minds that are questioning and capable of critical thinking and asking the right questions, would having a teacher with an allegiance to a particular political party allow objective discussions in the classroom? Of course, schools, colleges, universities should discuss politics and students should be able to express their views fearlessly for or against any political party, based on their own understanding of what the party ideology is and what its vision for the state and the country is. But education must also keep itself above political conflicts and partisan views. When a teacher/professor is a member of political party, that precludes a free and frank discussion about the political party he/she belongs to and about other political parties. Students know better than to even begin a discussion on politics when they know their teacher is wedded to a particular ideology and will not entertain any dissenting views.

Education is a dynamic process which fosters human capabilities. It can only flourish in an ecosystem that guarantees overall freedom to think, act and speak within the classroom and outside it, keeping in mind the rules and regulations that drive the institution. The socio-economic development of any country is strongly linked to education since education ensures optimal utilization of resources through development of the human capital. Education is the ultimate liberator, empowering people to make personal, social and political choices.

The teacher is the most important resource in an education system and the main determinant of the quality and effectiveness of its results. The system should strive to attract qualified people to the profession and to provide them the best working conditions where institutional autonomy and academic freedom have fee play.

In a 2012 ruling, the Bombay High Court observed that a government servant or person in employment in an educational institution cannot have any political association or connection as long as he is in service. They observed that if an employee was actively associated with a political organization, his political ideas may influence his teaching. Observing that a teacher's role is to impart education to students in an impartial manner, the judges said the suspension order couldn't be struck down by holding that the teacher was free to continue his political activities along with his teaching job. "So far as education is concerned, it should be kept away from politics and educational field should not be allowed to be polluted in any manner by bringing in politics. There are some institutions, which are required to be kept away from politics and academic institution is one of such institutions," Justices P B Majumdar and Justice P B Varale of the Nagpur bench of Bombay High Court observed while dismissing the petition seeking quashing of the suspension order. The Meghalaya High Court thinks differently! The ruling of the Supreme Court on this matter is awaited!

Letters to the Editor

From verdant to barren: Meghalaya's environmental horror

Editor, In Meghalaya, where the verdant hills once whispered country tales, the narrative is unfortunately changing into a terrifying environmental horror story. It's a tale of how people, in their relentless pursuit of making quick money, hack away at the very bosom of the earth's crust. Senior journalist Patricia Mukhim in her article last Friday, "Environment: No one's baby - Meghalaya stares at a bleak future," aptly portrays not just neglect but also a deliberate "destruction" of Mother Nature. It is a grim reality that should deeply concern every citizen when climate change is rearing its ugly head. Well, if we listen carefully, we might hear the hills around quietly weeping under the assault of chainsaws, bulldozers, and fearsome detonators.

Look at how those tall and lush green (pine) trees that once covered Meghalaya's landscapes are nearly gone. Places where trees stood just a year ago are being chopped down to make way for new quarries. Stone and sand mining has become a godsend opportunity. Countless trucks of stone and sand

have been extracted, with the buyers not from the home state but from Bangladesh. It's like the "transplantation" of a vital organ, where the recipient is a foreign land! Thus, whether we agree or not, we are making our state weaker and paler.

As if tearing the earth open wasn't enough, the state's rivers, streams, and drains are treated like dumpsters—nauseating eyesores. The water bodies, once clear and pristine, are now choked with everything from plastic bottles and sacks to old, unwanted furniture and broken appliances and all nasty things. It's as if the urban residents have adopted a new mantra: "If it floats, it ships." But where to? Does it not result in the accumulation of debris in the ailing Umiyam Lake? Are we not aware that the lake that illuminates Shillong City can also push us into the darkness of despondency?

With the environment being treated as if it were nobody's child, as highlighted by Patricia Mukhim, the state is likely facing an extremely dark future. Hardly any leaders spoke about protecting the environment in their election campaigns, a serious concern in itself. Nor did the electorate bother at all. How insensitive it is that we simply undermine the sustained efforts made by the members of OCU to clean up mountains of garbage on the riverbanks?

No Beginning No End

The "Indus Valley Civilisation" is the oldest civilisation known to have existed in our subcontinent. Infact, it is one of the oldest in the world. Its antiquity is confirmed based on scientific studies of the ruins and various artefacts discovered. Archaeologists date it to C 3000BC - 1700BC. This civilisation mysteriously disappeared and there is ongoing research to ascertain the cause, but despite several theories nothing is conclusive as yet. A great flood or climatic event is widely believed to be the cause of its obliteration. After a period of around 200 years a new age began slightly north of the ruins of Harappa, which can be referred to as the "Vedic Age" dated to 1500BC - 600BC. This was a period in which a people, incorrectly called the "Aryans" are said to have brought the Sanskrit language and sacred beliefs with them from the land below the Caspian Sea. This theory was mostly propounded by western scholars in the last century and continues to be used conveniently by sinister minds looking to cripple the Soul of India, despite the universal acceptance by scholars today that there was never really a distinct people or a pure ethnic group that could be called "Aryan". In fact, there is no mention of the word 'Aryan' in the 10,000 plus verses of the sacred hymns known as the Vedas, which were preserved by oral tradition for over a thousand years. The word used is: 'Arya'. There is also not a single mention or suggestion in the scriptures that the people came from somewhere else.

Over the last hundred years there have been several theories propounded by scholars from across the world and the country on the beginnings of India's ancient past, particularly on the origin of the people who composed the Vedas. There are Four Vedas and they are universally acknowledged as being the sacred source of several aspects of what is today called "Hinduism". The early theories, put forth by European scholars, such as Max Müller claimed the hymns and religious texts were written by people who inhabited the south of the Caspian, who migrated both westward and eastward, building their case based on the similarities found between Sanskrit and European languages such as Greek and Latin. There is no denying

Searching within, the eternal way

By Hammarsing L Kharhmar

that there perhaps is a common source, but where did that source originate from? *It is doubtful whether the term Arya was ever used in an ethnic sense' writes Romila Thapar, doyenne of ancient India's historians. What she calls the 'Aryan problem', or myth, is now to be regarded as 'perhaps the biggest red herring that was dragged across the path of India's historians'.

It is clear now that the Arya referred to in the Vedas are a linguistic identity and not an ethnic one. There were several theories that claimed that there was an "Aryan Invasion", however these too have been proven to be wrong and misleading. The 'Dasa' or 'Dasyu' referred to in the texts could have been other tribes inhabiting the area or offshoots of people from the Harappan - Mohenjodaro Civilisation. One thing has become certain: there was no pure race dominating over everyone; the society being formed was most definitely made up of different ethnicities. Archaeological studies show no traces of conquest and there is growing doubt as to whether there is no link at all, between the Indus Civilisation and what followed.

**The linga and the trishula (trident) are both present, though rare so far, in Harappan culture. Fire altars and the worship of a mother-goddess have also been documented at some sites. The pipal tree (Ficus religiosa), one of the most sacred Indian trees, was revered by Harappans. As early as in 1931, John Marshall, who directed excavations at Mohenjo-daro, could not help remark: "Taken as a whole, [the Harappan] religion is so characteristically Indian as hardly to be distinguished from still living Hinduism."

The Vedas are extremely detailed and vast, yet strangely, there is no mention of an epic journey from an open grassland area, through harsh mountain desert, down into lush green valleys and finally into the river plains fed by powerful monsoons. This fact was observed by Mountstuart Elphinstone who was a highly respected British scholar administrator in the 19th century. Some scholars refer to this as proof that there was no migration inward. It could be, or perhaps a significant period of time had lapsed since the

the Arya emerged and the period in which they began to compose the sacred texts; their journey no longer in their consciousness, or perhaps there was no journey at all. We can debate this till eternity. Our stances will be determined by the result we wish to choose.

However, what is undeniable and can no longer be contested is the fact that the sacred hymns were largely composed in the land known today as India amidst an infinite sea of diverse belief systems and forms of worship inseparable from the land, the rivers, the mountains and the people who live in this country. One of the most famous lines from the Vedas is: "Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti" which translates as, "Truth is One, The sages call it by various names". This encapsulates the essence of the beliefs that have blossomed from this land and it is precisely this foundation which will keep the diversity of India alive forever. The plurality of the land, we today call India, exists and thrives because of the resilience and dynamism of the various indigenous 'Ways of Life' and 'Systems of Belief'.

Defining and Redefining Hinduism

Before moving further, let's first understand the origins and meaning of the word "Hindu". The word Hindu was first used by the Greeks and Persians in the 6th century BCE to refer to the people who lived east of the river Indus. It did not refer to a specific set of beliefs or any specific tribes. It simply meant all the people who lived beyond the river Indus. However, today when we say "Hindu" it implies someone who adheres to Hinduism or the Hindu religion. Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world. There are approximately 1.2 billion Hindus in the world, out of which 94% live in India.

But what exactly is the Hindu Religion? Can it be defined in a single sentence? Is it one set of beliefs described in a single book or set of books or hymns? Is it the caste system? Is it owned by a single community? The answer is plain and simple: none of the above. It can be more accurately described as several Ways of Life and Systems of Belief and Thought, co-existing and contradicting each other, but none meant to supplant

the other. Many today are beginning to prefer the term "Sanatan Dharma", which translates as the "Eternal Way". As we look deeper and deeper into history and into ourselves we realise more and more that the country has survived endless onslaughts from external forces and also from within, primarily by those who do not understand that the Soul of India is One, but it is made up of Billions. Identities are often lost or removed when their roots have been destroyed by the people themselves. I believe that India should not be defined by Hinduism as it is commonly understood today. India should redefine what Hinduism is. It should return to its pluralistic roots. The plurality that has shone through exchange and understanding.

Every community in our country has their own unique way to the Eternal and their own songs to the Universe. Each is a flower in the garden of Mother India: "Bharat Mata". Our duty is to nurture and grow from our foundations, to strengthen each other, not to supplant or discard the priceless intangible inheritance preserved by ancestors. More and more discoveries are being made as we speak. In 1983, a 10,000 BC Shakti shrine built by a group of Paleolithic hunter gatherers was discovered by a team of researchers in Baghor, Madhya Pradesh that further deepens and widens the world that we are trying to understand. Each piece is an integral part of the whole. The wisdom of each and every community is the wisdom of India. The wisdom of the Khasis is the wisdom of India. It is a timeless wisdom, centered around understanding of the Self, fellow Man and Divinity that forms the great spiritual ocean of our country. The sacred story of 'U Hynfiwretrep' and 'Sohpetbneng' is a prime example. It is not just a story, it is a window or a portal into a unique worldview that if you look deeply enough you will find it brings the greatest intangible ever: Peace within, in Truth.

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Large gold imports are a reason behind Rupee depreciation India's rich have little trust in the future of local currency

By Nantoo Banerjee

Between 2014 and 2023, India's gold imports had gone up from 638 tonnes to 780.7 tonnes. The gold price in the country calculated on the basis of 24 karat per 10 grams went up, respectively, from Rs.28,000 to Rs.73,750 during this period. The exchange value of Indian Rupee dropped from Rs.59.90 in May 2014 to a US\$ to Rs.83.32 in April, 2024. Since long, India has been the world's second largest gold importer. India's rich have always gone for gold to substantially protect their wealth. The high demand for gold is linked with the low demand for Rupee among the rich. Rich Indians hold massive surplus wealth in Rupee. The country's top one percent population holds 40 percent of its wealth. Like any other asset, the value of a currency is determined by its demand

taken more often under political pressure mainly to appease local big business houses than for economic justification. It is another matter that bigtime fund borrowers from government-controlled banks are also bigtime debt offenders. The government refuses to learn. It rarely seeks to offend bigtime gold importers and the Mumbai-based Bullion Merchants' Association which is known to enjoy an excellent rapport with the World Gold Council.

The country has also failed to create enough employment to strengthen its economy. Low unemployment is an important indicator of a strong economy which increases demand for a country's currency. Higher unemployment is reflective of a weaker economy. While interest rates are among the most important



and supply. India's rich are flush with Rupee funds. For them, gold is a much more desirable asset than the paper currency.

Investments in stocks and real estates have been among other popular ways to protect the massive Rupee earnings of the country's rich. This explains why the demand for gold has always outstripped the demand for Rupee. Ironically, India remains as one of the world's poorest countries in terms of per capita income. According to the IMF World Economic Outlook, GDP (nominal) per capita of India in 2024 is projected at US\$2,848 at current prices, placing India at 143rd position out of 195 global economies. The income share of the country's top one percent ranks among the highest in the world, only behind a few small countries such as Peru and Yemen.

The factors that normally affect the value of a national currency are: demand for the currency and its supply; interest rates; economic performance; inflationary trend; GDP growth; unemployment rate; national debt; and political stability. As mentioned earlier, the demand for Indian Rupee (INR) is low among the rich, the single largest controller of the country's wealth including INR stocks. The supply of INR far exceeds its demand among the rich. INR is in demand among the poor and there is no supply shortage.

The interest rates are an issue. They are important determinants of exchange rates. A currency value rises when interest rates are high as investors always look for best rates to earn higher return. For many years, interest rates in India have stayed even lower than the inflation rates. The country's imported economic performance is hardly impressive despite its rising GDP. The import cost of gold and diamonds, mostly for personal use, is the second highest after petroleum. This is simply ridiculous for a generally poor country like India. And, the government seems to be afraid of offending the rich and the upper middle class by curtailing the gold import.

The price inflation has also not been under control as the decision for interest rate fixation to contain inflation is

determinants of exchange rates, nations with large public debts are also less attractive to overseas investors. Higher interest rates attract higher foreign capital inflow raising the demand and value of a currency. Large public debts often result in inflation.

Given the country's overall economic scenario which has not changed much over the years despite the government's tall public claims, India's Rupee-flush rich have gone for the easy option of converting their surplus cash wealth into gold. The price of gold does not seem to matter much to them. On April 20, 10 grams of 24k gold (99.9 percent) reached Rs.74,870. The continuously large investment in gold has been further bringing down the value of INR. Driven by robust demand, gold imports to India surged 26.7 percent to \$35.95 billion during April-December, last year, compared to the same period in the previous year. In December alone, imports of the precious yellow metal skyrocketed by 156.5 percent to \$3 billion. Switzerland remains the largest source of gold imports, accounting for around 41 percent share, followed by the United Arab Emirates, South Africa, Peru and Ghana.

Interestingly, gold imports in India went up substantially with the expansion of the circulation of Rupee in the last 10 years under the present government. Gold imports stood at 638 metric tonnes in 2013-14. Last year, the yellow metal imports touched 800 tonnes. In the last five years, the gold demand was held between the range of 700 and 800 tonnes. According to P.R. Somasundaram, chief executive officer of the World Gold Council's Indian operations, the demand is expected to rise between 800 and 900 tonnes, this year. This may not be good news in so far as the exchange value of INR is concerned. The exchange rate touched Rs.83.355 for a US\$ on April 27. Depending on the result of the current parliamentary election, the price of gold may shoot up further during the current year and INR may lose its exchange value close to Rs.95 before the end of 2024. A 6.8 percent GDP growth projection for India during 2024-25 by the IMF alone will not be able to halt INR's downhill journey. (IPA Service)

To their sheer disappointment, just days later, the same mountains of garbage reaccumulated to greet them. Frankly speaking, it seems not only the public but even the government administration is betraying these dedicated members by offering only lip service.

Incidentally, when we step out of our homes these days, almost every person we meet says, "Shillong has become Guwahati," meaning it's scorchingly hot in Shillong as in Guwahati. However, the sad part is that hardly anyone acknowledges or tries to find out the reasons that Ms. Patricia has detailed in the article. I believe it's time for every individual to pause and reflect on whether our day-to-day activities are contributing to the environmental mess with the searing escalation in temperatures. If we are not serious and act now, the state's reputation for having a pleasant climate will become a tale of the past.

Yours etc., Salil Gewali, Shillong

Weather update inaccurate

Editor, This is to bring to your kind attention that the weather update report in The Shillong Times E-paper

on 29.04.2024 (Source-IMD, Shillong) shows the minimum temperature of Shillong, Sohra and Umiyam as 2.6, 3.5 and 4.1 respectively (though not mentioned, it is assumed to be in °C, i.e. degrees Celsius). Given the current weather conditions, these figures appear to be quite different from actual figures. The weather Apps show the minimum temperatures in Shillong at around 20°C. This is for your kind information and clarification please.

Yours etc., Dr. Neelanjana Roy, Camp- Shillong

Editor replies: The daily weather updates are given to us by the India Meteorological Department, Meteorological Centre, Shillong, Meghalaya. Since this newspaper has no weather expert/climatologist we have to rely on reports given to us by the IMD.

Heat wave?

Editor, The news items in your paper dated April 27, 2024 on the above topic surprised us as the temperature was 21°C in the morning when we read it. The met office gave the temperature for Shillong as 26.1°C for April 27 as we read today. Is this heat wave temperature one would like to ask? Heat wave temperatures for plain areas should be over 40°C and

over 30°C for hilly areas according to the Met Offices.

Today the news item stated "Schools bypass Govt. Order" is unfair and unjust to the school and its young Principal, along with his teachers, who spares no effort or pain to give his best. The same headline implies scant disregard for Government guidelines and students' welfare.

It would be good if the Government and concerned Department carry out a reality check and consult school authorities before issuing such advisories or orders. Your reporters should try and verify facts about how the sports are conducted and also ask the other Principals who sent their pupils to participate. Would the concerned school Principals expose their pupils to possible heat strokes if they felt the weather was unsuitable? Why target only KC school when an institute nearby organized a football tournament from 9 AM till 6 PM without any provision for medical aid or side effects of a supposed heat wave? We also learnt that there was a football match at Polo grounds in which school students participated.

should an emergency occur. What more could one ask for? To read the stated headline about "Schools bypass Govt. Order" is unfair and unjust to the school and its young Principal, along with his teachers, who spares no effort or pain to give his best. The same headline implies scant disregard for Government guidelines and students' welfare.

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Yours etc., Br. Tom Pinto, Via email

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