" With the new day comes new strength and new thoughts."

--- Eleanor Roosevelt

The Shillong Times

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Poll compulsions

NORMALLY ministers seek to govern and ensure that law and order prevails. In the case of the MDA Government, a minister in the present dispensation is guilty of instigating pressure groups to agitate against the Centre's belligerent stance vis a vis granting of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) to all visitors to Meghalaya..The ILP is an archaic colonial law that has somehow found favour with groups that insist that the tribes (particularly the Khasi- Jaintia) tribes need protection from the avaricious "exploitative" non tribal. This logic is inherently flawed because the non-tribal in Meghalaya is already deprived of the right to land ownership and to conduct business unless sanctioned by the District Councils. An analytical study would reveal that the loss of the right to own land is because community land is shrinking. The reason lies in the fact that the affluent tribal is land hungry and has managed to buy land beyond their ability to use them.

Such absentee landlords are legion and there are no checks and balances on how much land an individual can own because there is no land ceiling act in Meghalaya. While chief ministers like BB Lyngdoh had the foresight to introduce the cadastral survey which would clearly establish the identities of the land owners and also enumerate how much of community land is still available for use. Unfortunately, the process was short-circuited by no less than the HSPDP supremo, HS Lyngdoh who resisted the cadastral survey on the pretext that the indigenous tribes would have to pay land taxes to the government. But that surely was not BB Lyngdoh's motive. However, since he headed a fragile coalition he had to give in to the untenable demands of coalition partners. Had the cadastral survey been conducted in the 1980s as desired by BB Lyngdoh the boundaries of Meghalaya too would have been demarcated and there would have been no border skirmishes.

These attempts at streamlining the governance processes, especially those related to land holdings patterns in Meghalaya that were thwarted by coalition partners of successive governments need to be documented because ultimately it is not the outsider that is responsible for the growing inequalities in Meghalaya. It is the tribal elite that benefits from the amorphous policies that obscure the grim realities obtaining here. To make up for the defects in governance there is a clamour for unnecessary protectionism like the ILP. And now a minister of the MDA Government is warning the central government and instigating the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) of which he was a former member to go on agitational mode in order to get central sanction for the ILP. Is this the brief of a minister of the present government? Is it not a dangerous trend? Obviously, this grandstanding is because the 2023 elections are just a wink away. But what a disastrous strategy!

Prayer for India in 2022

By Rajdeep Sardesai

As a difficult and turbulent year draws to a close, here is a prayer for a 'better' India in 2022.

An India where our political leadership will walk the talk on issues of critical public importance. Where you can't ask people to mask up, maintain physical distancing and strict discipline and yet choose to be personally reckless in not observing Covid protocols during election campaigns. Where you don't claim premature 'victory' over a pandemic as a personal image building exercise but prepare instead for a long and arduous battle, where you keep science above superstition when dealing with a once in a lifetime calamity. Where the oxygen of winning elections must surely matter less than the number of oxygen plants you actually set up, where good governance matters more crafty politics.

An India where young resident doctors don't have to hit the street to protest a delay in medical college admissions. Where there is no point in hailing hospital staff as 'covid warriors', engaging in 'taali-thali bajao' photo-ops and then denying them better working conditions: how many people are aware that post graduate medical admissions in the country have been delayed now by almost a year?

Where those who die of Covid are at least assured dignity in death, where Covid death numbers are accurately reported, where we don't revere the Ganga as the ultimate holy river and then allow dozens of decomposed bodies to float in the river or be buried in the sand banks only because there is no place left to cremate the dead and then target the media when it exposes the grim reality.

Where governments are accountable to the citizens and parliament. Where parliament functions in a spirit of genuine bipartisanship and not as a notice board for only bulldozing government bills by firman and without discussion. Where ministers cant get away by claiming in parliament that they have no knowledge of migrant deaths caused by lockdowns, or indeed of job losses because of economic dislocation. Where the government can't claim in court that the PM CARES Fund is not a public authority and hence cannot be brought under the purview of the Right to Information Act. Where it is my right to know how the thousands of crores raised in the name of the Fund have been spent in purchasing ventilators, vaccines and oxygen cylinders else the opacity threatens public trust.

An India where leaders don't seek to divide us by pitting one religion against another. Where no religious or political leader from any community is allowed to get away with hate speech or incitement to violence. Where the atrocities of Aurangzeb in the seventeenth century should not determine the fate of the Indian Muslim in the twenty first. Where scars of past animosities can't become the template for an India of the future. Where the electoral battle shouldn't be over who rebuilds how many temples and places of worship but who builds how many quality schools and hospitals. Where Hinduism's remarkable strength is seen to lie in its uniquely plural, inclusive traditions, not in seeking to mimic faiths driven by monotheistic beliefs. Where weaponising vigilante groups by allowing violent mobs to break into church halls is seen as a heinous criminal act that must lead to prosecution. Where the real battle is not between Hindu versus Hindutvawaadi but between constitutionalism versus anti constitutionalism. Where the Indian state must keep away from promoting any form of religious ritualism or intervening in personal freedoms. Where what we eat and drink, who we marry, what we wear must remain a matter of fierce individual choice.

An India where our borders are secured, where China and Pakistan aren't allowed to tie us down into a 'two front' war, where national security isn't entangled with viciously competitive domestic politics. Where an agitating Sikh farmer isn't labelled a 'Sikh terrorist' or a Kashmiri student isn't branded as 'anti-national'. Where terrorism doesn't resurface in Punjab or get caught in a bloodied cycle of oppression, alienation and violence in the Kashmir valley or where innocent labourers are shot dead by trigger happy armed forces in Nagaland. Where a robust civil society isn't seen as a new frontier of 'war' and dissent isn't criminalized.

An India where the health of the economy is not determined by the buoyant mood on Dalal Street as much as the deepening concerns over shrinking employment levels and falling incomes. Where no 'V' shaped economic recovery is possible until there is a revival in the struggling micro and small enterprises sector. Where rising inflation is reined in and fuel prices don't consistently challenge Sir Don Bradman's cricket average because of rampant profiteering by governments imposing unacceptably high taxes.

An India where governments realize that an entire generation of young students are victims of a widening digital divide in Covid times that needs urgent remedial measures. A recent survey shows that only 25 % of children enrolled in class 3 were able to read a simple sentence in 15 states across rural India. Did you know that 17 % of children in secondary schools have dropped out in this Covid period? According to the National Right to Education forum's policy paper, around 10 million girls alone are at the risk of dropping out. Where with 33 lakh children reportedly malnourished, an emergency intervention is called for to meet the nutrition challenge. Where environment consciousness is not just confined to seminar chat-rooms but translates into concrete action in ensuring clean air and protecting dwindling forest cover.

Where the political executive respects institutional integrity and doesn't misuse enforcement agencies to simply pulverize the opposition into submission. Where the process doesn't become the punishment, where it cannot be that opposition leaders are raided just before an election but then quickly given a clean chit if they switch sides. Where a top actor's son isn't imprisoned on spurious drug charges if only to send a chilling message to other celebrities to fall in line, where outdated sedition laws are not enforced to intimidate a young climate change activist, where the police realize that their true allegiance is to the rule of law and not to their political bosses. Where it cannot be that the Supreme Court protects the life and liberty of a high profile news anchor but habeas corpus petitions of less known Indians are kept pending for years. Where inconvenient truths aren't kept hidden in sealed envelopes.

An India where journalists realize that their professional duty is to ask questions of all but their primary task is to hold accountable those in power. Where we must all remember the golden words of the South African anti-apartheid icon Desmond Tutu who passed away this week: 'If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor'. Happy New year!

(The writer is a senior journalist and author. mail : rajdeepsardesai 522 gmail. com)

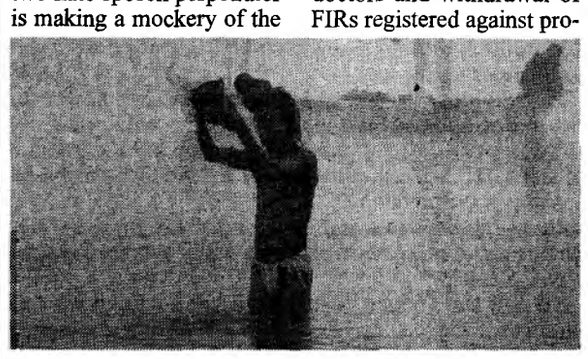
Hate Speech & Hinduism

By Insaf

Vision of 'new india'?

Where is India headed? The hate speeches at Haridwar's Dharam Sansad, religious conclave, and right-wing activists stalling Xmas celebrations in Karnataka, Assam and Gurugram should make many a head hang in shame. The Haridwar conclave unabashedly indulged in open Muslim-baiting and incitement to Hindus to take up arms, there were calls for genocide and violence. Neither a single person arrested nor the ruling BJP reining in the sadhus, which it fosters. Worse, it smacks of double standards wherein a stand-up comedian is arrested for statements attributed to him, social activists' languishing in jail under the draconian UAPA law for speeches, or for that matter an young activist arrested for an NGO toolkit, to mention only a few. Is the right to freedom of speech and expression a given for those speaking for a 'Hindu Rashtra'? And only because the battle of the ballot is upcoming in UP and Uttarakhand and such speeches will woo the BJP's vote bank, that it is brazenly ignored? Sending notices for appearance or lodging FIRs against one or two hate speech perpetrator is making a mockery of the system. Will the Supreme Court heed to a letter by 76 of its lawyers to take suo-moto cognisance of the events?

Round The States



It doesn't stop here. There are instances of right-wing activists targeting the Christians this past week. The group 'Hindu Jagarana Vedike' bullied and heckled a Christian convent Nirmala English High School's management in Mandya district in Karnataka, over Xmas celebrations. 'Why Hindu festivals like Ganesha festival were not being celebrated!, it asked. The Head Mistress said the group asked us to hang a photo of Goddess Saraswathi in the school and accused 'us of converting students which isn't true." In Assam's Silchar district, members of Bajrang Dal disrupted a Christmas programme in the town demanding Hindus must shun the celebrations and in another incident a group forced its way into a church and demanded it be shut down because Hindus could not take part in the festivities! In yet another incident a group of men claiming to be right-wing activists barged into a church premises in Gurugram's Pataudi disrupting the prayers, raising slogans 'Jai Shree Ram' and 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai'. Well, if the Dharam Sansad and these incidents are examples of the kind of society we are building, then God bless 'New India'!

Naga Conundrum

Has the Union Home Ministry made matters worse in Nagaland? Extending the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act for another six months by issuing a notification on Thursday last, declaring the entire state a "disturbed area", is being seen as an 'insult to all Nagas.' More so its timing – amidst a growing clamour for AFSPA's withdrawal following the botched army operation which led to killing of 14 civilians. Worse, the move puts a big question mark on the Centre's sincerity to make amends and heal wounds as just days before Amit Shah set up a committee to look into the possibility of its withdrawal, following a meeting with Chief Minister Rio and his team in Delhi. The Ministry's justification it was necessary as the committee would submit its report in 3 months and the June extension was expiring on 30 December, has no takers. Rather there is condemnation: An 'aghast and affronted' National People's Front (NPF), a constituent of State government slammed Modi government's "utter disregard" for "voices of smaller states" and "it added salt to injury'; the Naga Students' Federation reacted, the notification claiming whole of Nagaland was "disturbed" was an "insult to Nagas at this time of grief" and it has decided to come all out against the notification through a 'series of democratic agitations'. Has the Home Ministry bitten more than it can chew and isn't it versed with the idiom 'out of the frying pan into the fire'?

Relief For Delhi

The national capital, Delhi can heave a sigh of relief. The Federation of Resident Doctors Association (FORDA) has ended its 15-day long strike early Friday last, following assurances of their demands being met. These were: To get NEET-PG counselling expedited; an apology from authorities for police manhandling the doctors and withdrawal of FIRs registered against protesters. Patient care should limp back to normalcy as OPD services, wards and emergency services were impacted, worse at a time when Delhi's covid cases are drastically on the rise. And while Union Health Minister Mandaviya too should be less stressed, the big question he must address is why do doctors, the 'frontline workers' applauded for their stellar work during the pandemic, have to get on to the streets? Their demand for expediting NEET-PG counselling is justified, for the government's delay has left medical college hospitals 'short-staffed' with outgoing batch of 3rd year PG students having already left and many resident doctors are ending up working 100 to 120 hours a week due to the shortfall. This when nearly 45,000 NEET-PG aspirants across the country are waiting to join the workforce! The Ministry would do well in future to take the cue from 'A stitch in time saves nine'.

Innovative Jharkhand

Jharkhand shows the way. Petrol will be subsidised for the poor! On Wednesday last, marking two years of the JMM-led government Chief Minister Hemant Soren announced that petrol will be subsidised by Rs 25 per litre for ration-card holders with two-wheelers, among other schemes. However, there may be a cap of 10 litres per family per month, once modalities are finalised to the scheme to begin from Republic Day. This as Soren said: There are motorcycles in poor's homes, but people can't ride these because they don't have money for petrol... the person is unable to go to the market to sell his crop. We hear that people are mixing kerosene and petrol to ride motorcycles..." Like other States, petrol and diesel prices are Rs 98.52 per litre, and Rs 91.56 respectively, a pinch for the middle and lower-middle classes. According to data, there are 61 lakh families that have ration cards, and of these 2 lakh to 20 lakhs would have motorcycles, so the scheme is expected to make a difference, a feather in its cap. Other States' may consider riding the tide too. ---*INFA*

Letters to the Editor

A soulful article

Editor

I write to express my gratitude for the soulful article, "Reflections on the pandemic and rebuilding of humanity" by Jenniefer Dkhar. At a time like this, we all need the hope, warmth, and love that came across in this article.

Yours, etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Is regional party unity over?

Editor,

Several attempts were made in the past to bring all regional parties (state parties) under one umbrella but each attempt has failed miserably due to trust deficit, fear of being swallowed up by bigger and more capable regional parties and also among other things pride, egoism and one upmanship overtook some leaders and founders of some bigger and even smaller regional parties. The same reasons still exist in the rank and file of these parties (state parties). Again, the most prominent reason till date is because leaders of these parties still find difficulties in adjustments and cooperation with one another.

The political situation in Meghalaya today is ideal for the regional parties to unite or come under one umbrella as the Congress, which is the principal party here in Khasi-Jaintia hills, is broken up into fragments and NPP is yet to be firmly established and get mass support here. Whatever you may say but the Khasi-Jaintia voters (masses) are somehow regional minded if they see that the regional parties are sincere and really united.

As for Garo Hills, the voters there have not much choice between the NPP and AITMC. The Garos, as could be seen from past experience follow the tallest leader. In the present context there are only two, Conrad Kongkal Sangma and Dr Mukul Sangma. As far as experience goes the latter is more crafty and a veteran but Conrad is from the NPP, a Party that is comparatively well known to the Garos and to some extent he has some experience as he was in the MPA government and now as CM of MDA government for four years. But Dr Mukul Sangma is from the AITMC, a new political party in Meghalaya. Who of the two is the taller leader among the Garos? Public opinion gleaned from the Garos is that since the Congress is a shattered and almost a deserted house the choice weighs on the side of NPP and TMC but with more being inclined towards NPP.

Coming to the Khasi and Jaintia Hills the choice of the voters here is mainly among three political parties, UDP, NPP and Congress. Voters here hardly mention the HSPDP, PDF and KHNAM. Some of them venture to say that the golden opportunity this time is for the regional parties but since they are a divided lot the voters of Khasi and Jaintia hills will also be scattered but a good number will opt for NPP which they believe will stand to gain felt from the collapse of the Congress even in this eastern part of Meghalaya.

Yours etc..
Philip Marwein,
Sr.Journalist,
Meghalaya

Happy reminiscences

Editor,

The op-ed, "Of Devotion and Conversion" by Deepa Majumdar (ST Dec 30, 2021) is a happy reminiscence of our past school days. These were years of peaceful co -existence of students of all races and religions. We were in St Anthony's High School then. The most memorable aspect was that there were four sections for each class from 4 to 10.We had section A for our Catholic students, B for Protestants and Niamtre (Niam tynrai), C for the elites (English section) and D for vernacular students mostly Bengalis from Laban, Jail Road, Umpling, Mawprem and Laitumkhrah.

By the sheer wisdom of the Kothari Commission, the subject that taught us to be closer to our Maker was compulsory but not for promotional purposes. Catholic students had Catechism and for sections B,C and D there was Moral Science. Those were golden days before, as predicted by the far-sighted Kothari Commission in 1968, the subject was discontinued. Still, the effect was not visible till few years ago when religious hatred and racial overtones had taken our once peaceful and harmonious country by storm.

In our vernacular paper,(Khasi),recently the curriculum was changed. The renowned ' Ka Jingsneng Tymmen' (Counselling by wise elders) by Radhon Singh Berry was removed from the Middle School section at a time when we need it the most. Then the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, the brainchild of Rev JJM Nichols Roy too went out of the syllabus. In the Lower Primary section the Geography of Meghalaya is omitted. Hence students at that impressionable age are more knowledgeable about the geography of other states and countries. All this is the result of MBOSE constantly succumbing to Delhi publishers with representatives appearing yearly before session. Resulting in more books being recommended adding to the weight of the school bag. This year CBSE is having a curriculum workshop and lots of alterations will take place which should be minutely scrutinised.

Coming back to the article it is sad indeed that the peaceful and harmonious co- existence of all communities seems to have been blown apart. The St. Joseph's school in Madhya Pradesh was having class 12th Mathematics examination when some rowdy elements threw stones at the examinees. The frightened principal quickly called the police but they refused to intervene. 'Forceful conversion' was their defence and when asked for proof, they were dumb.

Let us pray that in 2022 the people in power would usher in the new dawn when all those values we cherished in our school days return yet again.

Yours etc.,
W Passah
Nongkrem

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

"Whatever the universal nature assigns to any man at any time is for the good of that man at that time."

—Marcus Aurelius

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Dynasties and doles

POLITICS in India is increasingly getting self-centered and dynasties have already begun ruling the roost – starting of course with the Nehru family and progressing into very many dynasties across states today. True to their character, public interests matter little to the dynasties, though this was not true of the Nehru family. Doles are announced left and right by selfish regional satraps to grab power and remain in power. The doles being extended to the poor for their sustenance or a help to them to build a dwelling are of one category, which serves a major social purpose. No nation or government can ignore their plight. No amount of support to them is unjustified.

But, the new-age rulers in various states are going further. So did the UPA-II by extending subsidized rations to the BPL families. Crores of families have benefited from this, but this did not translate into votes for the Congress-led alliance in the 2014 parliament polls and the rival BJP was swept to power. Odisha chief minister Naveen Patnaik is smiling through repeated terms in power by virtue of the one-rupee-a-kilo rice ration scheme for the large army of poor in the state. Now, Telangana's chief minister Chandrashekar Rao is set to implement an election promise of giving over Rs 3,000 as dole every month to every unemployed youth in the state -- its employment exchange itself having a backlog of 10 lakh jobless people, and the PSC having a list of 28 lakh people seeking jobs. The huge burden on the exchequer by giving them a dole of this size can only be surmised. He is principally playing vote bank politics to sustain his family in power for more terms.

Governments extending doles set apart huge sums in their budget for such indulgences. Public money for which they have been given control of is not for squandering. They must use it wisely. The other grim side of this splurge with motivated self-interest is a nurturing of a generation of lazy people. The youths who get a dole of over Rs 3,000 a month for free can mostly be trusted to sit back and do no work for the rest of their lives. A nation cannot grow if its productive forces are allowed a holiday. The free or subsidized ration schemes in Odisha first and across the country later have already done huge damage. Instead of the people giving their mite to the nation and its growth, the nation is paying them pocket money and free ration – all for votes. A shameful scenario, this!

Fifty Golden Years of Appeasement Politics in the State

By H H Mohrmen

The year that the State reaches its golden milestone should also be the year that we look back and forward and more importantly look inwards on how the governance system in the state has fared since it was first established. We are now at the beginning of the year and we have barely passed two days of the year 2022 which is also an important year in the history of the state. More importantly it is that moment in our history when we need to ask difficult and piercing questions like how best have the different governments governed the state in the last fifty years of its existence?

This article is looking at some areas of governance which even with change of governments from time to time in the last fifty years, this particular aspect of governance has remained unchanged since the state was first established. It is telling the truth as it is that the current MDA government is no different from the previous governments as it continues with the politics of appeasement in every aspect of governance.

Politics of Appeasement

The NPP-led MDA government not only continues with the politics of appeasement in everything that it has done from proposal of development activities to appointment of chairmen, vice-chairmen and members of different committees and commissions. Similar procedures are being followed in the implementation of schemes and setting up of development projects in the different parts of the state. Decision to implement a project is not made based on data and other scientific information or evidence. In fact, in some cases not even a proper study or baseline survey was conducted to arrive at such an important decision. In many cases the announcement was made at the drop of a hat just to pacify the party's constituent which was rubbed on the wrong side and was severely affected by the decision. The case in point is the shifting of the Jowai North Division to Shangpung and how the government without any study but in one fell swoop announced that it would construct a mini secretariat in the location. The idea is that the land which was earlier used to house the Jowai North Division will now be used for construction of a mini secretariat. No doubt this is being done to appease the brothers-in-law duo who are going to be affected by the decision.

Community Health Services

The Health Minister has recently laid the foundation stone of a proposed Community Health Centre at Shangpung but the truth is there is already a CHC very close to Shangpung. Laskein CHC is less than 20 km from Shangpung and there are few questions which the public need to ask with regards to this grand plan of the MDA government. Question number one is, isn't it true that Laskein CHC is less than five kilometers from Shangpung as the crow flies? Can the government waste its resources in having two CHCs at places which are at a very close proximity to each other and that too in the same development Block? There are Blocks which have no CHC like the Saipung Block in the East Jaintia Hills which it is also the most neglected area and it urgently needs a CHC. The next important question that the public are asking is, do we have enough doctors (as per norms) to man all the existing PHCs and CHCs in the state? Isn't it true that the CHC at Shangpung was proposed just to pacify the NPP MLA from the area who was recently dropped by Chief Minister from the Council of Ministers?

It may also not be out of place to mention that a similar announcement was made before the 2018 election that the government of the day had decided to upgrade the Ummulong and Nartiang PHCs to CHCs. But are there any changes in the mentioned PHCs? More so when the MLA from the area was re-elected and continues as a minister in the current government too? Obviously, politicians take advantage of the fact that public memory is very short and the people were simply taken for a ride.

Higher Education

The state government can claim that it has done something in the area of higher education by starting community colleges, which of course needs to be applauded. But what exactly are these community colleges? Community colleges which the government recently provided financial support to, were colleges which were initially established by the communities at their respective locations. The government is simply providing funds to improve the function of these colleges. There were no innovations introduced by the Education Department to improve the content in the courses provided in these colleges. It is simply a case of adopting the college lock, stock and barrel just as the community had left it.

Despite the fact that the government is aware of the statistics that educated youths who have graduated from similar colleges remain largely unemployed due to absence of skills training, yet there was no innovative thinking to come up with ideas of how these colleges could address this very serious problem that the state is facing today. The government would have been able to kill two birds with one stone if it had put on its thinking cap and come up with creative ideas and worked on the strengths it already has. It should have also trained youths in these community colleges on traditional skills, like agriculture farming, livestock farming and others which would help the youth be gainfully employed when they return to their communities.

The government would have been able to kill two birds with one stone if it had put on its thinking cap and come up with creative ideas and worked on the strengths it already has. It should have also trained youths in these community colleges on traditional skills, like agriculture farming, livestock farming and others which would help the youth be gainfully employed when they return to their communities.

The truth is that Community Colleges were recognized just to enable the Education Minister to financially support the college in his village. This is another case in Jaintia hills which was done to placate the other NPP MLA who was dropped from the cabinet minister rank.

The government has also announced that it would start its own engineering college this year and the MDA government deserves to be appreciated for achieving this milestone. But again, the question that begs the answer is whether the college will continue to provide training on traditional engineering trades which are already very popular. We already have qualified youths in trades like civil engineering, electrical engineering, mechanical engineering in plenty. Are we going to repeat the same mistakes? Can we expect the government to introduce in this in new engineering college courses like Artificial Intelligence, Robotics Science, Data Science and other new engineering courses which are expected to be in great demand in the future?

Political Appointees

How many of those members appointed to the different Committees and Commissions in the State are not members of the ruling parties in the MDA coalition Government? All such appointments are not based on educational qualifications, merit, training or experiences but solely on the basis of political affiliation of the members. It seems the appointment is meant to accommodate the party loyalists and provide them opportunity to enjoy government pay and perks. In fact, the appointment is being treated as a reward provided by the incumbent government to the party cadres for being loyal to the party.

It will be interesting finding if an RTI is filed to find out the numbers of these political appointees and how much the Government spend to provide pays and perks to these appointees. Perhaps one should start from the question of how many advisers does the current Chief Minister have and what are the pay and perks of the incumbent advisors? Are the pay and perks justified?

Sports Development and the National Games

Despite the fact that the state has produced footballers of national repute, internationally acclaimed martial arts artist, award-winning athletes, yet the sports infrastructure in the state leaves much to be desired. The MDA Government may say that the previous government has not done much in the Department of Sports either, but the question is - what has this Government done to improve sports facilities in the last four years? Sadly, the Government's plans to host the National Games as part of the state's golden jubilee celebration seems to have gone for a toss, as the plans are still in disarray.

As the Government gears up to celebrate Meghalaya's golden jubilees, the question that we need to ask is whether the current MDA Government is any better than the previous governments with regards to the politics of appeasement? There is no doubt that this Government is not only no different from the previous governments, and with regards to appeasement of the MLAs and party cadres, it has out-performed all the governments before it.

Email: hhmohrmen67@gmail.com

Linking Aadhaar with Voter identity is problematic

By Ajit Ranade

India takes great pride in her Election Commission, an independent authority entrusted with the conduct of free and fair elections for the Parliament and State Assemblies. It has the reputation of being independent and impartial, and it ensures people vote without fear, and that there is a level playing field among contestants. The EC was born one day before the Republic of India, i.e., on 25 January 1950. The EC is bound to act within the legal framework enshrined in the Representation of People Act 1951 (RPA). Only Parliament has the power to amend the RPA which has been done from time to time. It has been amended a few times in the past seventy years. One notable amendment was the transfer of election petitions from tribunals to high courts, which was why Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's election petition was heard in the Allahabad High Court where her election in 1975 was declared null and void. But major amendments to RPA have been pending for too long.

There are, for instance, the various recommendations of Law Commissions over many years that have not been implemented. The EC itself has written to the Prime Minister and the government to ensure that some important electoral reform laws are passed by Parliament. But this has fallen on deaf ears. One of the most important suggestions has been to disqualify criminal candidates from standing for election. As of now the disqualification criteria in the RPA is too weak, and has failed to check the rising number of elected lawmakers who face serious criminal charges.

In the absence of any action from Parliament the Supreme Court has often stepped in to remedy certain anomalies. This is how the NOTA (none of the above) button came on the ballot. This is how we have instant unseating of convicted lawmakers, even if the criminal case goes for appeal in a higher court. This is how, thanks to a 2003 judgement, the voters get to know criminal antecedents of their candidates through self-sworn affidavits. None of these reforms were brought in by Parliament but are in force thanks to the Supreme Court in response to public interest litigations. The desire of the public to bring political parties under the ambit of Right to Information is still languishing in the courts. This reform is also a reform too far.

When Parliament has chosen to act, it has often done so with dubious intention. One example is that of introducing electoral bonds, to increase the transparency of political funding. That law makes it impossible to know the identity of the donor or the recipient negating transparency completely. The word "transparency" is used for this legislation almost in an Orwellian sense! One more recent example of Parliamentary action on the RPA is the amendment passed last month. This is the linkage of Aadhaar with the voter identity card issued by the EC. It was passed in the Lok Sabha on December 20 without any discussion. It was passed in the Rajya Sabha the next day with a voice vote, even when there was strong demand for recording the vote. The video of the voice vote clearly shows the resounding vocal opposition to the bill, but it was still passed. Be that as it may, the Aadhaar linkage is very problematic, for several reasons.

Firstly, this amendment directly contradicts, at least prima facie, the Supreme Court judgement of 2018 which clearly said that Aadhaar is not mandatory for all citizens. Only for those receiving welfare benefits, and for a limited purpose only, can Aadhaar be made a requirement. That was a landmark judgment delivered in what was the second longest case ever heard by the Supreme Court.

Secondly, Aadhaar is meant to be a proof of identity not of citizenship. It was never meant to be a proof of being a citizen and of the eligibility to vote. In fact, the construction of the voter roll is a critical responsibility of the Election Commission and cannot be outsourced to another agency outside its ambit. The Aadhaar authority is not under the control of the EC. The power to add, delete and modify a voter record is with the electoral registration officer, and is circumscribed by the stringent requirement of physical verification. This can't be outsourced to an authority like the Unique Identity Authority i.e. Aadhaar.

When the EC undertook a pilot project, a "purification" exercise in 2015 to link the Aadhaar to voter id, it was struck down by the Supreme Court. But some damage had been done in that pilot project in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. With the Electoral Photo Identity Card (EPIC) and Aadhaar linkage exercise undertaken by the EC as part of its "National Electoral Roll Purification an Authentication Programme", lakhs of voters were affected. Nearly 30 lakh voters in Telangana and 21 lakh voters in A.P. had been struck off the rolls due to a "de-duplication" exercise which created a big furor. None of these voters were given a chance for a hearing and neither was the deletion subjected to a rigorous verification exercise, as would have been done under normal EC procedures.

Thirdly, even if the current amendment says linking Aadhaar is voluntary, it is not clear what that means. Will the linking be done at enrollment or at voting time? How is the Aadhaar number going to be verified, if not by the biometric method? But that has been explicitly ruled out. Will the electoral officer just put a tick mark against the voter record or will the Aadhaar number be entered? In which case it would be in the public domain violating a very basic requirement of privacy of the Aadhaar number. The current wording of the legislation says that denial to furnish the Aadhaar number to the electoral officer, can only be due to a "sufficient cause". Which implies that blanket denial is not to be allowed.

The government itself via an affidavit before the Supreme Court has said that the Aadhaar biometric identification fails on average 12 percent of the time. That is a huge error margin, especially when elections are keenly fought and winning margins can be as thin as single digits. In Jharkhand it was found that 88 percent of the ration cards deleted because of Aadhaar verification failure were genuine cases. So Aadhaar failure invariably is a burden that largely falls on the poor, the vulnerable, the indigent who often live in backward areas lacking in the infrastructure of electricity or connectivity.

Finally, the real fear is that Aadhaar linkage can become a powerful tool for voter profiling, wholesale disenfranchisement, gerrymandering and all kinds of electoral mischief, in the hands of those who have the database. The linking of the Aadhaar with the voter identity card is a path best not taken, or one that should be trodden on very, very carefully.

(Dr.Ajit Ranade is an economist and Senior Fellow, Takshashila) Institution) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org

Letters to the Editor

ATM charges unfair to customers

Editor,

Now ATMs are again charging Rs 23+ for other banks (after transaction limits) as per RBI guidelines. In taking such decisions, I don't know whether Customers' Forums are taken into consideration or not by RBI, but definitely RBI does look into the locations of ATMs in the cities, towns etc. What I mean to say is that in our locality of Rynjah there is not a single ATM of Punjab National Bank; the nearest one is in Don Bosco, Laitumkhrah. Now, as a PNB account holder I have no other alternative but to visit other banks' ATMs in my locality. I am charged Rs 23 + for every transaction (after the limit). If PNB had an ATM then I would not have had to pay this penalty for every transaction. I urge the Government to kindly look into this matter.

Yours etc.,
Anjan Kumar Das,
Shillong 6.

Silence of the lambs

Editor,

The rise of sporadic incidents of threats and intimidation by right-wing hindutva fanatic groups in different parts of the country is a cause of serious concern for all sections of society irrespective of their religious backgrounds and faith. Starting with enacting state laws based on unsubstantiated allegations of conversions by Christians without any proper facts points to the deterioration of law and order in certain states such as Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh as well nearer home in Assam. The very ideals of the Constitution that speak on the freedom of worship, freedom to preach and practice one's faith and the freedom of expression are being trampled upon with the covert support of state governments under the BJP. The irony above all this is the silence of various Christian denominations and predominantly by the Catholic community which holds more influence in the country and abroad. Amongst various political parties it is the AITC that has come out in defence of minorities whenever atrocities have been committed on them. However, various Catholic associations have become silent like lambs which portrays a very negative scenario that whatever happens each one has to fend for himself or herself. It is urged that the MDA coalition which has the BJP in its cabinet and an MP in the Upper House to speak out or write to the Prime Minister's Office rather than living in denial mode. For how long will this attitude continue and Christians remain muted? Silence when you are supposed to speak up gives rise to autocratic regimes.

Yours etc..
Dominic Stadlin
Wankhar,
Via email

Question with no answer

Editor,

The question posed by Phillip Marwein "Is regional party unity over?" (ST, Jan 1, 2022) has neither a yes or no answer. All those possibilities like trust deficit ,fear of being overwhelmed by a bigger party, egoism etc., do not fit into the ' may' or ' may not be,' syndrome. Too many elections had been fought involving these so-called regional parties who go their different ways before the polls and try to unite post-poll when their disunity had finally awarded the Congress a cake walk.

It was the all- powerful BJP at the centre with their state governor that in 2018, had snatched government formation from the Congress despite their larger vote share. And the silence of the UDP and HSPDP on the list of the unsavoury policies of the present Chief Minister like the support for the CAB then (then ordering his sister to help it turn into CAA),his escorting of Mr Rajnath Singh (now Union Defence Minister) before Lok Sabha elections to Catholic convents to garner votes(and today, he is silent while Catholic churches are being vandalised),the blatant violation of the NGT ban exposed in the Ksan tragedy and recently the Krem U Le. On this have we ever calculated the loot on our mother earth where coal reserves are exploited without revenue generation?.

Then there is the MDA's shady deal with the Ministry of Environment, Forests & Climate Change (MoEFCC) headed by the then Union Minister Prakash Javadekar which gave clearance to Star Cement to plunder 8.2 km of the reserved forest against the protest of the DFO, Jaintia Hills. Also, the secret attempt to sell-off of the Shillong and Jowai Circles to REPDCL; the CM's lukewarm attitude in the matter of ILP and 8th schedule and more critical is the shady deal of border issues with the HSPDP in the so-called give and take policy (as if Meghalaya ever stole the neighbour's land). All the above go to prove that they are not the parties worth calling regional, as the regional aspirations of the people of Meghalaya are thrown to the dustbin. Worse, none of the regional parties realise that NPP is BJP disguised in a lone one seat (NPP)uniform!

And the most dangerous idea of regionalism with no thought on nationalism will be devastating for Meghalaya. The state's health and prosperity lie not in our regional outlook but in the broader national outlook. For the HSPDP there is no worry for they continue to dominate West Khasi Hills. For the UDP as far as Jaintia Hills is concerned, the coal belts will get them the majority as voters tend to forget (no one will remember the state of education and our SSA teachers not being paid for 8 months or the FCI episode), and astute politicians will not throw hard earned money for the sake of the unmindful electorates that fall for freebies. In the urban areas of Shillong and its suburbs and the AITC with MLAs that have proven their worth to be MLAs, cannot be brushed aside. In Garo Hills the 8 MLAs will trouble Conrad, as now that the hate-Bengali campaign had eroded dramatically on account of the atrocities meted out on Catholic schools and nuns. And if the people of Meghalaya prefer to shut their eyes in spite of all these, then they have to be prepared for the worst, and the gnashing of teeth cannot be ruled out.

And let us understand why 31% votes win over 69%. India is not a Presidential form of government like the US where the difference between the vote share of Joe Biden and Donald Trump is a mere 4 %. Yet we continue to belabour the idea that India is the largest democracy in the world. Also, the public does not realise that like our regional parties in Meghalaya, the CPI, AAP,AIADMK, INC, Akali Dal RLD etc., each want to rule this country, hence Narendra Modi and BJP have the last laugh.

Yours etc.,
James Kharmih
Shillong 1

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"Every day brings new choices."

--- Martha Beck

The Shillong Times

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Why vandalize places of worship

IN the past several months members of the right-wing Hindutva groups have been carrying on acts of desecrating Christian churches across the country. Add to that the hate speecheby people in saffron robes in Haryana and elsewhere and their allegations of 'forced' conversion by Christian missionaries. Karnataka has even pushed for an anti-conversion Bill which awaits passage by the upper house (vidhan parishad). The lower house (vidhan sabha) has already passed the Bill. The first question that arises is why the state should step in, in a matter that pertains to the individual's choice of faith and worship. How does it matter which religion a person follows as long as that person does not violate the tenets of the Indian Constitution?

Articles 25-28 of the Indian Constitution guarantee freedom of religion and defines the parameters of those freedoms. The right to freedom of religion gives individuals the right to profess any religion of their choice. It also includes the freedom to change one's religion or beliefs. Article 25 gives every person the right to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practice, and propagate religion subject to public order, morality, and health. Article 26 gives all denominations the right to manage their own affairs in matters of religion ; the right to form and maintain institutions for religious and charitable intents; right to acquire immovable and movable property and to administer such property according to the law. Article 27 exempts all religious institutions from payment of taxes when money is directly used for the promotion and/or maintenance of any particular religion/religious denomination. Article 28 permits educational institutions that are maintained by religious groups to disseminate religious instruction. However, no religious instruction is not permitted in State-run educational institutions. Those educational institutions administered by the State but that were established under any endowment or trust which requires that religious instruction shall be imparted in such institutions are exempt from the above clause (that no religious instruction shall be provided).

When the Constitution itself has provided all clarity on Freedom of Religion why are some political parties and fringe elements hell bent on disrupting the peace? The vandalism of a temple in Shillong does not bode well for communal harmony. That such ripostes are expected after the series of attacks on Christian churches should have put the administrators of the North Eastern states on high alert. It does not take long for vengeance to travel. However, it is important not to arrive at any conclusions or to point fingers at any religious group or individual until the police are able to unearth the truth. In fact, this calls for a greater push towards building communal harmony in a cosmopolitan space like Shillong.

Bracing For 2022: An uncertain future

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

Though many decades have elapsed, I will never forget Rev B.D Pugh's New Year's Message in the 1980s. I remember vividly the tale about God Janus of ancient Rome which he told the congregation. His narration was so fluent and captivating that it remains in my memory till date. As an adolescent I was in awe when he narrated that Janus was a two-faced God, one facing backward and other forward and that Janus had eyes on both his heads.

Janus was one among the plethora of gods and goddesses in ancient Rome but he was the most revered god. As told by commentators he had eyes on both his heads which faced backwards to the past and forward to the future. With one head he could look back at the past and with the other he could visualise the future. In Janus' concept the future has no foundation without the past and the past is meaningless without the future.

Janus was venerated among the pantheon of ancient Rome as he was associated with the transition between the past and the present and between war and peace. He was the doorway or the passageways and as per tradition he held a staff in his right hand to guide the travellers along the right path. Moreover, the poet Martial described Janus as the "progenitor and father of years".

Hate is essentially destructive and it reminds us that Love and Justice are vital for human survival. Love and Justice make us to commit to rebuild human society wherever there is strife. Re-imagining the future of human society requires honest efforts. Through his back eyes, Janus could look back at the destruction caused by hate, whereas his front eyes are pointing towards peace, hope, fraternity and equality.

The year 2022 is also significant for us as the State is embarking on the 50th year of Statehood, but where have we reached? And where do we go from here? Nonetheless, I pay my utmost respects to the forebearers of the statehood movement. It is the fruit of their sweat and sacrifice that we are feasting today. In fact, we are destroying what the forebearers had built. From the environment to economy, to social and gender justice everything is in a shambles. We have contaminated the polity with corruption, criminality and arrogance.

The State Government is in a celebratory mood and there will be fanfare and festivals. But uncertainties also abound and are haunting the State and its citizens, especially the "rangli juki" or the commoners.

Unemployment may facilitate the resurgence of militancy or organized gang activities in the near future. As per the employment survey from January 2018 to November 2021, employment in Meghalaya is in a state of flux. The unemployment rate soared above 10% in March-June 2020 alone. Again it went 5% above between March-July 2021. The Government which is still relied upon as the major employer is plagued by corruption and systemic failure. It took nearly five years for the East Khasi Hills District Selection Commission to appoint all the 300 odd DSC qualified candidates of 2011-12. The District Authority was compelled to accord appointment due to persistent agitations and filing of RTIs by the qualified candidates. Besides, the condition is grim due to low wages and Meghalaya has large numbers of underpaid workers. The problem is exacerbated by the contractualization of the work force and majority of the workers under a labour contractor are underpaid and are being denied their rights.

Communal peace is at stake and is being interrupted frequently in the recent past. Despite having 95% of seats reserved for the Indigenous Tribes in the State Legislature why are we reeling under fear? Indeed, there are issues which need to be acknowledged by every community and also to be addressed sincerely by respecting the historical questions. For example, as concrete and as volatile as the Punjabi Line, the entire society has to acknowledge that the Mazhabi Sikhs and their descendants had been living in the area more or less since the establishment of the British Sanatorium and the inception of Shillong Municipal Station in 1878. Therefore, any plans to redevelop the area or relocate them has to be considered in the light of historical reasons and for the common good. Till date the Government has not given any indication as to what it is going to do with the place? However, as citizens we must make an honest demand for a just and fair solution towards the Mazhabi Sikhs in particular and also the area be used for public good, like building of community creche, hawkers' market, bus bay and community health clinics to name a few.

The historical and anthropological studies have to be given precedence in solving the long and arduous Meghalaya-Assam border conflict. There can be no helicoptered solution to the border conflicts nor will it be solved in a glamorous way as depicted recently. However, genuine solutions can be brought forward by the people and through people to people contact on the ground. It can also be arrived at by improving the livelihoods and well-being of the residents in the borders. Also, by giving palpable support to communities in every aspect.

On the eve of the 50th year of Statehood let us take note, that with the exception of the Land Transfer Act 1971, no other significant laws had been legislated in the State. Of late, two important legislations were adapted and passed viz, the Right to Information and the Lokayukta Act. These two laws also came into being in the State due to public demand led by civil society groups like the Right to Information and Maitshaphrang Movements, KSU, FKJGP, TUR, CSWO etc.

After the passage of the Meghalaya Transfer of Land Regulation Act 1971 there ensued a series of amendments which ultimately led to its total dilution in 1991 with the scheming of the single window policy and the subsequent decision to provide land to the Indian Administrative Services' officers who are serving the State at Rs 1 (one rupee) per square foot. Let me put on record here, in the year 1980-81 sensing the threat of dilution of the Act, Mr Martin Narayan Majaw who was instrumental in framing the Land Law had to convene a public meeting in the capital to voice against the various attempts to amend and dilute the law which he had legislated. Moreover, the single window policy which is still in operation is the most destructive one.

Against the backdrop of the Land Transfer Act, the Socio- Economic Caste Census 2011 painted a rather bleak story about landlessness in tribal Meghalaya. Accordingly, the percentage of landlessness in rural Meghalaya is as high as 76% and this has resulted in huge rural migration which is intrinsically link to failed agricultural governance in the State.

Since long, the tribal community of the State has been expressing fear of being overwhelmed by the majority community. The fear became existential with the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019. However, we must never allow such fears to compel us to subscribe to the politics of hate. Issues can be solved within the provisions of the Constitution and the Constitution of India is transformative and can adapt to conditions evolving in our polity. For instance, the issue of migrant labourers which is covertly or overtly linked to influx, can be best solved by having a robust Inter-State Migrant Labour Regulation Act with equal respect to labour rights, irrespective of caste or community and within the frame work of existing labour laws and the Constitution.

The uncertainty in the health and education sectors is staring at us in the eye. Health issues, including mental health, are eating into citizens' economic well-being, especially the poor. Access to better and affordable health care facility is a far cry in Meghalaya. Every second person has a relative or friend or acquaintance who is diagnosed with Cancer and the increase in cases is worrisome. The rise in infant and maternal mortality rate is going to impact generations. This is also linked to poverty, just like other crimes. When do we end the cycle?

Education is never an interesting field and no one cares about its development except for school building contracts. The State also seems to have abdicated the responsibility to bring forth human development via education. Today, education is a profit-making business.

The State and the people are going to celebrate that dream which was conceived long before Independence. The dream of being self-reliant, autonomous and self-governance within the Constitutional framework. At the same time the stark reality and uncertainties are confronting us.

Elections are also just a year away. If we are still fascinated by the politics of distribution, which means that MLAs or MLAs to-be are up there and everywhere to provide financial or material support for every death, wedding, hospitalization et al, then we are also partakers of the sin of distributional politics which has led us to this present deplorable condition and which is putting the future generations at stake.

Urgent need to strengthen democracy & democratic structure

Hate speeches part of a grand design by rightists

By Arun Srivastava

In its desperation to prove secularism irrelevant and worthless the rightist forces. BJP and RSS, are creating a Frankenstein monster by making the police into an arrogant force that turns democratic institutions into a ramshackle.

The saffron outfits are trying to depict secularism as fragile and uselss, making people believe that it has lost its relevance. BJP and RSS, in their mission to turn India into Hindu Rashtra, are out to prove secularism as worthless and ill-gotten idea.

Just a day ahead of the last day of the year 2021, Kerala BJP president K. Surendran had acknowledged induction of RSS supporters in the state police and said Sangh sympathisers could be found across the spectrum of society. Not only in Kerala in some other states too its cadres are found to be manning police stations. The fact is the governments have become more authoritarian since 2014. As an inevitable consequence, the police, deployed for internal security, have become more authoritarian.

The RSS and BJP leaders have launched a vicious campaign against Nehru and Gandhi who symbolise secularism. Though discrediting secularism has been the prime task of the rightist forces and RSS leaders it acquired a new dimension and pace during the rule of Narendra Modi.

Both RSS and Modi know that unless the images of these two leaders are tarnished and maligned and they proved to be anti-nationals and traitors, the character of the Indian state cannot be changed. The diabolical hate speech against Muslims and the clarion call to mercenary Hindus to kill Muslims are the manifestation of the malicious design to distort the Indian ethics and traditions.

The recent move of the Jammu and Kashmir police to terrorise the people and deny them the right to seek truth has to be seen in that backdrop. Instead of accepting the findings of the SIT about the killing of two businessmen by the state police, Jammu and Kashmir police chief Dilbag Singh accused the political leaders of the Valley of "counting votes on dead bodies". Only a person with sadist mindset could speak such language.

Singh's deputy, inspector-general Vijay Kumar, had already accused a former chief minister of instigating people and told politicians, the families of the victims and media that they had no right to declare a police probe good or bad. Strange is the conduct of the police. Yet to be exonerated of the charge of being the killer, they are behaving like the judge. Obviously this behaviour of the police underlines that the state administration has lost its relevance.

The audacity of the state police is also manifest in the warning of Singh. He told media "Such utterances are violative of the law and may be at some stage, if people will not mend their ways, law will take its own course. Counting votes on dead bodies may be the mission but we will not allow them to succeed". The IG has virtually redefined the entire procedure of law and civil rights. His observation "how somebody who was at a "higher post", "served as CM" and had been in charge of the home department had passed judgement on the probe."

The police have come to acquire power from the blessings and patronage of the Hindu and Hindutva leaders and mercenaries. They are no longer willing to function under a secular and socialist state machinery. The police are no longer content with their present power and authority, they intend to play a more crucial role and control the administrative machinery under the Hindu Rashtra. For them India has already ceased to be a secular state. What is happening in JK is a part of the Hindutva design.

It was the realisation, the unification of politics of Hindutva with the state police and administration surrendering before this combination that forced former chiefs of staff and other veterans including intellectuals and academics to write to the President expressing concern about the implications that hate speeches and genocide.

The desperation of the Hindu bigots to turn India into a Hindu Rashtra is manifest in the call given at the Dharma Sansad (religious parliament) of Hindu mahants, seers and sants in Haridwar on December 18. They instigated them to pick up weapons to kill Muslims. Shockingly neither the prime minister nor home minister nor any other person reacted to this call for genocide. A Muslim group has moved the Supreme Court over hate speech stating that "insulting Prophet Mohammad is akin to attacking the very foundation of Islam". With prosecution in the hands of the State, the Modi government does not prosecute the Hindutva hate-mongers while human rights defenders are placed behind bars. It is absolutely clear that under a deep rooted conspiracy the hate speech has been dropped off the front pages of newspapers. No media channel exposed the design.

Earlier several Supreme Court lawyers wrote to Chief Justice of India R V Ramana urging him to take suo motu cognizance of hate speeches calling for a genocide of Muslims to achieve ethnic cleansing. The letter cited the Dharam Sansad in Haridwar and a meeting in Delhi between December 17 and 19 and named nine persons against whom action should be taken on the basis of videos of their hate speeches. In the letter, the 76 signatories said the comments were not just hate speeches but they "amount to an open call for murder of an entire community".

It is a fact that functioning of the Supreme Court is invariably impacted by the political dispensation. History underlines majoritarian government exercises its influence on the Supreme Court. We have seen how the former CJIs have ducked the political pressures. It is a widely known fact that during Modi's rule the Supreme Court has failed to protect fundamental rights.

The situation has changed somehow during the year 2021, especially since in April 2021 the new Chief Justice of India (CJI), a judge who has been hailed by some as a saviour, took charge of the office. Compared to his predecessors, he is more transparent, participatory, and committed to the right to life and liberty.

CJI Ramana is known for speaking his mind. His observation that the law of sedition belongs to a bygone era is a candid example. His participation at the social events provides a rare glimpse into his mind. For the first time in the judicial history of the country he supported reservations for women in the judiciary and said, "It's a women's right. And they deserve to have it." The time has come for the CJI to intervene and take suo motu cognizance of hate speeches calling for the killing of Muslims. The Haridwar incident is the tip of the iceberg. The presence of a senior BJP leader at the Sansad makes it clear that the rightists are working under a well planned design. Shah in a way was right in saying that "What they are calling for is a full-scale civil war. " Modi government cannot throw 24 crores of Muslims out of India. They are born here, generations of their families have lived here. Mohan Bhagwat and Modi must adopt a rational political line and ensure that their politics of hatred does not destroy India. *(IPA Service)*

Letters to the Editor

Idol vandalism

Editor,

The grotesque incident of vandalism of Mother Kali in Barapathar, Shillong on 2nd January 2022 once again reminds us of the intolerance of some people irrespective of caste, creed and religion. We do expect both the print and electronic media to cover this issue and condemn it nationally. This incident reminds me of the Lalvilla, Laitumkhrah incident in the 1979 Kali Puja episode which people have almost forgotten. Now once again a similar incident by the 'miscreants' (as we call them) is being repeated. The acts of vandalism in Bangladesh during last year's Durga Puja crossed all limits,

We live together in Shillong and amidst the Covid situation people of Meghalaya have shown unity. Such an incident should be condemned by all and the culprits should be punished immediately.

Yours etc.,
Anjan Kumar Das.
Shillong - 6

Why the attack on a Hindu deity?

Editor,

How long will religious minorities in Meghalaya live in fear and trepidation? The question of vandalising an idol of a Hindu deity is not the fundamental question here. An idol is probably made from clay and mud probably and can be substituted with a new one. But the foremost question is that it hurts the religious sentiments of Hindu community as a whole.

Is this the act of Dhimmitude ? Hindus in the state have lived ostrich-like since a long time and are incarcerated into cocoons. They have been subjected to endless trepidation for the last forty odd years.

The life of the people of this religious faith is full of hilarious ruins and combustion, down with bottomless perdition and adamantine chain of infernal fire. The sword of Damocles has been hanging over them interminably. A perilous destiny is longing for them and most of the time hell falls apart. They probably feel like the tyrant obsequious courtier of Dionysius of Syracuse fame. The treacherous muse in the form of destiny could not confer preferences to them.

Of course, the time is ripe for expostulation. Not by useless bravado, instead they should raise their objections about the entire episode with the proper authorities as per the law of the land only.

Yours etc.,
Dibakar Purkayastha,
Bangalore -66

Chinese incursions

Editor,

China's revelation that it has standardised official names for 15 places in Arunachal Pradesh has worsened the already strained relations between India and China. However, the Indian government rejected the renaming of places and declared that the state has always been and will always be an integral part of India. This move comes along with China's new border law. Eight of the 15 places in ''Zangnan''(Chinese name for Arunachal Pradesh) are for inhabited areas, four are for mountains, two for rivers and one for a mountain pass. According to India, assigning invented names to places does not alter reality.

It must be noted that this is not the first time China attempted to rename places in Arunachal Pradesh. After the Dalai Lama's visit to the state in 2017 China had assigned Chinese names in Arunachal Pradesh. With the implementation of China's new border law, India is likely to face more challenges at the northern border. China is likely to come up with more border model villages to be used both for military and civilian purposes. This law will delineate and demarcate territorial boundaries with India and Bhutan. For China, it is a militarised solution to the boundary issue. The law prohibits any party from indulging in any activity in the border area.

The latest move by China comes against the backdrop of the ongoing standoff between India and China at the Line of Actual Control(LAC) in eastern Ladakh. Although the two troops de-escalated from a few friction points, they continue to face each other in other stand-off points in eastern Ladakh. Restoration of relations between the two countries is contingent on sensitivity between the two countries and compliance with past agreements. Provocations and threat will only deteriorate the relations.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS,
Kollam

CM with a heart for the poor!

Editor,

When "brave" "dynamic" leaders are seen to relentlessly beat their own trumpet, engage in shameless image-building by squandering billions of state money, there also dwells a certain Naveen Patnaik silently serving the electorate with utmost responsibility. When the dreaded Phailin hit the Odisha coast in October 2013, Patnaik literally led from the front and saw to it that the people of the coastal regions were transferred to secured buildings in safe distances and sufficient food products, clothes and medicines lasting a week were stocked. Thanks to Patnaik's supreme sense of responsibility towards humanity, Odisha saw minimum loss of human lives despite facing severe natural calamity. Thereafter, whenever severe cyclones are about to approach the Odisha coast; the state Government promptly initiates action to minimise loss of lives. Yet, far from advertising his deeds, Patnaik prefers to remain in the background and carries on his Constitutional duties quietly to serve the electorate of the state sincerely.

When starving, exhausted migrant laborers, originally hailing from Bengal/ Jharkhand/Bihar, were walking through Odisha while returning from South India following instant lockdown nationwide in March 2020; the Government of Patnaik had rendered yeoman's service to those hapless lot by picking them up in buses till the border of Odisha along with setting up kitchens on the way so they do not remain hungry! What an application of balm to the poorest of the poor!

In this perspective, when Patnaik comes forward with coffers of his not-so-prosperous state to financially support Missionaries of Charity; it hardly evokes surprise given his magnanimity. What the State has failed to deliver to the poorest, marginalized and illiterate souls of the country, are instead being served by the Christian missionaries with impeccable service in the sphere of education, health in remotest parts of India! When certain mandarins remain obsessed with religious muscle-flexing offering nothing better than "grand" shrines and corridors, the poor and helpless receive their share of human rights and dignity thanks to the missionaries. Yet, far from remaining indebted to the missionaries rendering unfathomable service towards the much-deprived folks, the concerned authorities are scandalously according step-motherly treatment to them by accusing them of initiating "conversions" and maintaining a stunning silence when they get physically assaulted or when Churches are vandalized!

And now arrives the news of blockade in the path of foreign funds reaching the esteemed institution named Missionaries of Charity whose contribution towards the homeless, lepers, destitute, poor is unfathomable to say the least!

However, amidst this dark intolerant scenario, Naveen Patnaik is that rare beacon of hope and sanity by offering funds from the treasury of Odisha to the Missionaries of Charity. What a gesture of responsibility towards those silent workers and their selfless service who are sacrificing their own lucrative careers, comforts by risking their own lives too in this vitiated environment for the sake of the welfare of the downtrodden! None other than Mother Teresa is surely blessing Naveen Patnaik from on high for his exceptional humanity!

Yours etc.,
Kajal Chatterjee,
Via email

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"Life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated."

--- Confucius

The Shillong Times

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More variants, more worry

THE nation is back to square one, it would appear, in terms of the Covid19 pandemic. Major cities and several states are under curfew-like situations at night and life has come to a halt in some sectors like education. The Third Wave is unfolding. With the Delta variant of the Chinese-induced virus having had a run, Omicron that is steadily spreading in cities and its tally now at around 2000, a fresh task is at hand for the health care sector that had only heaved a sigh of relief for the past couple of months. Hints are that the symptoms would be mild but the General OPs will see a surge of people. Expert view is also that Omicron does not attack vital organs like lungs and there would be less of a requirement for ICU beds or more of oxygen support. This was the advice coming from the World Health Organization that studied the emerging scenario.

By all indications so far, Omicron is less harmful while its rate of spread is faster. Fatalities are few. WHO chief scientist Soumya Swaminathan has taken exception to the penchant to declare curfews at the drop of a hat in city after city. Curfews, she said, have no scientific basis vis-à-vis checking the spread; rather, places of entertainment and the like are where the spread takes place. Air-conditioned rooms are also seen to be helping in the spread. Travel at night has no correlation to the spread of the virus other than that curfew on this count is a way of paralyzing public life. Notably, China had started with curfews when the first Covid wave erupted there and it is doing so selectively even now. But it is also taking several other effective measures to check the spread, whereas Covid guidelines like wearing masks etc are widely flouted by the people here.

A more worrisome fact today is that the saga will continue for a longer term, seriously affecting public life across the world. While WHO says this year could hopefully see an end to the Covid19's run, fact is also that new variants are emerging and arriving here just as Indian variants have gone to other nations. Scientists in France this week identified a new variant with more mutations than Omicron. As epidemiologist Eric Feigi-Ding stated, variants might not be a worry, but 'variants of concern' are, like Omicron; and more such are bound to be in the pipeline. The world would now have to learn to live with situations and yet keep life ticking.

Growing Majoritarianism

Where is society heading?

By Dhurjati Mukherjee

Political analysts have rightly warned that that the majoritarian State that we are presently heading towards has virtually pushed minorities to different forms of sufferance outside the protection of the rule of law. Such a system has tragically sent a feeling among the ethnic majority to feel vicariously superior to a vulnerable underclass.

The majoritarian crisis resulting in hate speeches and alienating the minorities, especially Muslims motivated Supreme Court lawyers in late December to write to the Chief Justice of India urging him to take suo motu cognisance of such speeches calling for a genocide of Muslims to achieve ethnic cleansing. The letter cited the Dharam Sansad in Haridwar and a meeting in Delhi (between December 17 and 19) and named nine persons against whom action should be taken on the basis of videos of their hate speeches. In the letter, the 76 signatories pointed out that hate speeches "amount to an open call for murder of the entire community" adding that they "pose a grave threat not just to the unity and integrity of our country but also endanger the lives of millions of Muslims citizens". It called for judicial intervention to prevent such events that seem to have become the order of the day.

The Hindu victimhood argument empowers them to define Hindus as a powerless majority, while the slogan 'sabka saath, sabka vikas' offers them an opportunity to avoid any discussion on specific issues and concerns of numerically inferior and marginalised groups – the minorities such as Muslims. The dominant discourse of politics is deeply embedded in identity-centric imaginations. The political class is shamelessly violating secular principles. Religion and caste are being celebrated in the name of people's sentiments. No political party is interested in serious public discussion on economic inequalities – the growing division between the rich and the poor.

In India, though the Citizenship Amendment Act may provide amnesty to all migrants but not Muslims, and create a modern inquisition where this community will be called upon to document their claim to India. In a reversal of the foundational principle of Indian law, they will have to prove their citizenship criteria. In one stroke, India's Muslims will be cast into the same void the Rohingya endured in independent Burma. The road to majoritarianism is a gradual one, which the present government is aiming for. Obviously, this aim is aimed towards electoral gains as the Sangh Parivar wants to prove that they are the saviours of Hinduism.

is what we have in India is contextual communalism that is linked to local history and memory of violence between communities in the past and contemporary cultural differences. What the Sangh Parivar does is offer selective tendering of history that can propel the consolidation of a majoritarian Hindu identity. But in the process, individual welfare is being sacrificed and communitarian bonds are not allowed to be

Today riots and violence have become part of policy, a way of achieving and consolidating power. Minorities, specially Muslims, are harassed and brutal force is used against them. Violence to the body and the body politic is accompanied by a post Orwellian language. In fact, the whole question of citizenship has been the biggest casualty of the regime as the informal worker, migrant, farmer and even academics and dissenters becomes less equal and subjected to harassment in different ways – economic, social and political.

Delving into the problem, it can safely be said that Hindutva and majoritarianism precisely wishes to move beyond the complexity and select rendering of history to an irrational hatred of Muslims. Such hatred may find hegemonic justification for the xenophobic exclusion of religious minorities. Violence would then not depend on organised riots but the break-up of society would lead to utter chaos, conflicts perpetrated naturally and spontaneously.

The growing discourse of growing Islamophobia has demonstrated that hatred against Muslims in the country is rampant and institutionalised. The reality developed.

Merely because Muslims have been associated with violence in the course of history, they cannot be blamed now. The Hindutva ecosystem depends on a legitimate entry point and the rendering of the past gives them an excellent opportunity. Instead of taking recourse to Islamophobia, secular democratic forces need to re-focus on the roots of communalism and look for means of burying the memories of violence between religious communities in the past and resist it in the present. The distortion of history by the Sangh Parivar has elicited global outcry and there is need to rectify this.

One may ponder here whether this majoritarianism is an offshoot of autocracy and totalitarianism. On the one hand, there is centralisation of powers at all levels – not just at the Centre but also in the States – and the offshoot of this is the Hindutva project where the government is reportedly glorifying Hindus and projecting Hindu culture. But are they actually doing so?

They are only dividing the community, thereby destroying social cohesion and goodwill. One may mention here that the line of Hinduism, preached and practised by the Sangh Parivar, is radically different from that envisaged by Swami Vivekananda. He talked of unity of all religions and inculcating a communitarian spirit for people to live in peace and happiness. According to him, Hinduism is not strictly a way of life where people from diverse fields of opinion could come and work together for human welfare.

Democracy has to be reinvented because the regime is enforcing a particular variant of authoritarian electoralism and claiming legitimacy. But how does this happen? People have to be educated and made aware of social norms and regulations as also their rights and duties in a democratic society. Moreover, they have to be educated about what religion is and the fact that there is no animosity among religions. The so-called religious protagonists mostly misinterpret religion to show that their religion is superior and protector of mankind. Then only can civil society at the grass-root level stand up against the challenge of centralism and forced decisions from above.

For a healthy society, communitarian bonds and grass-root cooperation are essential tenets for human happiness to flourish. If people cannot mix freely with individuals and neighbours as friends, how can society grow and develop? It needs to be reiterated that first and foremost we are individuals and the religious and/or caste identity comes much later. In modern times where science and technology is the focus of attention, religion and caste comes much later and should not be allowed to pollute society. But do our leaders realise this?

Modern trends in society with a pro-rich, pro-religion outlook do not possibly believe in how the masses can live a happy and contented life. Dividing people may help political parties to achieve electoral gains but cannot help make society stronger and healthier. Is it not a fact that due to this, the fellow-feeling and bondage between people is breaking up? Is it not time that instead of harping on majoritarianism, the political leaders should think of human welfare and try to develop bonds between people right from the grass-root level?---*INFA*

Poll on schedule is a sure-shot superspreader

Need to evolve safer election campaigns

By Kalyani Shankar

Many people doubt whether it is necessary to hold the upcoming Assembly polls in the poll-bound states next month or postpone, as the Allahabad High Court has suggested. During the earlier round of elections this year, another court- the Madras High Court- had held the Election Commission "irresponsible" for conducting the polls during the pandemic. Some argue that, after all, there are precedents of postponement of polls earlier while former Chief Election Commissioner S.Y Quereshi thinks constitutionally it is not possible.

With the scheduled elections in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Goa, Manipur, and Uttarakhand next month, it is clear that people can escape the killer Covid only if Election Commission guidelines are strictly enforced.

World over about 70 countries have postponed their elections due to Covid. Forty-two countries have postponed national elections and referendum. Even if the Commission could not delay the polls as the political parties want to stick to the schedule, can the Commission at least ban the super spreader poll rallies?

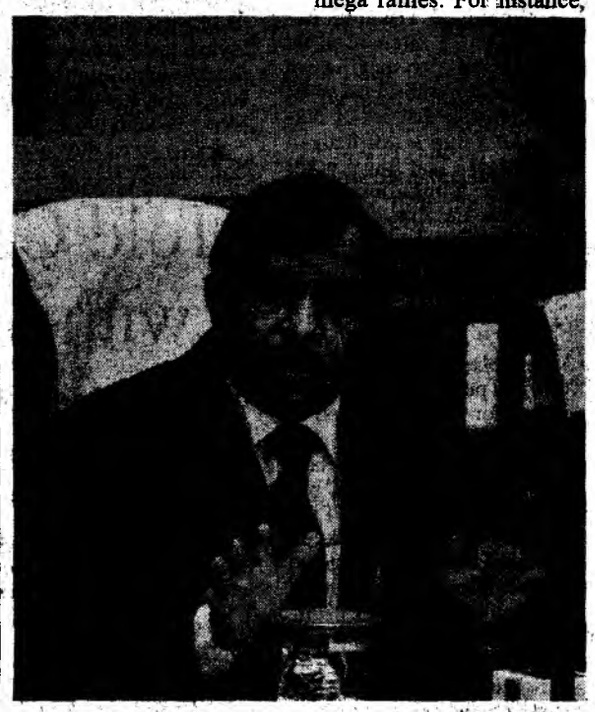
The poll panel decided to hold elections last week after discussing with all the stakeholders. Undoubtedly, the March- April elections last year have taught us a lesson as they had resulted in a massive increase of Covid cases in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and other poll-bound states. From April 1 to 14, corona cases increased by 532 percent in Assam, 420 percent in West Bengal, 165 percent in Puducherry, 159 percent in Tamil Nadu, and 103 percent in Kerala, according to official figures.

In the past few months, India had lifted mainly restrictions on public gatherings, travel and public spaces as infections fell. However, the new variant Omicron is spreading fast. Covid cases in several states have been rising, and the third wave may peak around February. It is compounded by the fact that many people have stopped wearing face masks, are getting tested less frequently than before, and congregate in large numbers.

Explaining the decision, Chief Election Commissioner Sushil Chandra said recently: "I have been told that 86 per cent of people in the state (UP) have got the first dose and 49 per cent the second shot of Covid vaccine. We have been assured that in 15 to 20 days, all eligible people will get their first dose. We have asked for increasing vaccination."

The Commission has decided to increase the voting time by an hour to make the voting easy, assuring that all poll officials on duty would be fully vaccinated. The poll body will reach out to the doorsteps of those who cannot come to the polling booth to vote. Additionally, live webcasting facilities will be available at around 1 lakh voting booths to ensure transparency in the election process. Chandra said because of the pandemic, the number of polling booths in the state would be increased by 11,000 to maintain proper social distancing.

While the poll-bound states have taken many steps to check the pandemic, party leaders, however, enjoy addressing massive rallies. As parties scramble for votes, politicians are not the shining examples of covid regulations like wearing masks and keeping social distance. They are brazenly going ahead with plans for mega rallies. For instance,



Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav's Unnao rally, Union Home Minister Amit Shah's roadshow in Hardoi, and Priyanka Gandhi's women's march drew massive crowds. The most prominent state among the five election states, Uttar Pradesh, has been declared a corona-affected state. Some people wonder that when the government has put regulations for inviting the number of guests for weddings and other celebrations and cinema halls are shut, why poll rallies are not regulated?

Can the nature of poll campaigns change? Most parties are now active in social media and use WhatsApp and mobile communication besides the TV ads. A Digital campaign is also an option.

Due to the efforts of the Union and state governments, we have controlled the pandemic to a great extent. But no one knows the trajectory of the Omicron variant. The government machinery is on high alert, but people have to obey government regulations like wearing the mast, keeping the social distance, and avoiding crowded places.

If Omicron spreads further, as it has in the United States and Europe, political parties have an equal share of the blame. In any case, all those who come to listen to their netas do not always vote for the party. If wiser counsels prevail, leaders might opt for virtual rallies and other methods of digital communication. Ideally, the nature of poll campaigns must also change, and the political fraternity, should come together and think of safe campaigning methods. Above all, it is for the people to comply with covid regulations as the government alone cannot do everything to contain the pandemic. *(IPA Service)*

Letters to the Editor

Idol vandalism should be condemned

Editor,

Apropos the two letters viz ' Idol vandalism ' by Anjan Kumar Das and ' Why the attack on a Hindu deity' by Dibakar Purkayastha, the condemnation should be joined in chorus by all who believe in the freedom of religious expression and the rule of the Constitution. In the same way that Christians are hurt when the crucifix was smashed; the St Joseph's school holding examination for its pupils was hurled with stones or the wife and the daughters of the pastor who died of Covid last year, were thrashed etc., Christians too are morally bound to condemn equivocally the vandalism on their symbols.

That said, my fervent prayer to all is not to seek vengeance at what is happening in our country. As Christians we believe in one verse from the Bible that says, "Vengeance is mine says the [illegible] repay (Romans [illegible] important to [illegible] both [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

"There is only one thing in life worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."

—Oscar Wilde

The Shillong Times

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Meghalaya loses a musical gem

THE shocking news of the passing away of Neil Nongkynrih, the founder director, Shillong Chamber Choir has shocked the world of music. That this should happen on Meghalaya's fiftieth birthday makes the loss even more tragic. Music has no barriers and Neil connected so seamlessly with his varied musical genre to a range of people across the world. Indeed, the world is poorer by one more versatile genius and as such don't walk this earth too often. Having mastered the art of writing music early in life Neil mentored the Shillong Chamber Choir that are now established as a formidable group that can take the stage anywhere by storm. Having won the tough India's Got Talent competition in 2010, there was no turning back for Neil and the Choir. They just surged ahead to win the hearts of whoever listened to them.

Neil Nongkynrih and the Choir were composing the music for Meghalaya's 50th year but without him to lead the Choir and inspire it, the journey would, for now be almost unbearable. But it is because Neil had portends of an early demise that he built up leaders who could stand their ground amidst great challenges. There have been many occasions when the Shillong Chamber Choir performed without their director but they still managed to wow the audience. That is real leadership where second rung leaders are built to take on the baton after the leader passes on.

For the Shillong Chamber Choir it has not been an easy journey. Discipline, hard work, rigour and mental and emotional strength all go into producing good music. It may look easy to the audience but the sleepless nights and rigorous practice over weeks and months is what people don't see. Far from being a lamourous job to be part of the Choir is also to learn team spirit. Neil Nongkynrih has trained his team to pursue a selfless life and to give their best. This sort of grooming is what will stand the Choir in good stead in the days to come. In fact the Shillong Chamber Choir represents the best leadership model – it's the model of servant-leadership which is in fact biblical. Leaders don't command others to do what they don't do themselves. Leaders lead by example. Neil Nongkynrih did that and made everything look easy. But only those who know the journey of the Choir would know the rough edges. It is this journey that must be documented for posterity. On a dark Wednesday, Meghalaya has lost a legend but legends live in the minds and hearts of people and continue to inspire well beyond their lifetime.

Governance in Meghalaya: A Chaos

By Batskhem Mawlein

Hello fellow citizens, let's think together about the issue of governance in the state. To begin with, what is of significance is who we are? Why are we silent? Are we OK? Where are we heading? What will be the future of the youth? Will the government be responsible?

Since the beginning of the MDA government led by NPP, the ordinary people of the state became the victim of its multifaceted ideologies of blaming others for whatever happened. The people are dissatisfied, making them awake from silence to react with resentment on the variety of malpractices in governance against those who have given them power. The time has come for people of the state to realize the victimization they are subjected to. Now th-eye are ready to move out of their comfort zones to unite, struggle, and fight together to get their rights, justice, and freedom as enshrined in the Constitution of India. If the government had failed people from time to time, it could not be considered the sole source of every decision. We believe people are the sole authority in any decision about human affairs. If the government misused its given power, the people have every right to protest against it in response to its wrong moves.

In governance, corruption is often considered one of the most unethical actions, and it has become the legitimate activities of many, if not all, in the present scenario. Corruption's inherent basis weakens practically all of a free democracy's procedures and aims while creating a high level of resentment among the poor; it disturbs the peace and creates confusion among the government and residents. Corruption in the government sector is strongly linked to a lack of stability during changes. But despite MDA's strength, corruption is widespread in the present government. It leads to painful circumstances as few researchers in social sciences, Tanzi, Kaufman, Wei, Goel, and Nelson have asserted. Their contention is that bureaucratic nightmares, government interference in the financial sectors, restrictions, and licensing allows the officers to check the economic activities to form a monopolistic power. It is discovered that the size of local public expenditure reflects the deteriorating position of the government. Although, it shows that socio-economic and cultural factors play a role in the extent of corruption in the public sector.

Another problem with Meghalaya is that business people entering politics have disfigured politics' striking symbol, representation, and meaning. There would be a purpose why so many saloons in the Wild West stated "no-politics" as a rule set: they didn't appear to have a blended combination like oil and water. The same might be true about businesses and their owners' and political parties in the state. For instance, there was a widespread catchword when Trump lost the election in the recent past, "Trump's leaving office now – and businessmen are leaving him. Can his toxic brand survive?" Perhaps, this is not what Trump had in mind when he stood for President of the United States. It would be the best lesson to learn about mixing politics and business from the West. Consequently, the business owner might fail, lose clients, reduce their fortune, and result in "market failure" and "state failure."

Most business people lack socio-political, administrative, and legal training and may not be well able to participate in the political process. Businesses often hire lobbyists who specialize in pushing government policy on subjects that are important to them. Business is too self-centered to care about the general good since its primary goal is to generate money. In the 1970s, for illustration, a major fast-food corporation donated a quarter-million dollars to President Richard Nixon's reelection bid. In exchange, the firm was allowed to frame laws allowing fast food outlets to pay adolescent laborers 20% below minimum wage.

It's hazardous to blend business with politics since it pushes personal preferences. It's a shambles, potentially lands the industry in heated air. Glancing at and studying the situation in Meghalaya, we can see that many business people who engage in local politics have failed to legislate for the general well-being of the citizens. Consider how many outstanding contributions they had made to the state due to their governmental positions. For instance, different Indian social organizations had assessed the state on various grounds; where are we heading regarding cleanliness, education, and poverty. The state is at the bottom of the lists; where will the MDA lead the people? On the other hand, politicians are still eager to welcome, integrate, and engage them to benefit themselves and encourage participation in manipulative politics for two-sided benefits.

Corruption has an influence that extends far beyond the corrupt people and the unfortunate coworkers who are entangled therein. Meghalaya's young people are crying for employment; the poor do not get access to proper medical facilities. Ordinary people who suffered from Covid-19 are in debt. Rural areas have no access to roads; parents are weeping because they can't pay their children's school fees. Teachers feed their children without salary for months; high inflation continues to skyrocket and drains public money overall. People believe there is a hidden agenda of the Government as these occurred synchronously. The MDA Govt. likes to blame others for their wrong deeds and even blame the Government of India for their failures. Oh! What a shame for the state government. As one of the senior BJP leaders stated, "they go to Delhi to get Meghalaya's funds every time with begging bowls." In the name of DEVELOPMENT and COVID, money is spent from all sources along with the central compensation availed. They are using public money by giving it to a few pockets at the cost of the people's plight.

The people of Meghalaya should demand that the government should develop a relationship of trust among people. The government is to empower state residents to help keep governance accountable. Effective law enforcement must ensure that the corrupt are punished so as to break the cycle of lawlessness or the freedom from punishment or loss. Encouragement of openness boosts public sector efficiency while promoting citizens involvement in a state.

The political conflicts of interest recently merged with a few politicians' selfish ambitions. This current political scenario is ridiculous and has worsened the situation. The drama is that in Meghalaya, there is no opposition party to openly voice corruption in government. We the people are the opposition, as one of the senior Congress leaders recently stated. The ideology of the NPP wins at last, others like the Congress, BJP, AITC, UDP, HSPDP, and PDF are mute spectator of the crucial drama. Meghalaya, more than any state in India, suffered the worst. The trend is dangerous; everybody likes those they consider Bosses for personal interests. The BOSS is different from the LEADER. The Boss commands and controls the Leader leads. We need LEADERS; Time has its course to stamp out the oppressors. Bette Davis once said, "If everyone likes you, you're not doing what is right." Many of whom we term as leaders are professional manipulators. Politicians should be aware that the agenda of greed has poisoned human souls.

In our daily lives, we are constantly changing. We change the channels on our TV screen, change dresses, hobbies and so forth. These changes are minor and widespread; yet, significant changes, such as changing the government's leadership, are rare but full of possibility. If we believe that it is possible, it is possible. Once the belief system changes, the political game in Meghalaya can easily change. The state's people desire a political change, and it is conceivable. When a group of people believes that the government maltreats them and does not support them, while the government believes what they're doing is OK, the tension between citizens and the government emerges. The public must embrace the imposed way of life, or the government must be convinced to do things differently to restore harmony in our society. These are politicians and cannot be designated as leaders.

On true leadership, Myles Munroe's famous quotation says, "Leadership is the capacity to influence others through inspiration, motivated by a passion, generated by a vision, produced by a conviction, ignited by a purpose." Do all our present politicians in Meghalaya qualify at least on one of these qualities? These challenges can be overcome if we are serious as people of the state. Leadership appeals to hope, faith, and success for a better Meghalaya. I conclude with this humble request to all responsible citizens to reason together with J.S. Mill's quote, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Silence is the enemy of democracy!

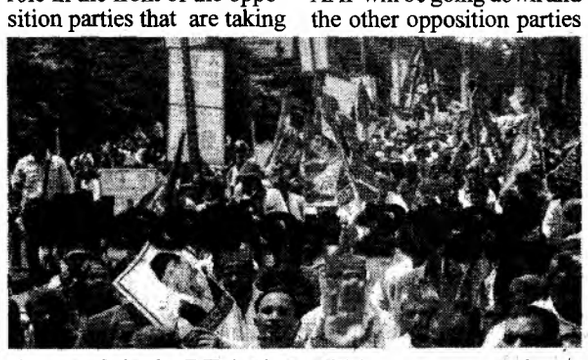
2022 Assembly Election outcomes to determine Congress role in opposition

By Nitya Chakraborty

The year 2021 ended with a significant outcome of civic polls in Chandigarh where the Aam Admi Party (AAP) emerged as the single largest party pushing the ruling BJP to the second and the Congress to the third position. This was followed by a survey of Times Now projecting AAP as the single largest party in the new assembly in Punjab, followed by the Congress while the Akalis and the BJP-Amarinder combination will be far behind.

The Times Now projection in its survey may be a bit optimistic but the signs are clear that AAP is making inroads among the electorate in Punjab on the eve of the 117 member assembly poll in February/March this year and that has ominous signal for the Congress which is the ruling party in the state and has won convincingly in the recent elections to the rural and urban bodies placing Akalis and BJP far behind. AAP could not do well in these polls.

For Congress, among the five states which are going to assembly elections in the next two months, Punjab is the only state the party is ruling. All other four states- Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Goa and Manipur, are ruled by the BJP. So for the Congress led by de facto president Rahul Gandhi, the retaining of Punjab is a must if the GOP wants to play any dominating role in the front of the opposition parties that are taking



shape to fight the BJP in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. If Congress by any means loses Punjab or even fails to get majority, that will give a big jolt to its stature and bargaining power with the other leading regional parties which are having better strike rate against the BJP compared to the Congress.

In fact, this issue of the Congress losing against the BJP where the competition is between these two national parties, is the root cause that has led the West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee to take on the Congress and challenging its supremacy as the natural leader. Sharad Pawar is also equally jittery that the Congress is not doing enough to defeat BJP in the states where it is the main challenger. In the assembly elections, the scenario is changed compared to the last assembly elections as the other regional parties are in the fray and in Goa, Uttarakhand, and Manipur, Congress, though remains as the main opposition party against BJP, has been losing its base.

In Goa, the Congress legislators number has been reduced to two now and both Trinamool and the AAP are posing as challengers to both the Congress and the BJP.. It is not clear whether Trinamool will have an alliance with AAP, but there are reasons to believe that both these new comers have created some big hype in the political landscape of the tiny state of Goa. Whether this will be translated to enough votes, remains to be seen. But the problem for the Congress is that the Party has not taken enough organisational steps to rejuvenate the party in the state and challenge the ruling BJP. P. Chidambaram is in charge of Goa from the Congress high command but his efforts have met limited success in tapping new support base in the state to make up its recent loss.

Similarly in Uttarakhand, AAP is making moves and putting all focus on about ten constituencies. This will hit both the Congress and the BJP as AAP campaigners are saying that their target is the disillusioned voters from both the two national parties. It is a tough task for Harish Rawat to ensure Congress win though there is big resentment against the ruling BJP. Congress has to mobilise more resources in the coming weeks to improve its position as the BJP is flush with funds. In Manipur also, the Congress has taken no major initiatives and political observers say that the state party is already having the feeling that it can not win.

The present mood of the Congress workers in the five poll bound states has to drastically change if the Congress has to get back one or two states out of the three smaller states. In Uttar Pradesh, still the Congress is far behind the Samajwadi Party though Priyanka Gandhi has certainly galvanised the women of the state by a number of programmes. SP has been far ahead in organisation and campaigning. Even if the SP may not finally beat BJP, the contest will be tough. The Congress has not that organisational muscle to take on SP and BJP and the performance may not show more than a few seats.

That is the real problem with the Congress at the moment. If the Party fails to get back at least one state, apart from Punjab in the coming assembly elections, Congress's bargaining power against the regional parties including Trinamool and AAP will be going down and the other opposition parties will be more responsive to the strategy of the TMC supremo. But if the Congress does really well, the mood will change and the Congress will emerge as the leading driver of the front of the opposition forces. It is true that there can be no opposition front against the BJP without the Congress but for that the Congress will have to increase substantially its striking power against the BJP in the coming assembly elections.

The Congress claims that the Party is in direct fight with the BJP in around 250 seats and it is the only national party, apart from BJP to have roots in every village of the country. That is true, But the 2019 and 2014 election results show that the BJP achieved most success in the seats where it fought Congress directly. In 2019 Lok Sabha polls, figures show that the Congress won only six seats out of the 250 direct fights and that was one of the major reasons for the massive victory of the saffrons. The regional parties, especially did much much better and that included the TRS of Telangana, YSRCP of Andhra Pradesh, and BJD in Odisha which are outside the anti-BJP opposition front, but now showing signs of aligning with anti-BJP regional combination.

Congress has to take note of this stance of the three regional parties which may not like to align with the Congress but may be part of the wider combination against the BJP for 2024 Lok Sabha polls. The opposition parties, taking into account the outcome of the assembly polls must harness their efforts to shape the unity of the opposition parties keeping scope for the participation of the TRS, YSRCP and BJD. The front has to be much wider than UPA to take on Narendra Modi in the 2024 polls. There has to be a solid unity of the regional parties and the Congress and both sides must recognise the ground realities. A combined leadership guided by the veteran like Sharad Pawar can emerge after the assembly elections to chart out detailed programme and roadmap for 2024 poll. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Why the high numbers of school drop-outs?

Editor,

The results of the SSLC selection Test Examination 2021 is pathetic as it brings unbearable emotional distress both for failed students and their parents as well. Classes begins with effect from 1st November 2021 and the Selection Test Examination commenced from mid-November 2021. Teachers somehow managed classes super fast making an attempt to cover up at least 50-60% of the entire course whereas students of diverse mental abilities could not cope up with the pressure and workload. That happened mainly in rural areas of Garo Hills. It was the heaviest burden to the students to cover up the 60% syllabi within two months. It was beyond limits for more than 50% of the students. About 50 – 60 % failure of students in many schools of Garo Hills, in my conjecture, may not be because of their laziness, sluggishness, slothfulness or because they are born brainless, mindless unlike their counterparts from urban areas. There must be some ground realities for the high number of school drop outs - more than 50% in my conjecture. It may be the time factor. When the number of school drop -outs is high, anti-social activities in the society goes up proportionately. The school that produces very high pass percentage but very high number of school drop outs, may not be called a "Good School." I love my poor students who failed. I am on their side. More than 50% of the failed students have been deprived of their rights and I feel pained for them and their parents.

Yours etc.,
Kenedy G. Momin,
Principal , Dilma Apal,
Higher Secondary School
North Garo Hills.

Voices of disunity

Editor

The recent alleged desecration of idols in a place of worship is uncalled and a reprehensible act of trying to create a wedge in a peaceful place like Shillong. The action by such elements demands an immediate attention by law enforcement authorities to prevent any further escalation. However, it is also discerning that the groups who protested this alleged desecration have chosen to remain mum on the same subject when it comes to a similar situation being carried out in BJP ruled states on religious places of Christians. Why they have not lent their voices or protested on an equal platform is ironic. Anti-social elements will always have an advantage if society irrespective of religion and faith or caste and creed are disunited to condemn all acts of vandalism on places of worship.

Yours etc..
Dominic Stadlin
Wankhar,
Via email

An uncaring public!

Editor

In view of the surge in Covid-19 cases in the country and the advent of the new variant Omicron, the Government has come out with the guidelines/advisories for the citizens to follow to avert the effect of the viruses. It will not be out of place to mention here that similar guidelines were issued by the Government umpteen times in the past but the citizens seems to defy them as if they are totally immune to the viruses. We see people loitering or walking in business complexes without masks and also no social distancing as per the advisories. It seems that the advisories have no impact on people.

Unless and until stringent measures like imposing fines and warnings the citizens will not adhere to the advisories. It is seen that as soon as there is a decline in Covid cases citizens become slack which them leads to a surge in cases. It seems that citizens have not understood the adverse effects

Another cause of increasing numbers is the hesitation by people to get vaccinated with the Covishield or Covaxin vaccines. It is a wise step by the Central Government to vaccinate youths within the age of 15 to 18 years and it is hoped that these youths will not succumb to the threats of the viruses and should also observe the guidelines and advisories like wearing of masks and maintaining social distancing. The introduction of RT-PCR should be adhered to till the effect of the viruses subside.

It will be difficult for the Government to overcome the economic hurdles as Covid hampers the functioning of industries like tourism etc., but the welfare of the people is a priority. There may be shortfall in the revenue but that should not be a deterrent to Government as it had already lost crores of rupees in various scams in the past as revealed by the CAG.

However, let us hope for the better days to come so that Meghalaya can be a vibrant state in this 50th year of statehood with the cooperation of one and all without any discrimination.

Yours etc.,
SL Singhania,
President,
Police Bazar Welfare
Society

China at it again!

Editor,

Satellite pictures show that a bridge is being built by the Chinese Army across the Pangong Lake on its side of the Line of Actual Control(LAC). China has been ramping up border infrastructure along the LAC over the years. On the other hand, this bridge-building across the Pangong Lake assumes enormous significance as the new development occurs against the backdrop of the ongoing standoff between India and China at the LAC. It shows China's flagrant disregard for the ongoing diplomatic efforts to defuse tension. Notwithstanding the fact that several rounds of talks between the two armies have not produced concrete results, hopes are high that a resolution to the conflicts can be found.

There is no denying the fact that the bitter hostility between the two armies creates an unprecedented situation. While China pretends to be serious about holding military or diplomatic talks, Chinese forces do not show any hesitancy in grabbing territory within India's side of the LAC. In fact, China's border infrastructure is better than that of India. Earlier India believed that inaccessibility to India's side would deter the Chinese from intruding across the border. Over the years India's approach has changed. Since the Galwan clash, the speed of India's border infrastructure development has increased. A substantial amount of money has been invested in border infrastructure development.

With the construction of the bridge, the Chinese forces can travel easily across the 135- km long lake and threaten India's military position at the LAC. Such infrastructure development by China invalidates the next rounds of military and diplomatic level talks. India and China must put in all efforts to end the conflict between the two countries and explore the avenues where the two countries can cooperate and together contribute for the welfare of the world.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS,
Kollam

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

"Life is all memory, except for the one present moment that goes by you so quickly you hardly catch it going."

--- **Tennessee Williams**

The Shillong Times

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Retreat in Punjab

IT'S a rarest of rare situation – that a highly billed event of a Prime Minister is cancelled, as has happened during Narendra Modi's road trip to Ferozepur on Wednesday. A protest by farmers with "Modi Go Back" placards en-route caused a halt to traffic for over 15 minutes. This was seen as a serious security lapse. Recovering from an initial embarrassment, Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi now says there was more than what meets the eye. He says the cancellation of the meeting had more to do with the poor attendance – some 700 people— where the PM was to lay the foundation stones for some medical infrastructure projects. The Congress party too has cited this as the "hidden reason" behind the PM's about-turn. True, a15-minute delay on the road by itself cannot cause the cancellation of the PM's address. Worse, the PM has also cancelled a rally he was to address in Lucknow later this week, and his office cited "likely rain" as the reason. Put together, this could be a pointer to the shape of things to come in the string of assembly polls expected in February in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and some other states.

The BJP is no great shakes in Punjab though it shared power in the state with the Shiromani Akali Dal in the past, after which power went into the hands of the Congress party. With Captain Amarinder Singh quitting the CM post, exiting from the Congress and forming a party, the Congress too might have lost its steam there. The AAP is on the ascendant in Punjab as is also evident from the Chandigarh civic poll results. Also, the people in the state are evidently not enthused by the foundation-laying tricks in the run-up to the assembly polls.

The cancellation of the Lucknow rally could mean all is not well with the BJP in Uttar Pradesh too. While Yogi Adityanath continues to enjoy considerable clout, the SP of Akhilesh Yadav is also building the electoral tempo in the state. Perceptions are that the halo that surrounded the prime minister is slowly ebbing as his governance now fails to inspire the people. He had won the last Lok Sabha polls in the Hindi belt by virtue, largely, of the Balakot IAF counter-offensive in the aftermath of the Pulwama militant attack on a CRPF convoy. The second term of the Modi governance was plagued by the Covid pandemic, adding to the long phase of inaction on the governance front. Most likely, all these are bound to impact future electoral outcomes.

Shillong Chamber Choir – Neil Nongkynrih's labour of love

By Patricia Mukhim

Much has been written about our very own musical star, Neil Nongkynrih who passed away on Tuesday last. In the digital world, news takes wings and transcends geographical boundaries. Condolences started pouring in and each member of the Shillong Chamber Choir (SCC) had to set aside their personal grief and loss on hold to respond to the messages and queries. The SCC have been in Mumbai since September last to record their magnum opus – a Gospel album under the direction of world-renowned British composer, arranger, orchestrator and conductor in the commercial music field, Nick Ingman. The SCC are witness to many miracles in their lives. One such miracle happened when Nick Ingman offered to do his work pro bono because he was won over by the candour, simplicity and purity of their voices which never fails to captivate the listener. But above all Ingman was deeply inspired by Neil's versatility as a musician.

Neil's tryst with music happened early in life. It was his passion and he found no meaning in pursuing anything else. That's called single-minded devotion. He was fortunate to find sponsors in the UK who supported his journey into the world of music until he returned home in 2001 an accomplished pianist whose fingers work magic on the piano keys. There's nothing more captivating than to watch Neil at the piano. The passion is visible and palpable. That's the power of music!

The Shillong Chamber Choir have come a long way since the first batch performed to a select audience at Pinewood Hotel in 2001. The moment Neil lay his fingers on the keys something came alive and there was no looking back. True, some members of that first batch have moved on but others joined and have remained steadfast for over a decade now. Neil's ability to stitch together the Choir and to nurture them musically, physically and above all spiritually takes a special gift. This aspect is not much known outside of Whispering Pines. For the casual onlooker it appears like everything is hunky dory but only Neil knows how much sweat and tears it has taken to keep afloat a ship with a dozen young people with only music as a common goal but with personalities that were poles apart. Yet the Choir succeeds essentially because it puts music above all else and knows that the harmony in singing comes from a pure soul.

A visit to Whispering Pines is like a pilgrimage from which one always comes away feeling blessed. There is palpable sense of being welcomed and loved; many listening ears and compassionate care.. I recall an occasion in 2013 when the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) had called a 36-hour bandh to protest the visit of the then President of India, Pranab Mukherjee. An organisation named ICARE (Informed Conscious Responsible Existence) of which I was a part, organised a protest meet at Khyndailad. The meet was to provide a platform to daily wage earners to register their protests. Several women domestic workers and daily wage earners used that platform to register their grievance against what they said was their right to work. Neil and the Shillong Chamber Choir were present at that meet to lend their support to ICARE and to the women who took the microphone one by one and spoke up. It was then that the song, "Ko Ri Baieid Jongnga" was born in Neil's heart. He was touched by the poor women who stood up to speak fearlessly. It has taken many years before the song was released this year.

"The Shillong Chamber Choir have come a long way since the first batch performed to a select audience at Pinewood Hotel in 2001. The moment Neil lay his fingers on the keys something came alive and there was no looking back. True, some members of that first batch have moved on but others joined and have remained steadfast for over a decade now."

During the 2018 imbroglio at Them Metor (Punjabi Lane) when several residents from there fled their homes for fear of being attacked and were provided shelter at the Garrison Ground by the army. Neil who personally knew the then GOC, 101 Area General DS Ahuja, called him up and persuaded him to ensure that all those who took shelter at the Ground, particularly the women and children were safe. Gen Ahuja assured him that no harm would befall those who had taken refuge there. Neil loved his own people but was tormented by the intolerance and communalism he witnessed in the city from time to time.

In all of this the Choir was at his side supporting him. Neil would often say that he will not get involved in politics as it is too crass and would kill the softer side of him that creates music, yet he never failed to be moved by the circumstances around him. He and the Choir would be on their knees praying for harmony and for those in the business of governance. The Shillong Chamber Choir is a praying choir and that is why being in their presence is spiritually uplifting.

Meghalaya is a place where every second person can sing and make a name for himself/herself but it takes more than just a good voice and musical talent to produce what the Shillong Chamber Choir has which is to mesmerize the audience. That takes a special inner beauty that shines out on stage. And it also takes a special kind of leader to bring out the best in his team. If Neil is to be remembered it must be above all for having built a second and third rung leadership that can take the Choir forward in his absence today. Sure, the Choir will need an enabling environment where they can step out into that bold new world of entertainment without their larger than life, "Uncle Neil." And yes, the pangs of loss will gnaw at their tender hearts but as the famous rock band Queen sang in their 1991 album 'Inuendo', "The Show Must Go On."

Other ventures that have been established since the pandemic – Uncle's Ark a home delivery service for groceries – which is now running full steam must also carry on as it is a labour of love. Uncle's Ark has been able to employ several young people and part of the proceeds from Uncle's Ark goes towards helping those in need, particularly the elderly. These are activities that have a larger meaning than just sheer entertainment or crass commerce.

Members of the Shillong Chamber Choir can cook, bake, teach and maintain a garden amongst other things. Their farm in Ri Bhoi district produces organic vegetables and fish which are sold through Uncle's Ark.

Neil was so grounded that even while he dined with the high and mighty - with ambassadors, prime ministers, presidents and even royalty, he never once forgot his roots. His greatest desire was to film an opera based on "Ka Sohlyngngem" a Khasi folklore that yet again speaks of a Khasi society that is class conscious and yet which is often thoughtlessly labelled "egalitarian." That angst remains incomplete. The Shillong Chamber Choir should perhaps complete this mission in their own time.

To capture the essence of Neil's personality and how it has rubbed off on the Choir would require a whole book. Someone from Bollywood had once attempted to make a film on the journey of Neil and the Choir but as it often happens the director tried to add a bit of spice to the whole drama so that it becomes a commercial hit. Neil rejected this attempt. He wanted a film on him to be true to life. Alas! Such a film never got made.

Shillong, nay Meghalaya agonises over the loss of a brilliant musician whose forte was his versatility to play around with different genres from opera to classical, pop, rock, folk and Hindustani music. This versatility is why the Shillong Chamber Choir has made a mark for itself. Neil has mentored the Choir to be independent and to strike out a future, should anything befall him. In fact, in conversations with friends Neil often spoke about death in the most graphic manner as if he knew he had a short sojourn on this earth. As humans we say, "Neil has gone too soon," but God the creator says, "Your time has come good and faithful servant," and Neil went obediently without a struggle, leaving us all in shock and pain!

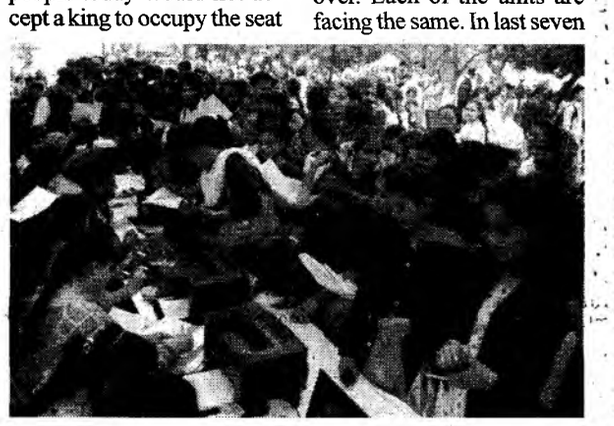
BJP govt's economic agenda has dried up new job opportunities

Unemployment rate hits four month high in December

By Krishna Jha

It is not wanderlust that drives people to places, these days it is replaced by hunger, a force that cannot be staved off. Some time back, the number of migratory labour, retrenched or pushed out, had shocked us with their growing numbers as thousands of men and women, children and the old, had walked through the long, bumpy stretches to arrive at, oh no, not at the green pastures of their dreams, but somewhere with bread. The spectre of hunger still haunts, taking its toll. Jobs are getting fewer every day. Openings are limited, choices scant, and never according to one's skills. One could have done business management and apply for a gardener's job or if one has done a doctorate, one can be a peon in a school. System refuses to open up for those skilled for their expertise, it prefers to let them waste.

Unemployment rate has hit the four month high in December at 7.91 according to CMIE. It has in fact gone up even above the great recession years. But that does not lead to rich getting less rich. They continue to get richer at the same rate. John Sherman, the US senator who got Antitrust Act passed in 1890 had observed that if people today would not accept a king to occupy the seat of power, there can not be any king for production, for transportation, and finally for the market.



Despite this popular creed that led countries some time cut to size those who rise to challenge its autonomy as they get close to power, efforts are made to tame them. Fall of Ali baba was an example of monopoly restrictive practice in China. In United States, there was the instance about Standard Oil and AT and T. In recent past there were in 2020 and 2021 steps taken against Microsoft and Qualcomm for violating the provisions of Sherman Anti Trust Act in US.

These steps were taken not to let the corporate have absolute power over the economy which is anti investment, anti production and hence stands opposite to capitalism. In our country too in 1969, Monopolistic and Restrictive Trade Practices Act, popularly known as MRTP Act "...was brought to provide that operation of the economic system does not result in concentration of economic power in hands of few. It was later repealed and came in its place Competition Act in 2002

It was dilution of MRTP Act that resulted in promotion of corporates like Ambanis and Adanis. But the MRTP remained the first anti-monopoly legislation in the country, to prohibit monopolistic and restrictive trade practices. Today, in contrast to it, in our democracy, we have nursed a king. It is not only the political power he wields, but also that which is inherent in the very basics, the economics. They are no more the invisible rulers, up and above board, they have shielded all the openings, hence they are no more of the people or from them, though by the people they are.

They belong to a whole new class that has swallowed up our all public sector units, small and medium level production units, got hold of banks, and now eying the relatively bigger public sector units, and thus, creating a new setting which is not a form of pure capitalism, since it never goes for investment, and also never needs pluralism, that is democracy. All the major decisions are taken unilaterally. Examples are multiple. Three agrarian laws were passed the same way and after 13 months were repealed also the same way. But MSP and several others have been withheld. They are deeply concerned about the elections, hence the hurry, though they never considered Parliament the summit of people's power. It is their own class interest that ran supreme. And that is now exclusively financialisation.

The recent steps taken by the government towards monetisation prove the same. It is dilution of public sector units, which is now almost over. Each of the units are facing the same. In last seven decades, many heavy industries were built up to cater to the needs of the country like steel units, mining for coal and other essentials. For transportation, roads were built, and for fuel, oil refineries were set up.

All these steps were taken to develop the country's infrastructure, to cater to the basic needs to evolve economy. With public money, the basics of industrial development were built. The tax money of the vast masses were spent to build roads, improve power sector, energy sector, health services, education, and many such initiatives. The selling of these basics mean fragmentation of the economy itself: It does not stop there. With

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It was dilution of MRTP Act that resulted in promotion of corporates like Ambanis and Adanis. But the MRTP remained the first anti-monopoly legislation in the country, to prohibit monopolistic and restrictive trade practices. Today, in contrast to it, in our democracy, we have nursed a king. It is not only the political power he wields, but also that which is inherent in the each sale, the government intends to usurp the entire revenue also.

Imperialism today has moved in a big way against the very productive capacities that sustain it and also the society. So far capitalism had exploited mainly the workers and peasants. For the first time in 20th century, and in particular 21st century, financial capitalism is moving against big, small and medium entrepreneurs also on a massive scale, exploiting them to the maximum. Finance capital is going against the very mode of production which created it.

Contemporary capitalism is characterized by a historical split between productive and finance capital, central to the contemporary crisis of imperialism, creating new bases for the program of democratic shifts in society. *(IPA Service)*

Letters to the Editor

Whom the gods love die young

Editor,

The demise of Neil Nongkynrih has left us grieving. Not just because a precious life has been taken away; the tragedy is so much larger. The Shillong Chamber Choir was the pride of Meghalaya, it gave visibility, respect, and prestige to the musical traditions of our community. Neil's musical genius and flair for classy showmanship melded the music of the northeast with Bollywood pop, and created an irresistible genre that entertained the nation. It provided the best of our youth with a platform to showcase their musical talent.

In one of the poorest states of India, our youth have very little. The miserable state of education ensures high dropout and low employability. They see little hope in their situation, so little to dream about or aspire for. For many, music offers solace, escapism, and maybe hope. For black children in America, sports offers an escape from the ghetto. Perhaps music can do the same for our gifted youth. The success of the Shillong Chamber has shown that it is possible to achieve the extraordinary.

Music, art and poetry are the soul of society. Yet we hardly honour our musical maestros, artistic legends, or literary savants. There are holidays for political personages, freedom fighters and even religious figures. Yet there is no holiday or memorial for Soso Tham or Homiwell Lyngdoh. With our misplaced priorities, we have only deprived ourselves and our children.

With Neil's death the majesty of our music has diminished. What's more, a measure of hope has been lost. But his life and work can be the inspiration for others to emulate his accomplishments.

A verse from Longfellow's poem: "There is a reaper, whose name is death, and, with his sickle keen, he reaps the bearded grain, and the flowers that grow between."

Yours etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor,
Via email

Neil Nongkynrih gone too soon

Editor,

I am really shocked and grieved on learning of the sudden demise of Neil Nongkynrih, a musical icon of Meghalaya who had created a niche for himself and his troupe not only nationally but internationally also. It was not time for his departure from this earthly dwelling where the future held more achievements to his credit. His void can hardly be filled.

I on behalf of the Police Bazar locality send my heartfelt condolences to the members of the bereaved family and in particular to the parents and sister who also is a renowned name in the musical field and to the members of the Shillong Chamber Choir.

I wish Neil eternal peace. May God take this soul in his arms unto eternity.

Yours etc.,
SL Singhania,
President, Police Bazar
Welfare Society
Shillong

Chanda culture in Assam

Editor,

As per media reports, the present Chief Minister of Assam seems to have instructed the Police to take steps to end the "chanda" culture in the State. Bravo!! While voluntary donations may be welcome, forceful or pressure created to donate in cash or in kind is definitely not a good sign.

However, even without a survey, people in Assam, in general, would opine that the organisations and people involved most in forceful donations ("chanda" in local parlance) are within the State Government, be it the Police and others. These are experienced or come to notice to even the most lay person in the State, and an average citizen in the State experiences harassment in dealing with governmental and law-enforcement agencies. Further, many culprits go scot-free, by way of "donations". For the people associated with public life and political life, these are "games" that are played at a different level. That, of course, does not imply that everyone is involved or corrupt.

Our honourable Chief Minister would do well to introspect and cleanse the system within. If that succeeds even to a partial extent, people would have the courage to refuse "chanda". Today, "chanda" culture has developed because many layers, within the Government and outside, work hand-in-hand, so that each one is benefitted, and people do not get the courage to speak out against this culture. This needs to be addressed positively.

Yours etc.,
D Bhutia,
Guwahati - 24

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"Cherish all your happy moments; they make a fine cushion for old age."

--- Booth Tarkington

The Shillong Times

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Covid lessons from the past

SINCE the last two weeks the number of Covid cases have suddenly gone up. The surge is due to several factors, one of which is the entry of the highly infectious Omicron variant of the Coronavirus. While medical experts have said that this variant does not cause serious illness requiring hospitalisation this is no cause for relaxing Covid protocols. Times without number it has been stated that vaccination, especially double vaccination is protective in that while it cannot prevent infection it can reduce the severity of the disease. However, what is troubling about Meghalaya is the resistance to vaccination. As of January 6 only about 26 % of Meghalaya's population has been doubly vaccinated and about 35% have been vaccinated with a single dose. This still leaves out more than half of the population from the vaccination regimen. Many argue that they still got Covid after being doubly vaccinated. Such arguments are contentious because the person making such a statement might not be alive if he/she had not been doubly vaccinated. In any case there was no claim made that vaccination would prevent infection. Vaccination is only a preventive measure.

With the rise in numbers of Covid infection the Government would be called upon to take some steps to ensure that it does not run out of hospital beds, oxygen-connected beds and ICU beds. But this does not warrant a lock-down. That in fact should be the last resort since lockdowns cause immense economic pressure which affects those at the lowest economic rung. Hence declaring a lockdown without due brainstorming and getting the views of community-run institutions is unwarranted. It has been observed that this time around most Covid positive individuals were not so severely affected and were treated at home but with due precautions, following which they recovered.

These experiences must be used to weigh the containment measures undertaken by the government. It has been reiterated by the World Health Organisation and our own national health missions that masking, social distancing and hand sanitising are hugely preventive measures. If these three important protocols are observed by all across the economic spectrum we can expect to beat the Omicron virus. For that to happen, the community-run institutions, including faith-based ones, must come forward and take it upon themselves to urge the community within their jurisdiction to maintain the protocols strictly. It cannot be left to the government to implement the protocols since there is not enough manpower to do so. Individual and collective responsibility will go a long way in containing the spread of Covid be it the Omicron or any other variant.

The unrealized potential of a Khasi bistro

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

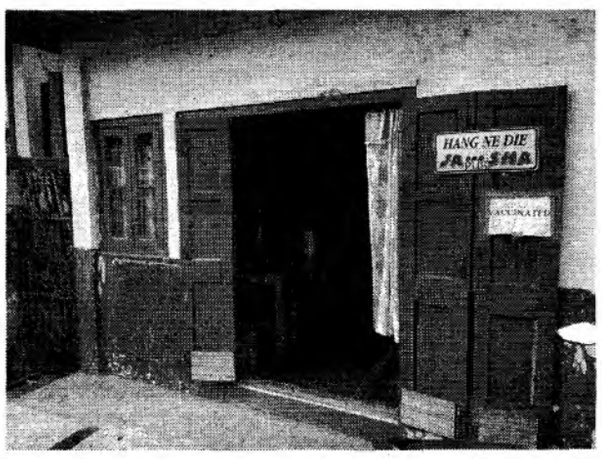
A bistro is a small and simple eatery which provides quick service. The meals are moderately priced so as to meet the needs of a variety of clientele. The food in a bistro is closely linked with the people and the culture of a place. It is a highlighting of the food habits of a particular people. That way, a Khasi Jadoh Stall (serving Khasi cuisine) is basically a bistro in its truest form depicting the culinary arts of a local entrepreneur. Every bistro has its unique selling proposition and signature item. In a Khasi bistro, it is primarily the jadoh (a specialised preparation of rice with meat) and a wide variety of meat preparations which goes with various chutneys. A common call in a Khasi bistro is 'ai da ka jadoh bad ka doh khleh' (give me a serving of the specialised rice and meat preparation). The clientele extends from the high income segments to the lowest income ones. This tells us of the scale and potential of a Khasi bistro. However, many (and even amongst the Khasis) do not give much importance to it. We will hardly come across people talking about it with excitement. If the locals themselves are not excited, what can we expect from the tourist/traveller? It is an unrealized potential. This throws into focus the various nuances of this common but rarely noticed representation of Khasi culture. Where are things going wrong?

To start with, the origins of a bistro can be traced to 19th century France. It took off during and after the Napoleonic wars of the early 19th century with the bistros golden period being the early 20th century till the start of the First World War in 1914. Although the origins of a bistro as a business entity is claimed to have a Russian connection in language/etymology, this is mostly debated and discarded by many researchers (mostly French). Keeping this debate aside, the fact of the matter is that the bistro as an economic sector did contribute a lot to the promotion and marketing of French culture in culinary arts and fine dining. In the case of a Khasi bistro, the journey has been chequered. There are good points to be proud about and there are shortcomings too. These shortcomings have been ignored for far too long and as a result we have a situation of its potential being unrealized, both in terms of cultural promotion and economic returns.

The Khasi cuisine is rich in variety and nutrition. The array of rice, meat, vegetables and chutneys are nourishing for the body and fulfilling for the soul. If we think in terms of a healthy eating habit, a

Khasi bistro is the place to go to. This is something to be proud of and partake from. Amidst this potential, it is frustrating to witness stagnancy and decline of Khasi bistros in recent years.

If we look into the reasons for the struggles and shortcomings of a Khasi bistro, the things that come to the forefront are mostly elementary. Cleanliness and



tidiness is foremost. Many do struggle on this aspect and some do not seem to give any importance to it. The high frequency of consumers eating would also mean adequate attention to repeated cleaning of the enterprise. This is lacking. Food is just one aspect of a bistro, cleanliness and presentation of the enterprise to the clientele is another. In a time where the consumers have become very health conscious, cleanliness is the leading factor in the picking of a bistro. In addition, the service delivery also lacks in many aspects. In small business, soft skill such as communications, problem solving, negotiation, etiquette, etc becomes important. This is what makes the consumers stick with a particular bistro. In general, many Khasi bistros do not factor this. Yes, it is true that we cannot expect all the bistros to operate at a high level of professionalism; but, the minimum level of service quality and soft skills is a must. Sometimes the internal layout of the bistro also becomes a disadvantage. In many cases, the dish washing space is clearly visible to the consumers seated at the tables. It is sort of an awkward situation and if it is not well maintained and clean, it becomes a problem.

As an intervention, if the issues concerning cleanliness, service delivery, soft skills, etc can be taken care of, then it can fairly be argued that the clientele of a Khasi bistro will only increase manifold. As concerned and responsible consumers one must make some time to discuss with the bistros on such issues. 'Make aware, give ideas and motivate' must be the mantra of all consumers to help out. In addition, the youth who are trained in entrepreneurship and small business can take this entire experience of a Khasi bistro to the next level. Being adequately trained, one can expect them to position bistros as one of the beacons of Khasi culture and culinary arts. The possibilities and potentials are immense. Just some dedication and professionalism is required. This way they can compete with the other eateries serving Indian, Chinese, continental cuisines etc. But, the point to be factored here is that without adopting a professional approach to business the Khasi bistro will not be in a position to compete effectively. That way, a lot is expected from the trained youth.

On a very recent trek to Nongriat village (5th January, 2022), it was heartening to see the growth in small businesses as compared to the year 2014. However, in relation to a Khasi bistro the problem remains the same. The representation, attractiveness and service delivery leaves a lot to be desired. This is the main reason as to why our bistros get such a poor response from the tourist. No tourist was giving them any attention. It is high time for concerned citizens and students to create awareness amongst the local entrepreneurs. The trained youth can lead the way by setting up a professional enterprise and show by example. In East Khasi Hills, there is a sizeable presence of Meghalaya Basin Development Authority (MBDA) activities. It would be a good idea if they include training and development programmes involving Khasi bistros so as to work towards realizing the potential of such businesses and entrepreneurs. This similar model may be applied in other areas as well where MBDA has a presence. In addition, tourism societies, learned community members and NGOs may also think in similar lines.

Finally putting a focus on Khasi bistros is a win-win situation both in terms of highlighting culture through food and its culinary arts and the economic returns that can be tapped. Sadly, this remains the unrealized potential of a Khasi bistro. As a reaction to this shortcoming this is a clarion call to the concerned to help start reversing the trend. All that is needed is a little talk and discussion with the bistros. In return, the rewards are not far off!

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

Dealing with Omicron threat requires fresh look at strategy

Health ministry must consult experts and OPT for foolproof package

By Dr. Soma Marla

In May, 2021, Union Minister Prakash Javadekar had announced that Vaccination would be completed by December, 2021. But the fact is that by December 31, 2021 only 63 percent of the adult population could be fully vaccinated. While the monthly average vaccination for September was around 8.1 million doses a day, it fell to 5.4 million in October and 5.7 million in November. A clear sign of loss of tempo and waste of valuable time in pandemic control with missed targets.

This is happening when Metro cities across the nation are witnessing a massive surge in COVID cases. Delhi and Mumbai too have rapidly rising cases and disease positivity rate touching 3.9 mark. A high positivity rate is a clear signal of the beginning of yet another disastrous pandemic. These days universal vaccination and appropriate behaviour are the only options available to avert rapid spread of the Omicron variant of Coronavirus. The central government is to be blamed for its flawed vaccination policy, pseudo scientific cures and its misplaced trust in the private sector with 25 percent of doses. The biased corporate health sector benefiting from 'differential pricing' and flawed vaccine production policies had to be abandoned for free and universal vaccination only after the Central government met with severe criticism and protests from opposition parties and civil groups.

As on December 31, short of year-end target, Only 63 per cent adults got fully vaccinated in India. As of today the only option to avert rapid spread of Omicron and COVID infection is fast tracking universal vaccination (two doses) and strict adherence to COVID behavioural discipline. Total vaccine requirement today would include – Nearly 99 million beneficiaries in the age group of 15-18 years, which will require about 198 million doses (2 doses),about 30 million precautionary doses for healthcare and frontline workers, 142 million precautionary doses for 60+year population and nearly 439.6 million doses for the remaining adult population. Looking at the performance during the pandemic, the private sector was largely ineffective in dealing with the crisis, with instances of profiteering with very high vaccine costs and hospitalization bills. This even made the Central and state governments to invoke powers to curb inhuman profiteering from helpless patients. In short, chief cause for emergence of new COVID variants is Vaccine inequality dictated by profit hungry global multinationals like Pfizer and Moderna. No surprise in capitalism even at times of pandemic, profits stand before human lives.

Achieving complete vaccination goal at least by middle of this year requires boosting vaccine production to full capacity with both vaccine manufacturers, making use of available unutilized production space in the public sector, for instance, Chengalputu Integrated Vaccine complex (Tamil Nadu) and other public sector units. Above all, the government should support and accept the demands of Asha workers, doctors and other health personnel immediately.

As of the last week of December, 2021, civilian vaccination in Africa stood at a meager 20 per cent (single dose). Although many African countries are a major source of gold, diamonds and also rare minerals to Western multinational corporations for manufacturing mobile phones to solar batteries, they remain poor and unable to pay high prices charged by global vaccine firms. Existing vaccine inequality and large tracks of unvaccinated population are the fertile ground for emergence of new COVID variants like Omicron.

In COVID 19 virus cells contain important genome regions that house Spike genes (responsible for entry into lungs, attack human immune system), envelope proteins and immune system compromising genes. Spike gene region is the most vital in infection and its genes get attached to Ece.2 receptors eventually dysfunctioning of lungs. The genes contain DNA acids that are placed like alphabets in a sentence.

In Alpha and Delta variants of non vaccinated people nearly 50 mutations have accumulated. Eventually evolving Omicron variant. Mutations are similar to wrong spelling of words (DNA) in the Spike genes of SARS virus. As genome sequencing facilities are practically on-existent in Africa the accumulated Spike gene mutations that led to new Omicron variants could not be detected early. RNA is extracted from suspected patient blood samples and passed through Illumina or Nanopore genome sequencer machines

Supercomputers are employed to read DNA spelling mistakes compared with original SARS Wuhan virus and mutants identified. Presence of thus identified variants are confirmed using a molecular biology test RTPCR. The whole procedure requires seven to eight hours for detection of Omicron variant infection in suspected patients. Genome sequencing, RTPCR and supercomputing facilities are essential for detection of rapidly emerging SARSCOVID variants and development of vaccines and drugs. In India there are only 10 to 12 laboratories equipped with genome sequencing facilities. One such genome sequencing facility is available in the author's laboratory in ICAR Delhi.

By virtue of gene mutations accumulated in the Omicron genome it spreads four times faster than Alpha and Beta and Delta variants. Another variant 'Demicron' is detected where both Delta and Omicron are together identified in patients.

As of 2nd January, nearly 27,000 new cases including the Omicron variant are reported across the country. Due to the rapid spreading of infection complete vaccination is absolutely necessary to avert the pandemic. Mass organizations and civil society groups should educate people to fast track vaccination. Central government should avoid pseudo science and immediately seek help from various opposition parties, scientists, secular civil society and religious groups to fast track and complete vaccination goals. *(IPA Service) (Author is Principal Scientist (Genomics; retd), ICAR, Delhi).*

Letters to the Editor

3rd Year of Covid-19 Pandemic: A Wise Approach Needed

Editor,

We are entering the third year of the current pandemic with this new covid-19 variant Omicron which is spreading like wild fire across the globe and now detected in our state. However, this time around we expect a different and more balanced approach from the government based on all the experience gathered over the past two years.

On behalf of the daily wage labourers, the students' community, business establishments and the general public, we request the government to take into consideration their well-being and interest before announcing any restrictions and curbs. Since, the past two years so much of hardships have been experienced by everyone because of the lockdown and various restrictions. We have witnessed so much of unemployment and loss of livelihoods, loss of learning opportunities, mental health issues, and a complete standstill of economic activities. Many families and businesses have been over- burdened with huge debts and losses in the past two years.

Recently, in the media we heard the opinions and voices of small shopkeepers and traders at Iewduh about the new restrictions announced by the government; we could feel their frustration and anxiety. I remember in many conversations with some members of the business community, where they expressed their desperation, saying that if ever the third lockdown is imposed again in the near future they will have no options but to close down their businesses and shops. This time many parents too have expressed their reservations of sending their children to school, with the fear that after having paid the full amount of school fees their children, as happened in the last two years, will not be able to go to school and will hardly learn anything. It is to be mentioned here that even UNICEF has admitted that repeated school closure due to Covid-19 resulted in learning loss and alarming inequities in learning opportunities for children, and reiterated "2022 cannot be another year of disrupted learning".

Since, international evidence indicates that the Omicron variant though likely to be more transmissible is less severe than Delta variant and also with reduced risk of hospitalization, I humbly request the Government to have proper consultation with experts so that the various measures to be imposed and their impact and effectiveness be properly evaluated, so that normal life will be least disrupted.

Yours etc.,
Samborlang Dkhar,
Shillong

The battle is not ours

Editor,

Recently a number of letters, articles and editorials have appeared in the print media which were critical of the church leaders and their silence on the atrocities meted out to Christians in states like Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, UP and others, to the extent of vandalising church buildings and burning holy scriptures. Many readers are perhaps waiting for a response to this unjustified outrage and hatred for Christians. What would Jesus have done in such a situation is a moot question. History tells us that He experienced much worse than this even to the extent of death by crucifixtion. How did He respond to His enemies ? He prayed and forgave them for they knew not what they were doing. He laid down the same principles to His followers.

Love your enemies, bless those that curse you, do good to those who hate you and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you. One may be tempted to say, these are hard instructions not relevant in the present age and difficult to follow. But Christians in the early church did and were successful. They encountered terrible times and many died as martyrs under the rule of emperor Nero, the monster of cruelty. The role of Christians in the State is elaborated in the New Testament of the Bible. 'Let everyone render due obedience to those who occupy positions of outstanding authority for there is no authority which is not allotted its place by God... (Rom.13:1-7).This passage is extremely surprising for it seems to counsel absolute obedience on the part of Christians to civil power. In fact it is a command that runs through the New Testament. 'I urge that supplications, prayers, intersessions and thanksgiving be made for all men, for kings and for all those in high position, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way.' wrote apostle Paul (I Tim.2:1-2). Similarly apostle Peter(I Pet.3:13-17) also counseled 'Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish men. Honour all men, love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor.' There was only one occasion when the earlier Christians refused to obey civil authorities when they were prevented from preaching the gospel. They said 'we ought to obey God rather than men'(Acts.5:29).

Apostle Paul did use his privilege as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caeser for a fair trial. There are times when believers must use the law to protect themselves and the ministry. What is more expedient is to let the court take suo moto cognizance or file an FIR and waste time and resources considering the drag-out Indian legal system. However in the long run the battle is not ours but the Lord's.(I Chrno.20:15)

Yours etc.,
Torist Mark,
Via email

No human rights in India!

Editor,

Alas, the 12-year-old Chattisgarh girl didn't succeed in returning home alive! While walking for days from distant Telengana following instant lockdown without notice; starving hungry vulnerable flower Jamalo, working in chilli fields as child labour, collapsed to death few kilometres before reaching her home! Yet not a single teardrop is being shed for her in the "NEW INDIA" basking in the "glory" of "GOOD DAYS"!

In the same vein not even a momentary sigh need to be reserved for the hundreds of the poorest of the poor migrants breathing their last on highways and railway tracks while negotiating hundreds and thousands of kilometers towards home in malnourished state; no mental turbulence should be registered when Junaids to Pehlu Khans meet their last thanks to the "cow-vigilantes" on way home; not even a murmur of protest should arise when Afrazool Khan, migrant worker from Bengal, is burnt to death in Rajasthan by the opposers of mythical "Love Jihad" ! Surely those who had died in inhumanitarian queues in banks to withdraw their own hard-earned money following overnight ban of notes or inside Assam jails on the accusation of being "infiltrators" also held no right to return home safe and sound !

The human right to return alive seems like the monopoly of a few privileged people only.

Yours etc.,
Kajal Chatterjee,
Kolkata -114

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

PHOTOGRAPHY TRENDS DURING COVID

By Sachin Katira

We are going through dynamic behavioural and psychological adjustments to overcome and adapt to the "new normal" of today, with the wave of pandemic still knocking at the world's doors. While the epidemic created a physical barrier between nations, it also gave birth to a new "phygital" world that merged physical and digital paradigms. This new ecology brought us closer to our roots, customs, and families while also demonstrating the potential of cooperation.

We saw new dimensions and behaviours in photography and what society documented as their memories as a result of the rapid changes taking place around the world. Printing your favourite memories has gone a long way, thanks to advances in photo printing technology that make it simple for anyone to make their own printed snapshots. From 2021 to 2028, the global online picture printing market is expected to increase at a CAGR of 6.47 per cent, from USD 13,074.70 million in 2020 to USD 21,082.23 million in 2028. Another important aspect favouring the expansion of this market is an increase in disposable income coupled with a greater willingness to spend on luxury presents.

We saw a few tectonic upheavals in the industry this year and identified several emerging trends that could shape 2022.

Scenic Domestic travels

People can now work from beautiful settings near the sea and mountains thanks to the new era of remote working. This gave the professionals a chance to relax and socialise with friends, family, and even strangers. People took advantage of the opportunity after the lockdowns were removed to explore and appreciate the vastness of the land. As a result, the number of local trip photos printed by families and couples has increased.

COVID baby boom

In the past year, there has been a little increase in the number of children born around the world. In these trying times, families went through an emotional overdrive to find a glimmer of happiness. Photo printing and Photobooks capturing a child's growth path with monthly timestamps have increased in popularity, allowing people to remember about this timeless marvel.

Capturing the radiance of Intimate Weddings

Couples and families resorted to modest, closed-door weddings throughout the year due to prohibitions on public gatherings and celebrations. This prompted the couples to spend more money on recording these memories and having them printed at their own speed, time, and design.

Indoor Celebrations gained momentum

In the midst of the epidemic, celebrations of milestones and events migrated indoors, with closed gatherings and family present. While individuals appreciated small, private parties, they also desired to document these moments and memories. As a result, the business has seen an increase in photo printing for birthday parties, online graduations, and other events.

Reminiscing and Persevering Old Memories

2021 has also been a year of significant throwbacks and reminiscing about the good old days. People had more time to seek for these images and relive those experiences in the first half of 2021, thus they printed more old memories, old vacations, and old events.

Photo Printing Boom in Tier 2&3 Cities

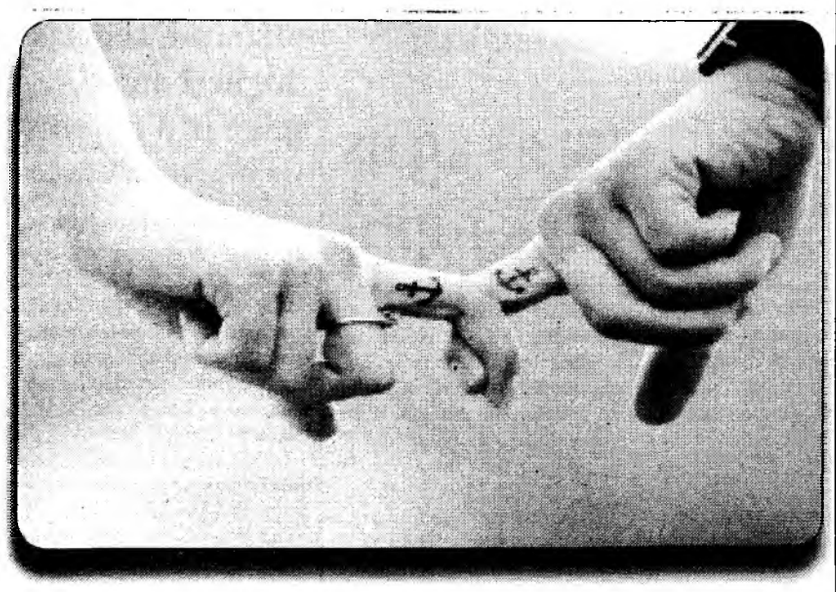
Tier 1 cities had a temporary drop in photo printing during the epidemic, while tier 2 and 3 towns were unaffected. Despite the fact that the country was in the midst of an economic downturn and the printing industry had seen a drop in total orders, the Tier 2 and 3 cities continued to print as usual. Orders from far-flung parts of India, such as war zones and Kashmir's outskirts, have increased, according to the market.

Home Decor becoming the new Hobby

People began to focus on accessorising and re-decorating as work from home became the new normal. People began to devote more time, effort, and money to house decor as they spent more time, effort, and money indoors. Framed Prints for home decor are in high demand, according to the photo printing business.

During the pandemic, the picture printing sector went through a lot of changes, which were prompted by the shifting behavioural and psychological patterns of the end users. Consumers gravitated to images for sustaining dialogues, creating fantastical stories, and enjoying ancient memories that connected them to a stream of eternal feelings, even in the face of such uncertainty.

Social media's impact on perception of love



Many of us don't genuinely compare true love, but we draw similarities from films and television shows. Doesn't that make you think? Do you ever wonder why people seem to have bought into an idea of love, which is designed for amusement?

Social media impacts our perceptions of true love and what it should look like. Let's have a look at some of the tools it employs.

High passion: This is defined as ensuring that your partnership is satisfied every day. It means that both partners are entirely satisfied with their relationship at all times.

Each person is constantly filled with butterflies for the other. This is just one aspect of your union when you truly fall in love and are a member of a solid relationship. You'll have off-days and days when you'd rather share something emotionally with each other than physically.

You'll have days when you don't want to talk at all. True love is when you can sit in a room with someone and be at ease in silence.

Romance: It's all about the romance in the movies: the flowers, the fancy dinners, the mansion and valuing your life over his. It's critical to value romance. Small things, on the other hand, are what keep it going. It's something that both parties should work on.

Do you get up early to say your goodbyes before he goes for work? When he arrives home, do you get a kiss? Even after courtship, if you practice simple things, the spark will stay. It's up to you both to keep it alive.

The "nomeansyes" trope: This is a difficult one. It's difficult because social media has discovered a technique to persuade us to believe in an idea that is neither pragmatic nor realistic. We have a tendency to believe that the one person with whom our timing was off, the one who slipped away, would someday return to us.

Wouldn't someone who is so ideal for you find a method to communicate with you? Yes, there are times when this genuinely works. However, it's definitely better to let someone leave with no expectations for the future. Allow the last chapter to come to a close and look forward to the next.

There's a reason for everything. Perhaps the pages in your book that were set aside for the person have ran out. You should allow yourself to consider a re-read if the stars mysteriously align.

The perfect person: Sorry to break it to you, but this is also a myth. Why? Because there is no such thing as a flawless human.

We see flawless portrayals of individuals in the media because a playwright has painstakingly crafted them. This could be their idealised version of what someone should be. There is a fact that you should quit looking for someone who is perfect in every way.

Are you flawless? Look for someone whose goals and values align with yours. Most crucial, aim for a relationship where you can adore each other's great as well as unfavorable aspects. Love is accepting each other's flaws as well.

For us, social media generates illusions. We cling to illusions that help us build our ideals and notions about what love should be like.

Let go of those illusions. Love is more about acts than it is about the flawless picture. Perhaps we should take a different approach.

Instead of waiting for them to make the first move, if you truly love someone, you should be bold enough to take action, to make the grand gesture at the end of the movie, and to profess your love.

Instead of ideals, perhaps what we should take away from social media is the power to find answers and take control. *(IANSlife)*

Books to kick-start the new year

With a wide choice of books, you can count on many beautiful pages of words to read and consider while starting off the New Year.

Open House with Piyush Pandey

Authors: Piyush Pandey and Anant Rangaswami
Publisher : Penguin Random House India Pvt Ltd

THE BOOK: Piyush Pandey takes readers on a voyage through his mind-his work, thoughts, and experiences-in Open House. People have asked him questions over the years, and he has answered them. There are three types of questions: serious, incisive, and frivolous. Is advertising a viable career path? Should political parties hire ad agencies? Why does Ogilvy work for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)? Should those who don't like the advertising take the law into their own hands? Is Ogilvy & Mather a lala firm? What does advertising's future hold? Is Piyush Pandey too old for this line of work?

This book, which has been expertly edited by Piyush Pandey and Anant Rangaswami, is honest, irreverent, and educational. Open House will both entertain and enlighten you with its practical wisdom and deep insights.

The Muslim Vanishes

Author: Saeed Naqvi
Publisher : Penguin Random House India Pvt Ltd

THE BOOK: The great poet Ghalib, part of a long tradition of eclectic liberalism, found Benaras so compelling that he wrote his longest poem on the holy city, 'Chiragh-e-Dair' (Mandir Ka Diya or Lamp in the Temple):

'Ibadat khaana-e-naaqoosian ast,
Hama na Kaaba-e-Hindostan ast.'
(Devotees make searing music with conch shells,
This truly is the Kaaba
of Hindustan.)

Remove Ghalib and his legion of devotees from the equation. Will Hindustan be left with a gaping hole or will it evolve into something quite different? Saeed Naqvi's play The Muslim Vanishes tries to answer such question.

The decibel levels on these topics are too high, with each side strongly defending their own narratives for a discourse to take place. Caste, the Hindu-Muslim split, Pakistan-Kashmir-the decibel levels on these issues are too high for a conversation to take place. Is there a way out of this bind?

Saeed Naqvi, razor-sharp, gentle, and humorous, springs an inspired surprise on us by combining grandma's bedside stories, Aesop's fables, and Mullah Nasruddin's faked flaws. Is it capable of putting out the fire?

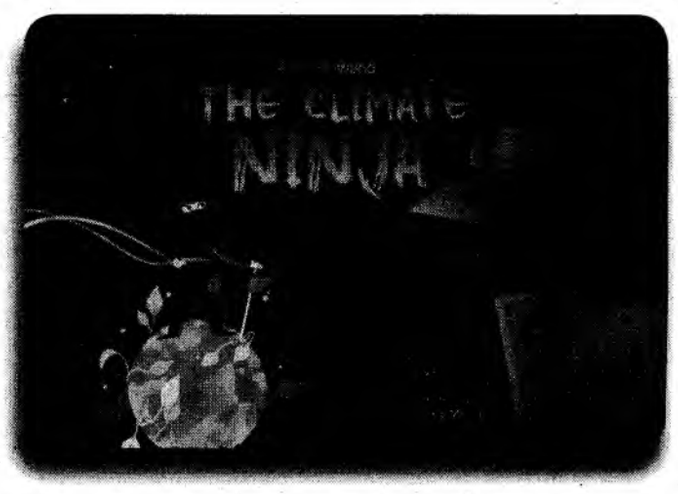
Nireeswaran

Author: VJ James
Publisher: Penguin Random House India Pvt Ltd

THE BOOK: Is it possible for a society to exist without religion? Nireeswaran, the most celebrated of Malayalam novelist V.J. James' works, uses incisive humour and satire to question blind faith and give an insight into what true spirituality is.

Antony, Sahir, and Bhaskaran, three atheists, embark on an elaborate prank to prove that God is nothing more than a myth.

They put up a mutilated Nireeswaran idol, which is basically anti-god, to demonstrate how worthless their faith is. When miracles begin to be credited to Nireeswaran, such as a man waking up after a twenty-four-year coma, an unemployed man unfit for government work receiving a contract, and a prostitute transforming into a saint, throngs of people go to worship the bogus deity. The trio is caught in the middle of a dilemma.

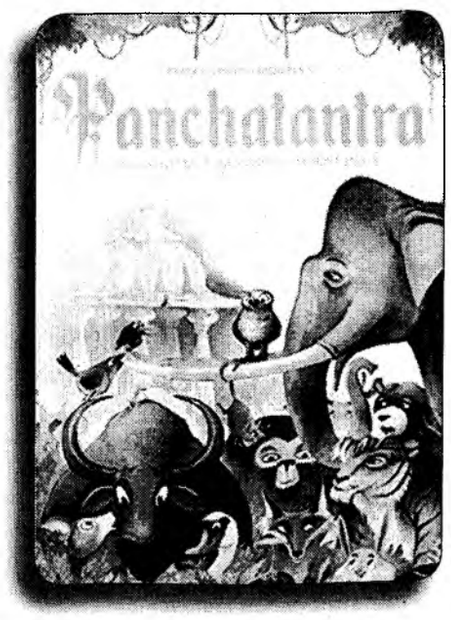


Will they be able to defeat their own creation? Is their obstinate thinking a sign that atheism is a religion in and of itself? It's possible that belief and disbelief are two sides of the same coin.

The Hidden Hindu

Author: Akshat Gupta
Publisher : Penguin Random House India Pvt Ltd

THE BOOK: Prithvi, a twenty-one-year-old, is on the hunt for Om Shastri, a mysterious middle-aged aghori (Shiva devotee) who was tracked down more than 200 years ago and taken to a high-tech facility on an isolated Indian island. When the aghori was drugged and hypnotised for questioning by a team of experts, he claimed to have seen all four yugas (Hindu epochs) and even participated in both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Om's amazing prior disclosures, which defied the laws of mortality, perplexed everyone. Om had been searching for the other immortals from each yuga, the crew discovers. These strange secrets have the potential to upend current ideas and change the trajectory of history. So, who is Om Shastri, exactly? Why was he apprehended? In this exhilarating and revealing journey, board the boat of Om Shastri's



secrets, Prithvi's chase, and the exploits of other intriguing immortals from Hindu mythology.

***The Climate Ninja* by Merlinwand book**

Merlinwand wants to teach the kids about global warming. The effects of climate change are being discussed all around the world.

The storytelling is what sets their story apart. Their goal isn't to preach (as all textbooks do), but to raise awareness in a humorous way.

A little human and his companion from the planet Mootza had an informative talk. While on a cruise with his parents, the miniature human falls into the ocean by accident. He encounters Rumpus, an extraterrestrial from Planet Mootza, after being rescued by a dolphin.

Rumpus has been on this island for a long time, since since his planet was devastated by pollution. The two have an engaging talk, and the small human recognises the seriousness of pollution (water, soil, noise, and air) on the planet.

After that, he declares himself to be The Climate Ninja. The most intriguing aspect of the book is that the client gets to choose the protagonist's name and appearance. They are given the option of choosing two of the four categories of pollution: air, noise, water, and soil pollution.

Pandit Vishnu Sharma's Panchatantra - Illustrated Tales From Ancient India

Panchatantra is a fantastic collection of moral stories drawn from Panchatantra's five books: mitrabheda, mitralabha, kakolukyam, labdhapranasam, and aparksitakarakam.

The legendary tales of Panchatantra continue to amaze young readers and adults alike with delightful narrated stories of smart animals, birds, and people. Young readers will be transported to another world by the gorgeous illustrations, where they will learn about life lessons, human nature, and how to achieve success.

How to Talk to Your Kids About Climate Change: Turning Angst into Action

Shugarman, a climate campaigner, has developed a pointedly apolitical work geared at helping parents and children talk about climate change. She also offers advise on how to protect children from feeling unhappy or overwhelmed (information that applies to adults as well) and how to encourage youngsters to pursue their unique passions while keeping the overall vision in mind.

Many people are talking about global warming these days, and the prospect of a climate calamity may scare many children.

How do we talk about these important issues in a way that is both informative and doesn't exacerbate anxieties? What can we do to ensure that our children have the best possible future in a disaster-plagued world? This book will answer all of your questions. Fear and grief can be overcome with the help of this book.

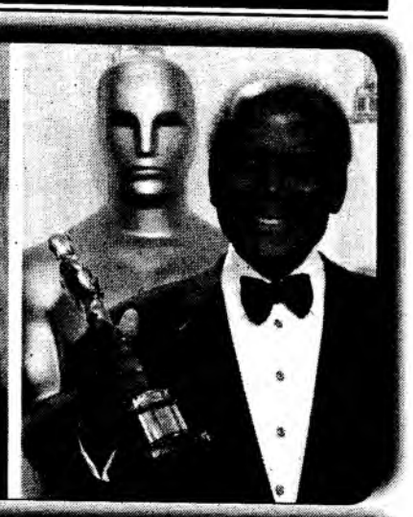
World's Greatest Leaders: Biographies of Inspirational Personalities

This is a painstakingly researched book that honours the accomplishments of charismatic, powerful, and influential individuals who have influenced the course of history.

Young inquisitive minds will be piqued by age-appropriate information, amusing facts, and vivid graphics, which will aid in the development of reading skills and general knowledge.

It's a fantastic book for teaching your child and yourself about the world's greatest leaders. It also teaches life lessons and even personal ethics that parents sometimes neglect to impart to their children. *(IANSlife)*

Sidney Poitier – from Hollywood's first Black leading man to civil rights activist



By Aram Goudsouzian

In the summer of 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. introduced the keynote speaker for the 10th-anniversary convention banquet of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Their guest, he said, was his "soul brother."

"He has carved for himself an imperishable niche in the annals of our nation's history," King told the audience of 2,000 delegates. "I consider him a friend. I consider him a great friend of humanity."

That man was Sidney Poitier.

Poitier, who died at 94 on January 7, 2022, broke the mold of what a Black actor could be in Hollywood. Before the 1950s, Black movie characters generally reflected racist stereotypes such as lazy servants and beefy mammies. Then came Poitier, the only Black man to consistently win leading roles in major films from the late 1950s through the late 1960s. Like King, Poitier projected ideals of respectability and integrity. He attracted not only the loyalty of African Americans, but also the goodwill of white liberals.

In my biography of him, titled *Sidney Poitier: Man, Actor, Icon*, I sought to capture his whole life, including his incredible rags-to-riches arc, his sizzling vitality on screen, his personal triumphs and foibles and his quest to live up to the values set forth by his Bahamian parents. But the most fascinating aspect of Poitier's career, to me, was his political and racial symbolism. In many ways, his screen life intertwined with that of the civil rights movement – and King himself.

An age of protests

In three separate columns in 1957, 1961 and 1962, a *New York Daily News* columnist named Dorothy Masters marvelled that Poitier had the warmth and charisma of a minister. Poitier lent his name and resources to King's causes, and he participated in demonstrations such as the 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage and the 1963 March on Washington. In this era of sit-ins, Freedom Rides and mass marches, activists engaged in nonviolent sacrifice not only to highlight racist oppression, but also to win broader sympathy for the cause of civil rights.

In that same vein, Poitier deliberately chose to portray characters who radiated goodness. They had decent values and helped white characters, and they often sacrificed themselves. He earned his first star billing in 1958, in *The Defiant Ones*, in which he played an escaped prisoner handcuffed to a racist played by Tony Curtis.

At the end, with the chain unbound, Poitier jumps off a train to stick with his new white friend. Writer James Baldwin reported seeing the film on Broadway, where white audiences clapped with reassurance, their racial guilt alleviated. When he saw it again in Harlem, members of the predominantly Black audience yelled "Get back on the train, you fool!"

King won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. In that same year, Poitier won the Oscar for Best Actor for *Lilies of the Field*, in which he played Homer Smith, a travelling handyman who builds a chapel for German nuns out of the goodness of his heart.

The sweet, low-budget movie was a surprise hit. In its own way, like the horrifying footage of water hoses and police dogs attacking civil rights activists, it fostered swelling support for racial integration.

A better man

By the time of the actor's Southern Christian Leadership Conference speech, both King and Poitier seemed to have a slipping grip on the American public. Bloody and destructive riots plagued the nation's cities, reflecting the enduring discontent of many poor African Americans. The swelling calls for "Black Power" challenged the ideals of nonviolence and racial brotherhood – ideals associated with both King and Poitier.

When Poitier stepped to the lectern that evening, he lamented the "greed, selfishness, indifference to the suffering of others, corruption of our value system, and a moral deterioration that has already scarred our souls irrevocably." "On my bad days," he said, "I am guilty of suspecting that there is a national death wish."

By the late 1960s, both King and Poitier had reached a crossroads. Federal legislation was dismantling Jim Crow in the South, but African Americans still suffered from limited opportunity. King prescribed a "revolution of values," denounced the Vietnam War, and launched a Poor People's Campaign. Poitier, in his 1967 speech for the SCLC, said that King, by adhering to his convictions for social justice and human dignity, "has made a better man of me."

Exceptional characters

Poitier tried to adhere to his own convictions. As long as he was the only Black leading man, he insisted on playing the same kind of hero. But in the era of Black Power, had Poitier's saintly hero become another stereotype? His rage was repressed, his sexuality stifled. A Black critic, writing in *The New York Times,* asked "Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?"

That critic had a point: As Poitier himself knew, his films created too-perfect characters. Although the films allowed white audiences to appreciate a Black man, they also implied that racial equality depends on such exceptional characters, stripped of any racial baggage. From late 1967 into early 1968, three of Poitier's movies owned the top spot at the box office, and a poll ranked him the most bankable star in Hollywood.

Each film provided a hero who soothed the liberal center. His mannered schoolteacher in *To Sir, With Love* tames a class of teenage ruffians in London's East End.

His razor-sharp detective in *In the Heat of the Night* helps a crotchety white Southern sheriff solve a murder. His world-renowned doctor in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* marries a white woman, but only after winning the blessing of her parents.

"I try to make movies about the dignity, nobility, the magnificence of human life," he insisted.

Audiences flocked to his films, in part, because he transcended racial division and social despair – even as more African Americans, baby boomers and film critics tired of the old-fashioned do-gooder spirit of these movies.

Intertwined lives

And then, the lives of Martin Luther King Jr. and Sidney Poitier intersected one final time.

After King's assassination on April 4, 1968, Poitier was a stand-in for the ideal that King embodied. When he presented at the Academy Awards, Poitier won a massive ovation. *In the Heat of the Night* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* captured most of the major awards. Hollywood again dealt with the nation's racial upheaval through Poitier movies.

But after King's violent murder, the Poitier icon no longer captured the national mood. In the 1970s, a generation of "Blaxploitation" films featured violent, sexually charged heroes.

They were a reaction against the image of a Black leading man associated with Poitier.

Although his career evolved, Poitier was no longer a superstar, and he no longer bore the burden of representing the Black freedom movement. Yet for a generation, he had served as popular culture's preeminent expression of the ideals of Martin Luther King.

(Aram Goudsouzian is Bizot Family Professor of History, at the University of Memphis)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi — **Sunday, JAN 9, 2022**

Moon square Venus on your solar return chart and it will give excellent results. The year will turn out very favourable one for you. You will be interacting a lot more with people. You will shed your inhabitations and become more extrovert. This will help you in developing lot of contacts and making new friends. Your professional circle will increase and will also prove to be of immense help to you. Some person will provide timely help and support. New job opportunities will keep coming. Your confidence will be high and a new personality will emerge. Romantic ties can lead to marriage. Peace and harmony will prevail at home. You will make plans for going on a holiday with family. Mate will continue to support. Health will remain perfect. Financial position will get strengthened. Children will shine in studies.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

The week will begin on a bright note. All your held up works will be completed. You will get an important post. Victory is written all over. There is yog of promotion in your job. Your officials will be supportive. You will begin a new work. Days will bring joy and wealth. You will get success in every work. People associated with media and technical field will reap lot of benefits. You will also get benefit from your inheritance. You will also focus on your work. Your self-confidence will be high. You will also make contact with new people. With the help of your friends your messed up tasks will improve. There are chances of you going on trips. You will spend your time having fun with your friends and close people. Politics will attract you.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

The week promises to bring positive results for you. Meeting with influential persons will open the doors of destiny for you. You will manage to get the support of your officers and subordinates. Many plans will occur to you and you will make an outline of those plans. You will be ambitious and also achieve your goals. You will have good monetary gains. You will also enjoy worldly pleasures. Meeting with loved ones will lighten your mood. You will be guest somewhere. Your relations with family members will strengthen. You will also plan for a major function. You will ask your children to do something special. Till you get success, you will not let go. You will also get success in competitive exams. You will also develop your own self. You will have the desire to learn something new, you will feel that your performance has become better then before.

Gemini: (May 22- June 21)

There are indications and 'Yog' of receiving unexpected gains and windfalls for you this week. You will reap rich dividends from some investments you had made in the past. Your financial position is going to improve drastically. Your spirits will be high and you will remain cheerful. You will find yourself financially strong and in a better position during this time. Your creative potentials will come out before everyone. This is a highly favorable time for writing, editing and other creative works. Take business related decisions only after giving a lot of thought. Your plans and projects will get implemented. Your romantic life is going to be wonderful. You will also have good marital relations with your partner. You will also welcome guests at your house. Students will excel in studies. Feelings of patriotism and national interest will engulf you. Through hard work and grit you will achieve everything that you had ever desired for.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

It is going to be an amazing week for you. You will have a passion to perform tough task. You will work passionately and truthfully towards your relations. Money will came to you. You will deal with your emotions and sensitivity properly during this time. You will also keep trying a balance between your family and married life. You will get full support of your subordinates. An important decision of yours will prove to be correct. You will also meet an influential politician or senior officer. You will also get into a fight with someone at your workplace.

Leo: (July 23- August 23)

Your influence and prestige will grow. You will also recollect some good memories. Your prestige in society will increase. And your deeds will bring lot of name and fame. You will have kindness and pity for the sick and needy. It is a very good time for financial gains. Some new guests will arrive at your home and will keep you busy. You will settle disputes and problems peacefully. Your time and money will be utilized properly. Love birds will have an amazing time. You will touch new heights of achievements in your business. Students will work hard and get desired results. You need to introspect and analyze yourself. It is time to become a bit vocal and express your feelings. You need to bring about a change in your communication and behavior. It will help you in meeting challenges of life well. Your friends and family members will keep supporting you.

Virgo: (August 24- September 22)

Your well executed plans will bring in lot of money. You will have sudden gains. Your efforts will also bear fruits. You will meet people with the same thinking. You will also pay attention to sports and entertainment. You will work hard and make progress in business/job. At home, the atmosphere will be in your favor and your family members will look towards you for guidance. You will also enhance your knowledge. Some happy moments will come in your life. You will be able to take everybody with you. Housewives and working women will pay attention to their families. You will top in some interview. There will be some enthusiastic activity in family life. You will be full of vigour and energy. Pending matters will gather momentum.

Libra: (September 23- Libra 23)

Things are looking up again for you this week. A dispute that was going on for long will get resolved with the help of a third person. It will bring you lot of relief. Possibility of some journey with your family is there. You will be appreciated for your contribution in your society and work place. Your opponents will be active, but will not be able to face you. You will also fulfill your family responsibility well. The time is in your favor. You will also recover your money that you gave to a third person as loan. Time will be spent on daily chores. There will be improvement in the health of an elderly. You will get success in a competitive exam.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

It is a wonderful week. Your relations with closed ones will improve. You will also enjoy good food in a restaurant. You will also purchase a new property. It is time to leave some of your old ideas and bring new energy and thinking in your personality. You can also get interested in religious work. The time will be well spent in the company of your spouse/mate. There will be stability in money related matters. You will make good gains in business. Legal matters will be resolved with the mediation of someone. The middle of the week will be peaceful. Some new thoughts may come to you. You will also complete your work with sincerity. The atmosphere at home will be happy. Students will get admission in institutes/courses of their own choice.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 23)

It is a very promising week for you. You will achieve your targets. Your popularity at workplace will increase. You could be promoted in your job. You will also have financial stability and strength. Your self respect and dignity will increase. Your colleagues will perform every task in office after consulting you. There will be stability in your career. Your efforts for acquiring money will be successful. The time will be success achieving. Students will get success in exams and interviews. Your government related work will get done. You will receive the rewards in the form of monetary gifts or benefits. You will also get benefits due to the change in your life.

Capricorn: (December 22- January 20)

Time will be highly beneficial for you. Some auspicious function will take place and you will enjoy your time with your family. Due to your busy schedule in your work you will be a bit tired. But yet you will complete your task. You will take proper care of your health. You will also be enthusiastic about something which will make you happy. You could fall in love with a person working in your office leading to a rollicking affair. Do not meddle in affairs of others; you may get a bad name for no fault of yours. You will achieve your targets. Do not engage yourself in any kind of extra work at this time, otherwise you may get nothing except trouble.

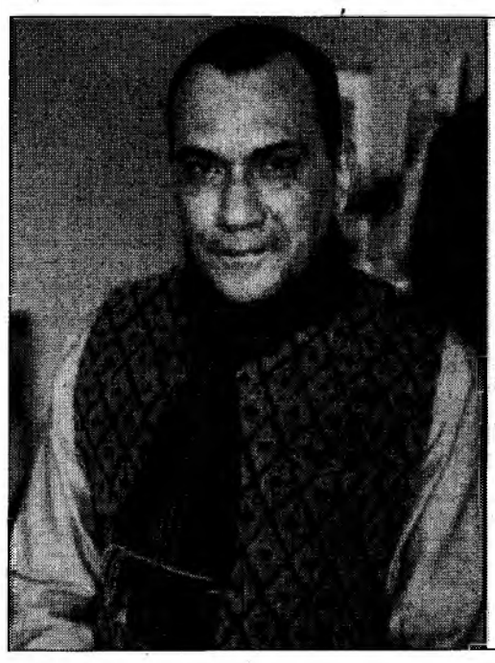
Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

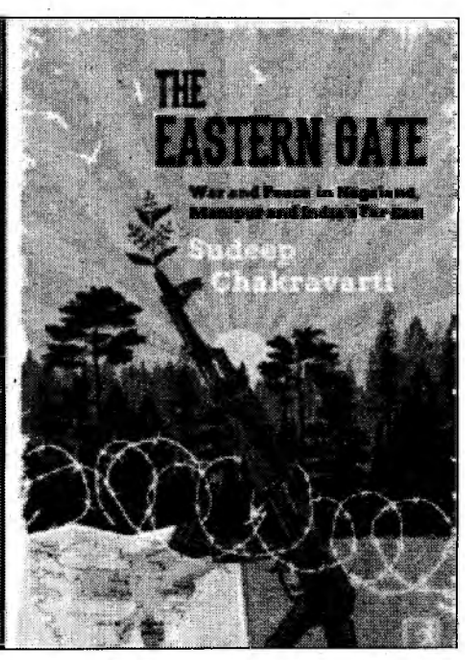
Some very positive developments will take place. You will get a work order from abroad. Those who are in business may enter into new partnership or association which will be beneficial. Your importance at your work will increase. Your work condition will be better and you will spend your time enjoying yourself. At your workplace keep your important documents ready you may clinch a favorable business deal. You need to limit your expenses. Your enemies will try but will not be able to harm your interests. You will also get success in government related matters. Your subordinates will fully support you. You will also get good support from your spouse. You will spend some quality time with him/her. You will get blessings of your elders. Students will keep performing well. You will also receive the full support of your parents and in-laws. You will understand your duties and also carry them out nicely.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

You will change decisions that you took in haste and will have no regrets in doing it. Work that were stalled will get completed with the help of dear ones. Your respect in the social sphere will increase. You will be full of happiness and warmth in your personal ties. Love mates will enjoy each other's company. You will discuss something vital with your mate. You will also respect feelings of others. There will be an improvement in your financial condition. You will also understanding the feelings of your colleagues, otherwise you will repent later. There will be an increase in your business. Meetings with people will be beneficial. You will be connected to the internet. Your efficiency will be commendable. New contacts will be beneficial. You will get the desired success. You could plan a short journey with partner.

The Eastern Gate: Understanding politics behind conflicts in NE





The recent killings of civilians in Nagaland in an army operation gone awry has led to renewed debate over the controversial Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA).

The Naga Peace Accord is in a state of uncertainty and the political situation in North East India is in the news again. But what is the story behind the headlines?

Award-winning author, media consultant and regional risk analyst Sudeep Chakravarti's extensively researched *The Eastern Gate - War and Peace in Nagaland, Manipur and India's Far East* (Simon & Schuster India) reveals the backdrop to the ongoing conflict, making the book critical to understanding the politics behind it.

Occupying nearly a seventh of India's landmass and home to almost 50 million people, the region is a pivot for India's Act East policy, and a gateway to a future of immense possibilities – from hydrocarbons to regional trade, the very harbinger of prosperity with threads over land and water, with the help of Myanmar and a surging Bangladesh, that could create a Silk Route for this century and beyond.

A bulwark of India's security in the shadow of China, the region is a cradle of worrying climate change dynamics and migration and the crucible of India's efforts at inclusive democracy.

North East India, the appellation often applied to India's far east, is all this and more.

Alongside immense hope and aspiration, it is also home to immense ethnic and communal horrors - and a decades-old Naga conflict - and the high-profile peace process that involves four gateway states – Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam – and several million people.

A series of callous and unthinking governments and enduring suspicion against the all-knowing 'Mainland' have together made it a touch-point of brutalized aspiration, identity, conflict and tragedy. It's among the most militarized zones in the world, with laws applied across vast geographies that offer the army and police both immunity and impunity. It's a playground of numbing corruption and engineered violence.

This includes the cauldron that has been the Naga rebellion and the makings of peace, and the myriad rebellions that feed neighbouring Manipur's political realities: an often-incendiary ethnic cocktail of Meitei, Naga, Kuki, Zomi. Only real peace as opposed to uneasy absence of conflict, and calm in both Myanmar and Bangladesh, will unlock this Eastern gate.

To this end, the book offers:

- Inside stories and a ringside view of the tortuous, unsuccessful attempts at resolving the many enduring conflicts in the region.
- Exclusive insights and interviews with rebel leaders, politicians, bureaucrats, policy-makers, army and police personnel, intelligence operatives, analysts, gunrunners, those in the narcotics trade, those privy to peace negotiations, and community leaders.
- A clear and comprehensive examination of the present situation.
- An up-close view of the Naga peace process.

A keen observer and frequent chronicler of the region, Chakravarti has for several years offered exclusive insights into the Machiavellian – indeed Chanakyan – world of the Naga and other conflicts and various attempts to resolve these. He now melds the skills of a journalist, analyst, historian, and ethnographer to offer a framework within which these conflicts – and the very aspiration of the people of India's most diverse, dynamic and desperately hopeful region – needs to be seen.

Employing a 'dispatches' style of storytelling, Chakravarti's narrative provides immediacy to, and understanding of, ongoing attempts to transition from war to peace, even as he keeps a firm gaze on the future. If North East India is a force of unstoppable nature and the nature of man, then "The Eastern Gate" is a tour de force that captures this story of our times.

Chakravarti is an award-winning author of several best-selling works of history, ethnography, politics and conflict resolution, including *Plassey: The Battle that Changed the Course of Indian History*, *The Bengalis: A Portrait of a Community*, and *Highway 39: Journeys through a Fractured Land.*

His other notable non-fiction works are *Red Sun: Travels through Naxalite Country*, and *Clear. Hold. Build: Hard Lessons of Business and Human Rights in India*, which won the Award for Excellence at the Asian Publishing Awards. He has written three critically acclaimed novels, and several short stories. His work has been translated into several languages. *(IANS)*

"You cannot change your destination overnight, but you can change your direction overnight."

— Jim Rohn

The Shillong Times

Vol No:LXIV No.149 SHILLONG, MONDAY, JANUARY 10, 2022

Unfolding poll scene

WITH curtains up on the assembly elections in five states, the voter mood is upbeat. Yet, an air of uncertainty hangs over the way the results would emerge by March 10, the day when the counting of votes in UP, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Manipur and Goa takes place in one sweet go. No political party is sure of winning any of these states. As for the central theatre of action, Uttar Pradesh, the Congress party has already lost the race; the fight will be between the ruling BJP and main Opposition, the SP. Akhilesh Yadav is set to give a tough fight to the BJP and, with Muslim backing, might even upset the BJP applecart. In Punjab, the BJP is already a lost cause while the Congress, after the Amarinder Singh exit from the party weeks ago, is no more a cohesive force. Worse, Charanjit Singh Channi as chief minister is not a guarantee to electoral success for the Congress. Goa was already a tough turf for the BJP after the demise of Manohar Parrikar. It oscillates between different political influences; and the situation in Manipur too is fluid due to a variety of reasons.

The present round of assembly polls will set the stage for the 2024 parliament polls. If the BJP loses UP, the game is over for the party at the national level too. Regional forces will gain huge clout across the states in their offensives against the saffron force. If the Congress manages to retain Punjab, that will save its face to an extent. The scene in Uttarakhand needs to be closely watched, though the ruling BJP has a shameful track record of having performed a 'musical chair' show of three CMs in a year. It showed the discomfiture in the saffron rank and file there.

Chief Election Commissioner Sushil Chandra has advised political parties to concentrate more on online and digital campaigns and avoid crowd formations. He has banned rallies and processions till January 15 and the scenario in the context of the Covid19 would be reviewed and an extension of this deadline is possible. The daily Covid count is already surging past 1.50 lakh in an emerging third wave. While the political parties will adhere to this EC call, they might flout other stipulations of a general nature as they did in the past too. When everyone flouts a call, the EC can only throw its hands up. If the national parties like the BJP and the Congress take a firm decision to abide by the rules, it would work wonders.

Humans and their legacy

By H.H.Mohrmen

Perhaps the earliest form of painting which can be seen today is the one in the Lascaux Cave. The painting is believed to have been done between c.15,000-10,000 years ago is an image of a man with a bison in front of him (Harari, Yuval Noah 2011). The painting is in fact a drawing which is to that which a toddler does with lines indicating the legs and the hands and the body which look like a square box. The head is round but it has a beak which makes it look like the head of bird and an image of a bird was also drawn near the man's image. The point is that even if this is a simple image drawn like a toddler's doodle it is the only piece of art that we have of our ancestors who lived thousands of generations before us.

Human's first legacy

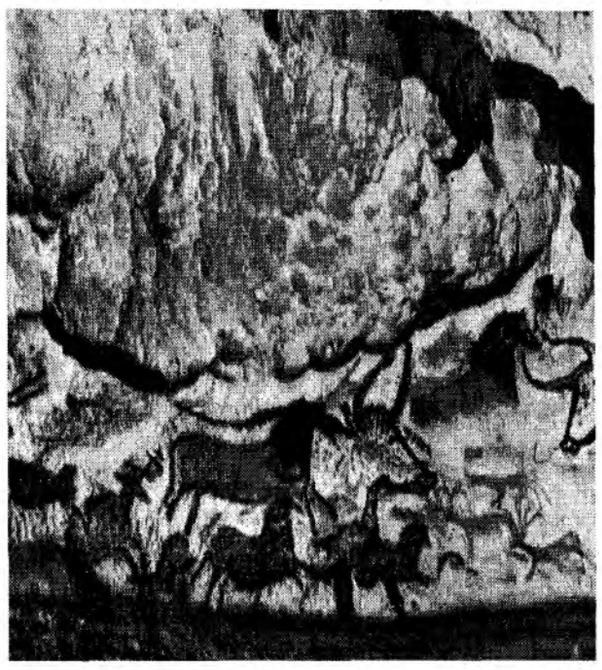
People with their respective interests tried to describe what this image symbolized; what it represents or what message the maker of this ancient image wished to communicate to others. Was it was an image of a man lying on the ground after he was hit by the bison or a man standing in front of the bison? Or maybe the image of a man with a head of a bird, has something else to tell us. These questions will continue to haunt the human quest for knowledge but in this article, we are only looking at the painting as a legacy - and what a legacy it has truly been. One can't help but wonder whether the painter of this particular art ever imagined that his/her painting would survive thousands of years after it was drawn. Or if the painter even has a sense of time - that there is the past the present and the future! More importantly, perhaps the painting was something that the painter just wanted to randomly do at that point of time without an inkling of what message he/she wanted to communicate or how long it would last.

Hands that become a legacy

This simple painting tells us something else about human life which is that at any point of time, humans have this desire to do something which they are passionate about and some of these pieces survive the assault of nature and the destruction of human hands but many did not. Another simple and interesting ancient image made by early humans was that of hands imprinted in a cave in Argentina. The image of many hands inside a cave called 'Hands Cave' is about 9000 years old (Harari, Yuval Noah 2011). Nobody knows what this image represents or what did those ancient people who had put the mark of their painted hands inside the cave meant. To the modern eye what they did look like are simple acts that toddlers have fun doing. Yet, these palms will continue to reach out to those who wish to understand what they were trying to tell.

In the modern world government uses hand prints as one of the most important biometrics to decide its citizens' identity. The print that we have in our hands has become the mark of our existence and this image is no known to many yet many like my mother's piece of writing which she secretly kept was perhaps meant for her near and dear ones only. We did not know that she was writing anything at all and we had only discovered it when she had died. During this time of the year when people have just finished writing their new year resolutions, the idea behind all this is to make a mark in one's life and to leave a legacy behind.

The legacy that our ancestors had left behind are the monolithic culture that we are proud of. And if these standing stones and flat stones found dotting the skyline everywhere would have been able to talk, they would say, "we are the hand mark of your ancestors." In spite



different to what the government is doing now. If there is one slogan that the owners of those hands would say, it would be "Here we are, we've been here" or rather "we've been here before you and here are the imprint of our hands." Hands mark were the first legacy that earliest humans left behind. No wonder that in the Khasi Pnar tradition, the word used for legacy is 'ki dak kti or ki mat- 'ti' and this is exactly what this image is trying to tell us.

In my opinion these two simple pieces of ancient art convey a very important message that every person who has lived on this earth wishes to leave a legacy behind. The only difference is the medium or the process that one uses to create this art or these memories. Some extraordinary arts may become popular and of the fact that monolithic culture was prevalent in the neolithic age, yet no study has been done to try understand this unique culture that continues till date. Why do people in some areas of the state still continue with this ancient culture? We are not even trying to collect and document the stories that these stones tell, because every monolith has a story to tell.

Neil Nongkynrih's rich legacy

Sadly, last week the state lost a person who even if he had died at a fairly young age, has left behind a rich legacy. I did not have the opportunity to meet Neil Nongkynrih and did not know him well as many of the readers of this newspaper do, but I consider him great not because of his musical talents but because of something else.

I admire people who had the opportunity to study and (in the case of Neil work) and live in the western world and still decided to return to their native land. The charm of the western world, the opportunity it offers and the prosperity that it offers has tempted many to stay on permanently in the land of opportunities and prosperity. With the kind of training and talent that Neil had, it would not have been difficult for him to migrate to the UK. More importantly in the late eighties (when he was in the UK) migration to that country was not as difficult as it is now. The question that no one asks is, "Why did Neil decide to come back to the land of the rolling hills? What charm did Meghalaya cast on him that he was willing to leave the hills of Derbyshire and Scotland for the Khasi and Jantia hills? To leave the Thames for Wah Umkhrah, the Lake District for Umïam, Trafalgar square for Khyndailad and the ancient marvel of UK for the sacred forests in the land of his birth?

Generally, people who had the opportunity to study and work in the western world can be broadly divided into two types. There are people who dream all of their lives to get an opportunity to study or even visit the western world, never to return to their native land. But there are people like Neil who went to study and trained themselves well in whatever their area of studies is and then return to share with folks back home what they have learned from abroad. The very fact that he decided to return home was a major decision that he has made and everybody knows that he was not wrong in making that decision.

It takes a man with a strong will and clear vision of what he is planning to do with his life to make this very important decision in his life. It is not easy to leave all the charms of the western world and come back to his land and his people. We must all thank Neil for his decision to return and the reason why he decided to come back is not difficult for us to see now. It is obvious that he has a clear vision about what he wanted to do with his life. What is important is that he has achieved his goal. It is his achievements that we are now celebrating and we will cherish the rich legacy that he left behind. Thank you for the life well lived and your legacy will live on.

Email: hhmohrmen67@gmail.com

Dutch PM pedals to office like anybody else

Modi's security lapse & theory of relativity in action

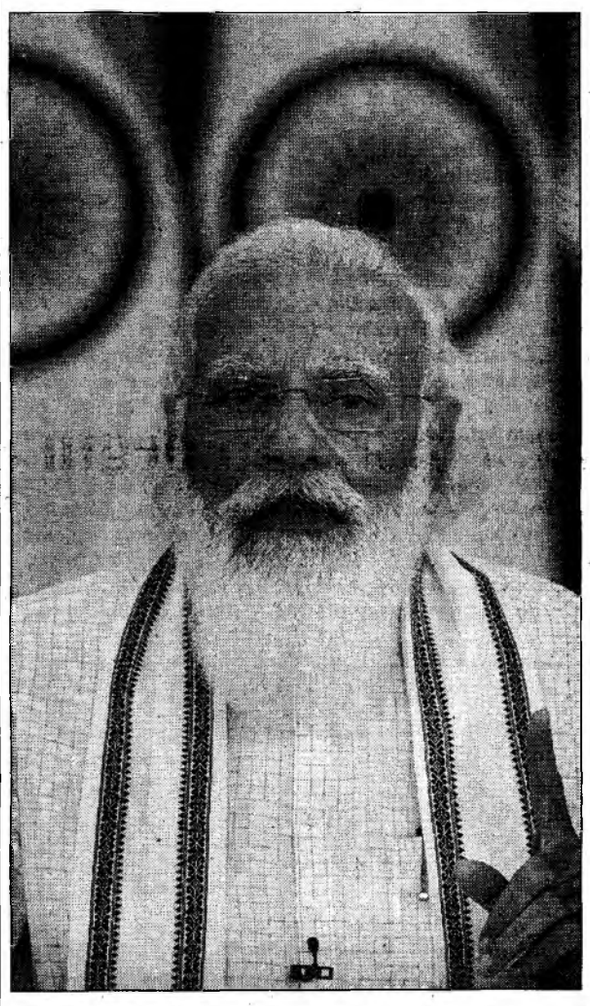
By K Raveendran

Two theories of relativity are possible in relation to the incident in which Prime Minister Modi was stuck on a flyover for up to 20 minutes, causing a national uproar. The first one, which Modi himself seems to have preferred, relates to the more classic interpretation that seeks to make predictions based on experiments and the other relates to two comparable situations as they really are.

When Modi 'thanked', if that is what he had intended to do, Punjab chief minister Channi for letting him 'return alive' he must have conjured up a situation in which his life was in danger as the farmers' protest caused his motorcade to halt in the middle of the flyover. There is another theory that he thanked the CM for making the event to be telecast live. Whether Modi intended a pun on life, only he knows and nobody else can say anything on it with certainty as long as the Prime Minister keeps his trademark silence.

Of course, the present case was avoidable by all means and clearly indicates a lapse. But there could always be unexpected developments, including those arising from natural causes, that can create such hold-ups any time and the security detail is expected to be equipped to deal with any such eventualities. The second question is whether an Indian Prime Minister is scared to be among his own people, in which case there is a deeper malady in the society.

Modi's reported exasperation also does not sync with his own approach towards the 'feudal customs' and 'red beacon culture' that he had been accusing India's longest-serving ruling party Congress of before his government finally decided to get rid of both. Modi had clearly denounced the 'red beacon culture' which he was keen to replace with greater emphasis on governance. But there has been a serious mismatch between words and deeds, with a disturbing rate of consistency.



Modi is not alone in the application of Albert Einstein's theory of relativity in a way that can construct scenes with potential for untoward outcomes. Even the President and the Supreme Court have expressed concern over the seriousness of the lapse. In fact, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta has told the court that it was a 'rarest of the rare' case that could cause potential international embarrassment. Mehta even raised the possibility of cross border terrorism. Modi's party BJP has, of course, decided to make maximum political capital out of the incident, forcing Punjab's ruling party Congress on the defensive.

Maverick PCC chief Navjot Singh Sidhu has dared to compare Modi's experience with that of the farmers who camped on the outskirts of Delhi for over a year braving the extremes of the national capital's climate as well as comparable behaviour by the administration and security forces. "I want to ask Pradhan Mantri Sahab, our farmer brothers camped at the Delhi borders for over one year... tell me, they stayed there for one and half-year. Your media did not say anything," Sidhu was quoted as saying at a rally.

The official response to the security lapse raises two fundamental issues. One, is the PM's security so vulnerable that it cannot deal with a 10 or 20 minute hold-up? Modi's cabinet had decided in 2017 to remove the red beacons from all official vehicles, including those on the PM's and it was widely hailed as the beginning of a new era. "This government is a government of common masses and has decided to abolish the VIP culture of beacon lights and sirens," transport and highways minister Nitin Gadkari had said after the decision. But the government of the common masses seems to be a long way off still, when a prime minister would feel safe among his people.

Coming back to the second interpretation of the theory of relativity, there was much media sensation recently on how Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte goes to office riding a bicycle. This may be a curious thing for outsiders, but it is the natural way for the Dutch, who take their equality before law seriously. There is reportedly a Dutch saying: 'Just be ordinary, that's crazy enough as it is.' The Dutch also believe that authority must be earned and it is not gained by default by virtue of one's position. For them, authority applies only to the workplace.

But then, despite all the protestations, India remains what it is and our prime minister has to thank someone for being 'alive' after a 20-minute forced halt. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Covid 19 restrictions and Fundamental Rights

Editor,

The world recorded more than two million daily Covid-19 cases on average between 1st and 7th January 2022. India saw a single-day rise of 1.59 lakhs new coronavirus cases, raising the tally to 3,55,28,004, which included 3,623 cases of Omicron variant reported across 27 states and union territories. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on everyone. It has disproportionately affected some groups due to their more vulnerable socio-economic and health status.

Governments around the world have introduced restrictions and ramped up vaccination and other urgent measures to curb its spread to safeguard public health. They are acting to defend the human rights of health and of life itself. Inevitably, these measures limit our human and fundamental rights to an extent rarely experienced in peacetime. It is important to ensure that such limitations are consistent with our legal safeguards and that their impact on a particular section of society is adequately taken into account. Individuals and certain groups have voiced their opposition to the Covid-19 restrictions and vaccination and termed it unconstitutional and infringement of fundamental rights.

Yes, it can be concluded that imposing lockdown and other restrictions violate the fundamental rights of citizens of our country but on the other hand, it is only to protect the citizens of our country from the spreading of the Coronavirus. Absolute individual rights cannot be guaranteed by any modern State. The freedom is limited by our Constitution itself, by conferring upon the 'State' a power to impose by its laws reasonable restrictions as may be necessary for the larger interest of the community.

Yours etc.,
Dr Omarlin Kyndiah,
Via email

Why selective condemnation?

Editor

Apropos to the letter by Dominic Stadlin Wankhar (ST 7, 2022) which highlighted the dangers of communalism and social disorder taking place in the state especially in a peaceful town like Shillong is most appropriate. The writer has rightly criticized the members of some groups who came out in protest on the alleged idol vandalism but the same people chose to remain silent when incidents of churches being attacked and attacks on Christians taking place were reported. When any untoward incident happens it should be squarely condemned without taking sides and without being hypocrites. Any act of vandalism needs to be condemned and such elements who tend to disturb social peace need to be dealt with according to the law.

Yours etc.,
Vivian C. Wahlang
Shillong -8

Barking dogs seldom bite!

Editor,

We have for the umpteenth times been hearing our Government boasting that the residents of Them Metor will be relocated to their new government settlement areas. However, to date it seems that the issue is hanging fire indefinitely and paradoxically, it appears that the festering indecision shall before long be dumped into a waste paper basket.

Conversely, just before the last bye elections to the three seats of Meghalaya State Legislative Assembly, if my memory serves me aright , it was reported that our Chief Minister had asserted that the residents of Them Metor will definitely be shifted in a few day's time, but the assertion was seemingly to make us live in a fool's paradise, not an action oriented statement . In contrast, in my incidental walk in and around the periphery of the Them Metor, I could palpably feel that those residents, bona-fide or otherwise, are blissfully making light of the Government crying wolf as perhaps they are already aware of the time tested idiom:" Empty vessel sound the most," or better still, "Barking dogs seldom bite."

Yours etc.,
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Shillong - 2

Unpredictable power cuts!

Editor,

As we try to beat the chilly winter of Shillong, we all know it would not be complete without the unpredictable power cuts. Frequently, we would get the 'Shut Down' notices about the six hours of power cuts for "maintenance work." While I understand the need to have these power cuts now and again the unpredictability has become a daily struggle for students and individuals who are working from home. A supplementary struggle is that with the loss of electricity comes the loss of cellular network as well.

As Omicron looms over us, many schools and colleges in the country have switched back to the online mode of learning. Students sit for their classes and exams with the fear that they might lose connectivity any minute.

This is a sincere request to the Power Corporation to take into consideration that not everyone in the city can afford an inverter battery to compensate for the inadequacy in its performance.

Yours etc.,
Serene Rynjah
Via email

Political parties gearing up for 2024!

Editor,

The upcoming elections to the five states pose a tough test not just for the two national parties- the BJP and Congress but parties like the SP, TMC and AAP too. The BJP is in power in four of the five states and the elections are the first test for the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi after the BJP government revoked the three controversial farm laws to stem growing discontent among a large section of farmers. The elections will have an impact on the opposition camp too as the AAP, TMC and SP have conducted intensive campaign. The Congress considered to be the spearhead of the opposition campaign, now faces questions over its place in the opposition. Political experts are of the opinion that the election results may lead to a realignment in the opposition politics.

The BJP is in power in UP, Uttarakhand, Manipur and Goa. In Punjab, where the farmers' agitation was most intense, the party wants to show its strength. Punjab elections are very important for the Congress too. It will determine the existence of the party in the face of severe challenges from the AAP and the BJP. It needs to return to power in Punjab. It has to prove its strength in other states too to remain relevant. This apart, Priyanka Gandhi needs to prove her leadership skills by putting up brilliant performances in Punjab and UP. The SP and AAP have been mounting vigorous campaigns and drawing crowds in UP and Punjab respectively. The recent political conflict between the BJP and Congress over the security breach during Modi's visit to Punjab adds another dimension to the elections in the state. In Goa, the BJP is facing challenges from the Congress, AAP and TMC.

Political experts believe that several political issues will have an impact on this election. It will set the political narrative in the country for the next general elections.

Yours etc.,
Venu G S.
Kollam

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" We've come a long way, but there is still a lot of discrimination."

--- **Aretha Franklin**

The Shillong Times

Vol No:LXIV No.150 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, JANUARY 11, 2022

Reinventing Education

THE surge in the number of Covid cases in recent times raises alarm bells for those running educational institutions, for teachers, students and their parents. All are worried but reasons are different. Parents know very well that the two years 2020-2021 are wasted since their children never really studied in the real sense of the term and the open book examination is actually a travesty since they have doubts about how much their wards have learnt. Things were beginning to improve when the Omicron variant arrived with a bang and there's no knowing what toll it is going to take. Students who have qualified for IITs, NITs, Medicine and other professional courses in 2021 were supposed to join their courses physically in early 2022 but now that looks impossible. Young, aspiring professionals are facing a bleak future and are unsure of their careers. Online lessons can never replace the real classroom and the laboratory. How can young people carry out experiments in their homes? This therefore calls for a new educational programme that can bridge the virtual distance. For this a lot of thinking and brainstorming is required by the Union Ministry for Human Resources Development (MHRD).

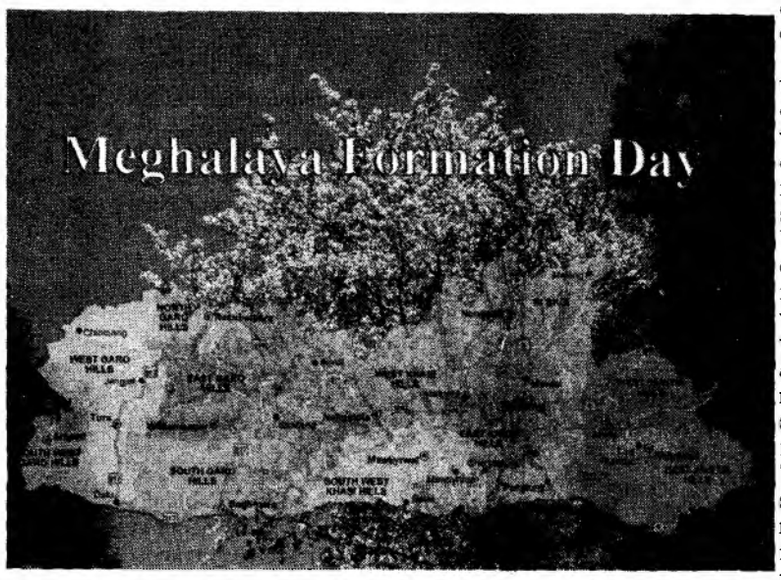
Unfortunately the MHRD has not yet given due attention to online classes for professional courses that require a close mentor-mentee relationship. The MHRD however did come up with better and more innovative learning modules for students from pre-school, primary and secondary levels. This would include integrated science labs, smart classrooms, play-based learning and support for vocational education. All these have been integrated under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan since 2018. The scheme is extended up to 2025-26 and includes the transformative recommendations of the National Education Policy 2020. The idea is to provide holistic school education as a continuum instead of disparate schemes that looked at pre-school, primary and secondary education in silos. Its noble aim is to improve the quality of school education.

The Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan was formed by subsuming the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Teachers Education. (TE) Teacher Education. The objective is to treat schooling as a smooth transition from pre-school, primary, upper primary, secondary and senior secondary level. This focus is to improve the quality of education at all levels by integrating the two T's – Teachers and Technology. MHRD is implementing the Scheme of Vocationalisation of School Education under the umbrella of Samagra Shiksha. Under this scheme a vocational subject is offered for Classes IX to XII along with general education to provide necessary employability and vocational skills for a variety of occupations. A similar innovative teaching-learning module is urgently needed for higher education.

Happy Birthday Dear Meghalaya

By Toki Blah

Our state of Meghalaya is going to be 50 years old on January 21, 2022 and everyone is expected to sing Meghalaya's birthday song; wishing the state and its people a bright and prosperous future; wishing it "All the best". Amid the din and fuss over this celebration, the loudest and most buoyant voice will be that of politicians and others who live off politics. They are celebrating 50 years of uninterrupted easy pickings off the fat of the land. Not surprising therefore for cheery greetings to cut across all political parties or from that creed of individuals who see themselves as popularly elected leaders of the people. Ordinary citizens though on the other hand might not share a similar enthusiasm. January 21, to the ordinary man might be just another day for getting pushed aside by supercilious siren blaring VIP vehicles. Perhaps other priorities occupy his mind than celebrating birthdays. Perhaps uppermost in his mind and occupying his inner most thoughts is how to make ends meet; how to make a decent livelihood; how to keep body and soul together; wondering how to bring food to the table; simply put - how to survive from one day to the next!



I can already hear the howls of protest against such insensitive, cynical remarks. I can foresee the trolls that will haunt my Facebook page for days to come, the most common perhaps will be the question as to who is this Doubting Thomas who dares challenge the inalienable birth and growth of our state? Famous Historical personalities have extolled its democratic institutions; Subhas Chandra Bose had observed "those who want to know about Democracy should come to the Khasi Hills"; the scenic beauty of its hills and waterfalls legendary; even its Capital Shillong described as 'The Scotland of the East'; Prof G G Swell had famously versed it as "a patch of beauty and grace and a shining outpost of India"; it has unlimited natural resources such as coal, limestone and uranium. It's God's own paradise and to claim ownership over this Garden of Eden, both Tribals and Non Tribals, in the 1960's fought and struggled, side by side, for their own Hill State. We wanted to control, administer, manage and govern it ourselves and on that note came up with the slogan "No Hill State, No Rest". Bro, that's how the State Meghalaya came about and there is no reason why its 50th anniversary should not be celebrated. Yes, I most humbly acknowledge these counter charges. I, however sincerely wish I can erase the doubts, the unease and skepticism that continue to dog my mind. But I am simply echoing the sentiments and feelings of this generation of Meghalayans about their state. I am simply reverberating the frustration of our youth when this 50th anniversary is made mention of. They are asking where has that Patch of Beauty and grace disappeared to; how did that harmonious aspiration of Hope and Pride shared by both Tribals and Non Tribals, fade away; who allowed that corps of self sacrificing leadership to degenerate into the despicable trash of opportunistic political leadership we suffer today? These are the questions our own people, especially our youth are asking as Meghalaya's 50th statehood approaches. I am concerned because they question. Disturbed, because we have no satisfactory answers to offer.

As a member of an indigenous community who once ruled themselves with value based tenets of governance that ensured a harmonious relationship between nature and man, I and many like me, anguish in silent despair at the speed with which we bartered away our value based Tribal identity, our lands and our eco-systems for a piece of paper called a currency note. 70 years ago a newly independent India recognized the merit of our customs and tradition and gave us the 6th Schedule of the Constitution to help us preserve and safeguard our indigenous identity. The irony is that all its beneficiaries then worked diligently to ensure the failure of this experiment of a Mini Constitution within a Constitution. In 1990, through exemption from the 73rd and 74th Amendment to the Constitution, we were allowed to retain our traditional institutions of governance, in the belief that we had the astuteness to bring in a better, modern and more inclusive grassroot system of governance than the Panchayati Raj. Once again we rebuffed the gesture with contemptuous scorn and today, 32 years down the line are still stuck with the ludicrous poser as to whether our women should participate or not in Village Dorbar meetings! Bereft of modern concepts of democratic and inclusive governance, how different are our grassroot institutions from the Khap Panchayats of UP? The High Court of Meghalaya has challenged the legal status of our village Dorbars, but sadly Dorbars still await a legislation to legitimise their existence. A birthday is also an occasion to review our past while simultaneously sketching a roadmap for our future. Meghalayans, love to glorify an imagined, undocumented, mythical past but for the inevitable dawn of tomorrow we have nothing but trepidation and Fear. So will this 50th anniversary celebration be just another event to glorify an uneventful past; squander on an uninspiring present or will it be used as a platform to plan for a sustainable future for our children? I leave this question not to our nonchalant politicians but for the anxious, worried citizens of Meghalaya to answer.

The other day I had a chance to talk to a young budding politician who had a rather different take on politics. He was worried at the nature and contour the profile of politics was shaping up in Meghalaya. It was a candid sort of discussion and he clearly was not in tune with the sentiment of his seniors that the end game of politics was simply to capture power. He frankly admitted that party manifestoes were never discussed (and this supposedly applied to all political parties) as it was clearly understood that it was money that produced electoral results and not policy nor guiding principles that brought in votes. This young person (a rare specimen among politicians) was perplexed over the emergence of an elite business cum political class that has nothing to offer but ploys on how to plunder the public exchequer. It is an elite power cartel; an oligarchy that believes in a few dominating the rest; feeding the masses with crumbs from the high table (he termed the MLA funds as one such crumb). Everything of course is done in the name of the public; a wretched writhing, squirming mass of poverty ridden humanity that has been led down the garden path for the last 50 years. It is an ignorant mass that continues to see elections as a sort of public entertainment. It is an electorate that is unable to connect politics with governance of its own welfare. It is a population led to believe that EVMs (Electronic Voting Machines) are ATMS that disburse money based on an EPIC card.

His words led me to think. If elite political conmen exist then where is the rest of society that has allowed itself to be led like sheep to the slaughter? With quite a shock it dawned on me that it is us, you and me – the very same electorate who voted these con artists to power, who now grumble, moan and whine about our future and our fate. The Church, the conscience keeper of most, has always been most articulate about the Good Shepherd who looks after his flock. The church however has been most remiss in not warning the people of present day wolves dressed in a shepherd's garb who come calling for your votes!

It is also most distressing to note that our over-reactive pressure groups,(in Khasi they call themselves Sengbhalang) whose self-declared objective is to save and protect indigenous society, themselves running after Government contracts and supply indentures, in the process rubbing shoulders with those most answerable for the pits we find ourselves in. The dismal performance of Meghalaya in the education and poverty front has led many to suspect that it is a secret deliberate policy of the political system to keep the people uneducated and poor so as to make it all that easier to fool them. True or not it is a poor reflection on the state of health of Meghalaya after 50 years of statehood. The 2023 State Assembly elections are not that far off. Statehood centenary celebrations will be an ideal occasion for many wolves in shepherd clothing to emerge from hibernation. Many will soon come calling; extending their hand in friendship; begging for an opportunity to once again be of service to humanity. Well, shake the hand if you must, of those who promise you the moon but as you do please be careful and ensure that the limb you are shaking is a human hand and not a ravenous wolf's paw!

Author is President of ICARE

"Not surprising therefore for cheery greetings to cut across all political parties or from that creed of individuals who see themselves as popularly elected leaders of the people."

The PM's new fiasco in Punjab

By Jagdish Rattanani

The vote-getting Prime Minister may have cost the BJP a lot of votes as a result of a series of mis-steps during his truncated visit to Punjab on January 5. The controversy created on the so-called security breaches, and several other strands of this episode, and some in the run up to it, point to a style that is failing and a veneer that is wearing thin. All in all, it has been a very poor start to the New Year for the BJP and its star campaigner just as he set out to garner votes yet again.

Consider the Prime Minister's remarks at Bhatinda airport on the way back to New Delhi, quoted by ANI: "say thanks to your CM that I was able to return to Bhatinda airport alive". This is an ugly depiction of whatever happened enroute, when the Prime Minister's cavalcade waited on a flyover because of blockages reported well ahead on the road. It gets uglier when seen in the light of videos that show a small group of people coming close to the PM's cars, who were actually BJP supporters carrying party flags and shouting slogans in his support, with the Special Protection Group (SPG) team doing nothing but watch. To cite this as a threat to his life, then to make a mockery of security protocols and reduce them to political scoring points and run down an elected Chief Minister before his officials speaks of a leader who was unduly unnerved, unnecessarily worried about his safety and someone who has begun to imbibe the Kool-Aid he has been so good at selling to others.

The words "your CM" tells us that there is the "ours" and "yours" in the world of Narendra Modi, a division that says "your" government did not secure "our" Prime Minister. Modi is prone to a swift slide into this quicksand, a reflection of the "them" versus "us" mind frame, the classical world of prejudice where all the "them" are categorised and painted as threats and all the "us" are to be supported and protected. Since these words were said by a Prime Minister who probably felt humiliated that a rally he came for could not be addressed, they show him under some stress and bring out how he acts in those circumstances. Words, after all, reveal the inner being; the choice of words is an indicator of the values, the assumptions, the mental models and a lot more about the person.

Pictures circulated by others, including the Congress, have pointed out that the real reason for turning back was that the rally he wanted to address and had prepared for had 70,000 chairs but only 700 attendees. The lack of crowds despite the attempt to busload numbers points to the fact that the Prime Minister has suffered a loss of standing so severe that an apology and a withdrawal of the farm laws he wanted to push down the gullets of unwilling farmers has not done much repair, particularly in Punjab. They indicate anger and even a sense of contempt that has gotten deeply embedded in the people of Punjab, thanks to the farm laws project. That anger has, unfortunately for the BJP, boiled to the surface again because of what was said in Punjab this time, remarks that have been seen as denigrating the State. The otherwise little-known Congress Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi has turned out pretty well in this episode by showing around reporters to display how he is stopped on the roads often and how he meets with people and how they then quietly disperse. He drives the point further by saying Punjab will not use force against ordinary people blocking roads in protest, and the contrast with the highfalutin ways of the BJP is complete.

The entire drama comes as Punjab goes to the polls. Channi has a point when he says that protests in general have increased ahead of the enforcement of the Election Commission's model code of conduct, under which the decision-making process will stop till elections are done. This is standard across all States at election time. But the empty chairs that waited to greet the Prime Minister are an indication of something different – they tell us that the withdrawal of the farm laws has not closed the case with the protesting communities and groups. The withdrawal of cases against those who were a part of the protests, the disbursal of relief to the farmers who died in the protests and a decision on the Minimum Support Price are demands that will continue to breed discontent unless they are met swiftly and in full.

That brings new significance to the remarks by the Meghalaya Governor Satyapal Malik at an interesting time – post the withdrawal of the farm laws and just when the election activity in the key States of Punjab and Uttar Pradesh is about to pick up. Malik has reported that his personal conversation with the Prime Minister on the farm laws and protests turned into a fight, and that the Prime Minister was very "arrogant". It tells us again from authoritative accounts that the leader in charge of the nation cannot countenance a different point of view, even from friends and colleagues. Malik said he was dispatched to meet the home minister instead. It is clear from the conversation that the abortive attempt at pushing the farm laws will continue to damage the Prime Minister. Mallik also served to remind the country and the establishment that the issue is far from settled, that the protestors' have only suspended their agitation, not called it off. The government will have to work with honesty to fulfill its promises on compensation for those killed in the protests, the MSP frameworks and withdrawal of cases.

All in all, the brief but very telling words of the Prime Minister, the rabble-rousing by the BJP to create the impression of a never-before security breach that put the life of the Prime Minister of India in danger, the cancellation of his visit midway and Malik's cautions to the government tell us that the way the farm laws were sought to be pushed by the insensitive, care-a-damn approach of the party continue to extract a high price for the BJP and its leader. Yes, there is also the question of how the SPG conducted itself, questions on whether security protocols were fully followed, and the competence of police forces -- all of which should be a matter of an apolitical inquiry by professionals. The unfortunate, unfair and uncalled for narrative that was built in an astonishingly short time, as if Punjab was out to harm the Prime Minister, thus demonising a State that is known for its sacrifices towards nation building, serves to tell the people that the farm laws were not a one-time mistake of this government. The problem lies deeper, and we may not have seen the last of the government's anti-people moves and statements. This is a factor that will extract its price and could well cost the BJP at the polls.

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

Letters to the Editor

Unavoidable power cuts

Editor,

Apropos to the letter 'Unpredictable power cuts!' by Serene Rynjah (ST Jan,10, 2022) it is very sad to say that the cuts are unavoidable. Let us be practical about the health of our power situation. In the beginning there was the 1.0 Mw got from Beadons Falls courtesy B.C Roy. In 1950,we had 75 MW from Umtrew built under the Colombo project. With these the Shillong city could be lit and remember no extra luxury items like heaters or refrigerators were used then, Then Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated the Umiam Dam in 1963 and by 1967 we could see our cities and villages around lighted (bulbs only).The 4 stages deliver 243 MW. With coal having been struck in Jaintia Hills the Shillong population multiplied by leaps and bounds. The whole of Meghalaya was powered. Then there are 9 cement plants in our state. One consumes 118 MW per month. Add to that 4 steel plants in Byrnihat with the same power consumption, made worst by power theft. The Leshka (ROR) can deliver only 80 MW and only if the monsoon is good.

And life is more luxurious than those 60's with fridge, microwave ovens, washing machines. power grinders etc. NEEPCO, through the riverine border law awards Meghalaya the owner of the river 6% of 275 MW, and we are contented.

So Meghalaya, and for that matter India is badly power- starved. I hate to say this but the voltage in the homes never crosses 170 volt which is 50 volt less than normal. This was pre-winter. Now with room heaters and ACs overloaded, MeECL cannot help but resort to load shedding and power rationing. Lack of vision made our Government to allow millions of cusecs of water from our reservoir to serve the Rangmen Military unit for residential quarters.

To add salt to injury, there are complexes which can light the fish ponds, whereas sad to say a villages nearby needs candles for children to study for their examinations. Unless we admit that power generation has remained stagnant since 1972 and we keep on meeting the needs of these corporates, the common domestic consumers would continue to suffer and with 170 volt at peak, the bill may treble. This is why 'one needs to cut one's coat according to one's cloth'.

Yours etc.,
F.L Kharkongor
Via email

Of leaving a legacy

Editor

I read with delight the article by HH Mohrmen's article, 'Humans and their legacy" (ST Jan 10, 2022) and reflected on what I would leave as a legacy. Indeed each one of us has the power to live well and ensure that when we leave this earth there is something we are remembered for. I am a great fan of Neil Nongkynrih the music maestro and I am in awe of his ability to move from one genre of music to another. I have attended all the concerts held in Shillong and was held spellbound by the musical "Sohlyngem" that was staged at the Soso Than auditorium many years ago. I can't imagine how Nongkynrih could write the musical and how he trained the members of the Choir to act out the play. It was truly magical.

Neil Nongkynrih's life must be documented sooner than later so that posterity remembers him for his major contribution to peace, brotherhood and love. There are many talented pianists in Shillong but none can compare to Neil whose fingers I always watched on the screen projector.

On Sunday, the Shillong Chamber Choir released his song, " Another World." It gave me goosebumps because Neil had sung this song as if he knew he was leaving this earth. Perhaps he knew his time on this earth was soon coming to an end. I also read Glenn Kharkongor's letter, "Who the God's love die young." We in Meghalaya should not only pay our tributes to Neil but also institutionalise all that he has created. The Shillong Chamber Choir is a brand and that brand should continue. For now the Choir must be feeling the pain of sudden loss but with time I am sure they will regain their composure and push ahead since we have heard that there are several projects ahead of them that need completion.

Meanwhile I pay my condolences to all the family, friends and fans of the Shillong Chamber Choir and Neil Nongkynrih. They have given us many moments of delight and joy and they have made us proud.

Yours etc.,
Andriana Lyngdoh,
Via email

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"Our rights are not absolute. Our rights can be curtailed in the interest of public safety."

--- John Kennedy

The Shillong Times

Vol No:LXIV No.151 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 12, 2022

Revolt in UP BJP

INDIA'S largest state, set for assembly polls in the next few weeks, is also set for a major political churning that will have major implications for national politics as well. The resignation of state labour minister Swamy Prasad Maurya and three other MLAs from the ruling BJP in Uttar Pradesh on Tuesday might have come as a bombshell on the saffron party that, till a week ago, was confident about retaining power in the state. The first sign that all was not well with the BJP came when Prime Minister Narendra Modi cancelled a poll rally in Lucknow a few days ago, citing "likely rainfall (in the coming days)." So much seems to be happening on the political turf there days after the Election Commission announced the polls.

The resignation of the minister and some MLAs could perhaps be out of a realization that the BJP might not give them the tickets this time. For, the exits from the ruling party came shortly after chief minister Yogi Adityanath held a meeting with Union home minister Amit Shah on the selection of party candidates for the assembly polls, in the absence of party chief JP Nadda who was down with Covid-19 infection. More resignations from the BJP and shift of saffron leaders to the SP are predicted. Whatever be the reason for this, SP chief Akhilesh Yadav set for a tough fight with Yogi Adityanath is smiling broadly. He has got the much-needed morale boost at the right time. Reports are also that the Apna Dal, a constituent of the NDA and sharing power with the BJP in Delhi, is building bridges with the SP on poll-eve. This is amid strong perceptions that the ground-level political mood is shifting against the BJP.

If "Modi" was the "magic" for the BJP to win the polls in the past, this might not be so in future – more so as an anti-incumbency wave might erupt after the BJP's five-year rule in the state. Irrespective of what opinion polls keep predicting about UP, a combination of factors are at work to let down the BJP there; the communal equations, for one. What the BJP did in the past to win elections was to mobilize funds to the maximum and hold a high-voltage campaign with PM Modi in the forefront. Put together, this was a lethal combination. Chances are that the saffron party will overcome the initial embarrassment and get back to power. But, given the present conditions, this will be an uphill task.

On Teachers and Politics

By Batskhem Myrboh

I am on the same page with the state government in its efforts to improve the quality of education in the state but I beg to defer on the method that is recently being adopted i.e., barring teachers in aided educational institutions from participating in political activities. In this piece I am not going to dwell on the positive contributions of teachers towards the political life of the state simply because, unlike in the past, we hardly have, at present, teachers who being in politics make any qualitative difference politically. Rather, a close look will be taken on the issue from other perspectives.

It was vide notification No. EDN.49/2015/Pt.1/504-A dated 23.03.2021 that the state government amended Rules 6 and 7 of the "Rules regarding Conduct and Discipline of the Employees of Aided Educational Institutions, 1961" (hereafter Rules 1961). According to the amended rules employees in aided educational institutions are barred from (i) holding offices of political organisations, (ii) offering as candidate in election to a legislative body, but they are not barred from any other political activity like joining a political organisation and even participating in election activities such as campaigning/canvassing. However, the circular issued by the Deputy Secretary, Education Department dated 17.11.2021 addressed to the Registrar NEHU, Deputy Commissioners, Director DHTE etc went a step further and beyond what the amended rules provide stating that all employees in aided educational institutions "are not allowed to hold office in political organisation or Local Bodies, or take part in any election activities". Therefore, there is lack of concurrence between these two documents of the same government. One may even wonder at the source of authority of the deputy secretary to bar employees from all election activities. Instead of focusing on their incongruence, it is better to look into their complementary roles. When they are read together, teachers are required to maintain political neutrality.

In the above mentioned notification, there was no justification for bringing the above amendment. But from utterances of its architects and proponents, it is learned that teachers are barred from joining politics in order to ensure their attendance in educational institutions which is important for enhancing quality education. This argument is seriously flawed on two grounds; first it is based on conjecture and not on facts, and second it is self-contradictory as such employees are permitted (verbally) to hold offices of local durbars. To be a headman is taxing- mentally, physically and also by way of time – perhaps much more than what involvement in politics entails. At the college level which I am conversant with, there is already a rule/instruction from the government that teachers in aided institutions need to adhere to UGC workload whereby they are required to work 40 hours in a week with a minimum of five hours a day. Moreover, assistant professors and associate professors/professors are required to engage 16 and 14 hours of direct teaching in a week respectively. Out of 40 hours in a week teachers are supposed to spend six hours for research activities. However, in order to enable teachers to perform their duties efficiently, putting in place required and supporting infrastructures is of great importance. I am sure effective enforcing of this rule will definitely bring about certain improvement in the quality of education but I am skeptical that barring teachers from engaging in political activities will bring any change. As long as a teacher can perform his/her duties what warrants the government to interfere in the activities which can be performed outside the working hours/days/weeks/months? In fact, if there is any teacher who fails to perform the duties, rules are already in place on which disciplinary action can be taken against such a teacher. Instead of taking necessary action against the defaulting teacher, the government is targeting every employee. This is an infantile overreaction.

Indian citizens enjoy, according to Article 19 (1) of the Indian Constitution, inter alia the right to freedom of speech and expression, the freedom to assemble peaceably without arms and the freedom to form associations or unions. No doubt, these freedoms are not absolute but their restrictions have to be reasonable. The question that arises is whether the restriction imposed by the government on teachers' right is reasonable or not. To test its reasonableness one may ask a question whether it serves the purpose of education and public interest. The answer is NO. There is no established correlation between political neutrality of an employee and quality of education. Had it been so, government schools and colleges whose employees maintain political neutrality would have been way ahead of aided institutions but the ground reality is completely different. When it does not serve its intended purpose, the act therefore, is unreasonable and liable to be declared unconstitutional.

So what hampers education? The answer to this is poor administration which is responsible for the non-implementation of the already existing rules one of which was already highlighted before in case there have been cases of it being breached. Besides, proper implementations of the pre-amended rules 6 and 7 of the Rules 1961would have already served the purpose of education without needing to take away the Fundamental Rights of the citizens. These rules while allowing an employee to hold office of political organisations or local bodies or offering himself as candidate in elections to legislative bodies, is required to take "compulsory leave without pay from the date of filing his nomination till the end of the next academic session or till the termination of the term of his office to which he is elected as the case may be". It is further provided that such employee cannot hold his post on lien beyond a period of five years.

It may be noted that the Supreme Court in the State of Assam and Another vs Ajit kumar Sharma and Others (27.10.1964) observed that the Rules 1961 was notified by the State of Assam (of which Meghalaya was a part and later adopted the Rules) on 29.03.1961 only after consultation with all the stakeholders, i.e, the Governing Bodies of all the affected colleges, Gauhati University and the Assam College Teachers' Association (ACTA). But when the Government of Meghalaya brought this amendment, it was unilaterally and dictatorially done without consulting the stakeholders. I have been an active member in the central body of the Meghalaya College Teachers' Association (MCTA) for nearly a decade now, but I am not aware of the government's consultation for bringing the amendment.

The fundamental considerations of barring a teacher of aided institutions from active engagement in politics are (1) whether he/she is a government employee and (2) whether his/her post constitutes an office of profit under the central government or state government. It has been maintained by the state government that employees in aided institutions are employees of the private managements and not of the state government and this has been upheld by the Division Bench of the Honorable Guahati High Court in Writ Appeal No. 14 of 2001, dated 07-12-2005. When they are not government employees they are not part of the state bureaucracy and therefore, they are not required to maintain political neutrality.

A government servant needs to maintain political neutrality and refrain from engaging in political activities other than voting and executing election duties not on the question of his/her ability or inability to make available for duties but to prevent the breakdown of administration that may occur due to his/her disloyalty to the government of the day and also to prevent him/her from misusing his/her official position and public resources for influencing elections. Again, it may be noted that teachers in aided institutions, unlike government employees, do not draw salary from the state government, rather they do so from the fund of the respective colleges; the government simply provides aid to the institution for which the colleges have to pay to the government 60 per cent of the tuition fees paid by students. The fund of the college is different from the fund of the government; it is not a public but a private fund. Therefore, it cannot be stated that teachers in aided institutions are holding offices of profit as mentioned in Articles 102 and 173 of the Indian Constitution which deal with disqualifications of the Members of Parliament and Members of the State Legislature {For more information see Joint Committee on Offices of Profit (Sixteenth Lok Sabha) Fourth Report, 2015}. When they are not government employees and are not holding offices of profit or in other words when they are not government servants, it is an arbitrary act to impose prohibition on them from having political affiliations and engaging in political activities including election activities after performing their duties.

The people of Meghalaya are not lacking in education and logical reasoning. Therefore, we deserve to hear a better, more convincing and logically sound argument when any measure is taken that affects our rights. But rules are valid unless legally challenged.

(Batskhem Myrboh teaches Political Science for the under-graduates in Synod College)

"What's The Deal Today"

Young & vile poison

By Poonam I Kaushish

As India is busy taking shots at recovery against Covid 19 latest variant Omicron, lost in euphoria of taming it is the growing cacophony of hate crime once again. The latest is when many Muslim women woke up to a horror of their photographs being stolen and morphed for a webpage, hosted on code sharing platform Github with the intent of "auctioning" them on New Year's day code named 'what's the deal'..

From Sulli Deals, a derogatory term used by right-wing social media trolls for Muslim women six months ago to the Bulli Bai app. Already police have arrested five students between 18-26 years from Bengaluru, Rudrapur, Kotdwar, Jorhat and Indore for creating these apps. Worse, they have no regrets for their heinous misdeeds which induced raw emotions of hate.

Questionably, what could have brought them all together in a mission to shame, embarrass, scare and dehumanise over 100 Muslim women concertedly and brazenly? Alas, nobody wants to address questions on why content on social media are becoming more venomous and toxic?

Can such issues which blatantly deepen religious cleavages by pitting Indians against each other be condoned as done in 'the heat of the moment' thereby unleashing a Frankenstein? How does one control the hate mongers and blunt them? Is the Government capable of defusing this treacherous lethal keg?

Educated youth pursuing their degrees are using tech and Internet to wage an online ideological war against communities. Targeted violent contents are openly shared across Twitter, Facebook, Telegram, Instagram, WhatsApp. Remember a Muslim man killed in Palwal video was shared on Facebook along-with a 14-year-old Muslim boy beaten foe venturing inside Dasna Devi temple to drink water video was uploaded on social media.

Shockingly, around 91% of hate crimes recorded in the last decade took place after Prime Minister Modi came to power. According to Hate Crime Watch, out of 287 hate crimes motivated by religious bias from January 2009 to April 2019, 262 took place between 2014-19 whereby 99 persons were killed and over 703 wounded across 23 States.

Minorities were victims of 263 (73%) cases of which Muslims accounted for 160 (61%), Hindus 37 (14%), Christians 27 (11%) and Sikhs 3 (1%). In 80 (31%) hate crimes, the perpetrator's religion was not known. Among 182 cases in which religion of the accused was known, 81% involved Hindus (148 cases). In 18% (33) attackers were Muslim. In one case, assailant was a Sikh.

Cow vigilantism was the most common reason for attacks with 77 such hate crimes. Overall, there were 124 cow-related hate crimes. The other frequent causes were opposition to interfaith relationships (15%) and communal clashes (10%).

Last year Karnataka saw 39 hate crimes against Christians. Recall, 2012 when North Easterners were made to flee Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore, Hyderabad. Knocked out by hate SMS, "Leave immediately or face unspecified action." Socking 'secular' India a deathly communal hatred -blow!

Why blame youth alone? Our political tribe is worse. Given that our politicians have perfected intemperate language to inject poison in society over the years, from communal hate speeches, taking crude and repulsive swipes at rivals to stoking communal violence and sowing seeds of rabid communalism. Namely, dangerous and diabolical machinations of vote-bank politics, pitting Hindus against Muslims, creating fissiparous tendencies resulting in a communal divide.

The Congress accuses the BJP for engineering a Hindu majoritarian communal style of politics by using tactics like attempting to electorally marginalise Muslims to patronising communal violence, especially around the emotive issue of gau raksha, love jihad and ghar wapsi. The Hindutva Brigade slams its rival as a 'Muslim party' part of the "tukde-tukde gang" which protects terrorists and is "working on Pakistan's agenda" and belongs there.

Undeniably, we are watching cut-throat communalism at work. Political leaders have made nationalism and the Hindu-Muslim vote-bank the tour de force of politics. Every leader is propounding his self-serving recipe of 'communal' harmony and harbouring the same intention just to keep their gullible vote-banks emotionally charged so that their own ulterior motives are well-served. Never mind, that the nation is getting sucked into the vortex of centrifugal bickering.

Clearly, the level of poison and hate coursing through political and social India and injecting venom in young minds and radicalizing them is worrisome and fraught with serious ramifications. Certainly the youth have plenty to be angry about. One, acute disruption of education and unemployment pushed many into online echo chambers that are resolute with the cause of their suffering. Two, polarization thanks to technology and social media is more extreme than any physical ghettoisation.

Pertinently, it underscores that toxic inputs across society starting with rabid politics of communalism, religious hatred leading to mob violence online and offline creates a domino effect destroying young innocent minds and turning them into monsters of venom and hate. Pointing to society's utter moral bankruptcy where communal elements openly target, vilify and perpetuate sexual violence against women and minorities with alarming impunity.

Importantly, no quarter should be given to those who fan hatred among people and communities. Be it a Hindu 'messiah' or Muslim 'mullah'. Both are destroyers of the State, which has no religious entity. Thus, our moral angst cannot be selective but should be just, honourable and equal.

In a mammoth one billion plus country there would be a billion views. You cannot curtail people's beliefs and rights. One is free not to accept another's view as it is a matter of perception. A statement objectionable to one might be normal for another. However, no licence should be given to anyone to spread hatred or ill-feeling towards any community.

In this dog whistle surcharged communalised atmosphere with dangerous ideas expressed in fissiparous language which appeal to baser emotions and promises unapologetically sectarian beliefs, the time has come for us to look at the perilous implications of the insidious out-pourings which inject poison in society.

Today, India is facing an existential crisis --- a pluralist, inclusive India is defending itself against toxic religiosity. Averting this dystopia requires work on multiple fronts: The police needs to look whether these youngsters were part of a larger conspiracy aided by organized groups spreading hate. Alongside, tough policing of hate crimes, effective social media regulation and politics staying away from religious misadventures.

Its time to adopt zero-tolerance stance on offensive and disruptive toolkits. The message has to go out clearly that no one belonging to community or group can spew hatred, and if they do, they lose their democratic right to be heard. Such dangerous proposals have no place in a civilised society.

----- INFA

Letters to the Editor

Meghalaya in a nutshell

Editor,

In his article "Happy Birthday Dear Meghalaya," (ST Jan 11, 2022), Toki Blah has brilliantly summed up the fateful fifty years of Meghalaya statehood. As someone who has lived, breathed, and often critiqued the happenings of the last half century in this hapless state of ours, Bah Toki's summary has hit the nail squarely on its head.

That's where it all begins, with our heads, be they at the helm of the state, the traditional bodies or at any level of local governance. In the battle to get our own state, we anticipated that our homegrown leaders would take us to dizzy heights of development and Meghalaya would fulfil Nehru's dictum that tribals should "develop according to their own genius".

Instead, Meghalaya languishes at the bottom of the country by so many measures. In social and economic indices, even other tribal states and regions have long overtaken our state. Political corruption exists in every state, but somehow health and education have improved everywhere except in our blighted rural backyard.

But to blame our leaders is to narrate only half the story. The other half of the blame lies with the citizenry. In our laidback lifestyle and parochial mindset, we have cocooned ourselves in a world of make-believe, sealed off from the realities and the opportunities of the real world. The most recent example of our regressive attitudes is anti-vaccination. We have wonderful individuals, but as a group, we falter. We lack the dynamism to pull ourselves up and to make Meghalaya a better place, at least for our children.

Golden lodes of resources exist in our blessed state. Our varied minerals, breathtaking biodiversity, and rich culture can make us all prosperous if channeled in the right way. Neil's death and Eugeneson's election remind us of the unparalleled talent of your youth. Why can't MBOSE start +2 streams of music or sports? New vistas of livelihoods and entrepreneurship can be created for our vast numbers of dropout, unemployed youth. If only we can think creatively, rather than remaining bogged down by an unsuitable education system.

Geologists have given the world a Meghalayan Age. Let's use the phrase to also usher in a golden era for our state and ourselves. Here's to the next fifty years!

Yours etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor,
Via email

Quo Vadis Shillong Engineering College?

Editor,

Some weeks ago, Dr Glen Kharkongor, Chancellor Martin Luther Christian University (MLCU) had questioned the rationale of opening an engineering college in the state with traditional courses and disciplines considering many engineering colleges across the country are closing down for want of students. Many engineering graduates in civil, electrical, etc are going around unemployed. Why add to this uneasy scenario? The college was conceived around the nineties when it was relevant then, but now it will be another white elephant like other existing corporations and drain the resources of the state. After going this far by constructing the buildings and other infrastructure, the authorities in the Education Department would hesitate to advise otherwise. However, there is hope and nothing is lost if we plan properly for the future. The facilities already created could be utilized for other courses/disciplines relevant for the next ten or twenty years. I would suggest that it is expedient we keep the project on hold and engage a reputed consultant who can advise the state in this matter. This will be a judicious decision on this 50th Statehood anniversary.

Yours etc.,
T Mark
Rtd. Director, Education,
Govt of Meghalaya

Faith and Vaccination

Editor,

It's almost a year since India started the Covid-19 Vaccination programme for its citizens. A total of 152 crore doses have been administered. The vaccination rate in Meghalaya is low especially in the rural areas due to hesitancy. Historically, vaccine hesitancy is a globally common phenomenon. The factors that affect people's attitudes towards acceptance of vaccination include Complacency, Convenience, and Confidence. With the third wave of Covid 19 around for months, vaccine acceptance among the general public will have a decisive role in the successful control of the pandemic. The most common reasons behind the refusal of vaccine acceptance and negative attitude towards the Covid 19 vaccine include medical reasons. Apart from medical reasons, religious, social, and philosophical reasons (personal belief, conscience objection) also play a key role in vaccine refusal.

There are reports of low Covid vaccination in remote villages of the Khasi & Jaintia Hills region, where the cult leader has influence in some pockets. Such cult leaders persuade their followers to reject the need for the Covid vaccine. No wonder, theologians had a long history of opposing scientific progress in the interest of dogmatic theology.

In the primitive society, illness was described in spiritual/religious rather than a medical terms. For a very long span of human history, illness and infections were believed to occur when one lost favour with God or gods or was the wrath of God upon humanity for sin. That was the age of ignorance and now we live in the era of modern science. Therefore, 'illness' must be defined in medical terms and treated with medicine. What is called "Bad Faith" is when religion undermines modern medicine.

To properly understand the impact of vaccines, it is necessary to recall the devastation wrought by infectious diseases before the invention of the vaccine. In the case of smallpox, the discovery of the smallpox vaccine was one of the greatest scientific and humanitarian achievements of the 20th Century, sweeping away long-held superstitions. In 1980 the World Health Organisation declared that the world is free of smallpox, thanks to Edward Jenner who introduced the smallpox vaccine in 1976.

While the global efforts to mitigate the effect of the pandemic and to reduce its health and socio-economic impact rely to a large extent on preventive measures, now we have an emerging way out, in which science has given us a gift that will save our lives - the Covid 19 Vaccine. Trust Science, get the vaccine. Together we can overcome the Covid 19 pandemic.

Yours etc.,
Dr Omarlin Kyndiah
Via email

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

"Change will come slowly, across generations, because old beliefs die hard even when demonstrably false."

--- **E. O. Wilson**

The Shillong Times

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Lockdown pangs

CHIEF Minister Conrad Sangma has hinted at a lockdown in case there is a sudden surge in Covid cases which might overwhelm the fragile healthcare system of the state. Some elected representatives have other views and feel that a lockdown should be the last resort. The grim reality is that the poor are most affected by lockdowns; it's a double whammy for them. For a large percentage of Meghalaya's population the only source of income is from daily wages. The wages come from vending vegetables and fruits, running tea shops, driving taxis, masonry, carpentry and domestic work. A lockdown creates major disruptions in the lives of people otherwise gainfully employed in their own little spheres. It is cruel to snatch away livelihoods unless there is proper compensation for that loss. The truth is that there is no real compensation for the loss of livelihoods.

The West Shillong MLA, Mohendro Rapsang has pleaded on behalf of the vendors at Iewduh and said that any plans to lock down the biggest market of Shillong is not a favourable option. In fact, it is not an option at all. What is needed at this point is for all the 60 MLAs to meet and decide the best course of action. To decide on a lockdown can no longer be the brief of only the government. It requires collective decision-making by all law makers and also collective responsibility and accountability for the outcomes. To be fair to the MLAs, many of them assisted their most needy constituents with rations using funds made available through the MLA scheme. However, not all MLAs were on deck. Quite a few were not seen during the first phase of the pandemic, perhaps out of fear of being Covid infected. The thing with leaders is that they must always lead from the front. If they are missing from action at critical moments when their constituents need them the most then that leadership style is highly questionable. It is only a quest for power. Such leaders will hopefully be weeded out in 2023.

The role of traditional institutions in deciding lockdowns is also critical. The Dorbar Shnong are best placed to decide the best course of action in their respective localities. It is only through regular consultations with them and with the active participation of the MLAs that the government can decide on the various courses of actions. In these uneasy times, cooperation can work wonders. It creates a cycle of positivity that brings better results than fault-finding. The citizenry too must show responsible behaviour and mask themselves even while following other Covid protocols.

Curious case of Meghalaya

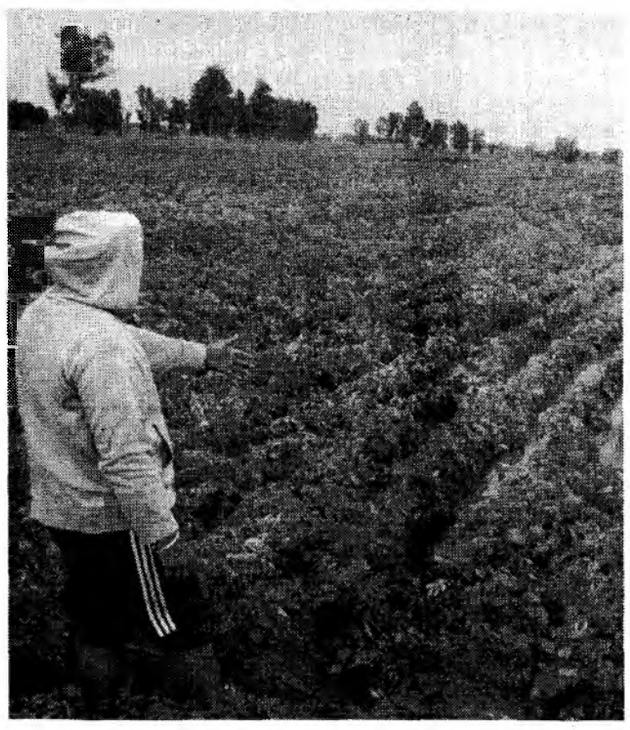
A poor state with richest farmers in the country

By Sumarbin Umdor

The citizens of our beleaguered state of Meghalaya are not used to receiving good news about their beloved state, particularly in the developmental front. The recently released India Today State of the State Survey, 2021 ranked Meghalaya at the bottom in the overall ranking of 10 small states. A month earlier, NITI Aayog's National Multi-dimensional Poverty Index (NMPI) baseline report covering multiple parameters of health, education and standards of living had placed Meghalaya as the poorest among small states and fourth from the bottom in the list of all states and Union territories (UTs). As per this measurement, about one third of the population of Meghalaya are multi-dimensionally poor. In the middle of last year, the Ministry of Education, Government of India (GoI) had released the Performance Grading Index (PGI) 2019-20 on status of school education according to which Meghalaya was the worst performer among the 36 states and UTs. The latest in the series of national ranking of states and UTs along socio-economic parameters is the Health Index Ranking of States 2021. It offers some good news as Meghalaya's ranking has marginally improved over last year's performance and it has also recorded maximum annual incremental in overall performance. However, even in this sector the State has much catching up to do.

Amidst these gloomy findings comes a startling revelation that the farmers of Meghalaya are the richest in the country with an average monthly household nominal income of Rs. 29,348, surpassing even the farmers of Punjab (Rs. 26,701) who are otherwise considered to be the wealthiest among farmers in the country. The findings are based on the 77th round of National Sample Survey conducted during January to December, 2019 and reported in the recently released report titled 'Situational Assessment of Agricultural Households and Land and Livestock Holdings of Households in Rural India, 2019'.

As per the survey, an agricultural household is defined as one with multiple sources of income but having at least one member engaged in agriculture and receiving more than Rs. 4000 as value of produce from agricultural activities. For Meghalaya, the monthly household income of farmers is reported to be about three times that of the all-India average, more than eight times that of farmers of Bihar (with lowest income), and more than double of most of the neighbouring states in the north-eastern region (NER). Further, nearly 75 percent of the income of farmers of the State came directly from crop production while for the rest of the country the share of income from agricultural production was only 37 percent.



The same survey carried out in the 70th round of NSS, 2013 had reported the monthly household income of farmers in Meghalaya at Rs. 11.792, which was the fifth highest among states and UTs and way below the monthly household income of farmers of Punjab which was the highest at Rs. 18,059. However, in the span of 6 years the nominal income of farmers in Meghalaya has more than doubled, recording a whopping inflation adjusted increase of 114 percent which is an astonishing feat that belies the conditions of the agricultural sector. It also contradicts with the other reports on the social and economic status of the state in and around the same period as summarized in the first paragraph of this write-up.

Besides income, the Situational Assessment of Agricultural Survey 2019 has also collected other information about the conditions of the farmers which requires a closer scrutiny in order to understand the situation under which farmers operate. According to the survey estimates, 74 percent of the nearly 5000 rural households in Meghalaya are agricultural households. 90 percent of these households are small and marginal farmers with land holding of 2 hectares and less. The State is next only to Mizoram in terms of highest percentage of households depending on jhum cultivation. It also reported the lowest percentage of agricultural households that had accessed the technical advice for crop production. The survey further revealed that farmer households in Meghalaya had the lowest access to credit in terms of average amount of outstanding loans (Rs 2237 against Rs. 74121 all India) and percentage of indebtedness (9 percent against 50 percent all India level of indebtedness).

However, battling all these odds, farmer households of Meghalaya having very small land holdings with many depending on subsistence farming practice of jhum, with very little investment due to lack of access to credit, not being able to plant multiple crops because of lack of irrigation, and without any price support from the government are somehow able to earn the highest monthly income of Rs. 29, 348 or about Rs. 965 per day that too mainly from crop production. This is the apparent conclusion that one would draw from the Situational Assessment of Agricultural Survey 2019.

Besides the average monthly income of agricultural households for all size class of land possessed, the report also provides income figures according to each size class of land possessed (in hectares) in the following seven class intervals: <.01, .01 to .40, .04 to 1.0, 1.1 to 2.0, 2.1 to 4.0, 4.01 to 10, and finally 10+. For Meghalaya, the average household income of small and marginal farmers (2 hectares and less) is about Rs. 19,848 which is much closer to the corresponding income level of farmers of same class intervals of Punjab (Rs. 18,645) and Haryana (Rs.18,353). However, the gap in the income level of farmers of Meghalaya and the rest of the country widens sharply at the higher size classes (above 2 hectares). At class intervals of 4.01 to 10.0 and 10.0 plus hectares the income of farmer households of the State is seven and eleven times that of his counterparts in Punjab.

Given the realities of the agriculture sector in the State, these figures are hard to accept and much harder to explain. It is therefore expected that people should raise doubts on the findings of the survey. However, to reject these findings one must have convincing arguments pointing out the lacunae in the survey, more so as the study has been conducted by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) which has the experience and expertise in designing and collecting national socio-economic surveys and enjoys high credibility among researchers and policy makers.

Even then, there are some indications on challenges with such surveys in the NER. One, the issue of sufficient sample size to generate reliable estimates for the small states of the region has been raised by some scholars in the past. The Government of India (GoI) appointed committee headed by Prof Atul Sharma in 2010 had recommended increasing sample size for NSSO survey in the NER. Other issues particular to the region are the lack of trained investigators and the poor response from informants. As one survey official observed, "many a times, the informant outrightly tells the investigator to write whatever they feel out of either lack of time or as he cannot recollect at all or due to lack of faith in the outcome of the survey as the surveys do not directly provide any benefits to the people." Maybe this is what happened during the collection of information on income of farmers in Meghalaya.

(The writer teaches economics in NEHU)

100 Years of Salesian Service to Northeast India

By Barnes Mawrie

Way back on January 12, 1922, eleven valiant Salesians of Don Bosco came as missionaries to Northeast India. They landed in Guwahati on 12th January and came up to Shillong on 13th January. The group was led by a charismatic and able leader Fr. Louis Mathias who later became the first bishop of Shillong in 1934 and was then transferred to Chennai as its archbishop. The eleven pioneering missionaries were – Mgr. Louis Mathias as the leader, Fr. Giovanni Deponti, Fr. Emmanuel Bars, Fr. Giuseppe Gill, Fr. Giuseppe Hauber, Fr. Paolo Bonardi, Bro. Pietro Aprile, Bro. Mario Calzi, Bro. Agostino Conti, Bro. Laureano Santana and Bro. Gumersindo Cid. They hailed from four different European countries, namely, Italy, France, Spain and San Marino. These missionaries through their hard work and dedicated service to the Church and to society, have laid a solid foundation for the years to come.

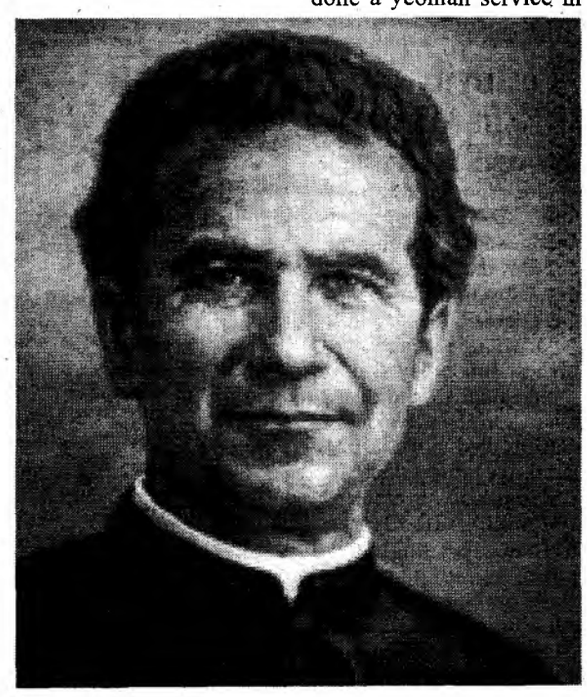
In these past one hundred years, the Salesian Congregation looks back with a sense of pride and satisfaction for the work accomplished. The Congregation has been instrumental for the growth and development not merely of the Church but of society at large. Some critics might say that the Salesians are indulging in triumphalism, but facts are facts and they speak for themselves. Let me list down some important contributions of the Salesians to Northeast India in this past one hundred years.

If Northeast India today can boast of a vast population of catholics in the fifteen dioceses, it is substantially to the credit of the Salesian missionaries who came from abroad and from South India. The Salvatorian missionaries who were here from 1890 to 1914, planted the seed of faith and prepared the grown. Their contribution was by no means insignificant. Perhaps they would have done greater things had they not been expelled by the British Government. The Salesians took up the responsibility from them and they further enhanced the work and thanks to the continuous flow of missionaries, they were able to sustain the growth and development. The fast growth of the Church in our region is an undeniable fact and much of the credit for that goes to our valiant Salesian missionaries prominent among them were Mgr. Louis Mathias, Mgr. Stephen Ferrando, Fr. Constantine Vendrame, Fr. Michael Balavoin among the Khasi-Pnars, Fr. Aloysius Ravalico, Fr. John Larrea, Fr. Peter Bianchi among the Nagas, Mgr. Orestes Marengo, Fr. Henry Frassy, Fr. John Baptist Bussolin, Fr. George Stadler among the Garos, Fr. Leo Piasecki, Fr. Remus Morra, Fr. Jose Zubizaretta among the Assam tribes and so on. Most of these missionaries were multi-faceted persons who contributed in different fields ranging from evangelization to education and social service.

Perhaps the greatest and most notable contribution of the Salesians to the tribal people of Northeast India, is education, both elementary and higher education. The large network of schools and colleges and the presence of the Don Bosco University in Assam, speak volume of their contribution in this field. History shows that the British colonists were not interested in providing higher education to local people for fear that they would begin to demand for their rights. This was the reason why they never established higher educational institutions in our region. Had it not been for the Christian churches both Catholic and Protestant, our tribal people would have remained at the elementary education level. The Salesians played a major role in establishing higher and professional educational institutions. Whether one likes it or not, Don Bosco schools and educational centres still attract a lot of applications. Salesian schools and colleges are associated with quality and all-round education. Critics from time to time have leveled charges against these Salesian educational institutions, yet the fact remains that these institutions continue to excel in their academic performances.

The Salesians have particularly proven themselves to be pioneers of technical education in this region. Don Bosco Technical School is the first technical school in Northeast India and today there is a large network of technical schools all over the region. These training institutes have been instrumental in grooming thousands of tribal youth in different technical skills and made them employable. Today as employment is becoming scarce with the growing number of formally educated youth, these technical institutes are in great demand as they provide alternative means of employment to youth.

The Salesians have also done a yeoman service in the area of tribal literature. Many Salesian missionaries were pioneers in the development of tribal languages. Fr. Balavoin was a pioneer in Tiwa language, Fr. Elias Khariong and Fr. Sylvanus Sngi Lyngdoh have both contributed much to the growth of Khasi language. Fr. Zephyrinus Baxla is doing a great service in promoting the Kurukh language of the Oraons, Fr. Joseph Pulinthanath is presently doing much for the promotion of Kokborok language in Tripura. When it comes to literature, the Salesians have done much for the tribal communities in Northeast India.



Honestly, the Salesian Congregation has every right to feel proud about her great sons who came to spread the light of the Gospel as well as the light of education in this corner of the Earth. As we celebrate the centenary of the arrival of the first Salesian missionary group to our region, we look back at these giants on whose shoulders we stand, and we thank God for the gift of these great persons. Salesians however should not rest on their laurels but should forge ahead doing "ever better and ever more." Our region is still under-developed and it still needs a lot of dedicated men and women who would champion the cause of growth and development.

Letters to the Editor

Sad state of affairs

Editor,

Apropos to Dr Omarlin Kyndiah's letter, 'Faith and Vaccination' (ST Jan 12, 2022), it really pains us the readers to learn of the views of people of any faith to refuse vaccination. The word 'Quarantine,' all need to know comes from the Bible (Old Testament), Chapter 13 of Leviticus. Qua is 4 and the whole meaning is 40 days and pertains to the person of whom the skin sort of rapture needs self- isolation for 40 days in a tent pitted outside. Only the priest is to reach him/her to determine their state of cure of the skin. The Old Testament is quite severe in dealing with a leper who has to go around announcing that he/she is a leper once declared so by the priest who examines him. Those whose case if unsure have to be quarantined for seven days.

And to bring home the point, let us take the case of malaria. People of the forest of Africa who are also God-fearing were afflicted by a disease they called Malaria. Mal is bad in Latin and Aria is air. They believed some bad element in the region had caused the air to turn bad and take it as a sort of God's punishment. Those suffering from malaria had to find another place to stay and this we have the wilderness. Actually, the cause of malaria is from the bite of the female (anopheles) mosquito. Two scientist-chemists Coventou and Pelletier discovered quinine in the 18th century. Quinine is extracted from the bark of the cinchona tree. Hence a medicine to cure malaria once believed to be the wrath of God - Quinine was discovered because God gives wisdom to his people and to date He helps doctors and scientists to discover vaccines to fight COVID-19.

And finally if the above arguments fail to convince the anti-vaxxers, then have a look at our missionaries who built schools but at the same time built dispensaries and hospitals. Are these needed if they had wanted us to refuse vaccines? What sort of mindset is this? Be that as it may, the least we need to have as Christians is a sense of responsibility towards our neighbours, for unless the whole world is vaccinated all are not safe.

Yours etc.,
J.Kharmih
Via email

Flawed reservation policy

Editor,

Finally, the NEET results are out. It is painful to note that the 40:40: 20 reservation formula adopted in Meghalaya where 40% seats are allocated for those from the Khasi-Jaintia community despite them being a larger population and 40% for the Garo people has resulted in many from the Khasi-Jaintia community who scored better percentages, losing out to their Garo counterparts with lower scores. The reservation policy as agreed upon by our leaders in 1972, without any time frame, is no longer justified. In fact, this reservation policy is flawed from day one.

Let us go back to history. Fifty years ago when the reservation policy was agreed upon without considering the population of the three tribes it was based purely on compassionate grounds as the three tribes fought unitedly for statehood. The argument then was that the Khasis and Jaintias were better placed than their Garo brethren academically. But every reservation policy should have a time frame so that people don't start taking things for granted and so that there is justice in the allocation of seats for professional courses and employment. Alas! Our leaders then forgot the importance of the time frame which should have been changed by now so that all benefit equally.

So let the NEET exam, 2021 be a game changer by which some new formula which is mutually agreed upon is evolved. After 50 years there has to be course correction on a decision that is inherently flawed. We write this with no prejudice towards anyone. We also urge our Garo friends to refrain from postponing any state examinations on flimsy grounds that they do not yet have adequate numbers to fill respective posts because those from the general category are greatly discriminated against by such claims.

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

Respecting our own heroes

Editor,

The 50th birth anniversary of Meghalaya is now upon us. Preparations for its celebrations are actively going on with the Government busy buffing up and putting a shine and sparkle on all the places, institutions and monuments that add to the beauty and splendour of our Capital, Shillong. This letter is not to criticize but to praise the Government for such efforts. They make us, the citizens of Shillong in particular and the State in general feel proud and satisfied.

One of the places where hectic activity towards what has been described above is in the State Central Library. The place is being renovated and polished up, at least the exterior of the place from what is observed from the outside. It is however disappointing to note that the Monument set up by the Government itself and inaugurated by no less a person than the former Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi , a monument erected to commemorate our three freedom fighters i.e. U Tirot Sing Syiem, U Kiang Nangbah and Pa Togan Sangma has received scant, *if no attention at all from the* authorities concerned.

The monuments mentioned above today stand forlorn, neglected and surrounded by filth and dirt. Debris, rubble and discarded liquor bottles are strewn all over the place. It is located within the premises of the State Central Library itself but for reasons best known to the officer concerned, the Director, Arts and Culture, this monument which was set up to honour our fallen heroes, has apparently been abandoned, forgotten and considered redundant by the Government. Would it be too much to expect, on the 50th year of Meghalaya's birth celebrations, for someone, somewhere in the seat of power to at least clean up the monument, give it a face lift and give it at least that look of respectability and decency it deserves?

Yours etc.,
Jonnas Sangma,
Via email

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"Optimism is essential to achievement and it is also the foundation of courage and true progress."

--- Nicholas M. Butler

The Shillong Times

Vol No:LXIV No.153 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, JANUARY 14, 2022

Parties, feudal states

THE rising clout of regional parties in India is at the expense of the two national political establishments – the Congress and the BJP. Regional parties, per se, are not an anathema but each such party in the mainland today is run as a family enterprise and is carrying with it the tag of corruption. No ideology guides these entities, unlike the two national parties or even the Left. Chances of fissiparous and separatist tendencies gaining the upper hand in due course are a matter of serious worry.

The Samajwadi Party is now threatening to outwit the BJP in Uttar Pradesh. The series of resignations of ministers and MLAs from the BJP is to the serious disadvantage of the ruling party. The regional parties are also attempting to grab power from the BJP at the Centre while they have turned states into Princely States as in the pre-Independence times. While West Bengal's Mamata Banerjee is seeking to cobble an anti-BJP, non-Congress front, this week saw RJD leader Tejaswi Yadav taking a chartered flight from Bihar to Telangana for a tie-up with chief minister Chandrashekar Rao. Once the 2024 results are out, a coalition against the BJP powered by the regional parties could emerge. If the BJP loses and unless the Congress gets substantial number of seats, regional parties could stake claim for the PM post to run the central government from the front -- based on their whims, not ideology.

When Narendra Modi campaigned for the 2014 polls and took power in Delhi, his promise was to neutralize the influence of the corrupt regional parties that made hay when the UPA II held power. Among his first acts was to include two "sons" from the BJP leadership to his ministry, if only to buy peace with the veterans in the party. In the past seven years of his rule, the clout of the regional parties has grown manifold. They are running the government in most states. There is no transparency in the way they use the huge funds they collect out of governmental deals – partly for party purposes and partly for their own cash chests. Loot is believed to be the name of the game as was evident also in the 'bar bribe' scam in Mumbai. Such a situation in state after state is created by the weakening of the Congress establishment and the failure of Prime Minister Modi and the BJP to effectively provide a counter-weight to regional parties. Their weak positioning hastened the worsening of this scenario.

Cannot say RIP to Optimism

Meghalaya needs huge doses of hope

By Patricia Mukhim

As we proceed to observe Meghalaya's 50th birthday we can nurture one of two emotions – hope or despair. And we do have a substantial number in this state who believe we are travelling in reverse gear and not getting anywhere. That is the height of pessimism. Meghalaya has progressed, although the pace could have been better with improved governance modules and an elected dispensation that is less self-centred and more caring about the state and its people. However, to paint all legislators with the same brush would be unfair. We have had elected representatives who have been exemplary in their conduct and service and we still have such MLAs even today. Hence we cannot write off everyone as being venal and in a rush to feather their nests. There are a few like that but should we blame them or those that elected them? If we really care about Meghalaya then we need to carry out a quick research as to why people elect the MLAs they do. The answers might surprise us. Only when we get to hear from the horse's mouth will we understand how convoluted electoral politics is! Else we come to conclusions that may be far off the mark and then get into dystopia – a sort of Apocalyse now situation!

Above all, it's important to ask ourselves as citizens of this state about our own contribution to the growth of Meghalaya. What has our contribution been? As educated citizens have we participated meaningfully and engaged with those in government when we see them following policies that are detrimental to the economic, social, political and intellectual growth of the people of Meghalaya? Venality and decadence are part of the human condition inasmuch as honour, dignity and integrity are. There is a little bit of the good and bad in us humans. Perhaps the problem is that there's no one to stop the rot of hedonism before it progresses beyond the point of redemption.

I often think of each of the legislators we have elected and their capability. Some are not articulate in the English language but is that even a qualification? If they are able to communicate with their constituents, isn't that good enough? If they have to answer questions in the Assembly there are officers in their department who can write out the answers and they can read from that written script. And in case they need to answer supplementaries they should be allowed to answer those in the vernacular. The heavens are not going to fall. The new Assembly building that will be inaugurated soon must have simultaneous translation facilities (from Khasi, Jaintia, Garo to English and vice versa). Many of us have attended world conferences where people proudly speak in their languages and that's translated into several languages. Knowing English is not a badge of honour. Delivering good governance – which essentially means knowing what people actually need the most – is important. Legislators should create these platforms in their constituencies where people are allowed to articulate their deepest angst – whether that be education, healthcare, roads, agricultural growth or any other aspiration. These platforms will help MLAs to better understand the ground realities and respond better. They will also be able to give an account of what they have done during their 5-year tenure, beginning from the first year. We should do away with the habit of electioneering where a sitting MLA comes to the constituency only in the last year and gives an account of what he/she does because by then the anti-incumbency factor has already set in.

Also, since the majority of our MLAs reside outside their constituencies (in Shillong city) their understanding of the daily grind in their constituencies may not be optimal. They need to develop constant feedback channels that are robust and that tell them the truth - not what they like to hear. This might be a positive way of beginning the 51st year of Meghalaya.

We have heard ad-nauseum that Meghalaya has vast potentials but somehow those potentials have been scuttled and then begins the blame game. I have always said this and will repeat it – to be a citizen of a democracy one cannot reside in a comfort zone. One must work hard to get vital information on government schemes and how they are implemented and point out with facts and figures the anomalies one sees. Unfortunately, this muck-raking duty has been thrown squarely into the shoulders of the media as if media persons are the only repositories of democratic tenets. That's the reason why venality thrives.

Very often when we speak of governance we tend to attribute every aspect of it to politicians, quite forgetting the huge army of bureaucrats that actually keep the governance machine well-oiled. The bureaucracy reaches or should reach the last mile in every sense of the term and we have seen that Meghalaya does have a cadre of officials that have served with integrity and passion and have felt the pain and suffering of people. It is because of such officers that Meghalaya is where it is today. True we have the bad apples but those survive purely on political patronage. What is demoralising for bureaucrats is to be given a punishment posting because they have called out corruption or become whistleblowers. This is where the public should step in because in a democracy it is the people who are the real rulers. If we the people don't take responsibility and don't stand with ethical officials it means we have handed over our power to elected representatives! It's our fault that we didn't stop corruption when we should have! So who do we blame and why should we blame the government when we as owners of that government decided to sit back and remain complicit by our studied silence?

On Meghalaya's 50th birthday let's count the many achievements and push for reforms in areas that need them. We need to get serious about pulling the MeECL from the precipice it's now hanging precariously from. Education needs a complete makeover and we have eminent educationists who can be called upon to give it a new sense of direction. We cannot leave education to politicians and bureaucrats only. Health care needs urgent revamping. Here we have the IIPH Shillong to give a new sense of direction to research and data crunching which is critical to addressing public health issues. The IIM Shillong needs to be put to good use to enhance the capabilities of the state in certain key sectors. In Meghalaya's 50th year, let's get a commitment from the government that traditional institutions will be given due recognition and their functioning institutionalized so that they qualify for direct funding. This would serve two purposes. We would not be enslaved to politicians asking them for crumbs from the MLA scheme. Second the traditional institutions would become accountable as their expenditure and receipts would be subject to audits. Third, the particular needs of every Dorbar would be better addressed.

This in fact is a year for deep introspection. Our politics is not broken yet but its just that we are perpetually unhappy with whoever is holding the reins. This pessimism can spread quickly and turn people into cynics. Cynicism also means people have no hope of anything ever going right. But I choose to differ because I believe, like the English poet Alexander Pope, that "Hope springs eternal in the human breast: man never is, but always to be blest." Hence a better way ahead is for whoever has a proposition for the government to also provide a roadmap for it.

Adults need to give hope to the younger generation, not to sow nihilism. The American Psychology Association reported that children who grew up in poverty but had success later in life all had one thing in common – hope. Dr. Valerie Maholmes, who worked on the research, said hope involves "planning and motivation and determination" to get what one hopes for. The opposite of hope is hopelessness and depression. Desmond Tutu once said, "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness,"

But hope does not mean expecting positive things to fall into our laps. It means that we have to work very hard to make that hope materialize.

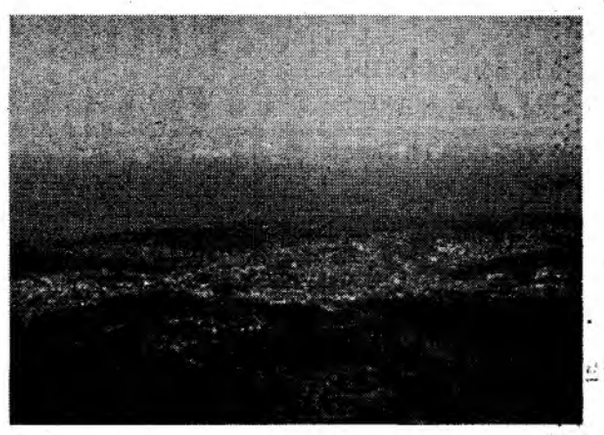
How did Shillong get its name?

By Dr Omarlin Kyndiah

Shillong is the present capital city of Meghalaya. Historically, the headquarter of the British Political Officer was shifted from Nongkhlaw to Cherrapunjee in 1835. In view of the unfavourable and humid climate of Cherrapunjee and its non-strategic location, keeping in mind the reinforcement to quell the Jaintia Rebellion led by U Kiang Nangbah, the search for a new and more congenial headquarter began . A Committee was appointed in 1862, which recommended Yeodo (Iewduh). Yeodo was renamed Shillong on 28th April 1866 by Col Henry Hopkinson.

"French scholar Przyluski mentioned an interesting finding that the Austric tribes used to migrate in batches under a leader. Like other Austrics, the Jaintias according to oral traditions and folklore were led by their great leader U Lakriah."

A section of the Austric people called T'sintaing or T'sin-tein migrated from China. They were later known as Zyntein or Synteng and now as Jaintia. The Jaintia came to the northeast and settled at Kamrup now known as Guwahati. Due to the threat of raids and conquest by the Brahman of the Indo-Aryan, the Jaintia migrated to the east and settled at the banks of the Kolong river. Subsequently, they moved south to establish an agricultural civilisation on the fertile valley of the Kupli River which they called Kremlamet and situated in the present-day North Cachar Hills. French scholar Przyluski mentioned an interesting finding that the Austric tribes used to migrate in batches under a leader. Like other Austrics, the Jaintias according to oral traditions and folklore were led by their great leader U Lakriah. The myth of U Lakriah and the descent of U Niaw Wasa (the Seven huts) through Ka Tangnoob Tangjri (the golden ladder) is connected with the origin of the Jaintias who migrated from Kremlamet decided to settle at Saphohlynrum. While the majority remained at Kupli valley under the leadership of U Long Chyllong's nephew, U Synriang. He was the son of Long Chyllong's sister, Ka Lisan Chyllong. U Long's other siblings are U Sin Chyllong and Ka Rah Chyllong. As they settled at Saphohlynrum, gradually they domesticated the land and started agriculture.



Worshipping mountain and river gods was one of the most important forms of nature worship. Around each god sprang up myths, legends, sacrificial rites, and procedures. Analysis of mountain god worship leads to a fuller understanding of Hynniewtrep mythology. According to tradition, U Long Chyllong built a sacred place of worship at the peak of Lum Chyllong (Shillong peak). Hence, the peak began to be deified and U Long Chyllong was made the King (Syiem Chyllong) who was regarded and revered as a god.

Meanwhile, the issue of ownership of the place of worship emerged between the Jaintias and the people of Mylliem. Oral tradition has it that both the parties decided to resolve the matter by prayer and libation to the deity. The Mylliem people cleverly faked the ceremonial rites. The Jaintias who were the early settlers of Saphohlynrum eventually decided to return to their original native land at Kupli valley. On their way back, different clans and clan-clusters joined together and formed villages or Chnong in the present-day Jaintia Hills. According to oral tradition, the founder of myth of U Niaw Wasa or Hynniewtrep. Myths usually came about during a time when history, science, philosophy, and technology were not very precise.

"U Long Chyllong and his men crossed the Kupli River and traveled on foot and reached the bottom of a mountain later known as Shillong peak.The place they called Saphohlynrum, has a large variety of wild fruits and vegetables."

But in the course of time and due to population growth and the pressure on natural resources availability like land and water, the Jaintias under the leadership of U Long Chyllong decided to find an additional settlement area having enough resources to feed all its inhabitants. U Long Chyllong and his men crossed the Kupli River and traveled on foot and reached the bottom of a mountain later known as Shillong peak.

The place they called Saphohlynrum, has a large variety of wild fruits and vegetables. The area is known for its rich soil and abundant access to water, a favourable spot for settlement. A section of the Jaintias who migrated from Kremlamet decided to settle at Saphohlynrum. While the majority remained at Kupli valley under the leadership of U Long Chyllong's nephew, U Synriang. He was the son of Long Chyllong's sister, Ka Lisan Chyllong. U Long's other siblings are U Sin Chyllong and Ka Rah Chyllong. As they settled at Saphohlynrum, gradually they domesticated the land and started agriculture.

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Thus, the origin of the city name Shillong is thought to be that of the reputed founder and first ruler, the legendary, U Chyllong. U Long Chyllong was tragically killed by his nephew, U Synriang during a fierce battle.

These are stories handed down from the remote past by word of mouth from one generation to another, reflecting the people's traditions, feelings, beliefs, and judgments. It is one of the numerous versions of the narrative of Shillong peak.

Letters to the Editor

Dubious Doctorate

Editor,

The Shillong Times, Jan 13, 2022, reported that a poet from Tura, Biswajit Nandi, has been awarded an honorary doctorate from the California Public University (CPU), USA. Contrary to what the article claims, CPU is not a leading educational institution. It does not appear on any university ranking list, and the word 'prestigious' is evidently exaggerated.

In fact, it is an online university which has never had a campus or any offline programs. The website does not mention any statutory recognitions or accreditations. It appears to be one of a cluster of such universities, that are set up to lure foreign students to obtain a foreign degree. These degree factories have been in the news and several of them have legal cases pending against them.

The modus operandi of such institutions is to advertise their courses through agents in India who will take the student, gullible or otherwise, through a process of basically purchasing a degree including doctorates. They arrange 'convocations', and tag on a few prominent names and pictures. Because of the Covid pandemic, they issue disclaimers about not receiving permission to hold actual events. A brief browse through the internet will reveal these shady dealings.

One of the 'research consultants' advertises its role with marketing lines like: "Panic about your Thesis writing? Not finding time for Thesis Writing? You don't have to worry about your Thesis writing anymore! We are experts in Thesis Writing, Synopsis Writing, Publications". I have quoted verbatim, with the grammatical and syntax errors. This particular ad has a poster with the names and logos of several universities including California Public University. In the CPU university is the line, "Only Few Nominations left".

There is much more on these murky educational institutions. The media, recruiting universities and the public should be aware of these fraudulent institutions. I fear that the poet has been misled.

Yours etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor,
Via email

Swami Vivekananda-a youth icon

Editor,

The nation celebrated the birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda on January 12. The main objective behind the celebration is to propagate the philosophy and the ideals of Swami Vivekananda for which he lived and worked and also to promote rational thinking among the youth, believed to be the future of the country.

One of the most significant contributions of Swami Vivekananda to the modern world is his interpretation of religion as a universal experience of transcendent Reality, common to all humanity. According to him 'Education means that process by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, and intellect is sharpened, as a result of which one can stand on one's own feet'. The larger objective should be to pursue the integrated study of philosophy and activities of Swami Vivekananda in Indian as well as global references, to undertake studies of different religions with an objective to spread the idea of harmony of religions and to treat all work as worship and service to humankind as service to God.

Yours etc.,
Pinaki Nandy,
Guwahati

Who cares for the disabled?

Editor

Every year seminars and programs are held by the state government for people suffering from various disabilities to create public awareness about the need to support and care for them. However, it is unfortunate that in the midst of the Covid lockdown in the previous year and these past months very little has been heard about any special intervention happening for them. The question is - are we so insensitive towards their plight? Do we just ignore them and think that they are "unwanted" in society? Where have all the civil society pressure groups gone? How sad it is to see people with the white cane being led by another with a white cane. How sad it is to see that people suffering from other forms of disabilities are made to fend for themselves. This raises a pertinent question about our collective insensitivity. And where is all that Central assistance and welfare schemes? There is a saying that when one's does good to another goodness comes back manifold. Let's all try and care for the disabled in whatever way we can!

Yours etc..
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar,
Via email

Memory crate

Editor,

The first thing I did every morning when I woke up is go through the front page of both the English and Vernacular newspapers. Yesterday's front page was different from most days. There was an advertisement by the Meghalaya government entitled,"Memory Crate". Memory Crate is part of the celebration for the 50 years of the birth of the state of Meghalaya. The Meghalaya government is organising various programs to celebrate this momentous occasion on a grand scale. So, "Memory Crate" as per the advertisement is a time capsule. It is an open invitation to the general public to share their precious memorabilia and thoughts through letters and the shared items will be kept inside the box and it will be opened 50 years from now. When I first read about it, I genuinely thought it was a laughing matter and I simply laughed it off. Then in the afternoon, a friend of mine shared the advertisement with me through WhatsApp and suggested that I write something. I said 'hehe,sa iapeit mo' (let's see). I was still not convinced. Then later in the evening, after a couple or more chats, I told him again that I'll if I can really come up with something.

After a few deep thoughts I came up with these few wishes. This is what I want Meghalaya to be when they finally open this box:

1. May we lead the way in peaceful co-existence: Sarong ia la ka jong, burom ia ka jong kiwei (Be proud of your own and respect what belong to others).
2. May we set the benchmark in organic farming.
3. May our gini coefficient be the lowest in India, somewhere near the zero mark.
4. May we be the apple of India's policy makers' eyes and last but not the least
5. May we be the Jonesses that every state in India will try to keep up with!

Some of you might say that it is wishful thinking. Many onlookers and political and economic observers feel that Meghalaya is going down the drain but as the saying goes we should always look on the bright side even if it's hoping against hope.

I just would like to mention in this letter about the Rs 700 crore that Japan gave us to develop the tourism sector. The amusing thing is when the news was first circulated online almost a month back, no one mentioned that it was a loan. Everyone lauded the Meghalaya government for this financial coup. Japan being a highly indebted country itself will definitely not give away funds for free. Now that the money will be in the coffers of the State Government, all I want to say to this present government is to use the money judiciously and make it fruitful. Let me remind our policy makers about a loan that England took from the USA during the second world war to finance it's war efforts. England finally cleared the loan in 2006.So the British general public had to bear the financial burden of an unproductive loan for almost 60 years!

Yours etc.,
Gary Marbaniang,
Via email

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

"When you ge[illegible] options narrow."

Robert Greene

The [illegible]mes

Vol No:LXIV No.154 [illegible] JANUARY 15, 2022

Whither Megh[illegible]cial Audit Council

THE Meghalay[illegible] Participation and Public Services [illegible]ct passed in April 2017 made this th[illegible]ess such an Act. The prime obj[illegible] was to review delivery of pub[illegible]mplementation of government [illegible]mmes through a participatory [illegible]rnment and stakeholders [illegible]. This would have ensured [illegible] and concurrent course-correction [illegible]ion of government schemes and [illegible]. The idea is to achieve the desir[illegible]utcomes."

The Council [illegible]'Concurrent Audit' of develo[illegible]es and public services. It would [illegible]ffectiveness and efficiency in im[illegible] development programmes and [illegible]s in a time-bound manner and initiate [illegible]orrection measures wherever necessa[illegible]d in turn encourage transparency in d[illegible]hanisms and institutions engag[illegible]e delivery. The Council would [illegible]on social audit processes and ma[illegible]e of their rights and entitlements [illegible]their confidence and secure their par[illegible]. The purpose is to enhance citizen's ow[illegible]p of the development initiatives taken up by the Government in the true spirit of Participatory Democracy.

The Social Audit [illegible]would have been the most appropriate [illegible]for airing of public grievances and to [illegible]time-bound redress of the same. It would have facilitated public participation in governance which is the essence of democracy. How else can people become stakeholders in governance without a people-friendly platform where they can connect with the Government? The State Social Audit Council was to be chaired by an emin[illegible]person with experience in the development sector. There would be representatives of the government departments not below the rank of Commissioner & Secretary as may be determined by the State Government. The Council would have not more than ten non-official members representing Village Institutions, organizations of workers and disadvantaged groups. The State Social Audit Council would involve trained civil society organizations to audit different government programmes. It would advise the State Government on all matters concerning the implementation [illegible]and recommend improvements required. In short this would have been a perfect system for checks and balances in governance and would have detected corruption at all levels. Sadly, this Council never took off. The non-official members were never announced and resources were not allocated. It was as good as dead the moment it was [illegible]. The MDA Government is silent on the abolition of the Social Audit Council and the present Opposition members during whose time the Act was passed are also silent. This shows that no government wants transparency or to be stale-mated when it turns rogue. On Meghalaya's 50th year will the public demand the resurrection of the Social Audit Council?

Politics Matters

By Batskhem Mawlein

Every aspect of politics involves decision-making and the process should include people with diverse backgrounds, interests, perspectives, gender, beliefs, race, ethnicity, age, and other characteristics. They all should have an equal opportunity to participate in the decision-making process and influence decisions that directly or indirectly affect their lives. When we hear young people say stuff like, "I'm too young to get involved in politics or even have a political opinion," it's tough to understand. Similarly, we hear some women declare, "Politics is a dirty word, and I don't want to participate in it." I'm concerned about how polarized political engagement has become in many parts of the globe. Ordinary people believe that they must be outspoken activists to participate in politics, which is not the case. Can we afford not to be engaged in politics or not to participate in politics? I want to question our young people and ordinary people in general?

Politics is about being aware of what's going on in the world and keeping ourselves informed. It's about being concerned about the facts. Politics is the means through which we organize ourselves as individuals and societies. Politics influences every element of life, and by refusing to participate in it, you are allowing it to control you. We let others decide how little we can eat, where we can live, whether or not we have access to health care, free education, how much tax we pay, when we can retire, and what our pension will be. Others assess whether our gender and ethnicity are sufficient to label us criminals or whether our religion and nationality are enough to place us on a terrorist watch list. People should be taught the value of decision-making and participate in it.

Political participation is a constitutionally protected right in India. Politics creates an equal chance for all citizens of a nation and an equal right to vote. People take franchises for granted. "We don't care who wins the election because no political officials have aided them during "these troubled times." The people can elect a new administration if they are sick of the current one. If they don't vote, the same party will be in power for five years, or there will be no changes whatsoever. Every vote is significant. When the people's mindset shifts to "my vote makes a difference, then the numbers increase, and a large number of people voting makes a difference and brings change. In the 2013 assembly election, Meghalaya recorded a voter turnout of 86.82%, which is lesser in 2018 with 84.86%. Even though voter engagement and trust declines as citizens are marginalized in participatory democracy, voters should go out and vote, keeping in mind that, each vote has the power to change things. Everyone can be the agent of change.

A state's economic ability to thrive and overcome the obstacles that come with advancement is doubtful without a well-organized political structure. People's best rights and values should be protected by governments, irrespective of race, gender, sexuality, religion, language, ethnicity, or political stances. Since its inception, the NPP-led government in Meghalaya failed; it reveals a lack of governance in every affair of the state. During the four years of its rule, the government busied itself laying foundation stones here and there to fool and attract the people for the next elections. The government has not completed several projects; most projects end up with foundation stones. Will the government complete different projects with only one year to complete its term? Or do people have to wait for another tenure to get things done.

The CM stated, "Our motto and mission to serve the people of the northeast will always be of supreme importance, as we begin a fresh chapter to expand our footprint in new regions and strengthen our organization in the states; where we already have a presence." The NPP, a BJP partner, has become the first political party designated as a national party in the northeast. It has been established as a state party in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Nagaland. The trend here is dangerous because Meghalaya stands at 32.7% among the top 5 Multi-dimensionally poor states among the Northeastern states. Furthermore, According to the NITI Aayog's first Multi-dimensional Poverty Index (MPI) assessment on November 26, 2021, Meghalaya is India's fifth poorest and most impoverished state in the northeastern region. If the state where they are ruling is in Poverty, how can the CM expand the NPP in the entire region? The state is in crisis, the poor have become the poorer, unemployment is on the rise, inflation everywhere so from where will the party earn money to invest in other states?

There is a possibility that the party will try its best to use Meghalaya's funds to finance elections in other states. How can they improve the lives of others when the people of the state are suffering? The Government has led people into Poverty. A poor woman in Latvia asserted, "Poverty is humiliation, the sense of being dependent and forced to accept rudeness, insults, and indifference when we seek help. It is treacherous." Mahatma Gandhi said, "Poverty is the worst form of violence against humanity." If the government uses violence against the people, how does it expect the people to behave and act? Can people trust their government with their money? Not even in the least! We must demand good ownership and control of state money as residents. The electorate's quantifiable right is to vote an inefficient government out of power. Overall, the voters determine the government we should have, not a socio-political lobby group. The people have every right to question the unjustifiable government.

There is indeed a backlog in money flow wherever it may be. There seems to be a culture of fraud. The CM, in the role of titular leader, is in charge of the overall system. Even among his co-workers, his way of doing things has sparked a lot of resentment. Democracy includes a form of democratic decision-making wherein the citizens exercise the authority provided by the Constitution. Decision-making for public welfare requires that all citizens actively participate in the elections. People are free to express their opinions, run for public office, and suggest recommendations. Most importantly, decisions are taken using some rational, socially progressive, and efficient approach of combining their voiced opinions. Few people are indifferent to politics; it is a precarious inclination. "Indifference" carved above Milan's Holocaust monument entrance emphasizes that the opponent of love is apathy, not hatred. The victims become invisible as a result of their own indifference. When Jews were dragged through Milan's magnificent streets to the central railroad station for transportation to detention camps beginning in 1943, no one seemed to mind.

It is common to see some sections or regions receive insufficient attention for various reasons. Additionally, several smaller parties are formed as a result of politics. Minor national-level parties such as NPP, NCP, and now TMC have come up. The regional parties like the UDP. PDF, HSPDP, KHNAM, GNC, etc., are voiceless. How they will go to the public in the next election? The sad story is that they have become speechless in the Assembly where voice matters. In this manner, society cannot benefit from equal growth and prosperity if the most prominent and most vigorous regional parties in India under the leadership of Naidu to Banerjee had failed their nationwide wager in 2019. What are the prospects of the regional parties in Meghalaya now?

Money has become prevalent in politics, from ordinary party business to selection of candidates, day-to-day government operations, and policy manipulation for personal advantage. Interestingly, poor governance leads to higher spending, with funds used for fraudulent vote-buying. Every election, politicians spend lots of money on canvassing and handing out money to people. However, most of today's political votes are purchased on the wrong side. At present, in Meghalaya, one vote will cost Rs 500 or 1000 and upwards not only in rural but in urban areas too. Ironically, individuals are deceived; money goes to a few pockets of those close to politicians.

Politics in the state is a principle in which the powerful hold total authority over society and must be challenged by others who lack the means to make a positive impact. The average citizen bears all of the burdens. Politicians and persons with solid political histories and families have ultimate power and can accomplish whatever they choose to. The ordinary citizens will undoubtedly feel the consequences of it all. It is one of the most severe repercussions of governance. We need leaders who are not interested only in power but leaders who genuinely empower people. Leadership is not about control but service and not about manipulation but inspiration. Yet, we will not live in darkness; the people need to convince our politicians to infuse leadership qualities in the younger generation to bring a change in the governance of the state.

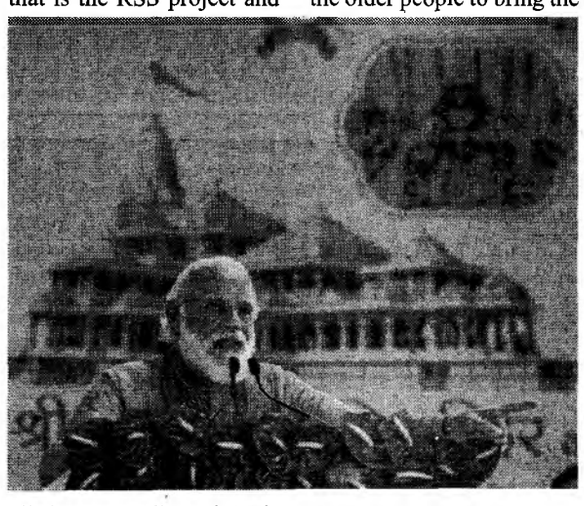
From Hindustani State to Hindu State

By Arun Sinha

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's open involvement in the construction, rebuilding and restoration of Hindu temples is a perilous thing for the Indian state or society. There is nothing wrong in the construction, rebuilding or restoration of Hindu temples. Those are iconic shrines which Hindus see as abodes of their highest deities and have a right to construct, rebuild or restore them. But why should the Prime Minister get involved?

Narendra Modi is a self-professed Hindu believer. Nobody would have raised any fingers if he were to be engaged with other Hindu believers to construct, rebuild or restore those temples as a person. Much like other devotees, he would have worn saffron clothes and a tilak on his forehead and joined them at the foundation laying or inauguration ceremonies in the performance of the rituals, and nobody would have objected. Even if the media would have noticed because he was Prime Minister, it would have been for his good and the good of the Indian state and society, for he would have been applauded for going to the ceremony as a common Hindu.

Nobody can take away Narendra Modi's right to believe in, follow and practise Hindu faith. Everyone in India is entitled to their faith. Where the problem arises is his participation in the projects and ceremonies in his official capacity as Prime Minister. He is completely ignoring the fact that as Prime Minister he represents the Indian state. By his participation he is making his personal faith as the faith of the Indian state. Surely, that is the RSS project and



all those grandiose, intoxicantly choreographed and widely broadcast ceremonies with him at the centre are calculated and designed to demonstrate that Hinduism is the national religion of India. The RSS and Modi seem to have decided that if they are restrained by various domestic and global factors to officially declare India as a Hindu rashtra they can at least unofficially proclaim it so.

But in the process they are causing serious damage to the Indian state and society. The ruler in India throughout history, be it Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh or Muslim—of course barring some exceptions—could not ignore the reality that their subjects followed different faiths and they could not impose their personal faith upon them. That is why theocracy found no space in India, unlike Europe where kings had to adopt extreme secularism to end the dominance of the extreme religionism of the Pope. Independent India's concept of the relation between the state and religion was a continuity of the native political tradition. This concept stood on a firm tripod of principles: one, everyone would be free to follow their faith; two, the ruler would not impose his faith upon the people; and three, he would equally honour all faiths.

Throughout history, kings gave grants of land and other support to their subjects of different faiths to set up their places of worship. Following that political tradition, the state in Independent India provided subsidies for Muslims go to Mecca for hajj, Hindus to participate in the Kumbh mela and Sikhs to go to Pakistan for pilgrimage. There was an equal respect and honour to all faiths. The state treated them impartially. All that is changing with Modi in the Prime Minister's office. Under him, the state has become partial to Hindu religion.

Had he been as personally involved in building, rebuilding and restoring the holy places of other faiths too, the world could have still said the Indian state was following the old tradition of equal respect for all faiths. But he is doing it only for Hindu faith. Under him, the state is using public money for the promotion, preservation and maintenance of only one faith. The money in the public treasury comes from followers of all faiths. But it is being used for building and rebuilding only holy places of Hinduism.

Modi's efforts to shower special privileges on Hinduism and accord it a unique status is a reversal of India's historical tradition of equal respect to all faiths. India under him might not be looking like what Iran became after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, but it is certainly showing some likeness to the Iraq of Saddam Hussein who, while his state remained secular on paper, started a Return to the Faith campaign to promote Islam as the preferred religion in public life and the life of the Iraqis.

The similarity is seen not only in how Modi is restoring Hindu holy places but also in how he is propagating Hinduism. He takes pride in saying that his idea behind the restoration of great Hindu holy places and development of infrastructure around them is to get more and more people to visit them. Addressing the crowd at Kedarnath in early November last year he asked the older people to bring the younger generations to the Hindu 'tirth sthals' (holy places) in order to acquaint them with 'our history, culture and tradition'.

Modi's partiality to Hinduism is a clear proof of the pseudo secularism of the RSS. In theory the RSS stands for a state that respects all religions and has no religion of its own. In the words of the RSS chief ideologue M.S. Golwalkar there has always been "scope and opportunity in India for every religious persuasion to grow". The king, he says, respected and encouraged "every single religious thought, however few its adherents, to grow according to its genius." The king was the pillar of support and protection for all faiths. To the king, followers of all faiths were equal in the eyes of the state. Golwalkar's clinching line is: "Never did the king prostitute the state apparatus to impose his personal religious dogmas."

But that is the secularism the RSS preaches. The secularism it practises is just the opposite of it. What we are seeing is the state's open partiality to one faith. The king is openly prostituting the state apparatus to impose his personal religious dogmas. The king is not a pillar of protection for all faiths but the promoter and propagator of one faith.

Modi's partiality to Hinduism is changing the character and image of the Indian state from multi-religious to mono-religious in the eyes of Indians and people abroad. From a Hindustani state we are becoming a Hindu state. And that shift has unleashed venomous dragons that are attacking followers of other faiths in every nook and corner of the country.

(Arun Sinha is a journalist and writer)

Letters to the Editor

Revisit state reservation policy

Editor,

I appreciate Adelbert Nongrum the MLA of [illegible] Shillong for raising the [illegible] pending issue of reser[illegible] policy. The State has readhe[illegible] its 50th year of statehoo[illegible] and it's high time to do away with the present reser[illegible] policy. Why would we need reservation within [illegible] vation? It's been 50 [illegible] and the special treatm[illegible] any particular ethnic [illegible] should be stopped [illegible] compete in an op[illegible] egory for all based so[illegible] merit. For the past [illegible] students have suf[illegible] spite of their merits f[illegible] of this age-old re[illegible] policy. Fifty year[illegible] agreed to lift on[illegible] both educationally [illegible] fessionally. I believ[illegible] are at par with [illegible] Why don't we let [illegible] get what they dese[illegible] Adelbert Nongrum[illegible] you sincerely follow[illegible] this issue.

Yours [illegible]

Jennifer [illegible]

Police n[illegible] crack the [illegible]

Editor,

Apropos of the th[illegible] provoking letter [illegible] Omarlin Kyndiah [illegible] restriction and Fund[illegible] Rights" (ST Jan 1[illegible] we the people, [illegible] governments and [illegible] ministrative an[illegible] departments, are [illegible]ought between the devil and the deep sea. Should we still be confused about the right to our good health and life? [illegible]ve all other rights not less important than the right to [illegible]? One believes, by putting the life of one and all [illegible]k one should not claim [illegible] personal rights and [illegible]es. Have the repeated [illegible] longer periods of lockdown virtually knocked [illegible]n countless households besides bringing the world economy to a grinding halt? [illegible]eightless virus has in [illegible]eighed heavily on the [illegible]ivilization.

[illegible]ently, in view of [illegible]es and rapid rise in [illegible]ses of the new variant [illegible] P.1, each individ[illegible] should be more [illegible] than ever before. [illegible]urse, the government [illegible]nistrative and medi[illegible]rtments have been [illegible] relentless efforts [illegible] the spread. But [illegible] citizens equally [illegible]ve? No, not at all. [illegible] one notices the [illegible]s in public places, [illegible]ngly less bothered [illegible]t the potential danger. [illegible] many places about 80% [illegible]ple are without masks [illegible]ring them prop[illegible] to speak of main[illegible]ysical distance. [illegible] certain group of [illegible]s masks that have [illegible]washed" ever since [illegible]been purchased. Is [illegible] most horrific situ[illegible] the unclean mask is [illegible]zardous.

[illegible]he police depart[illegible] crack the whip [illegible]rther leniency. [illegible] a reasonable [illegible] fine, effective [illegible] is a must. How about barring the mobile phone connection of the defaulter for a whole one-whole week for not wearing the mask in public places? This "communication blackout" can hold the defiant down! Yes, when a defaulter cannot use Facebook and WhatsApp for a week this message will spread like wildfire. And in no time the major concerns of flouting Covid regulations by the unruly public gets automatically solved. Let's use all possible tricks and means to protect and safeguard civilization. Humanity cannot be engulfed by uncertainty for so long.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong-2

JJM implementation

Editor,

Before JJM implementation starts in top gear, two statements from the PHE minister Renikton Lyngdoh Tongkhar exposes the past and the present history of engineers appointed to do the certification of pipes. The first statement of ensuring quality of materials (ST January 10) is an admission that the quality of pipes used in the past in GSSWS were not good. In the report of ST January 14, the minister says he will give strong orders against the supply of low quality pipes and he will again supervise all the concerned officials to do the work in a proper manner according to the guidelines of the Centre. This after the BJP dared the PHE Minister!

In a country of corporates pushing their products vehemently with lowest bid and percentage (of course hushed up), it is the customer especially the Government which is in the dark. The best example is the smart meter produced by HPL a company patronised by Satnam Global Infra Ltd. HPL is among the last in the list approved by the Power Ministry. The ones at the top are Schneider of France, Siemens of Germany which has now backed off and Genus of Karnataka. The MeECL's first experiment with the smart meter which was forcibly connected in one household at Mawlai and became defective after 8 months is a sorry one. For nearly a year now the smart meter remains unrepaired and the consumer has to pay the average bill. The HPL manufactured smart meters puts us Meghalayans at risk.

Is there any solution to quality certification in this murky world of business? In our own State the best quality cement of MCCL which is also reasonably priced loses out to TOPCEM etc. Buyers are greatly confused. So too TISCO steel of TATA Jamshedpur loses out to lesser known brands. Buyers today are duped and confused. Who is keeping a watch on quality?

Yours etc.,
C. Lyngdoh Mawnai
Shillong -14

Who do we trust?

Editor,

Scientists and experts are coming up with new and changed statements on Covid 19. The World Health Organisation (WHO) is making statements today that are in contrast to what it made the day before. Yes, I agree, that facts change with research but we ordinary mortals are highly confused. We have now started believing that this pandemic is here to stay and will never go away. A large number of people are now in the grip of psychological and mental trauma.

Moreover, reports of private hospitals and nursing homes charging exorbitant amounts for Covid treatment even for patients with the mildest symptoms compel us to doubt the system. But there is nothing we can do at this moment. We are totally helpless and at the mercy of the system!

We can only hope that the worst will be over soon.

Yours etc.,
Anjan Kumar Das,
Shillong 6

EC ban on rallies

Editor,

The Election Commission's (EC) decision to ban all political rallies, roadshows and other processions is praiseworthy. The EC has shown awareness of the fact that the upcoming elections are held in the middle of the third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. As Covid cases surge at an alarming rate we must never lose sight of the fact that the third wave of the pandemic is tightening its grip.

The EC has banned physical campaign rallies until January 15. No doubt, rallies are an integral part of election campaigns. They provide an opportunity to parties to showcase their popularity, announce their future plans and criticise their rivals. In addition to that, political parties can convince the voters about why they deserve their votes. As per the directions of the EC political parties need to switch to digital mode of campaigning. While the attempts to incorporate technology with election campaign is commendable, it has disadvantages as well. Voters who are not tech savvy are at a disadvantage. True, restrictions need to be imposed whenever required. When election campaigns are allowed without any restrictions, people will behave as they wish. In the absence of strict restrictions the second wave of the pandemic had caused a catastrophe in the country. We cannot afford to repeat such a folly.

By ordering a ban on rallies, the EC has sent a clear message to people about the possibility of a public health emergency. It would be better if the Commission extended the duration of the ban. It is now the responsibility of the EC that the restrictions are implemented strictly. Political parties must devise plans to reach out to people without mass gatherings.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS,
Kollam

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

KAPANY – THE MAN WHO BENT LIGHT

H[illegible] of [illegible] seven [illegible] 20th Century" [illegible] ing breakthrou[illegible] ject and is beha[illegible] from endoscope[illegible] fonic lines.

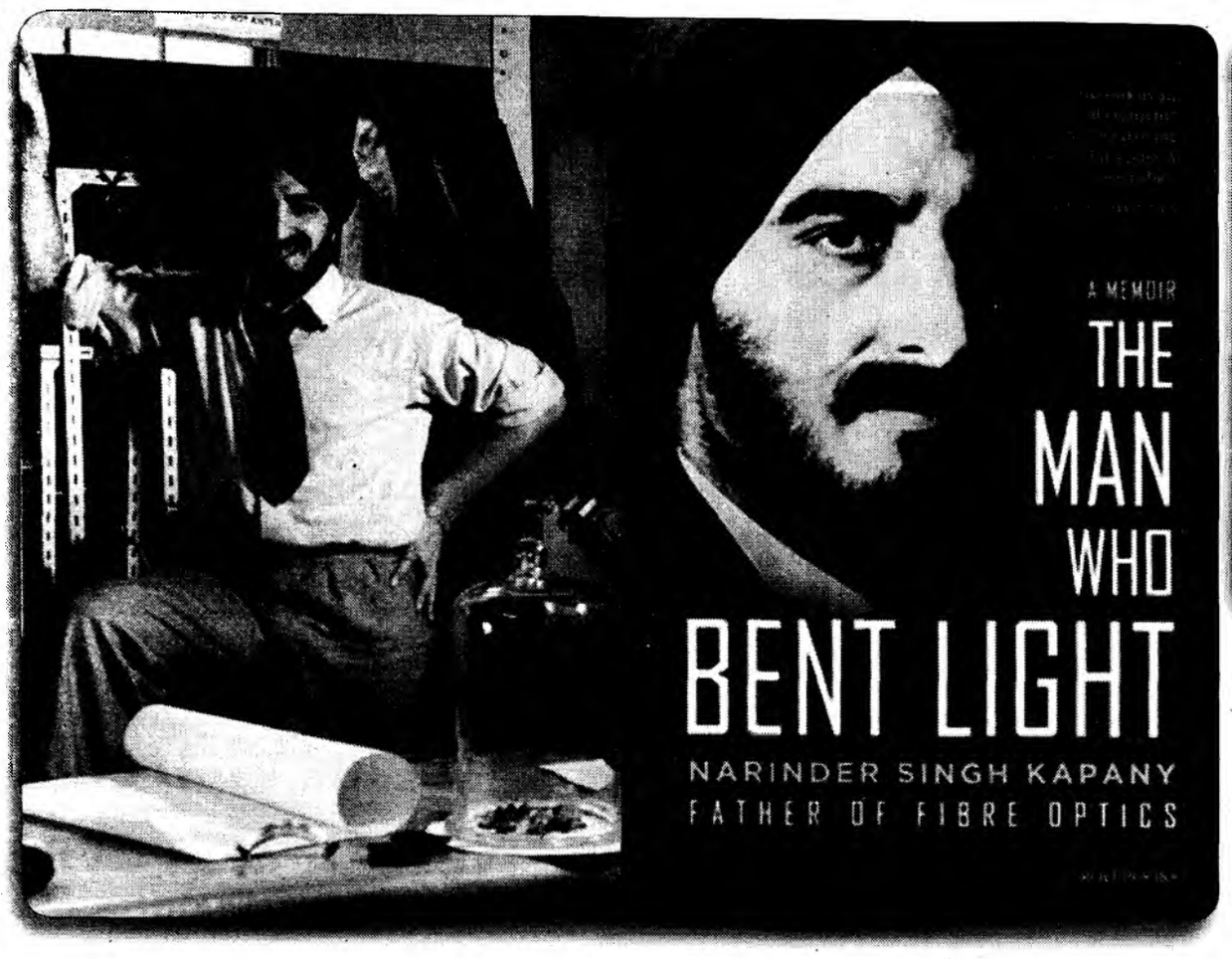
Yet, the [illegible] ject Nanno[illegible] the sleepy [illegible] gen- jab devote[illegible] in his 277-page[illegible] ards achievement

Instead, he [illegible] journey as an inven[illegible] encom- passing fibre [illegible] nications, lasers, bio[illegible] ication, solar energy [illegible] nowing, registering [illegible] ards, as also [illegible] family as a philanth[illegible]

Over [illegible] Alto, California [illegible] that Kapany founde[illegible] ored the display of [illegible] a and Albert Mus[illegible]

It has [illegible] promote and pres[illegible] educa- tion, cultur[illegible] writ- ing, mountin[illegible] ng the art for numer[illegible] ikh art retrospectives [illegible] and lecture seri[illegible] oronto and the US, [illegible] City, Washington D[illegible] for five years. [illegible], where at San Francis[illegible] Museum, Kapany donat[illegible] per- manent Sikh [illegible]

All this is [illegible] Chairs that the Founda[illegible] written at the Univer[illegible] Santa Cruz, Sana Bar[illegible] side and the Californi[illegible] ast Bay, as also its supp[illegible] anguage programmes [illegible] ford and the Universit[illegible] erkeley.



"Together, we must work toward absolute equality for all, promoting love and charity. This not one way of moving forward; it is the only way," Kapany, who died on December 4, 2020 aged 94, nine months after completing his memoirs, maintains in *The Man Who Bent Light* (Roli Books).

The spark was ignited in high school in Dehradun, where, a teacher told Kapany that light could travel only in a straight line.

Determined to prove his teacher wrong, he went on to graduate from Agra University before going to Imperial College to work on a PhD in optics from the University of London.

In 1953, working alongside physicist Harold Hopkins at the Imperial College, Kapany, after a great deal of trial and effort, was the first to successfully transmit high-quality images through fibre bundles, coining the term fibre optics in a 1960 article for *Scientific American*.

He describes the breakthrough rather modestly:

"On my request, Professor Hopkins appeared in the lab... I (had) affixed a black mask with the cut-out word eFIBRE' to a lens that I had set up in front of the business end of the remaining end remaining (optical glass) bunch and beamed it to a makeshift projection screen on the far wall.

"Well, Kapany, what do you have to show me?

"I pulled up the single chair in the lab, placed it with the best sight line to the screen, and urged him to sit.

"Ready, I asked.

"Yes, yes, he said, feigning impatience.

"I closed the door, shut off all the lights, and in a single, final effort, I switched on the light source. And there it was. On the screen. Like an optometrist's chart but with only a single line of large letters, as clear as it could be: F...I...B...R...E."

Kapany had proved that ultimately, what it comes down to is persistence.

"Doggedness is an important attribute in a field where, by most measures, only a fraction succeed," Kapany writes.

This was an attribute that followed him through his life.

In 1961, Kapany along with his wife moved to Woodside on the San Francisco Peninsula and today one of the wealthiest communities in the US, where he founded Optics Technology Inc successfully taking it public in 1967. He was the first Sikh Indian to take a company public in Silicon Valley. *The San Francisco Examiner*, in February 1969, described him as '...the most dashing corporate officer in the area'. Subsequently, he founded Kaptron Inc in 1973, which was later acquired by AMP Inc.

In between, he was offered the post of Scientific Advisor to then Defence Minister VK Krishna, with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru himself forwarding the recommendation to the UPSC, which made such senior appointments. However, the offer was a year in coming, during which Kapany had moved on.

He was later offered the position of Assistant Secretary for Commerce in the administration of Richard Nixon but this didn't go through as he was known to be uncomfortable with the then US President.

Kapany even had an extended meeting with Daniel Patrick Moynihan when he was named the US Ambassador to India to come on board as his number two "It was not to be the case, however, and largely, I believe, for the very trepidations he had expressed in our conversation that day: that it was simply too early in modern India's development for a partnership such as ours," Kapany writes.

It's a measure of the man who was posthumously awarded the Padma Vibhushan, India's second highest civilian award, that he has no regrets.

"To the years gone by, I bid a fond farewell. For those yet to come, I welcome them, I embrace them," Kapany wrote in the concluding chapter, titled "In Closing" that he signed off in March 2020. *(IANS)*

Royal food for common man

The [illegible] that [illegible] cafe to a big [illegible] were: 'I want to [illegible] by serving ro[illegible] Khan.' Haji Karim [illegible] the experience [illegible] age man led to [illegible] Karim's in Gali Kab[illegible] Delhi, in 1913

The jou[illegible] ural ensemble [illegible] ben Haji Karim[illegible] par excellen[illegible] afar during the [illegible] of the Mughal [illegible] same back to [illegible] gar and was [illegible] och savours th[illegible] sine to the roo[illegible]

Wit[illegible] ory palate in [illegible] small select to [illegible] his pas[illegible] to the [illegible]

[illegible] vision [illegible] sold[illegible] he had [illegible] tenure [illegible] purchas[illegible] um's [illegible] in the [illegible] Sup[illegible] thos[illegible] of the Mu[illegible] taking [illegible] royal [illegible] Today [illegible]

ning the show and has lived by the same legacy for over 106 years.

The core of this patronage for authentic Mughlai food is built on the mantra of quality and consistency, and takes pride that nothing has changed since the day Karim's was born.

However, keeping up with the modern taste palettes of their customers, Karim's has taken the menu through different regions of the country and added the taste of local dishes, such as in Calcutta, signature dishes.

While making their mark in the food and hospitality industry, Karim's aims to nurture the heritage of serving food from the Mughal Dynasty.

The brand was created for the common man, and generations have worked hard to maintain and preserve the beliefs. Karim's is looking forward to expanding their foothold through the franchising route, and the key is to make people embrace the royal and deliciously historic cuisine from the Mughal era.

The chain opened its first branch in the 1990s in Nizamuddin West, followed by Kailash Colony, Noida, Gurgaon, Kamla Nagar, Dwarka, Delhi and throughout the Delhi NCR region.

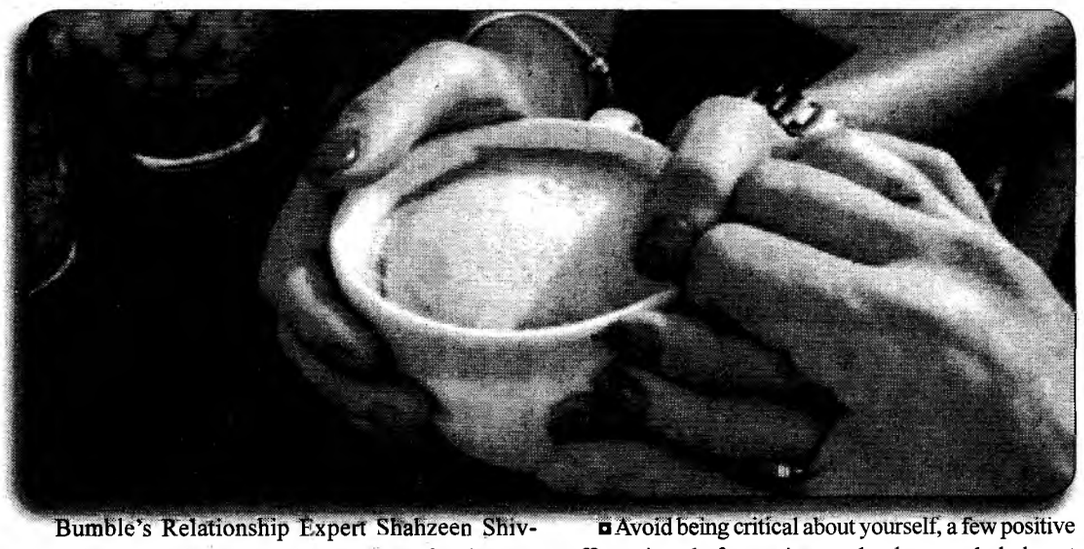
As a way forward for the future, the brand is looking forward to a mix of company-owned and company-operated outlets along with franchise-owned and company-operated outlets. It currently serves more than 50 outlets, with plans to expand globally in the coming years. *(IANSlife)*

Indians more willing to go on 'Dry Dates'

According to a recent study by Bumble, 32 percent of single Indians believe their relationship with alcohol has altered as a result of the pandemic, and they now drink much less than they did previously. The women's first dating app, highlights the growing trend of 'Dry-Dating' among single Indians as we enter the new year.

In fact, more than half of Indians (51 percent) are now more willing than they were before the outbreak to consider going on a 'dry date.' This trend is even more pronounced among GenZ, who are defying the 'Dry Dating' trend by refusing to drink at all on a date. As we manage the pandemic, people have re-evaluated their connection with alcohol. In fact, 43 percent of Indians polled said they plan to drink less in the new year than they did previously.

The platform recently introduced a new industry-first 'Sober' badge for people to clearly identify their sober lifestyle and drinking habits within the current 'Drinking' badge menu within the app to celebrate our sober members-and to give them the right tools to highlight their full, genuine selves to potential matches. One of the most popular badges among Bumble users in India is the 'Drinking' badge, which now includes the options 'Frequently,' 'Socially,' 'Never,' and 'Sober.'



Bumble's Relationship Expert Shahzeen Shivdasani shares a few tips on how to ace a dry date:

- Dating while sober may feel more difficult, but nothing feels more empowering than living a life true to your needs. Remember to always be your authentic self.
- Try proposing the first date spot yourself to avoid ending up at a bar. How about a cafe or a walk in the park?
- Avoid being critical about yourself, a few positive affirmations before going on the date can help boost your self-esteem!
- While on the date, focus on your good qualities and stay away from conversations about past relationships that may trigger an emotional reaction within you.
- Most importantly, be honest with yourself about your desires and limitations! *(IANSlife)*

Good mattress for good snoozes

Experts say that a typical adult needs six to eight unbroken hours of sleep per night. But who wants a restless night's sleep this year? Sleep deprivation causes dizziness throughout the day. There are a variety of reasons for sleep disturbances, one of which is the mattress issue. Back and neck pain can also be caused by sleeping on the wrong mattress. A good mattress is beneficial in more ways than one, check out these options for a good night's sleep:

Livpure's ORTHO-X (Advanced) Memory Foam Mattress

This mattress is designed specifically for people who suffer from back pain. It has cool gel shape-retention memory foam and 5-inch high-density support foam for optimal back and posture support. The cool gel memory foam adjusts to the temperature of the room.

The sensitive memory foam conforms to the shape of one's spine, reducing the risk of back problems. Its washable and breathable bamboo fibre outer cover is easy to maintain. It costs Rs 7,897 and is available online through Livpure Sleep's website, as well as Amazon, Flipkart, and Pepperfry.

Wakefit Orthopedic Memory Foam Mattress

When your spine is crooked, an Orthopedic Memory Foam Mattress is the finest option. Wakefit's Orthopedic Memory Foam Mattress has been improved to provide targeted relief. This means it's built with diverse zones to meet the support needs of various portions of your body, from the heaviest to the lightest. This aligns your spine and provides greater comfort for your entire body, ensuring that you wake up feeling refreshed every morning. The Wakefit Orthopedic Memory Foam Mattress moulds to your body, offering consistent support and increasing your comfort. It costs Rs 5,133 and is available online through Wakefit's website, as well as Amazon, Flipkart, and Pepperfry.

PEPS Spine guard Mattress

Peps is India's largest inner spring mattress manufacturer, with a product line that rivals the world's best. Wake up with no aches and pains by sleeping on a Spine Guard mattress. The innovative Memory Foam softens in the right places to support you along your body's natural lines and contours.

This maintains optimal spine alignment and relieves pressure on specific body areas. There will be no more tossing and turning in your bed in quest of a comfy spot. There will be no more aching backs. It costs 20,293 and is available online through Peps India's website, as well as Amazon, Flipkart, and Pepperfry.

Kurl-on Relax Mattress

Kurl-on is one of India's oldest mattress manufacturers. Its brand name encompasses a wide range of home comfort products, from mattresses to furnishings. The company is a pioneer in the field of choir mattresses. The thick high-density layer of PU foam in Relax by Kurlon is designed for greater comfort.

For high-end comfort, the mattress is composed of poly cotton tapestry and filled with high-quality 32 density PU foam. Thickness that is uniform PU foam core layer provides medium-firm body support. On top, a high-density PU foam blanket can withstand weight and provides exceptional core support. Mattress made to order - polyester tapestry fitted with a web tape finish that keeps the threads locked in place. Kurlon, the company's website, as well as Amazon, sell it at a price of Rs 5,824.

Sleepyhead Orthopedic Memory Foam Mattress

Sleep in whichever position you like; our multi-layered mattress will keep you comfortable and let you wake up feeling refreshed. This mattress is the first and original

Sleepyhead mattress, and it's as supportive as your mother. It's the perfect balance of support and comfort, with layers of memory foam and springy breathable foam for that cocoon-like feeling. The Sleepyhead Original mattress is made up of multiple layers that provide the ideal orthopaedic support: ultra soft foam, pressure-relieving memory foam, and high-density foam.

Memory foam, which was invented by NASA, conforms to your body, reducing stress pressure points and allowing your body to recover itself as you sleep. It costs Rs 7,499 and is available on SleepyHead's website, as well as Amazon, Flipkart, and Pepperfry. *(IANSlife)*

Decoding the 1994 ISRO espionage case

By Vishnu Makhijani

S Nambi Narayanan, the aerospace engineer discharged in what is known as the ISRO spy case of the 1990s, is now playing the martyr to cover up his own role in the case, says veteran journalist J Rajasekharan Nair in the sequel to his book on the infamous episode.

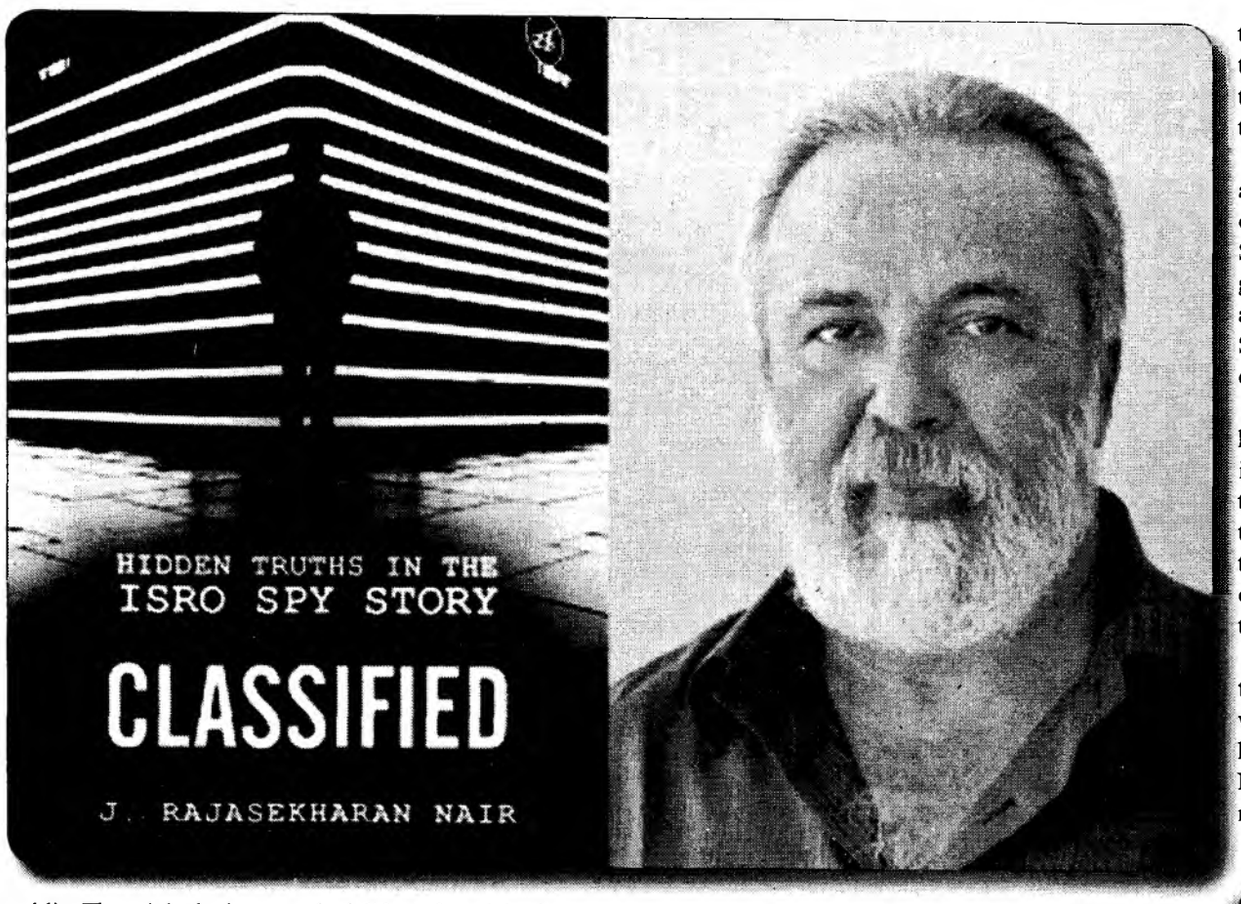
"Nambi Narayanan was a key figure in the failed operation to illegally transport cryogenic rocket technology from Glavkosmos (a subsidiary of the Russian State Space Corporation Roscomos) to ISRO using clandestine methods under a 1991 agreement between Glavkosmos and ISRO that was cancelled by Russia in 1993 invoking a force majeure," Nair said in an interview.

"The operation was jointly planned by ISRO top brass and an influential section in Glavkosmos. The operation was illegal because the 1991 agreement meant to transfer the cryogenic technology was cancelled and the new agreement signed in 1994 January had no clause for technology transfer," Nair said.

Glavkosmos, according to him, agreed to supply the material but was not ready for door-to- door delivery. Nambi Narayanan contacted Air India but it refused to carry the material without proper documents. Nambi Narayanan then contacted Ural Airlines "who agreed to take the risk".

"Though there are five airports in Moscow (where Glavkosmos is located), airlifting the material from any of these airports, hoodwinking the US eyes, was unthinkable. So the material was transported to Tashkent in Uzbekistan by road travelling more than 3,300 km and from there airlifted to ISRO. It is reliably learnt that Nambi Narayanan was on the first Ural flight," Nair said.

"Nambi Narayanan doesn't want these pieces of information (that ISRO had planned an illegal operation and he was a crucial player in it) to become



public. Though he had approached different legal forums nearly ten times, never did he pray that the entire matter surrounding the espionage case be proved. Moreover, when a PIL was filed before the Kerala High court for a judicial enquiry into the espionage case, he fought against it.

"He wants only that much truth that would keep him afloat in his safe zone to come to the surface and doesn't want the whole matter (for instance, who planted the false and baseless spy story and why) to reach the public domain," Nair maintained.

The ISRO spy case, which hit the headlines in 1994, centred around allegations of transfer of cryogenic technology and confidential documents on India's space programme to a foreign country by two scientists (including Nambi Narayanan) and four others, including two Maldivian women. Nambi Narayanan was eventually discharged after a laborious process, awarded compensation of Rs 50 lakhs by the Supreme Court but accepted Rs 1 crore as an out-of-court settlement from the Kerala government on a Rs 1 crore suit of damages he had sought, and was awarded a Padma Bhushan in 2019.

"As the public gropes in the dark about the essence of the ISRO espionage case, a re-evaluation of the case is imperative to see afresh why the espionage story cropped up. It is most essential to re-read the text of the ISRO espionage case through documents, facts, and prudence, and not through the projection of individuals as the good, the bad and the ugly," Nair writes in the book, *Classified - Hidden Truths In the ISRO Spy Story* (Srishti).

The media, in general, he said during the interview, has not discussed the meat of the matter: What was the espionage case and how could IB and Kerala Police say that certain persons in ISRO had leaked cryogenic technology to a foreign country using two semi-literate Maldivian women at a time (1994) when ISRO didn't have the technology?

"No journalist bothered to check with ISRO whether they had the cryogenic technology in 1994. Instead, media houses sent journalists to the Maldives to collect information about the two Maldivian women and filed sleazy stories on them. All the accused were presented as morally corrupt persons when morality had nothing to do with the espionage case," Nair said.

After the CBI had concluded in 1996 that the case was false and baseless, nobody, not even CBI, asked "how the absurd spy story came from nowhere and why the Director of IB had directed the Kerala Police to register a case under the Indian Official Secrets Act", Nair said

"Nobody, not even the CBI asked why was Ural Airlines carrying material to ISRO from Glavkosmos and why the transportation came to an abrupt end in the wake of the espionage story (if the transportation was legal).

"Nobody (not even the judiciary) asked the pertinent questions how a case could be filed under the Indian Official Secrets Act without ISRO or the central government filing a written complaint as is unambiguously made clear in Section 13(3) and (5) of the Act," Nair contended.

Instead, Nair said, the media were hailing the police officers who did an illegal act of registering a case under the Indian Official Secrets Act and airing the absurd story that cryogenic rocket technology had been leaked to a foreign country at a time when ISRO didn't have the technology.

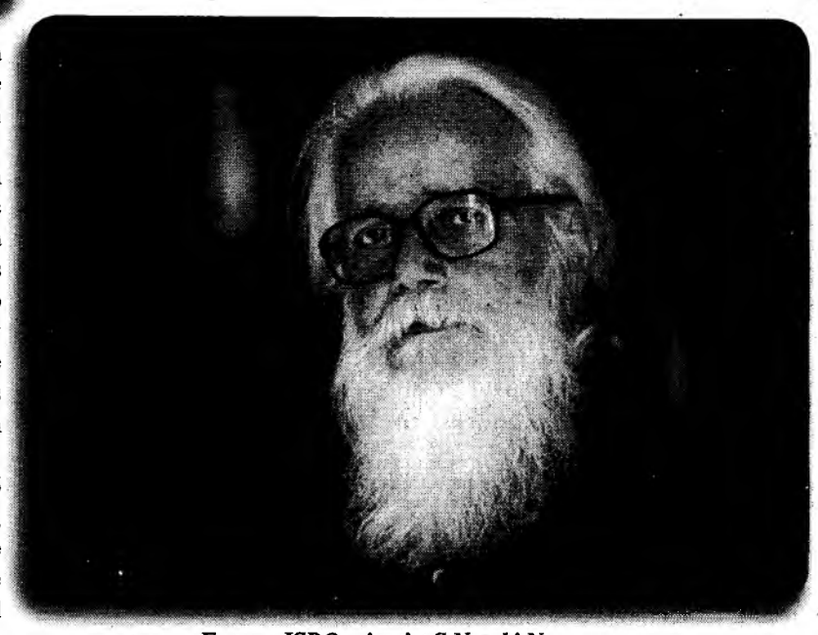
"Now, when the situation changed, the same media are hailing the old villains as the new heroes and the old heroes are the new villains. So, Nambi Narayanan and other accused are the new heroes; the Kerala Police officers and IB officials are villains. Their discussions are around individuals and are not focused on the central matter.

"The espionage case is a techno-legal matter. It was never discussed in that way. It was always discussed from the point of view of persons; not from the POV of facts," Nair maintained.

"That is why the case is still confusing. My book attempts to do a post mortem of the case from the techno-legal angle strictly based on facts, documents, and records," he added.

ISRO and the Indian government, Nair writes in the book, "need to tell the people to what extent the misfired 'patriotic' adventure has cost ISRO in terms of money, especially when the business from the space market is expected to touch $558 billion by 2026 and up to $1.75 trillion by 2040.

"It is high time ISRO and the government of India come clean on the matter. If both parties confirm this operation (under the 1991 agreement) was in the interest of the nation and hence need to be treated as brave acts of 'patriotism', a different picture would emerge.



Former ISRO scientist S Nambi Narayanan

"But then, one needs to deconstruct the very concept of patriotism," Nair concludes the book.

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi ***Sunday, JAN 16, 2022***

Moon semi sextile Saturn on your solar return chart and it is going to give excellent results. You will get many opportunities to grow in business/job. Financial position too will be stable and strong. You will also meet a special person, leading to warm and fulfilling relationship resulting to marriage. You will also make yoga, meditation, walking, exercise etc. a part of your daily routine. You will achieve a lot in your business and work. Your associates/colleagues will help you a lot. The expansion of your business is going to be done on a grand scale. New property like land, building, vehicle, gold, silver etc. might be purchased. You will prepare a new strategy for marketing and business.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

Things will be a lot better this week. You will win confidence of your bosses and your work will come in for lot of praise. You will also remember some close one with moist eyes. You may be lost in the past memories. You will also get a promotion or transfer in your job. You will be in a dominant position at your workplace. You need to stay away from controversy and arguments. Expenses will be on the rise. You need to curb it. A secret affair of yours could also get exposed. But it will not trouble you much. Financially you will be in a stronger position. You will also take new projects on your hands. You could also get some honor, award or reward. Things will be fine at your home. You will be finishing your work with the cooperation of your family members. You will remain devoted to your partner. You will also remain busy in meditation, prayers and spiritual works.

Taurus: (April 21- May 21)

A good news will lift your spirit. It could be related to a promotion, getting a new work order or about property. You will be much sought after person. And people will love your company. Your ideas will be welcomed by one and all. You will finish your work on a day to day basis. You will be on the road to prosperity. Your work will get done with ease with the cooperation of your colleagues. Your friends will also support you. You can also enter into new love relations. Some issue at your work will trouble you as a few things will get done against your wish. But you will Hold your ground and will have the final say. You will not accept anything unethical. In the workplace, conditions are in your favor. Students will again work hard to complete their syllabus. They will try to make up for the lost time. There are chances of money gain.

Gemini: (May 22- June 21)

Some minor argument at your workplace may prove to be a headache for you. It will look that dispute will go out of hands. But you will resolve it in time with your intelligence mixed with cleverness. Your opponents will have to suffer defeat in the process. Keep a sharp eye on your enemies and foes. Someone may try to take advantage of your trust and goodwill. A pleasant news related to your children's progress will lift your morale and mood. Business person will get success in their trade and their profit too will rise. Students will also get good results in exams and interviews. You will also enjoy confidence and trust of your family members. Your partner/ spouse will be your biggest source of strength. He/she will keep motivating you. Your government related task will also get done with ease.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

It is an ideal time to make your best efforts and to cash on to it. Your name, fame, respect and prestige will rise. You will be busy in official activities. Your peers and superiors will back you fully. Your advice will be taken in important matters. Income will be good. You will also explore new avenues of growth in your business in collaboration or partnership. Those who are unemployed for a long time will get suitable offers. Even those who want to change their present job will have ample choice in their hands. Your family members will support you and will stand with you. Your honesty and dedication will be your biggest plus. You will also be not afraid to tell the truth and call spade a spade. You will keep your target in your mind and complete it in time period given to you. You need to deal with strangers with a wise head and cautions thinking.

Leo: (July 23- August 23)

The timing is perfect. You just need to plan out things. Your best is yet to come. You can change your destiny as you plan well. You could get a very good job offer. You can also get a transfer to some new place. You can also plan to go out of country and settle there. Be prepared to work in a new atmosphere and surrounding. You will be meeting lot of new people and contacts. It will help you in the long run. An engagement or marriage can also get fixed. Additional sources of income could be explored. You plan a major expansion in business in partnership. Your rivals will be active but will get dealt friendly. Your presence of mind is your biggest plus point. You could face some opposition in your home and workplace. But it will only bring out the best in you. Things come only to test us and in the end we only become stronger. And also gain valuable experience.

Virgo (August 24- September 22)

The time is fabulous. Your physical health will be at its best. You will be in peak of your fitness and will feel mentally cheerful to take new challenges. Work and home will both be important for you. There will be freshness in your personal relations. You will also begin new work/ projects. You will also take up multiple work on many fronts at a time. It will prove to be tiresome experience but you will manage well. You will finish all your work by any means. You will also try to avoid any controversy at your work place. You will also bargain hard in your business and will strike out best deals. You will be liked by people around you. Rich and powerful people will get known to you. You will see a rise in your popularity. You will be praised for some efforts of yours. Your image will improve as you have worked a lot on it. You will be willingly helping people.

Libra: (September 23- Libra 23)

It is going to be a wonderful week for you. You will be working to achieve your goals. Your personality will undergo a sea-change. A visible change will be seen in your personality. You will be admired a lot. You will make best use of your communication skills. You will also hold talks and sigh financial deals. You need to control your words. It is time for financial gains. You will also excel in your job and business. You will attend some party and feel good to be with your loved ones. You will also fulfill your responsibilities very well. There will be career related works. You will be earning lot of money. You will do your work very thoughtfully. You will also get rid of tensions and you will feel cheerful and a lot more better.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

A pleasant news from somewhere all of a sudden will lift your spirits. You will earn lot of money in business and work. Additional responsibility too may be given to you. You will not compromise with anyone in the terms of work. Your relationship with your partner will get better. You will feel a lot happy. The time will be peaceful and you can plan a lot of things. You will keep doing your work calmly despite the opposition you face. Time will be of special benefit for you. You will have the pleasure of material goods. You will enjoy clothes, luxuries and entertainment in plenty. You will never be sort of funds. Stay from legal complexities. You cannot dilly dally in office work. There will be expenditure on children's education and career. You will put much trust on your hard work to meet the target in your work. Students will focus on their studies and do well.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 23)

It will be a beneficial week for you. You will have profits in every work. You will be cheerful at home and will share wonderful bonding with your spouse/partner. You will also get support of your peers and bosses. Your work will also get completed in time. Outside also you will spend your time in entertainment and recreation. You will be at best in your creative pursuits. You will also find time to fulfill your hobbies and interests. Your luck will be easy progressing. There will be stability in your thoughts. You will continue your hard work and get success in due course. You can also expect arrival of some guests at your home. It will keep you busy and occupied. The matters of land, housing and other property will be solved quickly. You will stay away from bad company. Your tactics in business will help you increase your profits.

Capricorn: (December 22- January 20)

Some matters at your workplace will keep pre-occupied. You need to take help and aid of your seniors to come out of the situation. In business you may lose a valuable order. You will do research work. Your friendly and social nature will take you far ahead. It will increase the feelings of love people have for you. You will also enjoy perfect understanding with your mate. Your progress in your work will be fast. Work/business related journey will keep you occupied. You will have monetary gains. You will make contact with people for finance related works. In this period even your little efforts will fetch good results. Avoid making any new experiments in work. You also need to take care of health of elders in your family.

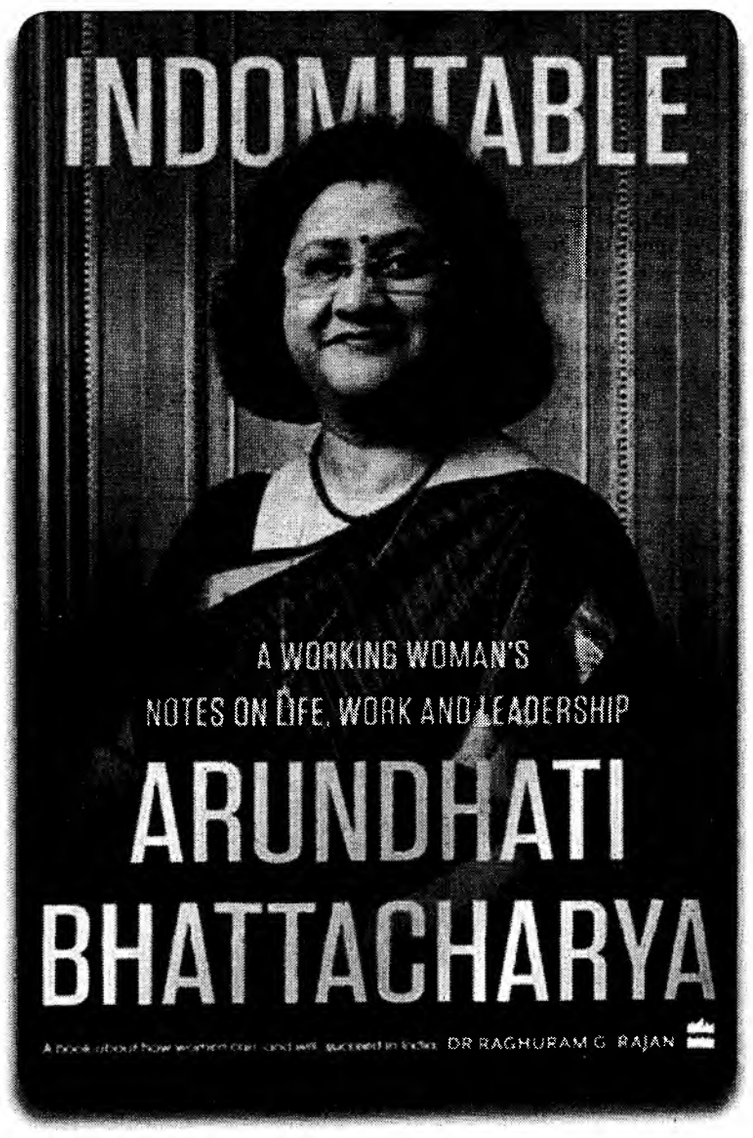
Aquarius: (January 21- February 18)

Some very positive developments will take place. You will get a work order from abroad. Those who are in business may enter into new partnership or association which will be beneficial. Your importance at your work will increase. Your work condition will be better and you will spend your time enjoying yourself. At your workplace keep your important documents ready you may clinch a favorable business deal. You need to limit your expenses. Your enemies will try but will not be able to harm your interests. You will also get success in government related matters. Your subordinates will fully support you. You will also get good support from your spouse. You will spend some quality time with him/her. You will get blessings of your elders. Students will keep performing well. You will also receive the full support of your parents and in-laws.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

There are promotion possibilities. You will have good equation with your bosses. They will be happy with your performance. Your self confidence will also be high. You will have monetary gains. You will not compare yourself with others. Your partner will be with you all the time. But you will miss the company of a family member close to you. Your parents' blessings will be with you. You will also be able to do renovation of your house or other repairs needed for maintenance. You will also plan a major expansion of your business. You will get a letter for new appointment. You will also be successful in competitions/exams. Take care of your diet. You will also get materialistic things easily. You will also think about the welfare of your servant. You will also do new experiments in your business and make it grow many folds. Destiny will favor you a lot.

Indomitable – a story of small towns, big dreams and greater achievements



Growing up in the sleepy towns of Bhilai and Bokaro, Arundhati Bhattacharya never imagined that one day she would go on to chair India's largest bank. It was by sheer chance that she came to know of the bank probationary officers' entrance examination through a friend. She applied, was selected and went on to chart out a glorious banking career spanning four decades.

Indomitable - A Working Woman's Notes on Life, Work and Leadership (Harper Business) is the story of Bhattacharya's life as a banker and the challenges she faced in a male-dominated bastion. She takes the reader through her growing up years and early education in the 1960s, getting to Kolkata for her college education and then into the State Bank of India (SBI), where she started her career.

The life of a woman banker with a family in a frequently transferable job isn't easy. In Bhattacharya's life, too, there were breaking points when she almost thought of quitting her career to balance her personal aspirations with her family's needs. But she didn't give up. Instead, she faced her challenges with humour and positivity and took up every assignment as a new chapter in learning and adapting.

In her role as the chairman of SBI, she steered the bank through some of its worst phases. She inspired confidence in the banking sector when the NPA crisis led to a significant public trust deficit. Under her leadership, SBI metamorphosed into a customer-centric and digitally advanced bank while playing a pivotal role in national development. Some of her human resources initiatives included industry-first practises that were appreciated and later adopted by other banks.

Candid, lucid and humble, *Indomitable* is the story that will galvanise you to embrace challenges, break barriers, push forward and achieve greater heights.

"From a very young age I listened to many older people talking about migrating to the Western world as it was defined as 'the land of your dreams'. First it was the UK, then the US and Canada and thereafter Australia and Singapore. I often wondered why India couldn't become the land of one's dreams. But I was told in India things don't work unless you know people. That capital was scarce and that the multiple barriers to living out your dreams didn't allow for anything other than a mundane existence to people coming from small towns with no backers or backgrounds.

"Did that mean people like me couldn't dream? This book is written to prove that India can be the land of our dreams and it is our ability to reach out with the right attitude and the right ideas that will get us there. Today's generation is proving me right and I am so proud of them. So to all those who dared to dream - cheers! Hang in there and you will make it," Bhattacharya asserts.

She not only made it but has also gone beyond and is today the chairperson and CEO of Salesforce India, a cloud-based SaaS company, listed in the US and headquartered in San Francisco.

The book "is the story of small towns, big dreams and greater achievements. Arundhati's journey, growing up in the sleepy towns of Bhilai and Bokaro, getting into a challenging banking job and leaving her mark as an exceptional leader is an inspiring tale that will be etched in a reader's mind for years. We are excited and privileged to be publishing this book," says HarperCollins India Executive Editor Sachin Sharma. *(IANS)*

"The man who goes alone can start today; but he who travels with another must wait till that other is ready."

— Henry David Thoreau

The Shillong Times

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India as 'terrorist'

PRIMA facie, it was an instance of the proverbial pot calling the kettle black. When Pakistan released its "first ever" National Security Policy this week, its central part blamed India as the promoter of terrorism in the subcontinent. It said India employed terrorism as a "preferred policy of choice" to undermine stability and national harmony (of the Pakistani society). The allusion was to the acts of some Afghan militants in Pakistan, allegedly at India's behest. In effect, Pakistan turned the familiar script – of Pakistan hugely nurturing terrorism on its soil – upside down and sought to project India as the villain of the piece. When it comes to strategizing, trading lies at diplomatic level, and acts of deceit as in its hiding of Osama bin Laden with full military cover, or running with the hare and hunting with the hound, Pakistan has a unique style of its own. Its national security policy runs its script through such a familiar territory.

Even as Indians look at Pakistan as a chaotic entity and its elected governments are seen acting on dictates from the military, the Islamic nation has its tasks cut out with a sense of determination and long-term vision. This is more so after it lost what was East Pakistan half a century ago with the formation of Bangladesh. India, on the other hand, is adrift, failing to firm up its policies on the external affairs front. After Indira Gandhi, those who led this nation have often displayed their failure to face situations squarely. That saga continues even today.

India's lack of cohesive policies on the external affairs front is reflected in a situation in which it is 'neither here nor there'. In the new season when Russia ended its old fascination towards the Non-Aligned Movement, nations like India fell between two stools. Both Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi edged a bit closer to the US in the post-Cold War era. Yet, the Indian leadership showed a lack of courage to firmly side with the US even as China began breathing down our neck. Pakistan, on the other hand, retained its old ties with the US and also won China to its side as an "all-weather" friend. That's the strength of its leadership. It gains from both sides. Effective strategizing is integral to good diplomacy. India's diplomacy is at odds with the realities on the ground. It stops at its Prime Minister putting a hand around the shoulders of a Trump or Biden at international fora or hosting a Xi Jinping in Mahabalipuram with no material gains whatsoever.

MDA government's tainted legacy

By HH Mohrmen

In the previous article we had discussed about legacy and learned that every person wishes to leave some kind of legacy behind. Leaving behind a legacy is not just the wish of an individual, but organisations and even governments too desire to leave some legacy for posterity. Similarly, the citizens of the state would like to see what legacy the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA) leaves behind after it has completed five years of its tenure in government. Now four years have elapsed and in few months' times the MDA government will have to produce its report card and share with the people its achievements in the last five years. The one area that the Conrad Sangma has failed miserably is to protect the fragile environment of the state.

If we take nature conservation into consideration, the MDA government does not have much to show to the people of the state. One may also ask how green its policies and approaches are in its endeavour to develop the state. Perhaps it is not wrong to say that at the end of the day, Conrad Sangma's MDA will be remembered as the government which has done very little or nothing to protect the environment.

The MDA government may blame COVID -19 for its failure; it can cite the lockdown due to the pandemic as an excuse for its failure. It can cite a plethora of reasons that it has not been able to deliver much services to the people of the state. To some extent it is also true that the lockdown due to the first wave of COVID attack followed by the second wave and now the third wave, has had a huge impact on the state and its people. But the truth is the government's approaches to environment conservation is questionable.

No walking the talk this Chief Minister

To the people of the state's pleasant surprise one fine day, Conrad Sangma decided to do what no former CM of the state has ever done before to mark the observance of World Environment Day. On June 5, 2018, World Environment Day the CM decided to walk to his office at the main secretariat from his home in Upper Shillong to demonstrate to the world how serious he was in his effort to protect the environment and everybody was happy with this gesture. The very next day he was at his best self again travelling with his usual cavalcade of cars guzzling gasoline to the hilt. It soon turns out to a mere PR exercise. The Chief Minister was only trying to fool the people of the state. The walk to office gesture which he wishes others to emulate became a flop show as it turned out to be a one-day affair only. This chief minister is not somebody who walks the talk.

Million tree campaign

The other gimmick that the Chief Minister came up with was to plant one million tree saplings during World Environment Day. This is another brilliant idea, a well thought off PR exercise which drew so many eye- balls. But at the end of the day, it become an empty rhetoric. When the government was asked where were the million trees planted, mum was the answer. And when another pertinent question of how many of the million saplings survived the winter, no answer came forth from the government to that question too.

The MDA government may blame COVID -19 for its failure; it can cite the lockdown due to the pandemic as an excuse for its failure. It can cite a plethora of reasons that it has not been able to deliver much services to the people of the state.

Minding the mining business

The MDA government in spite of its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, instead of stopping the illegal coal mining in the state, looks like it encourages people to engage themselves in the activity. The MDA government seems to encourage illegal transport of coal from the state by feigning ignorance to what happens along the national highways. There were many reports of this illegal activity in the press and many coal-laden trucks were apprehended by the police at different locations and at different points of time. The question that begs the answer is whether the government has helped speed up the investigation into the illegal coal mining which has taken many lives? Has the government initiated any legal action against the owners of the trucks which the police had caught illegally transporting coal from the State to Assam?

Accidents in the Mining areas

What about the many accidents which happened in coal mines which has also taken the lives of many miners? The mining accidents were serious cases because not only human lives were lost, but the mining activity itself was illegal when it happened. Has anybody involved in the tragic incidents been arrested? Or maybe the investigation was stopped midway or was rather prolonged because those who lost their lives were poor miners whose lives have no value at all. Maybe the investigation is now shoved under the carpet because the mine owners need to be protected. What takes the agencies so long to investigate on these very important cases which have grabbed headlines across the country? Now that the incidents are no longer in the news, people have started forgetting about the unfortunate deaths. But how many more mining accidents does it take for the police take these cases seriously?

It is obvious that the government is not serious in its effort to solve these cases, bring to book the culprits and let justice prevail.

Brichyrnot mining Permission

The decision of the Government to recommend that permission be given to the cement companies to start mining of limestone at Brichyrnot is another case which brought to light the true colours of the MDA government. Despite the fact that the cement company's carbon footprints are huge as it produces roughly about 8% of all greenhouse gas in comparison with aviation industry which produces 2.4%, yet the Government continues to support these industries. Most of the emission in the cement plants do not come from burning coal but from heating limestone inside giant kilns but the government is not considering the effects that this will has on the people.

Despite public protests the Government's decision to recommend to the authorities concerned to allow mining of limestone in the area is a classic case of putting corporate interests before the welfare of its people.

Mushrooming of Coke factories

Another case of the MDA government's insensitivity to the cause of the environment and even the health of the people of the state is the setting up of new coke factories in different parts of the state. It is reported that 30 of the more than 40 coke plants under construction in the East Jañtia hills district are already in operation. Coke is produced by heating coal at high temperatures, for long periods of time. The process is also called "thermal distillation" or "pyrolysis" and it takes 15-18 hours or sometime it can take up to 36 hours to complete the process. Now why does Meghalaya need so many of these coke factories which release toxic smoke in the air around its location? Who benefits from these factories and more importantly what effects is it going to have on the people who live in these areas?

MDA's gift to the NPP

The MDA government has somehow been able to gift itself or the parent party of the coalition a piece of Government land in a prime location of the state capital. In fact, construction work of the party office has already started in the location with many trees removed from the area. Perhaps knowing the entity and identity of the contractor engaged in the construction of the Party's office will also be able to connect us to the construction of one of the major projects in Meghalaya.

The question that people are now asking is - Can the MDA government achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals when it is also discreetly supporting illegal coal mining in the state? Attempting to achieve the SDGs will remain a joke if the government continues to support mining and encourages setting up of more coke factories in the state.

Hhmohrmen67@gmail.com

Round The States

By Insaf

UP Battlelines
HINDUTVA VERSUS OBC

Battlelines are getting drawn and redrawn in five States going to the polls, with Uttar Pradesh getting sharp focus at the national level. For the end result shall give an inkling to the popularity of the Modi NDA government. The big question doing the rounds in Lucknow and New Delhi is whether the Samajwadi Party under Akhilesh Yadav dethrones the BJP and perhaps dash Yogi Adityanath's hope of being a contender for the top seat post in 2024. Not only has Akhilesh got three ministers of Yogi government and a number of MLAs joining his party, but has managed to put spotlight on non-Yadav OBC communities against the saffron party's Hindu identity confines? The BJP this time around isn't being successful in consolidating the most backward classes, over 30% of total voters, in its favour, with the exodus of its leaders being seen. There is anger against Yogi's government about mishandling of the pandemic from this community, particularly added with the ire from the farmers. The BJP regime, it is now being voiced, has over the past four years 'neglected' leaders belonging to 'Dalit and backward communities and minorities,' and 'ignored' concerns of 'Dalits, backward communities, unemployed youth, small-and medium businesspersons', as letters of resignations of its ministers spell out.

During his stewardship, Yogi has asserted an upper caste-driven party and is said to have left no stone unturned to project himself as a 'Thakur leader.' His penchant for pushing the Hindutva agenda of the party has gradually earned ire from the backward and Dalit caste groups which see promise of 'social justice' having got lost and choose to voice it openly in this battle.

The fact that Yogi is now contesting from Gorakhpur, his stronghold, and not Ayodhya or Mathura, is also a message that BJP has... realised it needs to do a lot more than just consolidate its Hindu vote.

Akhilesh seems to have grabbed the opportunity—turning the polls into a battle between Hindutva and social justice politics. He is building a coalition of parties representing interests of different non-Yadav OBC and MBC communities. The fact that Yogi is now contesting from Gorakhpur, his stronghold, and not Ayodhya or Mathura, is also a message that BJP has realised it needs to do a lot more than just consolidate its Hindu vote. This election, the BSP, seems to be a non-contender, even though Mayawati has announced 53 candidates in its first list. The Congress has announced a total of 125 candidates, 40% are women and 40% youth and hopes the combination would bring in a 'new kind of politics in the state.' There are permutations and combinations which shall further emerge during the seven-phase poll for 403 seats, but the triumph of BJP over its rivals is clearly blurred as of now. Hold on, it will say for it is bound to have tricks up its sleeve.

Congress' Fate In Manipur

Will the Congress be able to reconstruct itself in the upcoming Manipur elections, is the question. Having ruled the State from 2002 to 2017, the Congress which is today down to mere 13 MLAs, continues to have hope on its three time Chief Minister, 73-year-old Ibobi Singh, currently Leader of the Opposition, to bounce back. The reasoning being that 'winning' constituencies is key for individual candidates and not the party banner alone. Besides, there is infighting within the ruling BJP alliance, with many contenders, such as the NPP, wanting the coveted Chief Minister's seat, held by Biren Singh. Of course, it's important the Congress gives tickets to individuals who could be the winning horse as despite an exodus, the State unit has received applications for tickets from 'aspirants from 50-odd Assembly constituencies'. However, it must also work out an understanding with smaller parties, like the BJP did in 2017, when it outdid the Congress, single largest party, and formed the government. Can the trend of being swayed by the ruling party at the Centre, typical in the north east, be halted?

Goa Conundrum

It's sheer conundrum for the voter in Goa. An alliance between the Opposition parties to edge out the BJP, is to be or not to be? The sparring between the TMC and Congress refuses to ebb, rather picks up steam. The Congress accuses the TMC of rumour mongering of a possible alliance with it and categorically says it's a no-go, 'completely baseless & untrue,' and that the grand old party is confident of putting 'Goa back on the path to progress soon.'. It further accused the TMC of 'brilliant strategy' to aid the BJP by seeking to 'weaken Congress and divide the anti-BJP.' The TMC hit back saying that Congress' 'uninformed false bravado is no substitute for rational thinking and maturity', and though there was a definite offer between principals on table two weeks ago, it was taken off. Clearly, the two are caught in the bind of who should be the big brother and be the 'lead party' in forming an alliance. With no truck between the two, the BJP should see hope of retaining power as the anti-BJP alliance of Congress, TMC, Goa Forward Party, MGP and AAP seems to be a distant dream as of now, unless there is a miracle!

Delhi-Centre Row

Delhi and team AAP is peeved with the Centre. It views the notice issued by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), last week recommending suspension of its government's 'Desh ke Mentor' programme as yet another "conspiracy by the BJP." As an education initiative, it launched the programme last October to provide voluntary mentors to IX and XII class students, wherein those aged between 18-35 years sign up to become mentors through an app to connect with students and have regular phone calls for a minimum 2 months, which could extend up to 4 months. So far, 44,000 are 'mentors', of which 500 are IIT graduates, 500 IIM graduates, 15,600 studying from graduation to PhDs and 15,600 working. The NCPCR received a complaint by a 'BJP worker in Chhattisgarh' alleging the programme brings kids and "unknown persons" together and exposes them to danger as there's lack of mentors' verification, especially if they have any record of crimes against children! It sought Delhi government's response; termed the reply as "ineffectual"; recommended the programme be suspended immediately "until all loopholes pertaining to safety are overhauled". But AAP is unwilling to heed rather urges BJP at Centre to stop playing politics. It argues: through the programme education is now becoming a mass movement...the BJP is worried that if the coming generation is educated, how will it keep them trapped in darkness and entangled in communal fights?.." Instead, it asks the programme be implemented across the country! INFA

Letters to the Editor

Let's honour our Hill State movement volunteers

Editor,

As we are on the threshold of celebrating the grand official function of the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of Meghalaya Statehood on the January, 2022, I wish to place on record my humble gratitude to all the tall personalities - men and women from the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo community who led from the front with head and heart, body and soul, through hard work and sacrifice giving their time, money and energy in the fight for statehood. I also express my sincere gratitude even to those non-tribals who were empathetic towards the cause of the tribals here in Meghalaya and perhaps contributed materially or in whatever way towards attainment of the goal. My greatest gratitude goes to those unsung heroes of 42,600 volunteers from among the Khasi, Jaintias and Garos during the height of the Hill State Movement. These men, women and youths were from the towns of Shillong and Tura, mostly from sub-urban and rural areas. Later on the Hill State Movement Volunteers were lesser in numbers though peaceful all through when it took the form of a full-fledged Hill State demonstration through hunger strikes, black flag demonstrations, raising of banners and distribution of pamphlets which said, "We want a full-fledged Hill State," "Down with Autonomous State" from the public gallery in the old Assam Legislative Assembly. However, the movement for a full-fledged Hill State was by no means less forceful. My gratitude goes to the volunteers of the full-fledged Hill State Movement who spent more sleepless nights, endured more hunger and fasting and suffering body pain from the lathis of the Assam police and most of all who underwent imprisonments for longer days and even for six months both in Shillong and Guwahati jails.

My only suggestion and fervent appeal to the MDA government is to recognise the above prominently and award them suitably not only with certificates, mementos etc., but by giving them handsome cash awards of not less than one lakh rupees each for every Hill State volunteer whether alive or dead. If the state has money to spend on worthless festivals like the Megong Festival, Cherry Blossom Festivals, Umgot River Festival, Winter Tales Festivals and other wasteful and fruitless spending in order to enrich some private pockets, what is a few crores of rupees as one-time expenditure for the contributions of the Hill State Volunteers who got us this beloved state? My appeal to the rulers of Meghalaya is to stop corruption at all levels of the government forthwith and to ensure clean and efficient governance. To the 33.9 lakh voters of Meghalaya my humble appeal is - let us vote judiciously to get all-round better quality legislators, if not the best. Our state is still suffering from the infirmities of lack of leadership in governance.

Yours etc.,
Philip Marwein,
Senior journalist,
Via email

Hindustan not a Hindu state

Editor,

Kudos to journalist and fellow citizen Arun Sinha for his sensible write-up under the heading From Hindustani State to Hindu State in your esteemed newspaper (ST Jan 15, 2022). Observations made by him on the recent unabashed involvement of the Prime Minister in building of Hindu temples is unbecoming of that office. I am not anti- Hindu or pro any religion. Never in the past since independence has this office been seen to be associated with religious activities of any religion. Constitutional heads stay away from such events. The Prime Minister will do well to keep alive and uphold the idea of India as enshrined in our Constitution.

Yours etc.,
Fearless Warjri,
Via email

Flouting supreme court orders

Editor,

Time and again your newspaper and others as well have consistently highlighted the misuse of sirens on private and government vehicles. The irony is that everyone with a new vehicle wants to flaunt their importance so that people take notice but ultimately these not so- important people look like morons. The Supreme Court of India has clearly laid down rules regarding the use of red and blue beacons as well as sirens. The state home department and the transport authorities have literally failed to abide by this ruling. As per the MV Act 1988 only emergency vehicles are allowed to use sirens not even a local MLA or bureaucrat. The Supreme Court had earlier directed the Centre and states to amend the Motor Vehicles Act to ensure that the use of red beacons on official vehicles are restricted. However, these rules are never implemented. They are just toothless paper tigers.

Yours etc..
Dominic Stadlin
Wankhar,
Via email

How time flies!

Editor,

The Salesians are celebrating their centenary this year. Thirty-eight years after the Salesians came to these hills we were in class 4 in St Anthony's High School. The picture of the school with a lone Assam Traffic police in shorts with turban, with only one passer-by is a reminiscence of those silent yester years.

The most valued item was the shining metal heart shaped badge, the size of a revenue stamp in which is inscribed the words Virtuti Et Studio the Latin for Virtues and Studies. It cost four anna's which is a quarter of a rupee then. Those days we needed to wear our uniforms only on Wednesdays. Wearing shoes was not compulsory and we felt safe as the roads were clean. Books were not a problem then as there was an English low priced textbooks society and also there was no annual invasion of private textbooks. If any text book was not available, Fr Kenny the English Professor of the College opposite our school would supply us with cyclo-styled green ink notes weekly.

The inspectors were very considerate in that they believed that not all are born arithmeticians let alone mathematicians. So for boys, typing was given in lieu of Arithmetic. For girls in girls' only schools had Domestic Science. Girls were taught to cook, wash and iron and by the time boys passed their High School they were competent with the typewriter.

A little distance away was and still is a technical school that provided vocational education according to the vision of the Salesian founder Don Bosco after which the technical school was named. It has a Welding(Steel fabrications) section, Carpentry, Automobile repair, Shoe making and Book Binding. And Shillong was blessed with welders, carpenters, shoemakers and automobile mechanics of the best brand .

To sum up, we received the best education at a nominal fee. For this we owe a debt of gratitude to the Salesians and to Don Bosco for providing both academic and technical education and lifting the weak and underprivileged of this region. The monument in front of the school still stands as a testimony of their glorious past.

Yours etc.,
J Kharmih (1966 batch Matriculate)
Via email

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

"Over every mountain there is a path, although it may not be seen from the valley."

--- Theodore Roethke

The Shillong Times

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Ugly saga of illegal coal mining

THE Constitutional Rights Forum (CRF) , a pressure group from Garo Hills has been raising a stink about the illegal coal mining that continues unabated in South Garo Hills. The pressure group has written to no less than the Chief Secretary asking that action be taken against officials that are facilitating this illegal coal trade. They include the district administrator, the Director Mining and Geology, the Commissioner of Transport amongst others. For some reason the police have been kept out of the complaint. One of the illegalities that has persisted in Meghalaya is the illegal coal mining which became a public embarrassment for Meghalaya when in December 2018 the Ksan mining tragedy happened which led to the death of fifteen miners whose bodies, barring one could not be retrieved by the Indian Navy divers despite their best efforts. A case was filed in the Supreme Court by a compassionate Delhi based lawyer on behalf of the families of the deceased miners. The Supreme Court after several hearings allowed coal mining on the condition that rat hole mining would be banned and that the State should have a fool-proof mining policy both of which have been violated by the State Government. In the absence of petitioners informing the apex court of the grievous violations of its orders, life goes on as usual. It is also evident that the entire government machinery is in collusion with these illegalities beginning from the Deputy Commissioners to the Superintendents of Police who have become acquiescent facilitators of what wrongdoing.

It is rather late in the day for the United Democratic Party (UDP) to be raising their voices now in the penultimate year of the MDA Government of which they are a coalition partner. Above all the Home Minister is a UDP man so they are castigating one of their own and it is expected that they should hold him accountable for the continued venality in the Home Department because without the collusion of the police, coal cannot be transported out of the state. The UDP can therefore not wash its hands off the illegal mining saga.

It is also intuitive that the inquiries into the deaths of the miners in the Ksan mining tragedy of 2018 have not been made public till date. Other mining tragedies have occurred but they have slipped off our collective memories. Neither the Opposition MLAs nor the public of Meghalaya care about these poor souls. They have become mere statistics. On Meghalaya's 50th year should it not be the desire of the people of the State to end this state-sponsored malfeasance?

Meghalaya @50: Celebrating the Dream

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

There are many like me who were born months after the inauguration of Meghalaya on January 21 1972. It never occurred to me to ask my deceased mother what she felt when Meghalaya was inaugurated and what it meant for her? Like any lower middleclass family, I believe that my parents felt very secure as they worked in Government establishments, however low the grade, and that their children's future were certain and as they were able to raise us well and provide us good education.

We heard stories told by our parents and elders that even prior to statehood, educated individuals were accorded appointments on the spot in Government establishments. Many were also asked to join as teachers in order to help build the educational sector and with zeal they worked towards laying the foundation for the development of education in the new State. However, over a hundred years before Meghalaya was born, the Christian mission run schools were the only institutions which provided basic education in the region. As a society we are indebted to them.

Decades before the era of commercialization of health care in the State, we had dedicated doctors, nurses etc who would treat every illness or disease with vigour and respect the sick and the needy. Despite the constraints in resources and human capital no stone was left unturned in their service to the people. The State has two major health care providers, the Religious Missions and the Government. While the former have been in the field about a hundred years ago, both served the people and the State was healthy. It was both the welfarist and socialist approach to health care and education which enabled my parents to trust the State and brought us up with certainty.

On the 50th Anniversary of Statehood I salute the teachers and health workers who had selflessly served the State and its people. I also salute sportspersons, writers, free thinkers, traders, journalists, artists, cultivators and farmers, bus and taxi drivers, construction workers, tailors, shoe makers, domestic workers and labourers in general who had toiled and contributed to the growth and development of the State. Though Meghalaya is predominantly tribal, but for ages together diverse non indigenous communities had been inhabiting the State, especially Shillong since it became the British Headquarters in 1866. Other smaller tribes indigenous to the State also contributed their mite and one must sincerely acknowledge their contributions and participation in State and community building. Henceforth, platforms must be created for interface between communities.

With due apologies, my knowledge of the Garos and their participation in the Hill State Movement is shallow. However, I strongly believe that the Garos too have stood firm in their resolve for autonomy and self-rule and contributed immensely towards the formation of Meghalaya.

The Hills Union and Khasi National Dorbar were amongst the first to submit their respective memoranda to the States Re-Organization Commission demanding for a separate Hill State in April 1954. The Garos under the leadership of Captain W.A. Sangma wired an express telegram to the State Reorganization Commission, "GAROS FULLY SUPPORT THE DEMAND BY THE KHASI NATIONAL DORBAR FOR FORMATION OF SEPARATE HILL STATE. STOP. REASONS FOR SUPPORT BEING SUBMITTED". During the conclave of District Councils of Assam held in Shillong in June 1954, Captain Sangma reiterated the need for a separate state for the Hill Tribes of Assam. He pointed out that "there are no adequate safeguards for preservation of the identity-racial, language and culture-of the Hills People...that the provisions of the Sixth Schedule do not give the Hills adequate power to safeguard their interests-social, economic and political..." Besides, the majoritarian attitude and domination of Assamese culture added fire to the already burning aspiration for self- determination.

In the Khasi Hills, the movement for political autonomy and self-rule can be traced back to the early 20th century with the formation of the Khasi National Dorbar on the September 4, 1923. The reason for the formation of the Khasi National Dorbar was laid bare in the Letter and Notice dated July 27, 1923, "You are all aware that the people of India had started a great movement for self-rule and independence. Since 1921 the British rulers had initiated certain reforms to facilitate participation of native Indians in Governance and many Indians have begun to occupy important positions including the bureaucracy... therefore it is imperative upon the native tribes of the Khasi Hills to wake up and to think for the good and future of the Khasi Nation in relation to the ensuing governmental and legislative reforms...to prepare ourselves to meet the imminent changes and to build the community in the sphere of education, self-rule and in every aspect of life. Thus, for the larger cause of the Khasi tribe everyone is urged to take up the responsibility and participate in the Dorbar to be held from 4-6 September 1923".

The Khasi National Dorbar in spite of its drawbacks and not being able to sustain the movement, played an important role in the formulation of democratic and participatory processes. At the right moment it provided the platform for the people in the Khasi Hills to debate and visualise their dream. Three important pieces of legislations concerning the Khasi Community were debated at length in its regular sessions and these laws were more or less the codification of the customary practices prevalent among the Khasis. Interestingly, the question of who is a Khasi was debated and settled by the Khasi National Dorbar in 1925.

Another issue which was debated and settled in 1925 was the participation of women in governance and at the end of the Session in October 1925, Rev J.J.M Nichols Roy put forward his submission, "Before the Dorbar concludes today I want to mention a word. We now witnessed in the developed nations that there was a movement and major consideration for the full participation of women in governance and politics. In our own country we witnessed the participation of women in various spheres and we also see that many are present in this Dorbar today. Thus, the Executive Committee of the Khasi National Dorbar had proposed to amend its rule to allow women to be members...When the building is complete, we will provide a special space for women..." Subsequently, the Dorbar passed the amendment for full membership of women and thus J.J.M Nichols Roy's rhetoric about a special space for women had envisioned reservation for women!

Dreaming of self-governance and autonomy, L.L.D Basan of Hill Union wrote in 1954, "If full fledged Autonomy is desired, it cannot be had within the State of Assam, for full- fledged Autonomy implies a separate State within the Union of India....there will be no scope for the present Sixth Schedule Districts to aspire for Autonomy as the scope for such aspiration lies only in a separate state..."

A year later, while pursuing the dream, Prof G.G Swell made public his 16 Point Programme of Action for Meghalaya. Through his letter of appeal Dated July 6, 1973, to the intelligentsia and the common citizens he urged upon the people to deliberate and debate on matters concerning the state which was at its nascent stage then. His programme of action covered a vast range of areas and subjects which needed policy and legislative formulations.

From land to agriculture to economy all were included in his programme of action. It is imperative upon the State to protect the interest of farmers and not to leave them at the mercy of merchants and traders. Prof G.G Swell strongly argued that the State must enter the market in order to protect the cultivators/farmers against exploitation by "fixing the floor purchasing price annually after taking into account the farmers' cost of production and allowing the differential between the floor price and the ruling market price to go to the benefit of the farmers."

On the land question he defended the land holding system prevalent among the tribal community whereby there exist the clan and community ownership of lands, but be believed that this idea of the commons has to be reinforced with policy and legislative formulations. Moreover, he stated the necessity of having a proper registration of records of rights to help people from unnecessary and wasteful litigations.

When it began in 1972, Meghalaya's per capita income was Rs 327 and was the lowest in the country. It is ironic that today at fifty the State is again among the last five States with lowest per capita income which includes Manipur, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and Bihar. Today the per capita income of Meghalaya is about Rs 95,000. In the 16 points of action Prof GG Swell reminded that the State was created not only to meet the political aspirations of the Hill people but also to overcome their great economic backwardness.

The State and people will continue to dream and chart a future for themselves. But what about the socio-political leadership which Prof G.G Swell retorted in these words in 1973, "...If leadership is corroded by vices and sap its strength, vitality and will, the best of programmes (laws and policies) will remain but a scrap of paper".

Poll and Pandemic Cloud Over Union Budget

By Ajit Ranade

In the Union Budget, 2021, the finance minister had announced that the new labour laws would come into effect from April 1, 2021. These are the four labour codes, which will replace 29 existing labour laws, considerably improving the status of the labour market in the country. It constitutes a major economic reform by the Modi government. The four codes as individual bills have already been passed by Parliament and take effect once the rules are framed by the Labour Ministry, and by respective State governments, since labour is a concurrent subject. But rules have not yet been notified by the Union government. One reason could be the upcoming elections to the five State assemblies. Labour reforms can be tough even at the best of times, but why risk political capital at a time of close electoral contests? One impact of the new codes is that take home pay of employees might decrease since high contributions to pensions are mandated. The employers' share also might have to go up. Another reform is that firms with less than 300 employees do not need government permission for layoffs. Yet another feature is a new category of fixed term employment, which relieves the burden from employers to make workers "permanent". Since each such reform creates a constituency which will be adversely affected, leading to noise from these quarters, status quo is to being maintained at least till the elections are over.

The repeal of the three

farm laws too was perhaps necessitated with an eye on the elections. Of course, this is not to deny that the year-long agitation led by farmers was the biggest major factor. The farm unrest over the three reform laws was most manifest from Punjab and Western Uttar Pradesh, where elections are due to be held. So, poll prospects surely affected the final decision to repeal.

The free ration scheme introduced in March 2020 as part of pandemic relief has now been extended all the way till the end of March 2022. This is the Pradhan Mantri Gram Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) which covers nearly 800 million people under the National Food Security Act. The free rations of 5 kilo foodgrain per family per month was necessitated and introduced during the first wave of the pandemic itself. It has been extended twice already. Recently the government of Uttar Pradesh unilaterally announced doubling of the free ration, and extension all the way till the end of March 2022. The Union government then followed suit and it covers the whole country up to March 2022. This fifth extension for four months beyond November 2021, too appears to be driven with the electoral impact in mind. The incremental cost of the extension of free rations is about Rs 53,000 crore to the central exchequer with an additional outgo of 16.3 million tonnes of foodgrain. In the two years since March 2020 the PMGKAY would have cost 260,000 crore and distributed 60 million tonnes of foodgrain. It is by far the largest free food-grain distribution scheme in the world. With GDP growth expected to be 10 percent during this fiscal year, continuation of the free food scheme is a validation of its necessity from the welfarism point of view, and also for electoral prospects.

Hence it is amply clear whether it is the delay in notifying the rules of new reforms in labour laws, or the repeal of farm laws, or the generous extension of PMGKAY, the political and electoral angles loom large. Even the progress on the asset monetisation initiative announced in the last budget has been slow due to political resistance. Bank unions are increasing their pitch in opposition to privatisation.

Two more factors are now at play. One is the third wave, the so-called Omicron phase of the Covid pandemic. Much more infectious and with a faster spread, albeit less potent and with lower fatalities, it has affected the economy. The slowdown is palpable in the macro-economic statistics like index of industrial production, sales of two wheeler vehicles, consumer spending in retail, urban unemployment and so on. Hopefully this is a temporary setback, and the Omicron spike is soon expected to fade. Exports are doing extremely well, thanks to booming world economy. If India can grab and hold onto this export momentum it could become a significant driver of growth well into the next year. Another worrying sign is a very wholesale price index (WPI) based inflation at about 14 percent. It is reflecting high inflation in input commodities used by producers. The consumer price inflation is still modest around 5 percent, but there is a risk that WPI might spill into CPI inflation. The second factor now at play are pre-poll surveys showing the narrowing gap between incumbent government and challengers. The Uttar Pradesh assembly is a very big prize, but elections in Punjab, Goa, Uttarakhand and Manipur are important too.

With a combination of pandemic related anxiety (hopefully temporary) and uncertain poll prospects these two will have a large influence on the Union Budget proposals to be unveiled on February 1. The economic size even after a 10 percent growth this year will be barely above its 2019 level. Unemployment and underemployment numbers are large and worrying. Schools have been shut for nearly two years, and hardest hit have been children of the urban poor, the informal sector and the rural school with poor connectivity. Tax collections on GST have been quite good, reflecting good profitability of the organised corporate sector. The relatively higher inflation and high imports have also helped GST collection. But non-tax revenues, especially the disinvestment target of last year will be badly missed. The budget for fiscal year 2022-23 will still need a lot of fiscal support to get the economic engine revved up, and a heavy dose of social welfare spending for the unemployed, for the health sector and for education. There will of course be an eye on the upcoming State elections. It is most likely that we will have a growth-oriented, expansionary budget with a high fiscal deficit of 6 percent of GDP. No new taxes on the middle class are expected but some extra burden on the super-rich cannot be ruled out. India's struggle with low tax to GDP ratio will continue.

(Dr.Ajit Ranade is a economist and Senior Fellow, Takshashila) Institution (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

Salesians hit a century in North East India

Editor,

I am grateful to Barnes Mawrie for his article '100 years of Salesian Service to North East' (ST Jan 13m 2022). This is a reminder to millions in this region who knew them, were associated with them and benefited from their services. I am one of the many beneficiaries and I would like to express my gratitude to them for the services rendered and will continue to render in future.

These sons and daughters of Don Bosco, founder of the Salesian congregation have rendered yeoman services not only to our state, our region (as pointed out by Barnes Mawrie) but all over the world. May the name of Don Bosco be ever remembered ever after in this world and may many more continue to take forward the works of this founder with greater dedication and zeal. I appeal to the sons and daughters of Don Bosco to be more worthy of him.

Yours etc...
Philip Marwein,
Shillong-2

Consumerism is hurting NATURE

Editor,

The great scientist of electronics - Nikola Tesla once exclaimed,"If you want to find the secrets of the universe, think in terms of energy, frequency and vibration." It is perhaps the "ripe time" to take heed at these words from the Serbian-born American genius to heart! From an environmental perspective, the present world is obviously a fearsome place to be in. We have in fact made the worst use of the best inventions. What scientists discovered and gave to mankind have been senselessly abused, thereby setting off the danger alarm. We only listen to what capitalists dictate to us. Moreover, man's weakness has been "easily" exploited.

We just allow bouncy celebs on booming TVs to entice us into possessing fancy gadgets endlessly! We are virtually tired of cleaning our house by hand which we did with ease till a few decades back. So, we quickly browse for a new dinky vacuum cleaner that does the job in a jiffy. What is worse is we merrily junk away the old gadgets we purchased just a year ago and luxuriate ourselves in a whole range of new gadgets! We have just bought an I-phone 13 months ago, and after a year we impatiently wait for APPLE to announce it's I-phone-14. We hardly think of the consequences. Every single second we send the smoke up in the production of the colossal number of hard appliances of convenience. We seldom give a sane thought to the fact that this planet might soon run out of fuel.

Meanwhile, the UN frantically convened a series of environment conferences all over the planet in order to educate us on the catastrophic climate change that looms larger. Alas! this has hardly dampened our fascination for consumer items. Unarguably we are squarely responsible for the fast pace of climate change. Our entrenched consumerism and collective delusion have relentlessly depleted the planet's resources with alarming consequences! The environment that is oscillating in the erratic wavelength has long been sending out the wrong signals. In 2021, the world recorded an "unprecedented" number of bush fires, flash floods, volcano eruptions, earthquakes, cyclones, forest fires, melting glaciers, tornados, and much more. Mother Earth has had ENOUGH of being plundered by humanity, and is now seeking revenge!

Of course, the conscious environmentalists now in desperation try to convince us that the only way out is to lead a frugal life. Switching our elegant motor cars with a humble cycle can alone cheer up Mother Earth. So, get on your knees to mop and sweep. Grow your vegetables in your own backyard and eat organic. Buddha's wisdom of austerity and abstinence alone helps bring the damaged ecosystem to alignment. But very sadly, amidst the roar of extravagance and exhibitionism, this "simplistic solution" hardly sounds practical.

True, the problem is multi-fold. This calls for serious brainstorming so we may arrive at an ingenious solution. We need to turn around and change our "consumption behaviours". There is an urgency, nay emergency for shifting our dependence from fossil fuels to green energy. Biogas, solar power, wind power and hydropower could alone hold out a ray of hope. If we want to live longer and see our children happy, we need to listen to what conscious environmentalists tell us. We need to rhyme with the rhythm of NATURE.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

US Govt honours Maya Angelou

Editor,

For the first time in the history of the United States, a black woman's image has appeared on US coin. What makes it noteworthy is that the image is that of legendary poet and activist Maya Angelou. The US announced that it is rolling out a quarter with Angelou on it. This development assumes enormous significance as racism and social discrimination are rooted in the country's history and culture. The government's decision to distribute coins with Angelou's image sends a positive message to the people of the country as well as people across the world.

The coin depicts Angelou with outstretched arms. Behind her are a bird in flight and a rising sun. These images symbolise the black people's freedom and hopes. These images were inspired by her poetry and symbolic of the way she lived. Apart from showing the importance of equality of man, the coins remind people of the great contributions of Angelou to poetry. It will motivate people to read and appreciate the poems of Angelou which depict the lives of black women.

Apart from being a world famous poet, Maya Angelou was hailed as an internationally regarded figure for her role as a civil rights leader who fought for social and racial justice. During the Civil Rights Movement, she worked with great people like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Junior.

The US government's decision to distribute coins depicting the great personality is commendable. More prominent women will appear on US coins in the future. The legacy left by Angelou will continue to inspire people.

Yours etc.,
Venu GS,
Kollam

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"As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest."

--- Nelson Mandela

The Shillong Times

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India and inequality

A just-released Oxfam report on poverty and inequality has stated only the obvious – that the rich in India are becoming richer even in the Covid times and the poor poorer. The London-based charity that surveyed the inequality scene across the globe has said India's governance structure promotes accumulation of wealth by a few, with little regard to the plight of the poor. It has also noted that liberal financial support and huge tax cuts were extended to the corporates and big business ("tranches") in the guise of helping them to weather the pandemic situation, while the poor and the middle class are made to cough up more to the exchequer by way of indirect taxes. India's richest 98 billionaires have as much wealth as the poorest 55.5 crore people mostly in the Below Poverty Line (BPL) segment, the Oxfam report has stated.

In all fairness, central and state governments in recent years have been generous in helping the poor with a series of doles, like the food security programme launched by the UPA-II, the Ayushman Bharat and Jan Dhan subsidized health care schemes and the pensions for farmers and street vendors by the Modi government, the series of free housing schemes by the Centre and states, and even unemployment allowance to the youth. These have all helped ease the life of India's large army of poor – and have also turned them lazy. A Chinese proverb has this to say: "Give a poor man a fish and you feed him for a day. You teach him to fish and he will feed himself and his family for a lifetime."

Leadership is all about having a vision for the future and taking the right steps forward. By giving doles, precious money earned by a government is handed down to the people with no benefit to the national economy. If the productive sectors are activated and every individual made to contribute his/her mite to the nation's growth, the collective release of energy from a 1.35 billion population can work wonders for a nation. China is precisely doing this. India is today the land of freebies because the politician who runs the government is having a single-minded obsession – to please all and win the next elections so that he can warm his chair for more years. Pressure groups get the first hearing, be it businessmen or organised employee unions, because men with feet of clay at the helm of affairs do not have the courage to confront situations or control vested interests.

50 Years of Statehood : Staring at Daunting Problems – Why ?

By C F Lyngdoh

Meghalaya will very soon celebrate its Golden Jubilee but is there any cause for celebration and cheering up on the big day? Sad to say that mammoth problems are facing Meghalayans on every front. But all of the critical problems, two glaring ones being faced daily by the people are:-

The traffic snarls of Shillong city

The mounting garbage dumps and the pollution of surface water bodies.

1. Snarling traffic jam:

This problem is becoming more and more acute year after year. The obvious reason is known to all. Vehicle population is growing exponentially while the roads have remained static because further widening is impossible. However, even a casual study indicates that the main cause of traffic jam is caused due to the bottlenecks starting at Mawlai (near Petrol Pump), at junction near KHADC, junction near Anjalee Cinema, Malki point, Dhanketi junction, etc. The problem at the junctions is that vehicle routes criss-cross (e.g., Barik – Laitumkhrah route criss-cross with Lachumiere – Fire-brigade route and so on), so that the flow of vehicles in one route has to be stopped for a few minutes to allow vehicles on the other route to move on. But even 4 or 5 minutes of stoppage in one route causes a long line of stranded vehicles on the other route.

No doubt, successive state governments might have considered the problem but usually they get the stock answer – there is no space available on the present routes to construct fly-overs and the matter ends there. However, if there is no space to accommodate fly-overs, there is an alternate solution i.e. to construct Overhead Crossings (O.C) of short length at the bottleneck points. For instance, vehicles on the Lachumiere – Fire-brigade route and the Barik-Laitumkhrah route can simultaneously criss-cross above and below the O.C which reduces traffic jam. The overhead crossing may start from the hump of the Lachumiere road near Loreto Convent, extend over the traffic point and ending near the entry to St. Peter's School – a short O.C of about 300 m length similar to what Sikkim built in Gangtok. Similar projects may be taken up gradually at the other bottleneck locations. One limitation for using the overhead crossing is that only light/medium motor vehicles can be allowed on the O.C; the width of the overhead crossing about 5 m in two lanes should be sufficient for two vehicles to pass each other from opposite directions. The road designers can prepare suitable designs when pressed to action. During the time of Assam Government, just after independence there was a PWD minister named Rev. J.J.M Nichols Roy, a man of vision. He saw the serious necessity to have an all-season road from Sohra – Mawmluh to Shella via Mawmluh village. The Assam PWD then told the minster that is it impossible to make the road in such steep terrain. The minister Rev. Nichols Roy did not accept such reply and simply told them that he had seen and travelled on the roads built in more difficult terrain when he was staying in USA for a few years. Reluctantly, the PWD engineers carried out a survey and did some formation cutting but as soon as Rev. Nichols Roy was shifted from PWD, the work was abandoned. Fortunately, after attaining statehood, Meghalaya government revived the project and the rest is history. Nowadays the Mawmluh – Shella road is always a preferred route for all small and medium vehicles though passenger buses also use it whenever needed. To his credit, Rev Nichols Roy never lost the general elections from the Shillong constituency, always holding cabinet rank in the Assam Government. During the last phase of his political career however he was much opposed and reviled by his opponents because of his Congress membership. In one of his election campaigns he frankly told the heckling group among the crowd "Even if you do not vote for me I will win the election because the Angels will cast their vote for me" Yes he won. He later became one of the Architects of the Constitution and the author of the Sixth Schedule. Present day politicians do not have the moral strength of Rev. Nichols Roy but unlike him they can confidently say 'Whether you like me or not I will win the next elections because I have collected crores and crores of money to buy any number of votes that I need to win'.

2. Garbage handling in Shillong, etc:

The gateway to Shillong city whether you arrive from Guwahati city or Umroi Airport does not have the beautiful 'WELCOME' arch structure with clean surroundings to greet you but tonnes and tonnes of garbage so close to the highway emitting a repulsive stench accompanied by toxic smoke rising from the burning garbage which includes huge amount of discarded plastic material. This is the first impression of Shillong city to the visitors and tourists. The place is called Marten and is being used as a garbage dump-yard or landfill for about a century or so. The stench from the said landfill/garbage dump spreads around even as far as the Mawlai Petrol Pump. In these days of advanced Scientific Technology, big cities and metro cities in India and abroad have successfully tackled the problem so efficiently by using modern garbage handling plants to treat bio-degradable, plastic and electronic waste materials separately, even deriving saleable manure, etc for respective purposes.

By these processes, garbage dumps are being eliminated (even profitably) daily. But Meghalaya state continues the use of Marten for landfill. The authorities have even scouted for suitable and potential landfill area. But with the spread of information on the unhealthy atmosphere of Marten, village after village have refused to sell their land for landfill. It is high time that Meghalaya tackles the problem of garbage handling scientifically without further delay. If Kolkata or Bangalore or other cities can solve the problem of garbage handling efficiently, why not Shillong? What's happening in Marten is slowly building up in Tura and Jowai. Protests have taken place recently in Jowai over the subject of garbage dumping.

The failure of the state government to take up the issues noted, speaks volumes on the capability of the Government to administer the state, not to speak of misadventure in handling and transportation of coal and huge leakage of revenue from royalty and dues payable by the cement companies located in the state. Meghalaya's handling of the social garbage is still being done in a primitive way even after 50 years of existence; what a shame for each of us when it comes to the topic of garbage handling. What is happening in Shillong is now slowly taking place in other towns of Meghalaya also. But the authorities are turning a blind eye. It is time the powers that be wake up to the realities of the situation. So much for garbage. What about liquid effluents from the city, which include effluent from septic tanks, kitchens, bathrooms, etc which drain out ultimately to the stream/ rivers – Wahumkhrah, Wah Umshyrpi and then to the Umiam Lake. The above mentioned Wah Umkhrah and Wah Umshyrpi which flow on the periphery of Shillong city used to be the important sites where people wash their clothes and children enjoy swimming, even angling for small fishes; these streams are the sites where dhobis (washermen) of Shillong earn their livelihood by washing clothes near Polo ground, Nongmynsong, Cantonment area, etc. The water in the streams 50 years ago was crystal clear and suitable for washing clothes but now we do not like to touch the stream water even with our feet.

In Gangtok the capital of Sikkim all the liquid effluent from the inhabited areas are diverted by small pipes to the main pipe of about 50 cm dia which carries away the effluent over a distance of more than 10 km to the Effluent Treatment plant where the polluted water is purified and in the process some manure like urea is produced. After treatment, clear water is obtained; it is then recycled for use in the factories or used in agricultural farms; the excess water is released to the Teesta river which always retains its clarity throughout its course. To see the waters of Wah Umkhrah, Wah Umshyrpi and Umjasai in their pristine clarity is now a wishful dream which may never come true as serious attempts have never been made to emulate the wonderful example of Sikkim, which attained statehood not even 40 years ago.

50 years ago, our founding fathers scripted their vision. 'To make Meghalaya a shining outpost of progress in the corner of North-east India'. Sad to note, that vision is shattered before our own eyes. Still it is not too late for the state government to address above urgent issues. It takes strong determination, steadfast devotion to realise the goals and scientific planning and implementation of the projects by entrusting the projects to well qualified agencies which are reputed and have sufficient expertise and experience in executing the projects on a time bound schedule.

Wake up Meghalaya. Shake off the lethargy that has gripped us. Get going and doing, seriously and honestly. May God Help Us.

Impose inequality tax on super rich in 2022-23 budget

Minimum basic income for urban and rural poor need of the hour

By Nitya Chakraborty

The Oxfam inequality report released coinciding with the virtual meeting of the World Economic Forum on Davos Agenda, has exposed in a candid manner how the two year pandemic has widened the inequality in the Globe including India. Specifically for India, the situation is grimmer as the present Government lacks the social security system to protect the poor and the distressed resulting in further deterioration in the livelihood of the poor.

Presently, discussions are going on in the Finance Ministry and the PMO about the shape of the 2022-23 budget and all suggestions are being given by different sections of the society including the industry and the economists. The next budget is scheduled to be presented on February 1 as usual and both the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister are expected to state after presentation that the new budget proposals will take India to a new high and catapult the country into the big league of the developed nations.

In the last seven years, the NDA government led by Narendra Modi pursued the growth path that has only widened the inequalities and every economic crisis was taken advantage by the rich to make gains at the cost of the poor and the lower segments of the Indian society. This process intensified in the last two years of pandemic despite continuous government announcements on the so called sops to the distressed by the Modi Government.

Starting with the sudden declaration of lock down on March 24, 2020 in the first wave to the present third wave, the wage earners, the employees of the SMEs, the migrant labour and lakhs of employees of the private sector small companies have been languishing in abject poverty with job losses, layoffs and reduction of income. These were the people who also suffered under the slowdown which gripped the Indian economy from 2017 onwards. But what has happened to the Indian rich during this period? They have increased their wealth to a record level while the country's economy as a whole suffered.

Oxfam's annual report on inequality in India has focused on the Modi Government's governance structures that promote the accumulation of wealth by a few, while failing to provide safety nets to the rest of the population. The report titled 'Inequality Kills' also highlighted the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the rich and the poor in India.

The report said that by taxing just these super-rich families only 1% of their wealth, India could fund its entire vaccination programme cost of Rs 50,000 crore ($6.8 billion). "Instead, the burden of taxation in India currently rests on the shoulders of India's middle class and the poor, and not addressing the proposal for a one-time tax on the wealthy, for COVID-19 recovery, has resulted in the government using the only other available option i.e., raising funds through indirect tax revenue which penalises the poor," the report said.

In September 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Narendra Modi government had slashed corporate tax rates for domestic manufacturers from 30% to 22%, and for new manufacturing companies, the rate was reduced from 25% to 15%, provided they do not claim any exemptions. The government took 36 hours to implement this decision, with the help of Rule 12 that empowers the prime minister to take a decision and get the cabinet's ratification later. US-based credit ratings agency S&P Global had termed the move "credit negative". This corporate tax cut resulted in a loss of Rs. 1.5 lakh crore contributing to the rise in India's fiscal deficit.

What is startling as per the report is that 142 Indian billionaires collectively own wealth of $719 billion (over Rs 53 lakh crore), while the richest 98 of them now have the same wealth as the poorest 55.5 crore people in the bottom 40% ($657 billion or nearly Rs 49 lakh crore). A 4-5 per cent tax on the billionaires can take care of the Universal Basic Income scheme to ensure a minimum income of Rs. 4000 to Rs. 5,000 per month to the urban and rural poor, especially the people below the poverty line.

The country faces an extraordinary situation and this needs immediate measures to protect the most vulnerable sections of our society. Already, the poor and the unorganised sections of the labour force suffered immensely during the first wave in 2020.The situation continued with the second wave in 2021 and now they are in the grip of third wave. The CMIE report has already shown that more than 4 crore people have been added to the number of the poor again.

So what is the best option at this extraordinary time? All leading development economists are now talking of a minimum basic income meant for the vulnerable sections of the society in India. This is the only way, the standard of living of a major section can be improved and demand can be generated quite rapidly having positive impact on the country's economy. The US has a capitalist economy with high living standard. Even there, President Biden has framed his rescue package proposals in such a way that it gives additional income guarantee to the lower sections of the American society, apart from the other pro-working class measures.

As usual, PM's addresses these days including the latest one at World Economic Forum on January 17 are more of optics, rather substance. He is showcasing the emergence of a digitally vibrant New India which has no place for the vulnerable. The digitalization of the economy and the other activities is welcome but there should be concrete measures to bring vulnerable population under the programmes, not accentuating the digital divide within the society.

The central government defied all the novel suggestions made by the leading economists like Amartya Sen, Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee and Raghuram Rajan, and instead opted for a shaky dependence on huge bank loan-based revival without taking into account the grim reality that nobody, even those who have funds, are in a mood to spend . The poor and the jobless, in staggering numbers, can be made to spend, and thus boost consumption, only through direct transfer of funds which is possible through this universal basic income.

The Universal Basic Income (UBI) issue generated a big debate in the West, especially the USA where the issue of inequality came to the fore in a big way during the last presidential elections... Prominent Democratic Party leader Bernie Sanders in USA has been talking about the economies being run in the interests of one per cent and promising to change the system to favour 99 per cent. Even the capitalists of new generation like Marc Zuckerberg and Chris Hughes, co-founders of Facebook, have argued for UBI as not necessarily a comprehensive solution, but as at least a moderating analgesic for the severity of income inequality and poverty in countries, including global powers like America.

(IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

MPSC needs urgent reforms

Editor,

I refer to an item which appeared in your newspaper dated January 18, 2022 under the caption, "Govt set to hike upper age limit by five years," which reported about the government's decision to increase the age eligibility limit from 32 to 37 years for several categories of posts. As a common citizen, I thank Mr Adelbert Nongrum for first bringing the subject before the Legislative Assembly and which was later on pursued by leaders of other political parties.

Although this is good news for thousands of our unemployed youth, I think more needs to be done to bring about fair and transparent recruitment. MPSC needs urgent reforms in the way it works. In this regard two suggestions are given below :-

1. The recruitment process of the MPSC has always been a long drawn out affair. For instance, MPSC conducted exams in December 2020 for posts advertised in April 2016 and results for a few categories of posts are yet to be declared. Further, exams for 328 posts advertised on December 14, 2020 are yet to be held. I know that this time the MPSC has the pandemic as a scapegoat to blame for this delay. However, central government recruitment agencies like the Staff Selection Commission, State Bank of India Recruitment Board and Institute of Bank Personnel Selection found ways to continue with their respective recruitment processes during those months when Covid cases were sliding in numbers and at a minimum. In any case, MPSC has no valid excuse to offer when even during normal times 3-4 years have to elapse from the date of its advertisement of posts till appointment of personnel. Contrast this with the SSC which rarely takes more than a year in its entire recruitment process while SBI Recruitment Board and IBPS take 5- 6 months and 7-8 months respectively. The above mentioned three central government agencies always mention the exam calendars and stick to such calendars while MPSC never mentions any such calendars in its advertisements

2. MPSC is the only government recruitment agency that still continues with oral interviews for Group B (non-gazetted) and Group C and D categories of posts. All other states have abandoned this practice following central government directives in this regard. Mention may be made of a news item which appeared in this newspaper dated May 19, 2018 headlined " Centre slams nine states over slow progress in abolishing job interviews". The report inter alia mentions that the centre censured nine states including Meghalaya for not abolishing interviews for the above categories of posts in line with what the central government had done since January 1, 2016 to ensure fairness, transparency and a level playing field to job aspirants. The above news item also mentioned that the issue was discussed with the Principal Secretaries/Secretaries of General Administrations of all states at a meeting held on April 16, 2016 in New Delhi. A letter available on the website of the Government of India's Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions (No. 39020/09 - 2015 Estt. (B) dated 28th January 2016) circulated to all states and UTs to abolish job interviews to the above categories of posts has surely been disregarded by our government for obvious reasons.

Under the above circumstances, will our leaders see to it that MPSC is reformed? Will Organizations which claim to stand for the interests of the youth like the HYC, KSU, etc., finally take up this issue with all seriousness?

Yours etc.,
Samuel Swett,
Shillong- 2

Name of Shillong Peak

Editor,

Apropos of Dr Omarlin Kyndiah's article, "How did Shillong get Its Name?" (ST Jan 14, 2022), it is felt some more information needs to be given to somehow complete the story started by him. It is pertinent that the first question that should have been asked is: How did Shillong Peak get its name? as they say, first thing first! Following Dr. Kyndiah's story, the Shillong Peak obviously got its name from the Jaintia leader Shyllong who led about a quarter of the Jaintia people many hundred years ago from across the Kupli river (i.e. from a place later called North Cachar Hills), to Saphohlynrum. (Those who believe in the mythology of U Shulong may not agree). So Yeodo (Iewduh) was renamed Shillong by the Britishers after the name of the Peak which stands majestically in the south overlooking the city of Shillong.

Saphohlynrum was situated at the foot of the said Peak now occupied by the Assam Rifles & the Eastern Air Command; of course, Saphohlynrum extended up to Mylliem valley in the south-west and to the present Smit village in the east. The Bodo Achiks (later called Garos) came to Saphohlynrum to live together again with Austrics as they did in Kamrup thousands of years ago. They were separated most probably in the fourth century C.E. when a wicked king of Kamrupa threatened to clear them off Kamrup. While the Bodo Achiks fled to the west, the Austrics fled to the East up to the river Kalong and spread to Kapili and Jamuna valleys where they established their Nari-Rajya or Women kingdom; locally the kingdom was called JAINTA and the people were christened Jaintias.

When the two tribes were together again at Saphohlynrum after many hundred years, there were large-scale intermarriages between the Jaintia men and the Achik women. The Jaintia women were not happy with such intermarriages. Hence together with their families they migrated to other places and founded new villages like Laitlyngkot, Sohra, and other places mentioned by Dr. Kyndiah. Many of them moved to Jaintia Hills to join their cousins in many dalloiships like Nangjngi, Changpung, and Raliang.

Seeing the attitudes of the Jaintia women, the Achiks proceeded towards the east while giving names to places wherever they halted like Myllem (Mylliem), Rongkrim (Nongkrem), Pohumora (Pomura) and Song (Sung). They ascended the mountains to Madur-Maskut (within the Jaintia kingdom) and thought of founding a kingdom over there. But the soldiers of the Jaintia kingdom drove them away killing their two warrior kings or migratory leaders while their followers ran away in a helter-skelter dash. The Achiks decided to trace back their route to Dura (later Tura) Hills. And, as they reached the plains of Kamrup they halted at a place called Sangati (in between the present Boko & Rajapara) to hold their assembly where they took a historic decision to adopt the matrilineal system of the Jaintias.

Historical researchers may like to refer to this writer's two research Papers – one on "The Place of Saphohlynrum ...." published in the Proceedings of the North East India History Association Conference, 38th Session 2017, pp.404-14; and another on "Nari-Rajya or Women Kingdom...." published recently in the Souvenir of the Moosalyngkat Dorbar Chnong, Jowai.

Yours etc.,
Prof. P.M. Passah
Moosalyngkat, Jowai

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"Once you hear the details of victory, it is hard to distinguish it from a defeat."

— Jean-Paul Sartre

The Shillong Times

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Meghalaya has miles to go

MEGHALAYA is turning 50 on Friday and it is befitting to celebrate this milestone. But what happens the day after? People living in Shillong often live in a bubble and they include MLAs. It does not occur to them that life beyond the state capital is a daily grind. Till date the rural populace of Meghalaya struggle to bring their farm/ orchard products to the markets simply because there are no roads. There are many villages that have not seen their MLA visiting them since he she was elected. People rue that MLAs only respond to people of those villages that vote for them. This is the standard complaint of people across Meghalaya. If all MLAs take an active interest in the development of their constituencies, in 50 years all villages would have been connected to the district headquarters and to the district markets if not the state capital.

These days, it is observed that buyers come directly to the farm gate to buy agricultural produce from the growers; that is if those villages have motorable roads. In Meghalaya, last mile connectivity is still a distant dream. Unfortunately, people have not yet understood their power as voters. They are yet to mobilise themselves effectively to speak up against unequal development because of which they stuck in the rut of poverty. On this 50th year of statehood can the MDA Government do an audit of all the villages that are yet to be connected to the nearest Block/District headquarter and make this a priority in the next one year? Road connectivity is the basis for economic empowerment of people.

Another malaise affecting the growth of Meghalaya is the data vacuum. On the health front data on maternal and child mortality and nutrition was earlier not available. The state and other researchers had to rely on the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO). Even data on people living below poverty line (BPL) is skewed. The data that claims Meghalaya's farmers to be richer than those in Punjab and other states is laughable. Yet this is what the country believes. And unless this is countered by the State the data generated by national agencies will continue to be bandied about and affect resource allocation by the Centre. Most statistical data on health, education, economic growth among others is generated by the NSSO and now the NITI Aayog. Such agencies hardly understand the nuances of tribal societies and their land holding systems which are starkly different from the rest of the country. Local universities both public funded and private ones are today well placed to gather accurate data which is integral to governance interventions. As Meghalaya turns 50 can we expect robust data collection and strengthening of the Department of Economics and Statistics?

District Task Force on Environment

By Toki Blah

A vernacular paper recently carried a news headline titled *"Yn peit ki DTF ia ka jingtih & jingkit ia ki maw, shyiap."* (The DTF shall henceforth supervise the mining of boulders and sand). On further enquiry from relevant sources it was discovered that this news item relates to the Government of Meghalaya, Forest and Environment Department, Notification dated January 12, 2022 which in turn is based on an NGT order No 360/2015 Dt 26/02/2021. The Govt of Meghalaya notification mentioned above was all about the constitution of a District Task Force (DTF) to check illegal mining and transportation of minor minerals within each district of the State. The DTF in turn was to comprise of the following. The Deputy Commissioner (Chairperson) ,the SP, the DFO (Member Secretary) , DTO, Rep of Meg State Pollution Control Board, EE Water Resources, Divisional Mining Officer and two independent members from retired Govt Officials, retired school teachers /ex service man, or ex-members of the judiciary.

The DTF is obviously a body, once again purposely set up to check and regulate environmental irregularities that arise from the illegal mining of minor minerals and river sand. On the other hand there are many more environmental offences and crimes; activities currently being carried out in Meghalaya, that threaten the fragile ecosystem of the state. These 101 other misdeeds against the environment of our state exist despite the existence of a plethora of Central and State Acts and Rules , that aim at the preservation of our forests, our wild life, our water resources, our biodiversity, control on charcoal burning, felling of trees, wetland preservation so on and so forth. Committees, Task forces and Commissions have been set up to implement the above. Unfortunately at the end of the day one has to admit that the failure rate on environmental protection far exceeds our rate of success. It therefore it will not be abnormal or disparaging to say that there will be little or no chance of the above mentioned DTF to be able to implement and perform its mandate. Its chances of success is dismal at the least and therefore it is important to determine the reason for such pessimistic conclusions .

First and foremost, the setting up of such task forces or commissions to safeguard the environment are usually a reaction to pressure from above either from the Central Govt, the Supreme Court, the High Court or the NGT. It is simply a bureaucratic reaction of the State Government which on its own has never bothered to even set up an agenda to discuss such environmental matters in the Legislature. As a matter of fact discussion on such issues would prove an embarrassment to most of our MLAs and discretion demands that the sooner such matters are swept under the carpet, the better it is for those in power. Therefore such commissions as set up simply to avoid a rebuke, a reprimand from a higher authority. They are not meant to produce results. They lack imagination, creativity nor any sense of commitment to the cause they espouse. Such bodies are usually, if not always, top heavy with bureaucrats or technocrats with very little involvement of the public which the Act / Rule is supposed to serve. For example in the present DTF under discussion, the public representation and participation is strictly confined to retired officials. For goodness sakes, why can't we be more imaginative; more resourceful; more inspired in identifying persons who can provide more positive contribution through their commitment to the cause. Retired officials are retired and they have other priorities, like tending to their grandchildren or their own health problems than contributing to management of the environment. Question then is why can't such task forces seek the meaningful participation of people, persons or groups to whom environment preservation is a priority and a passion; people who actually see, observe, live with and witness these acts of environmental degradation in surroundings and situations in which they themselves live in; people who actually want to do something about the better management of their natural surroundings? Why can't we have participation of those who are actual stakeholders in the matter involved; A Bottom Up, Demand Driven approach to environmental protection; a Participatory Natural Resource Management paradigm as solutions for our Environmental problems?

If I question and critique the composition of the DTF and its delivery competency, I must be equally prepared to provide a better solution. Environmental protection in our case will mainly be associated, except in the case of garbage and waste management of towns and metro areas, with the better management of our natural resources. The area and theatre of operations will be our rural villages. We have our Dorbars that serve as grassroots units of self-governance though they are yet to receive legal recognition. Why can't the Government set up a Natural Resource and Environmental Management Group (NaREM-G) for each village. One man and one woman from each household of the village will be members of the NaREM-G. The NaREM-G functions under the Dorbar Shnong and their mandate is strictly limited to Management of Natural Resources and the Environment. They advise the Dorbar on such matters. They choose their own Chairperson who could be a woman or an educated youth of the village with a passion for environmental preservation. (No bar for the concurrent Rangbah Shnong to be elected Chairperson of the NaREM-G and we leave such decisions to the wisdom of the community). Individual NaRM-Gs will also elect two from its members to represent the NaREM-G at the cluster level. All NaRM-Gs falling under any particular C&RD Block will form the cluster association of that Block where the BDO will be Chairperson of such NaREM-G association. Discussion and prioritization on issues of Environmental concerns shall form the mandate of the Association and this Cluster Association will also identify one individual from among its members to represent the concerns of the cluster to the DTF.

One NaRM-G member from each Block Association will be elected by his peers to be the community representative to the DTF than the useless retired officials identified in the present notification. In this manner the DTF will receive upto date and pin point location accuracy of any environmental infringement, breach, violation or contravention occurring within the District. The mandate of the DTF will necessarily need to widen from its present narrow focus only on illegal mining of minor minerals. Within its scope will fall first hand community reports on all types of abuses on the environment that could range from illegal felling of trees; illegal hunting; illegal mining; acts of destruction on our rivers and fishes and rampant illegal exploitation of our natural resources. It must be recognized within our culture and land tenure system that natural resources are community owned. No single individual can own and exploit them but sadly because of lack of community empowerment, rich and ruthless business persons have managed to exploit such resources for their own private use. The drilling of underground water for commercial purposes is rampant in Shillong and is a case study which the administration has failed to address. Meghalaya must develop a Public Trust Doctrine which primarily rests on the principle that certain natural resources such as air and water are of utmost importance for the survival of humanity as a whole and that it is wholly unjustified to allow private ownership over them. It is such a Doctrine that must determine the nature and mandate of the DTF.

In conclusion a warning would be most appropriate and the warning is that the proposals made above to revamp the District Task Force on environment will be opposed tooth and nail by vested interests who happen to head the governance in Meghalaya, for these proposals are a direct threat to the environmental abuse with which such people have exploited the natural resources of the state with which to finance them to positions of power that they now hold. The safety and preservation of our environment and the future of our children however will rest on how ready we are to protect and preserve the Community Natural Resources that we possess. As a first step towards such a goal will be the public reaction; response in writing, rejoinders and criticisms to this article so that those who rule us realize what the public expects out of them.

Email: tokiwaioblah505@gmail.com

RSS desperate to find out why Dalits have deserted BJP

By Arun Srivastava

Social scientists are busy trying to analyse the reasons for the recent large scale desertion of senior BJP ministers and legislators and subsequently going back to the SP. While some look at it as an old syndrome, a large section of experts and scholars nevertheless strongly feel that it symbolises the protest of Dalits and non-Yadav OBCs against the hegemonistic politics of RSS and BJP.

To describe the desertion as ayaram and gayaram syndrome is naïve. Politicians usually do not dump a winning party. No doubt the farmers' movement has shaken the trust level of the BJP, but still the cadres and bhakts are sure that Modi's charisma would salvage the situation and they would win.

In such a backdrop the decision of the Dalit and OBC leaders to quit has more political relevance than meets the eye. Since 2014 of the Modi rule, the Dalits and non-Yadav OBCs were made to be subservient to the RSS and BJP. RSS came out with the façade of presenting them as the major section of the Hindus. Though the RSS and BJP continued with their rhetoric, in reality they ill-treated the Dalits and OBCs.

A number of massacres took place; Dalits were lynched and their women folk were violated and even burnt after perpetrating the heinous crime, the BJP leadership, especially Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Home Minister and other senior leaders maintained a passive silence. The most deplorable was the antipathy of RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat. He has been continuously claiming that these people are part of the greater Hindu society, but he never condemned and castigated the Sangh mercenaries and vigilantes who were involved in the grisly incidents.

These incidents had completely alienated the Dalits and non-yadav OBCs. They restarted the move to unite and come under one banner. In the initial months, Samajwadi Party was not in the reckoning. In fact, the Dalits were not too keen to align with SP. But the success of the farmer's movement changed the entire scenario. It cannot be denied that the re-emergence of Dalits as a potent force is a gift of the farmers' movement.

It is a known fact that Dalits and non-yadav OBCs have antagonistic relations with Samajwadi Party which is perceived as the party of the Yadavs, the intermediate caste. Nevertheless the urgency to break the political hegemony of the rightist and Hindutva forces made them join hands with the SP. It is worth mentioning that in 2017 and 2019 these forces had joined BJP and it was due to their support the BJP won the UP assembly and Lok Sabha elections. The BJP had secured about 42 per cent of votes in the 2017 Assembly elections and nearly 50 per cent in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls in Uttar Pradesh. Now, support among the Dalit and OBC voters is waning due to acute economic distress and unemployment in east Uttar Pradesh. It would be wrong to construe that the BJP would have dared to deny tickets to Maurya and Chauhan. Their exit suggests they are responding to the mood of their voters. During last fortnight, till January 13, 2022, 19 BJP members joined the SP-led front. According to data collected by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), between 2016 and 2020, 182 MLAs from across the country joined the BJP while only 18 left the party. But now the reverse trend has begun. It implies that everything is not good with the BJP in Uttar Pradesh.

Some time back CM Yogi Adityanath had claimed that the election is between 80 per cent and 20 per cent (Muslims make up 20 per cent of the electorate). He had included the vast population of Dalits and non-Yadav OBCs in 80 percent Hindu. Now with the Dalits and non-Yadav OBC rebelling against the BJP the situation has turned against it.

Nevertheless an insight into the nature and character of the shift of allegiance would unravel that it has got a wider political implications and would blunt the Hindutva parquet of the saffron outfit. Such large number of shifts underlines that it was conjured not only by monetary lust, it was resorted to protect the identity of the Dalits, and non-Yadav OBCs. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat and Narendra Modi had scribbled the Hindutva script for the assembly election. The extent of their reliance on the strategy could be gauged from the simple fact that Modi paid two obeisance visit to Kashi-Vishwanath. His visit cost around Rs 1500 crore. Prasad was distributed in 100 villages surrounding Kashi. Modi made all attempts to polarise the Hindu voters and turn Hindutva a talking point across the state. But if the mood of the people is any indicator, it can safely be said that it has failed to have major impact on the electorate. Modi's Hindutva could not blur the economic compulsions of the people of Purvanchal, the most underdeveloped region of the state.

This single incident of senior Dalit leaders deserting the BJP has turned redundant the Mandal politics which has started dictating the political discourse and progression. It has altered the political narrative. This shifting of loyalty is not trivial. Earlier, politicians resorted to this tactics to turn the mood of the people, but this time the politicians have ventured after listening to the voice of Dalit protests at the lowest level. With the announcement of the date of election the voice of protest had become louder and more prominent

Coinciding with these two significant developments some Dalit scholars and activists launched a campaign to redefine the teachings of Ambedkar and second, a new kind of initiative was tossed to find out the caste of Emperor Ashoka. Dalit scholars were forced to evaluate Emperor Ashoka only after the BJP launched the move to identify him as Hindu icon. True enough the move to establish the caste of Ashoka changed the entire political contour of the UP and Bihar politics. Shifting of the focus on the Mauryan king who ruled India between 268 BCE and 232 BCE was a big challenge to the RSS theory that India has been a Hindu nation.

No doubt the BJP first tried to set the caste cauldron in UP on the boil ahead of the Assembly polls, and use the caste value of Emperor Ashoka, but soon it realised that it was going out of its hands. It has motivated the Dalits to question the attitude of the RSS and BJP towards them. On the other side of the battlefield is Bihar which had the privilege of claiming Emperor Ashoka as its own. Never in the political history of India have Dalits been pitted against the Hindus in this manner. For them usurping the legacy of Emperor Ashoka would be the biggest gain.

The Sangh Parivar has unleashed its radical Hindutva outfits to target the minorities in a brazen manner and polarise Hindu votes. For instance, hate-mongers masquerading as Hindu priests have launched the 'safayee abhiyan (ethnic cleansing)' and 'genocide' of the minorities at the Haridwar Dharam Sansad last month. Even the Bajrang Dal and Vishwa Hindu Parishad put up posters along the ghats of the River Ganga at Varansasi asking non-Hindus to keep out of the shrines along Mother Ganga. These developments created doubts about the BJP's intention among the OBCs and Dalits. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Why the negativity on statehood celebration?

Editor,

It is seen that there is a lot of negative publicity on the celebration of Meghalaya statehood; some even suggest boycotting it. This kind of mindset coming from no less than some public representatives suggests a narrow mindset and not that of a mature citizen. On the other hand, I feel that it is right and fitting to observe and celebrate our state's golden jubilee for it is time to rejoice at the historic milestone of getting a full-fledged state not an Autonomous state under Assam as happened earlier. Yes, it was wrong to have accepted a full-fledged state without clearly defining and demarcating boundaries. It reflected the hurry at which our leaders were blinded and pushed by the temptations of occupying the seats of power in the new born state. However, now is the appropriate time to look back and reflect on our success, if any and our failures, which are many, and a time to take corrective steps by setting out clear cut goals to reach in successive years perhaps in the next 10-20 years. If the wait is too long it might impact future plans. Among other important things I would like to put forward a few steps to read to reach the desired goals.

1. Since our state is sadly lacking in leadership this can be met with building up human capital in many areas.

2. Since about 70 per cent of our economy comes from agriculture and allied sectors these have to be accorded topmost priority by suitable policies and programmes to take proper care of the people who are pillars of these sectors and who constitute 70 per cent of the electorate. If they are also an informed lot politically, better quality public representatives who are also legislators of the state will emerge.

3. The Education sector in our state has collapsed so this needs to be accorded topmost priority with far more financial investment in government and private agencies man by educational experts. This will take care of various deficiencies.

4. Land and land rights are the life and death of the indigenous tribes of Meghalaya who constitute the majority population of the state. These subjects are almost untouched by Meghalaya Government. In fact there are no policies and programmes in our state since the first to the tenth House of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. More and more tribals here are rapidly becoming landless as land is owned by the rich non-tribals and has fallen into nefarious companies. Urgent legislation is needed to arrest this alarming danger. Moreover, cadastral survey is non-existent in the state. This will lead to revolutions in the future as happened in France and elsewhere. It is very unfortunate for Meghalaya because the political class has been mortally afraid of touching this vital subject of land. I remember that experiments were tried in some parts of the state but the politicians then incited the people to go against cadastral survey (polygon surveys) of land partly because politicians, bureaucrats and the affluent owned vast tracks of land.

Yours etc..
Philip Marwein,
Sr.. Journalist,
Meghalaya

Religion-a dominant force of violence

Editor,

Considering that religion or beliefs, for anyone who professes either, is one of the fundamental elements in his conception of life and that freedom of religion or belief should be fully respected and guaranteed, India in the past few weeks witnessed a series of religious violence. Examples are the hate speech at a religious event in Haridwar, where calls were made for genocide and violence against Muslims; a life-size statue of Jesus Christ at the British-era Holy Redeemer Church in Ambala being vandalised. In Silchar, a group of youth manhandled a few non-Christians from celebrating Christmas. Back home, miscreants vandalised a Mother Kali idol in Them Mawbah. Religious violence must be condemned "unequivocally".

Communal violence is not a recent phenomenon in India. It has its root in the British divide-and-rule policy since the late 18th century. The British government used communalism to counter and weaken the growing national movement and the welding of the Indian people into a nation. It was presented by the colonial rulers as the problem of the defence of the minorities. Hindu-Muslim disunity was cited as the reason for the continuation of British rule.

Religions have influenced our lives most profoundly. Religious violence across the world is being committed in God's name. If Jesus, Abraham, Prophet Muhammad, Buddha, and Confucius were all alive and gathered in the same place, would they argue over who is right? Or would they respect and admire one another's teachings? Religious conflict can often be blamed not on the founders of religion but on their fanatical followers.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah
Via email

Lecturers' pending salary

Editor,

While our government jubilantly prepares to commemorate the attainment of 50 years of our state, it is a depressing occasion for the morning lecturers of Kiang Nangbah Government College, Jowai. For a long while now they have been deprived of their long overdue payments. With the pandemic coming to the plate, making ends meet was tough on these lecturers. As per the information (from a reliable source) about their pending salary, the workload of these lecturers is heavy and though many letters have been sent to the concerned authorities about getting their dues with enhancement, no one is paying attention to the hue and cry of these dedicated lecturers. As a concerned citizen, I do not want the morning students to suffer when these lecturers decide to stage a protest. So, before things get out of hand, I urge the concerned authorities to look into the pending salary of these lecturers with seriousness as it is rightfully theirs to receive.

Yours etc.,
A concerned citizen,
Name withheld on request

Case of illogical conclusions

Editor,

I read Dr Omarlin Kyndiah's, article, "How did Shillong get its name?" and what prompted me to read the article was a follow up letter today which totally erased the Khynriam from the history of Shillong. I'm not trying to belittle Kyndiah's article but the general consensus among academicians, historians and anthropologists alike is that there is no recorded migration of Austro-Asiatic people from China. Most of the races who migrated to the Indian subcontinent from China belong to the Tibeto- Burman race. The accepted scientific reasoning based on isolation, genotyping and sequencing of DNA samples is that the Austro-Asiatic race who are now settled in the plateau of Meghalaya migrated to these hills from mainland India. So the article by Dr Omarlin Kyndiah about the origin of the etymology,"Shillong" is built on shaky ground if the premise of the article starts with the theory that the Jaintias migrated to these hills from China. I have utmost respect for Dr Omarlin Kyndiah. When I was in Class 11, I was part of the badminton team that represented St Edmunds college. The four member team consisted of a Bhutanese,a Mizo,a Naga and I. Being the only local member of the team I was treated as one of his own by Dr Kyndiah who was the teacher in-charge of the team. I just feel that the letter written by Prof Passah from Jowai (ST 19, Jan,2022) borders on ethnocentrism. Let us not sow seeds of division especially if those seeds are sown on grounds of illogicality.

Yours etc.,
Gary Marbaniang,
Via email

"Every beginning is only a sequel,
after all, and the book of events
is always open halfway through."

--- Wislawa Szymborska

The Shillong Times

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Meghalaya @ 50: In Retrospect

TODAY is a day for celebration. Celebration of 50 years of self-rule of and by the tribes but a rule that is inclusive of all who are citizens of this state. While enumerating the milestones, the people of Meghalaya ought also to do a reality check about how the state is being run and who is actually controlling the fate of 34 lakh Meghalayans today. It is part of Meghalaya's checkered history that in 1979 those running the state could not prevent a communal outrage against a section of the community which was suddenly called the "other" and was under attack. Such incidents of communal violence were repeated in 1982, 87, 92 and they occur as isolated incidents in parts of the state even today. These do not bode well for a state that is still on the way to progress and is in need of creating windows of opportunity for its youth population. Violence, uncertainty and the absence of the rule of law, are the biggest impediments to economic progress. Government's brief is to enable job creation through entrepreneurship and industries that make judicious use of local resources keeping in mind the fragile ecology of this hill state. That these goal posts were not earmarked in the early days of statehood reflects the lack of vision of those that fought long and hard for a separate state. It is a matter of regret today that attaining a separate state became an end in itself and even Meghalaya's contentious boundaries have remained areas of contestation with Assam from which the state was carved out. Priorities should have been set right at the beginning when Meghalaya became a reality.

Hopefully the thorny boundary issue is set to be resolved by the MDA Government through consensus building with neighbouring Assam. However, it is also a fact that previous governments holding the reins of governance in Meghalaya have done precious little to develop the border areas and to make the residents there the stakeholders that would zealously guard those borders. On the contrary Assam has done more in terms of providing last mile connectivity for the border residents so that they are able to improve their livelihoods and enjoy the fruits of governance. Because border residents find the Assam Government to be more attentive to their needs, they have made their preferences clear about opting to be with Assam. The administrative machinery of Meghalaya has been amiss with such overtures.

On Meghalaya's 50th year will we see a closure to the border battles between Assam and Meghalaya? We wait and watch and hope that the state achieves this one important milestone!

Khublei Meghalaya: May you be that shining outpost!

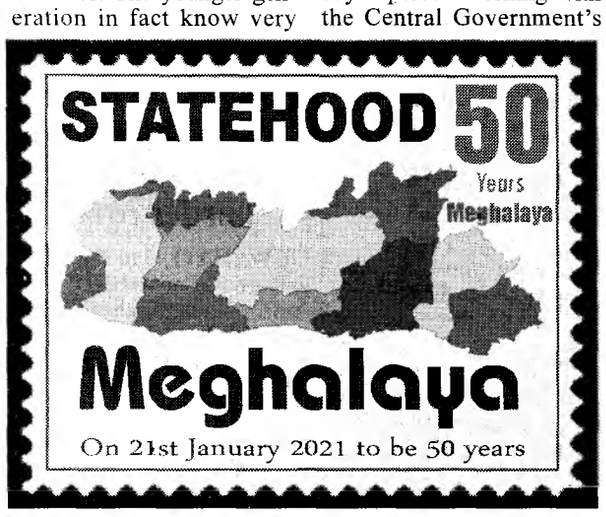
By Patricia Mukhim

Meghalaya is 50 today. If Meghalaya was a person, 50 is the age when one looks back and smiles at what one has achieved, frowns at missed opportunities, and releases a slight chuckle at those moments. The years between fifty and seventy are the hardest. You are always being asked to do things, and yet you are not decrepit enough to turn them down, said TS Elliot in. "The Calloused Hand." So no, Meghalaya is not yet decrepit because she does not drive but is driven by some young, energetic leaders who were elected to drive this vehicle with 34 lakh people on board. A lot depends on where we the passengers want to go and what we do when we reach our destination every five years.

For us humans touching 50 comes with a touch of gray at the sideburns, but otherwise a more mature, wiser and experienced look. Is that how Meghalaya looks today. This was a state born out of the angst of many to be independent of Assam's strangle-hold and its cussedness to impose on us an unfamiliar language – Assamese. Sometimes you wonder at this strange posturing of the Assamese leadership then. It's a desire to control the tribes by making them cringe with the sheer weight of the thought that they would have to compulsorily have to learn to speak and write a language that's new to them. English was bad enough and the fact that Khasi is not a recognized language meant that we would have to write our Board exams in English while all other students from different language groups could write the Matric exams in the vernacular. If this is not an uneven battlefield then I wonder what is.

The fire that was lit in the hearts and minds of the Khasi (and here I include all sub-groups – Khynriam, Pnar/Synteng, Bhoi, War, Lyngngam) people then was firstly to throw off that yoke of the language imposition. As a young girl of 10 years I recall being led by my mother who though uneducated was quite an activist, to one of those protest marches near the Secretariat. We were told to shout in unison, "We Want Hill State; No Hill State No Rest. We Oppose Assamese." This rang out loud and clear and we had leaders then that were worthy of our trust. None of them died rich. One of them was GG Swell – a man who many failed to understand but he had a mind of his own. He rose through sheer merit to become the Deputy Speaker of the Lok Sabha. There was Hoover Hynniewta, PR Mawthoh, Moristo Swer, BB Lyngdoh, PR Kyndiah and a number of gentle ladies like Kong Rose Warjri (the mother of Roshan Warjri), Kong Bon Marbaniang (mother of Angel Marbaniang the former Principal Lady Keane College) and many others whose names don't appear because they were women. But let's leave this gender debate for another day.

Those ruling the state of Meghalaya have done very little to commemorate these personalities that were responsible for achieving the dream of an autonomous Meghalaya where we would be the masters of our own destinies. The younger generation in fact know very



little about how Meghalaya was born. It is true that some of these personalities were afflicted by flights of fancy to be chief minister of Meghalaya. That desire turned into an obsession and the hurly burly of politics overtook the need to chart out a more decisive goal for the state in the area of health, education, the economy and of the best way to make use of natural resources without depleting the fragile ecosystem. These needed statesmanship of a very high order! Here the leaders were found wanting. Politics and the quest for power dominated the early leadership in Meghalaya because of which there was political instability created by coalition governments that never lasted a full five-year term until the nineties. Meghalaya was wracked by the affliction of rotating chief ministers with each partner out to checkmate or blackmail the other. Politics in Meghalaya had become a promiscuous game. That this should happen in its formative years when stability was needed to steer its course reeks of a political culture gone obscene.

Then we had a saga of jumbo-sized cabinets as MLAs were wooed to support a government. Thankfully that painful saga is over. Or is it? Isn't the appointment of advisers to the present chief minister with the pay and perks of a minister one way of circumventing the 91st Amendment of the Constitution which in 2004 restricted the size of the ministry to 15%. In many ways the style of governance today is not very different from what it was 40 or 30 years ago. Politics is rife with treachery and cut-throat business deals at the cost of the state exchequer. The other day a person working with the Central Government's Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs who is here to evaluate the progress of the Smart City project of Shillong asked a few people their views of the progress of the project. To be frank, one has not seen anything smart about Shillong city. The roads are unsmart because they have not tackled the monstrous traffic jams. We haven't yet seen the rain water harvesting projects. We only see some work happening vis a vis the Laitumkhrah market.

Meghalaya must be the only state where roads are made by the State PWD without any drains. The result? Roads are eroded with the first flush of monsoon. I once asked the PWD officials working somewhere in Shella whose brief it is to make drains by the side of the road and got some wishy-washy answers. I can put up several photographs of roads with no drains that have been recently repaired and where rain water flows right through the middle of the road. Someone has to answer this and who better than the PWD Minister who is himself from the family which owns a construction company and which is taking up most of the road construction in the state. Many roads inside the localities in Shillong city are without drains. So the smart city project seems like a no go area.

Like many other writers I would not like to delve too much into the past and turn politicians with proclivities for power into heroes. They all had their failings. They may not have displayed brazen opportunism and a wealth-creation mania but they did have a penchant for power for its own sake and not for the genuine progress of the state. The only person who tried to bring in both political and administrative reforms and set about enunciating policies for a state that did not have a single policy brief until 1988 was PA Sangma. Sangma put a cap on land compensation for road making projects and irked some of the business tycoons of Meghalaya. They toppled his government with the tacit support of politicians who indulged in the most despicable backroom conspiracies. That too is part of Meghalaya's sordid history that cannot be easily forgotten because it revealed the ruthless nature of political players the state has produced and people had elected.

And now we have a clutch of technocrats out to feather their nests out of every road construction or other project that the state undertakes. Anyone who travels on the shortcut from Mawlai along NEHU to Mawiong at the ISBT junction would have seen all kinds of buildings coming up and encroaching onto the main road. Most of the land by the roadside is owned by our engineers. So too, much of the land by the side of the Shillong by-pass. And we still dare to swear that 'land belongs to the people?' Who are we trying to con?

On Meghalaya's 50th year, as a citizen I would dare the MDA Government to carry out a cadastral survey of the entire state. It's time to call the bluff of politicians, bureaucrats, technocrats and the business class. If the MDA Government cannot undertake the cadastral survey then let us make this our main election plank for 2023.

Sorry Meghalaya that all this has to be said on your Birthday!

Keys of yesterday will be the keys of tomorrow

By Bansharailang Pyngrope

As we step into our Golden Jubilee year, our state is geared up for a celebration filled 2022 where several projects and programmes will be announced by the Chief Minister. Our state is young, but it has grown and has many memories to reminisce. Vast majority of today's population were not born during the time when our people fought for an independent state and this is the perfect time to look back, beyond the hill state movement, to the roots of the characteristics that have been instilled upon the leaders of that time to go on to achieve this great objective.

Although we do not have a vast number of articles, books, authors, etc in our Khasi language, we however have many stories- doctored through books or through stories orally passed down through generations and not to forget the beautiful music we have been blessed with. The basic theme of all these stories and songs which ring the loudest are two basic qualities which are heavily emphasized- "trei shitom"(work hard) and "kamai ka hok"(earn honestly). We have heard these two powerful phrases so much that maybe we have taken them for granted or maybe we the young generation with social media and other distractions have not pondered enough on these two important phrases.

"Although we do not have a vast number of articles, books, authors, etc in our Khasi language, we however have many stories- doctored through books or through stories orally passed down through generations and not to forget the beautiful music we have been blessed with."

Our ancestors were simple, raw and wise. These two qualities of "trei shitom" and "kamai ka hok" might sound simple but are the keys to our tomorrow, as they were the keys to the successes of yester-years. The leaders who fought for our statehood, fought it with honour and dignity; not a single drop of blood was shed and yet they achieved this great feat. How? When our state was declared autonomous, Late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi said, "When I think of Meghalaya I hear a musical sound evoking thoughts of high hills and clouds.... blessed with rainfall and sunshine, dense forest and high plateaus and deep gorges, where the air is refreshing and invigorating, with tumbling waterfalls and crystal clear rivers BUT ABOVE ALL ELSE Meghalaya has been blessed with sturdy and intelligent people, Meghalaya is definitely one of the most beautiful states in the country."

The leaders were sturdy and intelligent. These qualities stemmed out of these deep rooted teachings of "trei shitom" and "kamai ka hok". I've heard stories of our Late Chief Minister, B.B. Lyngdoh saying that the best exercise is washing clothes at 5 am in the morning. It is something simple but so powerful. Do we the current generation and the young generation have such discipline and energy? These are stories I've heard. There are also stories I've seen from close quarters. My Mei Ieid (maternal grandmother) a business lady selling fish in Iewduh since she was in her early teens, giving up her studies for her younger siblings to be able to continue theirs. Ever since I could remember, she had a routine she followed thoroughly every single day from Monday to Saturday "leit sha iew" (go to the market) from morning till evening and Sunday spend time tending her garden. She was never tired. She was of that generation who through words or actions showed us the value of "trei shitom."

I also hear through stories from my elders about the generation of leaders who fought for our statehood and how they were just a completely different breed of politicians to the ones we have now. They were not drawn by the glitter and diamonds of politics but simply looked at it as just another job, to work earnestly and honestly.

Again I look no further than my Mei Ieid who taught me through her actions that no matter how many people lied to her and cheated her, she stood strong and never followed their tricks to earn dishonestly. She believed in the good side of people and had never thought of keeping a rupee she didn't earn. Despite being in Iewduh her whole life, she never taught us tricks but instead showed us the spirit of earning every rupee honestly and to value it. From her actions I can closely see the spirit of our ancestors-"kamai ia ka hok."

These are the qualities which are enshrined in our culture, but somewhere, somehow we are forgetting these virtues. Our present generation has grown increasingly selfish and impatient, looking for easy ways to do things, reluctant to work hard because apparently that is what being smart today is. This is best reflected by the people who are actually elected to represent us. Only few exude the spirit of "trei shitom" and "kamai ia ka hok", and maybe this is why we as a state are lagging behind on almost every parameter, whether it is our education sector or our capacity to generate employment. But we cannot put all the blame on the politicians because what is truly the mood on the ground? People who aspire to be politicians and even those who don't, blatantly take it for granted that people aspiring to be politicians are all the same. They see politics as the door to a luxurious life, forgetting that there are lakhs of people who do not even get the basic necessities of life.

"Our ancestors were simple, raw and wise. These two qualities of "trei shitom" and "kamai ka hok" might sound simple but are the keys to our tomorrow, as they were the keys to the successes of yester-years. The leaders who fought for our statehood, fought it with honour and dignity; not a single drop of blood was shed and yet they achieved this great feat."

We the people on the ground need to change our perspective; we need to take ownership of our state, our land, our home. We need to inculcate in ourselves and in our future generations the two wonderful qualities which have been passed down from generation to generation, through words and actions, the spirit of "trei shitom" and "kamai ka hok" for these were the keys of yesterday which gave us our statehood and these will be the keys we use today to open doors to a beautiful and prosperous tomorrow.

Letters to the Editor

Meghalaya @50: Reminiscences

Editor,

In 1952, I was in class 9 studying in the Welsh Mission Girls High School and I vividly remember enrolling myself as a volunteer in the protest against the nomination of Member to the District Council (MDC) which we called "MDC shu sieh"(planted) in the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council. While celebrating the Golden Year of Meghalaya, it is important for the people to remember the important historical events which ultimately led to the formation of Meghalaya on 21 January 1972.

In 1923, the formation of Khasi National Dorbar was an important moment in our history whereby the idea and dream for self-rule began to take shape. When India became Independent on 15 August 1947 once again the Khasi people were confronted with two options, one, to remain independent and two, to accede to the Dominion of India. The former, was too big a challenge for the smaller Khasi native states. Therefore, we chose to accede to the Indian Union, and an Instrument of Accession was signed separately by the Khasi Syiems. Thus, the Khasi States Constitution Making Dorbar was held in 1949 to debate and decide the political future of the region.

In 1952, the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council was inaugurated under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. The nomination of the non-indigenous member to the District Council, by the Assam Government enraged the Khasi people and eventually led to the protest movement under the leadership of Messrs Hoover Hynniewta, Molen Swer and others. Lest we forget the house of Molen Swer in Mawkhar Main Road, was the place where the think tank of the movement would meet and deliberate the course of action.

On the morning of 27 June 1952, a large public gathering was convened in the Hall of the Khasi National Dorbar at Mawkhar, to protest against the nomination of a non-indigenous member the District Council which was meant to protect tribal customary laws, culture and tradition. It was on this day, that many students like me, came forward to sign and pledge as volunteers for the protest movement. I remember some of the youths from Riatsamthiah who signed were myself (Filtina Lyndem), Mera Malniang and others. From among the prominent leaders who took active part in the protest were Lina Adel Laloo and Enit from Mission Compound, Moreen Lyngdoh, Plain R Mawthoh, L. Gilbert Shullai, Stephen Lyngdoh, Markan Lyndem, Dr Victor Diengdoh, Hamlet Bareh, Wattis War and many more.

The protest began from the Hall of the Khasi National Dorbar and proceeded towards Motphran where it was met with a heavy hand from the District Administration, and Mr Perry who was the Deputy Commissioner gave an order to clamp down the protest. When the protesters resisted, the District Administration resorted to lathi charge and tear gas, in which many protesters were injured. I remember that the entire stretch of Mawkhar Main Road leading up to the Office of the Dorbar Syiem of Hima Mylliem, was engulfed in fumes but at the same time families along the Mawkhar Main Road came rushing with buckets full of water to help the protesters to wash the fumes from their eyes. My friend Mera and I were helped by the family of Kong Lin Jyrwa (Oasis Restaurant). The lathi charge was followed by tear gassing. The police arrested Hoover Hynniewta, however immediately after the arrest, Plain Mawthoh and Stephen Lyngdoh took over the leadership and led the protesters to the Police Station to demand for the release of Hynniewta.

On June 27, 1952 the protest movement had a far-reaching impact on the political movements which eventually led to the demand for a separate State. Immediately, on December 29, 1953 the Government of India passed a Resolution to constitute the States Re organization Committee. Therefore, no one can deny the fact, that the Hill State Movement started gaining moment since then.

In 1954 the States Re Organization Committee visited the Khasi and Jaintia Hills to examine the political unrest. Thus, the Khasi National Dorbar was among the first to submit the Memorandum to the States Reorganization Committee on April 1, 1954 to demand for a separate State.

From 1954 onwards, many agitations, protests and movements for a separate state followed. Ultimately, in 1971 an Act known as the North Eastern Areas (Reorganization Act) 1971 was passed by Parliament, and with effect from 21 January 1972, Meghalaya became a full-fledged State with Shillong as the Capital.

Yours etc.,
Filtina Lyndem, (senior citizen)
Shillong -14

GG Swell: The unsung hero

Editor,

Tomorrow we will celebrate 50 years of being put together in one state with a people who we don't have any thing in common. For better or for worse, we're in the same boat now. Lets go back to the years before India attained Independence. The Khasis and Jaintias were at sixes and sevens. No one knew for sure where we would end up when India finally breaks free from the shackles of British rule. Hands down the Khasis and Jaintias were the most educated people in North East India in the years priort to India;s indpenence. When the Khasi Naitonal Dorbar was convened some of the best minds from the community sat down together to discuss the fate of our people. There was GG Swell and the now not so great JJM Nichols Roy. GG Swell and and others overwhelmingly favoured a unified administration for the Khasis outside Assam even if we decided to accede to India.

JJM Nichols Roy on the other hand was of the opinion that it would be better for us to become part of Assam. No one knows what swayed his decision. He had friends in high places, I mean in the Assam Assembly. A vote was taken in the KND to decide the matter and the motion initiated by G G Swell and modified upon by the Syiem of Jirang, Paiem Sirendro supporting a unified administration for the Khasis outside Assam prevailed. J J M Nichols Roy didn't back down; he vowed that it was his way or the highway. So it was solely his decision that led to the Khasi states being part of Assam. When the young educated people eventually knew the fate of our people, there was a huge disappointment. When the office of the District Council was inaugurated in Shillong, there were violent agitations. The frustration of being part of Assam among the educated eventually led to the fight for a separate state. When we finally got our own State in 1972, the Garos were clubbed together with us. So here we are celebrating 50 years of togetherness, thanks to JJM Nichols Roy and his unwavering desire for us to be part of Assam in the first place. No one knows for sure till now what swayed his decision in favour of us being part of Assam rather than us being the masters of our own destiny from the very start.

It was stalwarts like GG Swell, BB Lyngdoh, PR Kyndiah, Hoover Hynniewta and others who carried on the fight that finally resulted in the carving of the state of Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
Gary Marbaniang,
Via email

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

"Conflict is good in a negotiation process... it's the clash of two ideas, which then, all being well, produces a third idea."

— Luke Roberts

The Shillong Times

SHILLONG, SATURDAY, JANUARY 22, 2022

Polls sans street shows

The five-state assembly poll scene is warming up even as there's no scope for street shows that usually punctuated the campaigns of major political parties, in the initial stage of nomination this time due to the EC ban for checking Covid-19 spread. Chances are that the ban could again be extended. Leaders must be itching for action on the ground as they are the heroes of the season with flashlights of TV cameras in full glow. The problem, however, is how to gauge the public mood. The large crowds at meetings of top leaders are 'organised' with liberal use of party funds and hence the size by itself does not matter. But, the frenzy or the absence of it among the assembled crowd is indication as to which way the wind blows. This time, the campaign could mostly be in the digital mode and the mood of the voters is so far a guesswork other than for the figures held out in opinion polls.

What's coming up in the form of a mini-general election is spectacularly different from previous polls also in that one major player, the AAP, has announced well in advance its CM nominee for two states – Bhagwant Mann for Punjab and Amit Palekar in Goa. This involved a calculated risk as the polity is deeply divided on caste and community lines across the country – a reason why other parties hesitated to do so, hoping to win votes from all. Both these leaders are socially active, Mann a popular comedian and Palekar an activist lawyer. The AAP decisions have changed the dynamics of the electoral fight in these two states, though AAP was so far a non-entity in Goa. No doubt, the trend was set by [illegible] in the 2014 Parliament polls, which saw [illegible] Narendra Modi flying from state to state and stirring up the public mood to his and the BJP's advantage. Now, AAP might be putting the BJP on the defensive in Punjab at least on the strength of the same style of electoral heft.

The poll-eve floor-crossings, seen in Goa, Punjab and UP now, only go to show how unprincipled and selfish the politicians of today are. When it comes to promoting their own interests, no scruples stand in the way. Even family members, as in UP, are changing colours with the ease of a chameleon in the pre-poll days to win favour from rival political shades. That likely holds true of the son of deceased and respected Manohar Parrikar in Goa too.

Meghalaya 50 Years - Past & Future

By Rudi Warjri

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" . A line from Charles Dickens , A Tale of Two Cities , resonates in my mind when I look back a little more than 50 years ago to an event that culminated and finally led to the emergence of the Meghalaya State .

Best of times , as a fledgling teenager , consumed with idealism and valour I participated on the September 10, 1968 picketing at the then Assam Secretariat (now Meghalaya Secretariat). Enrolled by my Uncle (Hamilton Warjri) as the Volunteers Organizer from Malki for the Non Violent Direct Action (NVDA) but who prematurely passed away in 1967. Worst of times, because of the neo-imperialism under the then Assam Government. And the fear of being arrested , lathi charged and teargassed at the picketing .

Golden Jubilee and we celebrate the 50 years of statehood. The attainment of what the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi described "to fulfil the aspirations of the Hill People!" The sense of a separate entity and identity; the devolution of power and self governance to protect and promote one's interest , culture and customs; the opportunity to create more opportunities, develop and optimize one's potentials, given the physical material , natural and intellectual resources we had; to catch up with the rest of the advanced States in India and indeed with the rest of the world . In short , to decide and shape for oneself about one's future .

The real meat of the celebration however lies in tangible Socio – Economic indicators. In the current global context what the Israeli historian Yuval Harari would call the 'Data religion'. Much has been written about Meghalaya's abysmal ranking in Government of India agency-conducted surveys relating to National Multi – dimensional Poverty Index , [illegible] Index , the cold [illegible] some [illegible] in Meghalaya is the richest in India .

Population in 1972 was a little more than 2 million; it is now almost 4 million. Literacy in 1972 was almost 30% , now it is 75%. Evidently visible among them is the expanding numbers of educational institutions . The expanding elite and middle class population and consumption of fast moving consumer goods. In 1972 the number of privately owned vehicles could be counted. Today several households would have more than one vehicle. In 1972 being allotted a telephone even by a Government official was hieratchical, today the very landline itself has become more or less obsolete and replaced by the ubiquitous mobile. Rapid urbanization has seen proliferation of shops and departmental stores. We can dig and analyse on other data like per capita GDP , infant mortality rate , maternity mortality rate etc. And between rising population and progress in education arises rising expectations. And most importantly bridging the gap in socio – economic disparity. What Mahatma Gandhi says, " to wipe every tear from every eye ".

The stress on growing population is because it impacts directly on the entire infrastructure supply and demand of the State. Then there is the gap between multiplication in vehicles and road construction. This applies equally to health, education, power and energy, water, sanitation, civic governance , employment, economic activities that include agriculture , industries , services and on environment and climate change .

So we celebrate 50 years of political autonomy but what about economic autonomy? At infancy there is need for parenting so dependence on the Central Government in Delhi was justified. Being a Special Category State was necessary but should it continue for the next 50 years? Should exemption from income tax for the tribal community continue infinitely? Has there been even a marginal shrinking of budget dependence on the Central Government in Delhi? One wonders what work do the several Government appointed bodies with superlative nomenclatures like Planning Board , Economic Task Force , Economic Council , Resource Mobilization et al do ?

As far as the quality of political leadership is concerned, gone are the days of leaders like JJM Nichols Roy , whose sterling performance at the Constituent Assembly of India in 1947 – 48 led to the creation of the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs). Discovering the inadequacies of the ADCs under the Assam Government led to the demand for a Hill State and produced leaders like Capt W A Sangma , B B Lyngdoh , Stanley Nichols Roy , G G Swell, Edwin Bareh and several others. Today , mostly , charlatans are occupying positions of political leadership. The key qualification for contesting elections is Money . And ruefully majority among the electorate has also accepted it as normal .

Inherent in a vibrant and a robust democracy is political activism. In Meghalaya today political activism of a plethora of pressure groups has become an overkill and a vested interest industry in itself. Even more regrettable is the populist and expedient attitude of the Government in power towards these pressure groups. Hyperbolically speaking , the pressure groups have become parallel governments. The pressure groups say ILP , Government and the whole Assembly lock stock and barrel says ILP. No one wants to study why Simla (a higher hill station than Shillong and also inhabited by highlanders) where the railways arrived more than 100 years ago have been able to retain their exceptional character. Darjeeling Railways have been in existence 140 years ago. Positively , the politically mobilized society can be converted into a society which is economically mobilized .

Charles Darwin says "It is not the strongest of the species that survives , nor the most intelligent , it is one most adaptable to change." The book, ' The Age of AI (Artificial Intelligence) And Our Human Future" by Kissinger , Schmidt and Huttenlocher talks about how AI is transforming societies in fundamental and profound ways . To faith and reason, AI adds a third. AI is the game changer for the future. Does Meghalaya even know what AI is beyond AI in our smart mobile phones?

We are living in a VUCA (Volatility , Uncertainty , Complexity , Ambiguity) world. The Corona Virus epidemic in the last two years has perplexed the VUCA world even further. Tech companies and enterprises have benefited while services sectors like Tourism , Hospitality , Aviation , Real Estate etc have suffered . Online education has become the new normal. The prognosis is the digital divide is widening. Meghalaya has to choose which side of the digital divide it wants to be in by being "adaptable to change".

The key to the next 50 years is change and reforms . India is where it is today because of economic reforms that began with liberalization in 1991. Not to speak of China which started in 1978. Begin with land. Cadastral survey that leads to a systematic land record and that makes land to be a convenient collateral asset for bankable purposes is the need of the hour. Do away with the archaic system of land transaction or the antediluvian outdated colonial patta system where local vested interests are benefiting instead of accruing revenue to the Government treasury for public interest.

On border problems, while India is tortuously deliberating border issues with China , States within Northeast India are ludicrously resorting to shooting over boundaries. People living in borders across the world are surviving more on the cross-border economy. They either benefit or suffer from the border trade, illegal smuggling, human and drug trafficking etc. Meghalaya and Assam can come with 'out of the box' and innovative system of utilising the common borders to facilitate legal transaction and checking crimes. Boundary for the sake of boundary just to satiate populist sentiments is transient .

Let us not forget that south of Meghalaya is a country called Bangladesh. Its data is overtaking India in many respects from per capita income to women's empowerment . Therefore, wake up from looking down on Bangladeshis. Rather take advantage of export-import trade , tourism , access to Chittagong port etc. through Bangladesh. And Meghalaya Government please come up with a Look South policy.

I am writing this piece more for those who will be around in Meghalaya 50 years from now.

Raising Marriage Age

Education vital for success

By Dr Oishee Mukherjee

The recent decision of the Modi government to raise the marriage age for women from 18 to 21 has evoked mixed reaction. The Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill, 2021, tabled in the Lok Sabha, was sent to a select parliamentary committee as many Opposition parties opposed it. The concern being that child marriages are rife in the country despite the law and it is critical that rather than legally raising the minimum marital age, the root cause of child marriage be addressed in order to bring about a value change in society.

However, the task force under Jaya Jaitley last year had examined the correlation between the age of marriage and issues such as nutrition, prevalence of anaemia, infant mortality rate, maternal mortality rate etc. It felt that delaying the age of marriage , and in turn, child birth may have a positive impact on the IMR and MMR.

Counter opinions to increasing the marriageable age of women are being discussed, including that such a law could be used by parents to control the autonomy of young women and to penalise the sexual choice they make as adults or that a 18-20 year-old married woman under the current law can have her marriage nullified and rights under it denied .

A minimum age of marriage signifies that unions below a specific age would be liable for criminal prosecution if they are reported. But the law remains hazy on how the government intends to enforce monitoring mechanisms. Concerns have been expressed about how the new law could push underage marriages and control trafficking. A study on a decade of child marriage law revealed that the legislation had been overwhelming used by parents to punish daughters who had eloped. As is well known, the causes of minor marriages lie in poverty, traditional ideas about marriage and the desire to control female sexuality.

A study on a decade of child marriage law revealed that the legislation had been overwhelming used by parents to punish daughters who had eloped. As is well known, the causes of minor marriages lie in poverty, traditional ideas about marriage and the desire to control female sexuality.

Given the aim to eliminate child marriage by 2030 as part of the Sustainable Development Goals, this move is in the right direction. The Jaya Jaitley headed task force asked the government to look into increasing access to schools and colleges for girls including their transportation. Skill and business training has also been recommended as has sex education in schools along with training and livelihood enhancement to ensure that an increase in marriageable age can be implemented. According to the committee, these steps must come first because unless they are implemented, the law will not be effective.

It is pertinent here to mention that over 70 per cent of students across 16 universities as part of the spadework by the Jaya Jaitley led 10-member central panel, have favoured raising the legal age of marriage for women from 18 to 21 years and about 67 per cent thought the ideal age to get married was between 26 and 30 years. However, the study found that among male students a considerable proportion – of about 24 per cent – believed that there was no need to increase the legal age of marriage.

As per government data, the average age of women getting married in India increased to 22 years. But around 24 per cent of women aged 20-24 years still get married before 18. There are expectations that reducing the drop-out rate of girl students at school and college since early marriage is the most prevalent reason for girls dropping out at school level. Raising the legal age of marriage will provide them with the opportunity to prepare them for a better life and be economically self-reliant.

Some experts believe that raising the marriage age to curb population growth is misleading. India's fertility rate is already down to 2.2 and will soon fall to 2.1 children per woman at which rate the population will stabilize and ageing will become a problem. Despite the government's claim to giving special priority to women, their position has kept deteriorating because the deep social prejudices and crime women face cannot be changed. It cannot be said that raising the minimum age of marriage will lead to female empowerment though such an increase may motivate them to continue with their studies.

In many developed countries, including those in Scandinavia and also Britain the minimum marriageable age varies between 16 and 18. But these cannot be given as examples as the education levels in these countries are high and girls continue with their studies after marriage. As per available records, a quarter of Indian women are married before 18, some even before they attain the age of 15. UNICEF data has shown that India is home to every third child bride in the world with more than 100 million of them getting married even before the turn 15 .

Though appreciating the need that increasing the marriage age is a step in the right direction, only education facilities for girls have to be improved and special incentives given for those studying in higher secondary classes. The local panchayat bodies and society organizations should be roped in to stop child marriages and ensure that they continue their education. If necessary, books and education materials should be provided to girls to enable them to continue their studies.

Both at the national and state levels, there should be a thrust on recruitment of women so that they feel that gender parity is emerging in the country. Already during the past four or so, there has been considerable recruitment of girls in the private sector but in government jobs despite much talk of empowering women, just 11 per cent of 31 Central government employees in 2011 were women. But by March 2020, the employee strength had increased to 32 million though the share of women has not changed much. Moreover, out of nearly 21 million police personnel in the country as of January 2020, only 10.30 per cent were women though there has been talk of increasing this share to around 33 per cent.

The whole question is the empowerment of women and providing them education and health facilities at grass-root levels, specially in the backward districts of the country. While increasing the age of marriage of women is necessary, there is a simultaneous need to educate them about the realities and challenges of life, especially in relation to having children and attendant responsibilities of nurturing them. And not just the women, but equally the men. —*INFA*

Letters to the Editor

Stop the unprovoked assault on non-tribals

Editor,

The unprovoked assault on innocent non-tribal persons in the heart of Shillong that too just opposite a police station speaks volume of the status of minority community in Meghalaya even after half century of its existence. The attack is nothing but an organized and preplanned one just to convey the message that minorities have to bear such violence in the coming days as well. Legacy of such hate crimes is continuing for over forty years with the tacit support of the Police, administration and civil society. No doubt there will be feeble 'strong condemnation' from few persons and the Police will try to catch the 'miscreants' or 'misguided youths' without any result. I therefore, urge the minority populace of Meghalaya to reconcile to the fact that if they are to stay in Meghalaya they have to bear such assaults and violence at regular intervals as they have experienced all these years without any qualms and not to expect any justice from the administration or solidarity from the civil society.

Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee
Shillong-1

Austrics migration- a scientific approach

Editor,

Apropos Gary Marbaniang's "Case of illogical conclusions" (ST January 20, 2022), the question of localising the Austro-Asiatic (AA) homeland is a crucial and an increasingly topical one for scholars. Gary's argument that there are no records or evidence of the migration of the Austro-Asiatic (Austrics) from China and the AA language family who are now settled in Meghalaya migrated from mainland India, is not based on available prehistoric, Linguistic and Biological evidence. Hence the veracity of this claim is in question.

The original homeland of the Austrics is taken by many scholars to be somewhere near about northern Indo-Chima near the Mekong River, while some locate it in Siberia. Since the 1990s there has been a resurgence of interest in AA linguistics and the homeland question. Linguistic, archaeological, and classical genetic marker studies suggested two possible routes of migration of the Austro-Asiatic into the Indian Subcontinent; the first trace the migratory routes from Africa to India via Central Asia, while the second route is from Africa to Northeast Asia (China included in the region). Genetic markers seem to corroborate the aforesaid view. One of the Y-chromosome studies conducted by a researcher of Anthropology and Human Genetics Unit, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata suggests that the sister-clade of haplogroup O-M175 i.e. N (xO), 22g is confined only to Northeast Asia including Russia and Siberia, and is absent or found in negligibly low frequency in Central, South and Southeast Asia. Presently, results of the genetic marker studies are widely received and accepted in tracing the origin and historic expansion of the Indian Austro-Asiatic group.

Looking forward, I wish that more research emerges from these dynamic research areas.

Yours etc.,
Dr Omarlin Kyndiah
Associate Professor,
Biochemistry
St. Edmund's College,
Shillong

Some facts about Covid 19

Editor,

We live in a world where - due to increasing censorship - the truth is hard to find. So here are some facts about this so-called "pandemic":

First, the official Infection Fatality Rate (IFR) of COVID-19 according to the United Kingdom government is 0,096 percent or if we round up, 0.1 percent. That means about 99.9 percent of people who get the virus survive! Most people who die from COVID-19 are over the age of 80 and would likely have died anyway from natural causes or another disease within a few months or years (that is a simple fact, though it might seem harsh).

Second, lockdowns were never tried before in human history because it was acknowledged the economic costs are too high. No scientific paper published between 1900 to 2019 recommended mass scale lockdowns. The published pandemic plans of the world's major economies did not include anything about lockdowns for flu-like viruses. For example, the World Health Organisation in 2019 advised against lockdowns and border closures. That, of course, was before the corruption of science that has occurred in recent times.

Saving one grandma should not come at the expense of killing young people through lockdowns. Lockdowns have killed at least two million people globally. Professor Ramesh Thakur of Australian National University notes that lockdowns have probably killed more people than the virus. Lockdowns cause more COVID-19 deaths because they herd people indoors and thereby suppress their immune systems by preventing access to sunshine (vitamin D) and to exercise (by closing gyms). Look up Sweden or South Dakota - neither of which had lockdowns or mandatory masks - but are now outperforming other nearby jurisdictions with respect to COVID-19 deaths.

The fact that the Indian Government failed to provide enough hospital facilities for COVID-19 patients has made the virus seem worse than it is. Blame India's pathetic government-run and funded healthcare system, not a mild virus. Nearly one million scientists have signed a petition called the Great Barrington Declaration, opposing pseudo-public health measures.

Yours etc.,
Sukrit Sabhlok
New South Wales,
Australia

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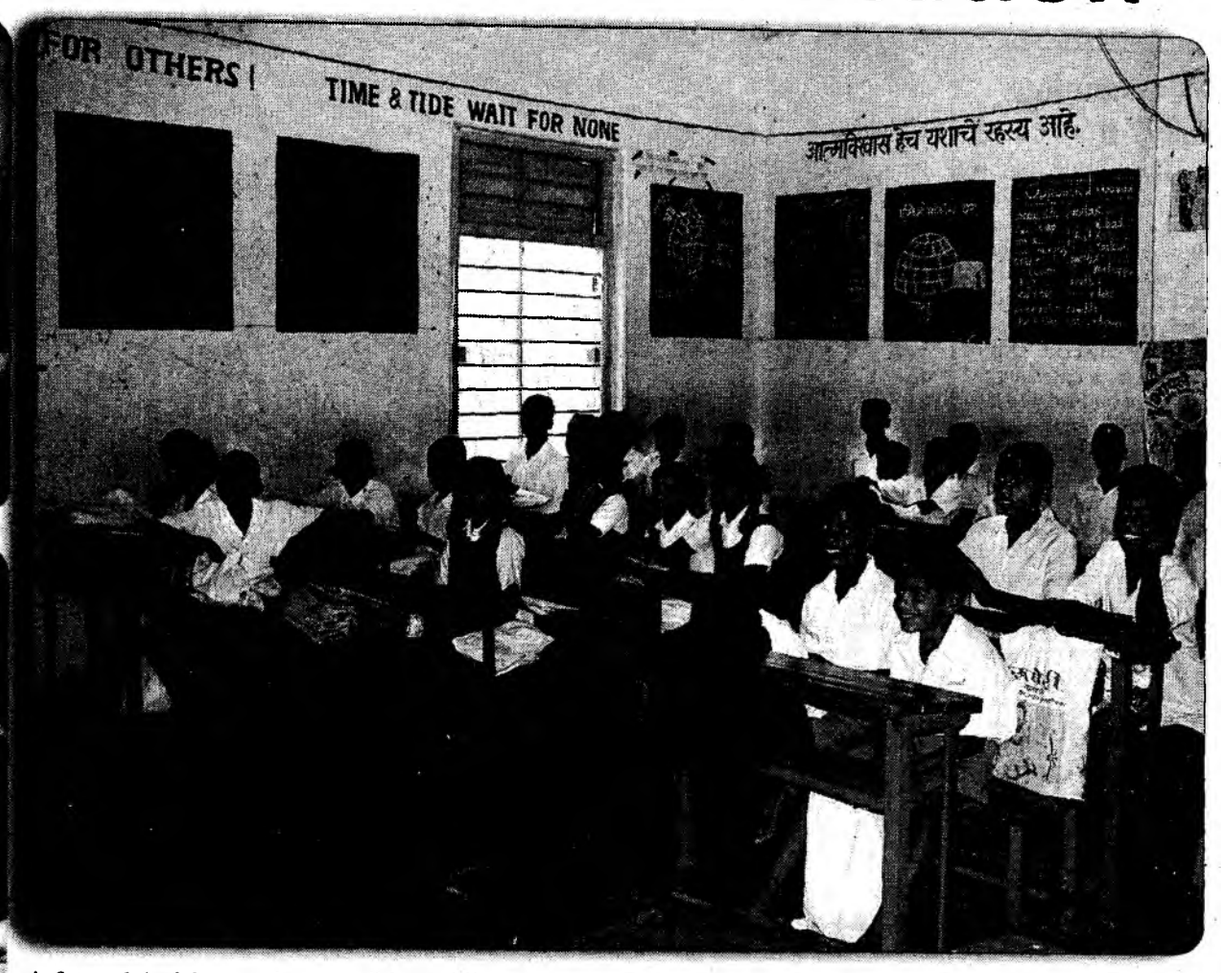
Need for environmental ethics into education

By Bellarmine Nneji



One of the goals most of the world has agreed on is education for sustainable development. This means development that considers present concerns without compromising the interests of future generations. Nations develop through education that takes care of the present and the future.

As I have argued in a paper on environmental ethics in education, I believe that the principles and ideas of sustainable development and consumption should be embedded in all aspects of education. Every course or subject in the school curriculum should contain these ideas. Education should give future leaders the critical thinking tools they will need in a dynamic society faced with serious climate change challenges. Almost every profession and livelihood has an impact on the environment.

Call for 'edutainability'

In Nigeria's schools, there is little or no emphasis on sustainable consumption as part of sustainable development. My call is for the idea of "edutainability". This I derived from a combination of the words education and sustainability. It is based on the gap I see in the idea of education for sustainable development. This misses the consumption aspect, which adversely affects our environment.

Edutainability stresses that every subject must incorporate ideas about how to ensure sustainable development and consumption.

I also argue that learning about sustainable development and consumption should not be limited to disciplines in the sciences and technologies. Almost every human action affects sustainability and has an impact on the environment, directly or indirectly.

Edutainability can be viewed as part of environmental ethics. Environmental ethics is a branch of applied philosophy that studies the conceptual foundations of environmental values. It's also concerned with issues surrounding societal attitudes, actions, and policies to protect and sustain biodiversity and ecological systems. It applies the rigour of ethical thinking to the natural world and the relationship between humans and the planet Earth.

The earlier children are introduced to reflecting and asking questions about the environment and the impacts of human activities on it, the better they can begin to develop an attitude of care for the environment.

Children are inquisitive and full of questions about their surroundings. This is what the introduction of philosophy at primary and secondary school level could exploit. It would help shape children's reasoning and equip them eventually to take part in debates and policy making. As UNESCO puts it, education that would lead to sustainable development empowers citizens to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society for present and future generations.

It is not enough to tell people what to do in order to preserve the environment. Children must understand the rationale and the interconnectedness of humans and nature. They need to know their environmental rights, such as the right to inherit a healthy and sustainable environment, and the right to food, water, shelter and education. They also need to know that climate change is going to affect the exercising and enjoyment of these rights.

For example, recent flooding in parts of Nigeria is one reason to introduce environmental ethics into the country's education system (and elsewhere on the continent). Children were major victims of the flooding and remain at risk. Drought in the Sahel is another issue that children need to understand. They should appreciate the differences between human-made and natural disasters.

They also need to appreciate the political nature of climate change and what their various governments are doing about their future. When it is time for them to take over they must be equipped for the task.

Everybody is a consumer

It's not enough to teach environmental ethics and philosophy of technology to students in science and technology departments. That would be a limited perspective, focusing only on producers (the professions in the two sectors) while ignoring the end users.

For example, certain pest control chemicals, when applied safely, can be sustainable but applying them or disposing of them incorrectly would challenge sustainability.

My view is that every course or subject must incorporate how to ensure and contribute to sustainable development and consumption. Also, all academic research must incorporate a section on sustainable development and consumption from the perspective of the discipline concerned.

The choices of consumers can greatly influence producers to adopt sustainable development approaches. And everybody is a consumer.

(Bellarmine Nneji is Lecturer in Philosophy of Education at Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education.)

Benefits of good handwriting

Time and time again, we have hopped onto technology thinking it's the best possible invention for communication. Despite the advantages that technology brings, writing remains at the forefront when it comes to ideation and communication. The creative stimulation that results when putting pen to paper has specifically gained traction during the lockdown days after the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic.

People were looking for expression avenues away from technology and screens turning to creative activities to remain inspired. Writing, a form of expression provided individuals with a platform to process emotional stress and effectively manage their feelings during testing times.

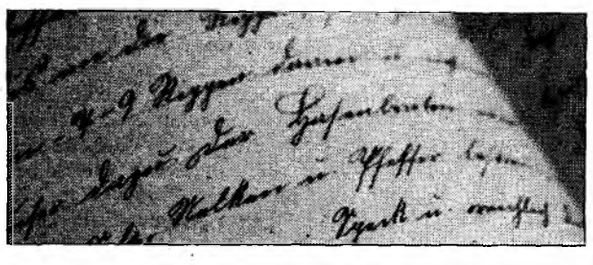
As we kick off 2022, and in celebration of National Handwriting Day, Eirini Petratou, Senior User Research Manager at BIC, sheds light on the benefits of handwriting and the underrated magic that it holds.

Handwriting boosts cognitive processes

As opposed to taking notes on a gadget, using pen and paper helps better activate cognitive processes. It improves the capacity to retain knowledge, recall facts and concepts, and provide a more in-depth comprehension of the subject at hand. Cursive writing specifically proved to boost brain development in the domains of thinking, language and reasoning. According to a *New York Times* study, cursive writing also promotes brain synchronisation between the left and right hemispheres.

Handwriting develops brain health

Handwriting, like meditation, boosts cerebral activity in certain areas of the brain. According to research conducted at Indiana University, the act of writing by hand stimulates creativity that is not easily accessible in any other manner. High-tech magnetic resonance imaging proved that low-tech handwriting enhances neuronal activity in some areas of the brain.



Writing enhances creativity and thought processes

Writing helps get our creative juices flowing and supports organising thought processes. In one of his articles, renowned author Patrick McClean stated that using pen and paper help avoid the distractions that result from digital platforms. When typing, individuals tend to focus on editing content as they develop it -- which is counterproductive to the creative process. On the other hand, using pen and paper allows people to jot down their creative ideas, fully gather their thoughts and edit later.

Handwriting boosts happiness

According to a health encyclopedia by Rochester University, journaling helps improve the mood, as writing down thoughts, ideas and emotions on paper gives people a platform to better express themselves and understand their emotions. It allows enough time for people to identify and understand their feelings. Writing helps articulate thoughts that lead people to feel uninspired or demotivated. The process of jotting down emotions on paper has proven to be therapeutic and helps enhance feelings of happiness as well as reduce stress.

Mark this special day and jump on the handwriting bandwagon. Grab a pen and paper and kick off your year with positive and valuable habits. *(IANSlife)*

(National Handwriting Day is celebrated annually on January 23)

The untold story of Netaji

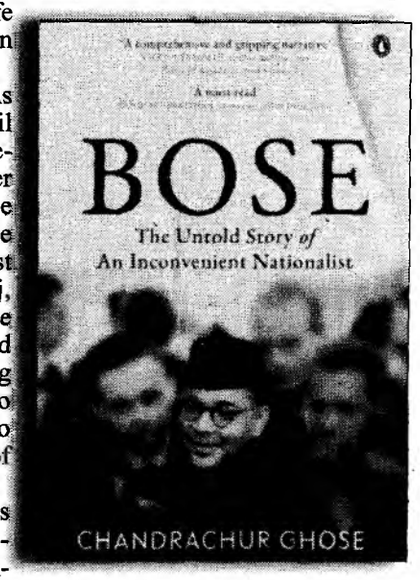
This is probably the first critical biography of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose till date.

There are not many Indian heroes whose lives have been as dramatic and adventurous as that of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. That, however, is an assessment of his life based on what is widely known about him.

These often revolve around his resignation from the Indian Civil Service, joining the freedom movement, to be exiled twice for over seven years, throwing a challenge to the Gandhian leadership in the Congress, taking up an extremist position against the British Raj, evading the famed intelligence network to travel to Europe and then to Southeast Asia, forming two Governments and raising two armies and then disappearing into the unknown. All this in a span of just two decades.

Now, new information throws light on Bose's intense political activities surrounding the revolutionary groups in Bengal, Punjab, the United Provinces and what is now Maharashtra and his efforts to bridge the increasing communal divide and his influence among the splintered political landscape; his outlook and relations with women; his plunge into the depths of spirituality; his penchant for covert operations and his efforts to engineer a rebellion among the Indian armed forces.

With this new information, what appeared to be dramatic now becomes more intense with plots and subplots under one man's single-minded focus on freeing the motherland and envisioning its development in a new era.



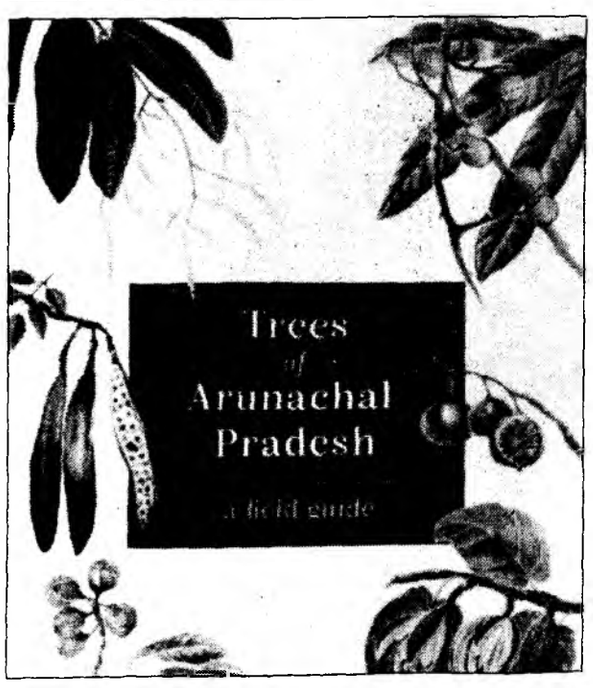
Furthermore, one of the most sensitive issues that have prevented political parties and successive governments from talking much about Bose is his joining the Axis camp. While Jawaharlal Nehru and other prominent Congress leaders publicly denounced the move, the Communist Party of India went on to a prolonged vilification campaign. Sardar Patel issued instruction to Congress leaders to defend the INA soldiers without eulogizing their leader.

Was Bose really a Nazi sympathiser? Knowing very well about the strong public opinion that existed among the political leadership and the intelligentsia in India against Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and imperial Japan, why did he risk his own political image by allying with the Axis powers?

Pacey, thought-provoking and absolutely unputdownable, Chandrachur Ghose, in *Bose: The Untold Story of an Inconvenient Nationalist* (Penguin) opens a window to many hitherto untold and unknown stories of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose.

Chandrachur Ghose is an author, researcher and commentator on history, economics and environment, having graduated from Visva Bharati and the University of Sussex. He has co-authored *Conundrum: Subhas Bose's Life After Death*, which features among the bestsellers on Amazon.

Ghose is one of the founders of the Mission Netaji pressure group that has been the moving force behind the declassification of secret documents related to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. His activism led to the declassification of over ten thousand pages in 2010. *(IANS)*



Pictorial guide *Trees of Arunachal Pradesh* published

With over 1,500 photos of 241 species, biologists from the Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) have published the first ever pictorial field guide to the *Trees of Arunachal Pradesh*, a region famed for its biological diversity.

Authored by three seasoned field biologists - Dr Navendu Page (WII) and Dr Aparajita Datta and Bibidishananda Basu (both from the NCF), the book builds on their collective experience of over two decades of field botany and forest ecology of Northeast India to present an authoritative guide to the trees.

The *Trees of Arunachal Pradesh: A Field Guide* is a first-of-its kind pictorial guide for a wide audience.

Visually rich, this book will help a commoner to efficiently and easily identify trees of this region.

Terming it as an absolute delight not only for biologists but also for anyone remotely interested in exploring plant life in the land of the rising sun, Director of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), Dr Bivash Pandav, said: "Moving forward from the conventional plant taxonomy literature, this book is a breath of fresh air and will surely generate huge interest among the readers to understand the plant diversity of Arunachal Pradesh."

"Elegant illustrations and appropriate descriptions along with actual photographs of the flora, make this field guide easy to use for both professionals as well as nature enthusiasts," Pandav said

This field guide is an outcome of years of hard work put in by the authors and demonstrates their thorough understanding of the region. A must have while planning for a trip to India's Northeast," Pandav added.

The book features more than 1,500 photos of 241 species of trees, shrubs and a few climbers.

'Keys' based on easily observable characters such as leaves, flowers, and fruits, help the reader navigate through the pages and to identify each species, said one of the author, said.

"These provide pointers to compare similar-looking species, helping get past the lookalikes and identify the plant of interest quickly and accurately," the author added.

The species pages, which form the bulk of the book, give an account of the species' ecology and utility, with images of the plant parts.

Another author, Datta said: "We have given the flowering and fruiting times, who eats the fruits or how seeds are dispersed from our field observations or literature."

The user-friendly and aesthetic features of this book, available online, make it an attractive resource for botany students, naturalists, plant explorers, tree watchers, teachers, researchers, forest department staff, and the people of Arunachal Pradesh, the authors' statement said. *(IANS)*

Legalising horn trade alone may not save the rhinos

By Vu Hoai Nam Dang and Martin Reinhardt Nielsen

Demand for rhino horn in Asian markets, especially Vietnam and China, has pushed the remaining rhino populations to the brink of extinction. In the past decade, nearly 10,000 rhinos were killed by poachers in Africa. The remaining rhino populations in Africa and Asia are steadily declining, with fewer than 30,000 animals left in 2020 from a population of 500,000 at the beginning of the 20th century.

Rhino horn is coveted for rumoured medicinal properties and as a status symbol. To stop the rhino poaching crisis, it has been suggested that horns sustainably harvested from live rhinos can be sold in a legal trade to international buyers to meet demand. At the same time, this may generate income to fund anti-poaching activities, create jobs for local people, discourage poachers and encourage private rhino owners to conserve rhinos.

In an international, legal trade, rhino horns can be micro-chipped, and a certification and permit system put in place to prevent laundering.

But whether legalising the international trade in rhino horn can contribute to conserve rhinos is a hotly debated question in conservation circles. Opponents argue that a legal trade will remove the stigma associated with using rhino horn and thus increase demand to a dangerous level.

We've published a new study that addresses this conundrum through an experiment with 345 rhino horn consumers in Vietnam to generate insights into their choices about purchasing rhino horn.

We found that a legal trade in rhino horn would not eliminate a parallel black market, but it would likely reduce it. Our insights can be used to evaluate the likely consequences of a legal trade and to develop policies and interventions to manage demand for rhino horn.

Preference for wild rhinos

The trade in rhino horn is highly lucrative. In the black market, rhino horn prices can fetch up to US$400,000 per kg for Asian rhino horns and US$20,000 per kg for African rhino horns.

While rhino horn is mostly used as a traditional medicine in Vietnam to reduce hangovers, detoxify the body, and reduce high fever (despite no scientific evidence supporting these benefits), a large quantity of rhino horn is supplied to the art and antiques market in China.

Only by interviewing actual consumers of this product can we generate insights into motivations for purchase and rhino horn preferences. However, because rhino horn is so expensive, rhino horn consumers are mostly senior and very wealthy individuals who are notoriously averse to investigations of their illegal behaviours.

They generally do not want to talk to researchers they do not trust about their purchase and use of rhino horn. Nor are they motivated to participate in interviews by small gifts or abstract reasons, like conserving rhinos. This poses a major challenge for studying the impact of a legal trade on consumer demand.

To interview a large number of rhino horn consumers, we hired a team of research assistants with a winning sense of humour, colourful life experience, and true grit. With a rented Porsche and a Rolex watch borrowed from friends, we reached out to various networks and clubs where wealthy consumers often gather, such as golf and tennis clubs, and established a network of key informants who helped introduce us to potential respondents.

In the interviews, we showed them choice cards and kindly asked them to make choices about purchasing rhino horn for medical use in different scenarios including an international, legal trade in rhino horn.

Our study shows that consumers do not want captive-bred rhinos who are perceived as "farmed", like cattle or horses. They prefer, and are willing, to pay more for horns from rhinos living in the wild or semi-wild environments – like private ranches where they need to find food and water themselves but receive supplemental feeding at some times of the year. This is because the consumers believe that wild rhino horns have better medicinal efficacy than farmed ones being exposed to naturally occurring medicinal herbs.

Consumers preferred a legal trade. However those with higher incomes were less concerned about legality. Hence, if the legal supply of wild rhino horns is not enough, they will likely buy poached or stolen horns from illegal suppliers.

Conservation implications

Our results show some support for the argument that a legal trade could shift the preference of a large proportion of consumers to legally supplied horns.

However, the strong preference for wild rhino horns is a major concern. As a consequence, a legal trade would likely continue to face competition from a parallel black market.

This means that the extent to which poaching would be reduced would depend on the legal supply of wild and semi-wild rhino horns, on campaigns' ability to change consumer preferences, to what extent the legal trade would reduce stigma and increase demand, and on enforcement efforts in both supply and demand countries.

Our results suggest that basing campaigns on the influence of peer reference could be a viable strategy to reduce demand by encouraging people who have experienced no or negative effects of using rhino horn to step forward in the debate. Rhino horn consumers often listen to their peers when considering to buy or use this product.

We found that the more peers used rhino horn with no, or negative, effects, the less likely consumers were to buy rhino horn.

Unanswered questions

Some important questions remain unanswered by the study. These include; to what extent legal supplies can meet potentially rising market demand and whether consumers can be convinced that less wild rhino horn has similar health benefits, if any, as those of wild rhino horn.

Furthermore, the aggregated international demand for rhino horn is unknown if the rhino horn trade was legalised, and there is no guarantee that legal horns can meet this demand. More importantly, consumers show a strong preference for wild rhinos, and do not believe that horns from semi-wild or farmed rhinos have the same medicinal effects.

Finally, our study only generates insights into Vietnamese consumers, while Chinese tourists visiting Hanoi to purchase rhino horn and the mainland Chinese market remain mostly unstudied. While more evidence is needed to confirm whether a legal trade will contribute to rhino conservation or not, demand reduction campaigns should continue.

(The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee for SCIENCE and SUND at the University of Copenhagen and the Ethical Review Board at the Hanoi University of Public Health. Respondents were informed of the study purposes, potential benefits and risks of being enrolled in the study and that they could withdraw from the interview at any point in time.)

Rhino horn slabs for sale in Vietnam.

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi ***Sunday, JAN 23, 2022***

Mars square Jupiter on your solar-return chart and it will give excellent results. You will be full of self-confidence and will feel on top of the world. You will get a job offer of your choice. Your plans regarding expansion of your business will also be successful. You will enjoy good equations with your bosses and co-workers. They will be happy with your performance. A warm and fulfilling love relation will end in marriage ties. You will achieve a lot in your work and business. You will find lot of time to pursue your interests too. Your health will remain perfect. A marriage proposal will be accepted in your family with your consent. Time is best for money and home affairs. Family members and friends will keep helping you. Students will get success in exams/interview. You will share your internal feelings with someone close. You will also follow some great person.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

You will get success in whatever work you do. There will be stability in your life. You will remain mentally alert. You will also remain busy in your work. You will also meet lot of people and will get your work done with ease. You will also love the company of your near and dear ones. You will have monetary gains. Your opponents will be active but will be unable to harm you. You will also get full backing of your bosses. Your gentle nature will win you lot of support. You will focus on your work. Your prestige will also rise. You will clinch financial deals. Some business activity will be in your favor. You will also enjoy wonderful bonding with your mate. You will also spend quality time with your family. There will be happy atmosphere in your home and you will lead fabulous life. You will also get good news from somewhere.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

It will be a peaceful week. You will take important decisions in your work. Your speed of work will be normal but your work will get done. There may be possibilities of getting new work in the near future. You will also enjoy a wonderful married life. New romantic relations are indicated. You will be full of energy and enthusiasm. Your children will also progress in their respective field. Your budget will be under control but your expenses will rise. You will enjoy a good health. Your tensions and worries will also get over. You will take a strong stand on an official matter. Peace and joy will prevail in family ties. Family members will come closer to each other. There will be unity in the family. You will be busy in religious activities. You can also start a new work. You can also get contracts from abroad. You will feel peace and serenity in your life.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

It is going to be a wonderful week for you. The time is suitable for new projects. You are strong willed and full of confidence. Whatever you will plan, you will achieve by your dint of hard work. You will also be able to expand your business. You will also get full support of your boss and colleagues. Even your friends, well wishers and family members will stand with you. You will show lot of maturity and seriousness in your work. You will be successful too. Those who are unemployed will get job opportunities. Your delayed and struck projects will get momentum. Your full focus will be on your target. Husband and wife will enjoy good understanding. There will be opportunities to travel abroad. You will also plan renovation of your house.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

It is time to realize your dreams into reality. You will have full faith in your own abilities and will be full of self-belief and confidence. You can get friendly with an influential person. He/she will help you a lot to achieve your goals. The time period is very suitable to start new projects. You will get full backing of your bosses. They expect a lot from you. You will also disappoint none. You will understand your responsibilities and fulfill it also. Money and wealth will keep coming. Destiny is favoring you and you can fall in love with a person known to you. You will share good relations with your siblings. Time will be in your favor and matters related to land and property will progress. Struck money will be recovered. Love affairs or wedding will get momentum.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

Your spirits will be high as you get to hear a good news. It will make you feel delighted. You will have monetary gains. Additional sources of income will be explored. Your happiness will get doubled as you get a news for a promotion in your job or get a new work order. Progress of your children in their line of interest will add to your happiness. It calls for celebration and you will enjoy it with your family members and friends. Your meetings with seniors at your place of work will prove to be beneficial and fruitful. You will give equal importance to your family ties too. You will enjoy perfect bonding with your partner/spouse. Love birds will have a wonderful time. Don't meddle in affairs of other persons. It will bring bad name for you. No need to take unnecessary tension. Time is for success in work. You will get expected cooperation from co-workers.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

It is high time you learn to say no too. People expect a lot from you and you cannot keep everyone happy. At times we need to take care of our own interest too. You need to learn the art of balancing things evenly. Thus you will progress in your life. There are promotion possibilities. You can also undertake a major expansion in your business. You will also visit your in-laws place. You will also keep everyone happy in your family. Even your boss and co-workers will be pleased with you. You will be kind bright, ambitious and outgoing. You need to be diplomatic in your dealings with people. You will also welcome guests at your home. Your income will be good. But your expenses will rise. You will undertake renovation of your house. You will remain busy in your work. You will also clinch new business deals.

Libra: (September 23 - Libra 23)

Your positive attitude will see you going ahead in life. You will make good progress in your job/business. You will also have monetary gains. Your profits will get doubled in your business. You will also enjoy joy and bliss in family ties. Love mates will also enjoy wonderful bonding. You will plan to buy new items for your house. You will buy jewelry and new clothes for your wife/sister. You will also develop new interest and pursue your hobbies. Your health will remain perfect. Physical exercise, yoga, meditation and prayers will keep you mentally and physically fine. Your relation with family will deepen. New business contracts will get signed. You can also undertake a sudden business trip. Time is suitable for you.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

There will be lot of positive developments taking place for you this week. You will bring in good things in your life. You will have the pleasure of spending time with your family members. You will also get lot of praise from your bosses. Your co-workers will also help you a lot. You will find atmosphere at home and work suitable. It will keep you mentally happy and peaceful. You will undertake business related trips. You will also come in contact with lot of persons. You will have the pleasure of going to a party, dinner. You will also share perfect bonding with your partner/spouse. Your desires will be fulfilled. You will also plan a change in your place. But you need to keep working hard. You will be optimistic about your success in competitive exams. Travels will bring pleasure. You will get success in legal matters after slight delay.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 23)

The time period is very positive. Your work will get done with the cooperation of your subordinates. Your boss will also suggest a few things which you need to implement. Loaned money will be received back. You will have monetary gains. Money and wealth will keep coming. You will also interact closely with your family and friends. In the process, you will be exchanging lot of ideas and learn a few things about yourself and others. You will realize people expect a lot from you. Small gathering, group meetings and auspicious functions/occasions will increase your happiness. Some person who has walked away from your life will come back all of a sudden. Your joy will know no bounds. You will like to go on a travel with your family. It will help you to relax and enjoy. You will spend peaceful day.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

It will turn out to be a fantastic week. Your income will grow and you will also explore additional sources of income. You will also plan to buy a new house /vehicle. You will have money to spend on luxury and comforts. Some vexed issue at workplace will get resolved. Government related matters will also get done. You will take right decisions with the support of your bosses. You will also dominate over your rivals. Opponents will be unable to take advantage of your weakness. You will have a perfect bonding with your mate. You will enjoy a wonderful marital life. You will be happy by spending time with persons close to your heart. Your disputes will get resolved. You will also be happy by helping your friends in their tough times. You will get lot of success after a hard struggle.

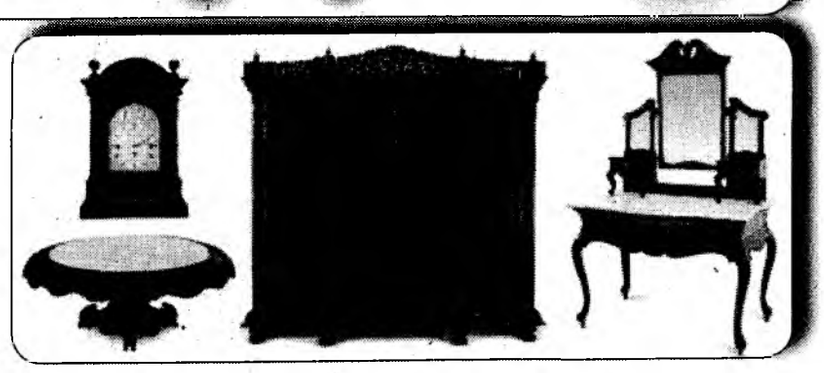
Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

Your strong personality will be visible and will make the real difference. You will have money in your hand and your financial position will get stronger. Luck is also favoring you and is on your side. You will make good progress in your job and business. Your bosses will also implement your ideas. You will do your work peacefully with the cooperation of your colleagues. You will also spend quality time with your friends and family members. You will be busy in social activities and recreation. You will be enjoying good health. Husband and wife will understand each other's feelings. Business related trips will keep you busy. Marriage of a family member will get fixed. You will be on the road to success. You will meet influential persons which will be beneficial for you.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

You will be modest in your behavior and outlook. People will take notice of you and your work will get done with ease. You will be successful to grow your popularity, image and reputation. A new person can enter your life leading to a warm and fulfilling relationship. New business/job offers will keep coming. You will be full of energy, zest and zeal. The favorable movements of planets will change your fortunes resulting in positivity, good openings and changes in your life. You will be able to concentrate a lot better. Good things will start happening in your life. You will have monetary gains. Your prestige, name and fame will grow. You will be very particular about your diet, clothes and finances. You will be full of confidence and will lead your life full. You will also help the poor and the needy. Your faith will get stronger.

Opulent collectibles auction



The second edition of AstaGuru's 'Opulent Collectibles' auction, featuring unique antiques to enhance and magnify a place with timeless beauty, honours a melange of worldwide workmanship. The catalogue for the next auction, which includes over 150 pieces, has been meticulously handpicked to bring together an extraordinary collection of decorative collectibles from 19th and 20th century India, China, Japan, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom. The auction features pottery, furniture, crystal chandeliers, silverware, Persian carpets, vintage clocks, and many more collectibles as a testament to the rich design aesthetics and traditions of these various countries.

Commenting on the auction, Sunny Chandiramani, Vice President, Client Relations, AstaGuru Auction Housesaid, "The success of our first Opulent Collectibles auction was a testimony to the attraction of fine antique decor items that are steeped in history. With this second auction, we are looking forward to continuing the legacy of bringing the best of "Opulent Collectibles." Our clients have shown a keen interest in the antique segment, and as difficult as the curation may be, we are committed and enthused about presenting collectibles that are rare and of great quality. We wish to cater to their diverse preferences by offering the best of 19th and 20th-century design aesthetics that are in excellent condition.

The auction's highlight is a Royal Silver Mounted Sofa from the early twentieth century. This wonderful piece of furniture is immersed in the heritage of the princely magnificence of the bygone era, and it is an amazing example of cultural fusion in colonial India. A image of Lord Shiva seated on his tiger dominates the rectangular back. A lion arm support flanks each side of the serpentine-shaped seat. It is expected to fetch between INR 1 and INR 1.2 crores.

Stunning crystal decorative items by famous crystal producer F & C Osler are also among the auction's highlights. Thomas Osler founded the company in Birmingham, England, in 1807, and it went on to become the leading providers of massive crystal and cut-glass artefacts for the magnum opus interiors of numerous princely palaces in British India.

A fascinating combination of Asian and Western pottery is also on display at the next auction. Ceramic antiques provide a sense of classic sophistication to a space and may highlight an antique collection considerably thanks to their beautiful beauty and rich history of crafting.

Vintage clocks from several British brands including Barraud & Lunds, Thomas Richards, and P Phillips & Co. will also be presented in the auction.

The online auction is scheduled to be held on January 27-28, and an analysis of the auction results can be viewed on www.astaguru.com. *(IANSlife)*

"The great art of life is sensation, to feel that we exist, even in pain."

— Lord Byron

The Shillong Times

Vol No:LXIV No.163 SHILLONG, MONDAY, JANUARY 24, 2022

Union Budget, Economy

PROPER economic management is central to the good governance of a nation. India on a downslide for the past few years - from even before the start of the pandemic season - would do well to listen to saner counsel if only for its leadership to avoid taking the nation to further abyss. In this context, reputed former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan's views expressed via an email interview to a media outlet deserve special attention. This, as the Finance Ministry is currently giving final touches to the Union Budget 2022 that will be presented in Parliament on February 1. Among other things, he suggests avoiding a K-shaped recovery after the Covid19 phase – or, avoiding a process of giving 'top priority to recovery for technology sector, large capital firms etc., with less emphasis on small and medium sector of business and industry' that had been majorly hit by the pandemic. Significantly, he has also supported asset sales to raise funds for the government in the given circumstances.

The going for India in most sectors of growth has not been impressive in recent times. One way to escape blame is to put the onus on the Covid19 pandemic; a time when enterprising nations even in the neighbourhood turned adversity to advantage and made hay. Looking back, the time when Narasimha Rao was prime minister and Manmohan Singh the finance minister, in the first phase of the 1990s, was a promising period. There was a total disaster to the economy due to the wayward governance of the past and India had no money to pay salaries to the government employees and no reserves to pay the export bills. Through a series of steps like economic liberalization, Rao and Singh uplifted the economy to healthy grounds. Both knew the fundamentals of growth. Singh had a great career graph as an economics professor, RBI governor and IMF consultant. Rao had in the past handled several central ministries. Put together, the two made a great mix. Governance is no child's play.

We as a polity in a democracy need to learn from our past experiences that will help guide us to a better future. As for Rajan, he too had acquitted himself well as RBI governor but, true to his intellectual aura, drew a line while listening to his political masters. He stood his ground and understandably found his way out. We are back in sad times today. In this hour of a national crisis, the government will do well if it takes the saner advice from other worthies, including Dr Singh.

From 'No Hill State No Rest,' to 'No Development No Rest'

By H H Mohrmen

The war cry during the Hill State movement which reverberated over the hills and mountains of this region was 'No Hill State No Rest.' Now 50 years later the people need to come up with a new slogan.

Not learning from history

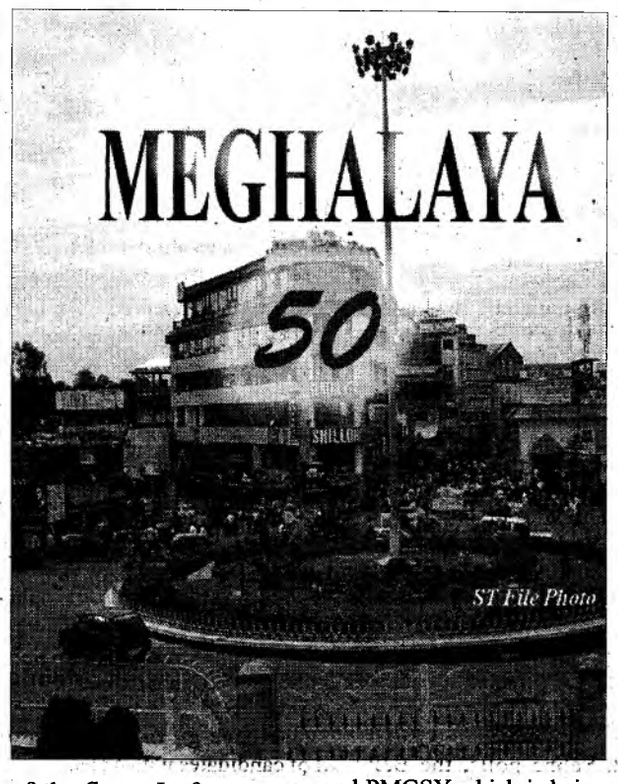
The main factor which helped strengthen the bond between the people of the three regions was the need to protect their unique culture. This was clear from the statement made by Captain W.A. Sangma in one of his speeches during the Hill State Movement. But it was the imposition of Assamese on the hills tribes which was the last straw that led to the fight for a separate hill state.

Many of our young citizens would perhaps not be familiar with the stories of the Hill State Movement for lack of information on the subject. This part of the history of the state was not considered important and the Hill State Movement was not even included in the school or college syllabus of Meghalaya. The pertinent question is why is the history of the Hill State Movement not popular? One also wonders if we have research scholars who had done studies on the movement.

A wise man once said life is like a marksman shooting an arrow from his bow; the farther he pulls the string backwards, the further the arrow will fly. If we do not know our history, we will not know where we are heading. Perhaps this is also the reason why the state has not developed as was expected. It seems like we do not want to understand the foundation on which the movement was launched and the ideals which helped sustain the movement and which also inspired the leaders to fight till the goal was achieved. There is also a saying that those who forget history are bound to repeat it. That is why the state is still under-developed because we are not learning from history.

In the absence of any form of history about the movement, young people are denied of the opportunity to learn about the influential personalities who had led the movement to victory. Hopefully the 50th statehood anniversary will help spark interest amongst students and researchers to conduct a comprehensive research on the movement which started in June 1952. Hopefully the life history of leaders like Captain W.A. Sangma, H.S. Lyngdoh, G.G. Swell, P.R. Kyndiah, Hoover Hyniewta, B.B. Lyngdoh, P.R. Mawthoh, Moristo Swer, Rokendro Dkhar, Gilfred S. Giri and women leaders like Rose Warjri, Filtina Lyndem, Mera Malniang, Lina Adel Laloo, and any others will come to light one day.

I was born five years before the state was carved out of the composite state of Assam, so what I learned about the Hill State Movement was from second hand sources. It good to know that B.M. Lanong has on the occasion of the golden jubilee of statehood celebration published a book on the movement which will help fill the gaps due to the lack of comprehensive information about the movement. No doubt articles and letters to the editor which related to the movement published by various newspapers both vernacular and English will help those who are interested in garnering more information about this important part of the history



of the State. In fact, even posts and uploads on social media will also help provide the much needed information about the Movement.

No development no rest

For the generation of people who are living fifty years after statehood was granted, the question that we need to ask is 'What is there for us to be proud of in our region getting statehood'? Are we proud of what the state has achieved in the last fifty years? The means to measure the progress of state is to go back to the three common paradigms used to gauge development of the state or the region. Let us begin by examining how the state has fared in its efforts to address the important issue of Poverty, Ignorance and Diseases (PID).

It will be unfair to say that the state has not developed since it began its journey fifty years ago. We now have roads where none existed before and we have improved and widened the existing roads. The example that comes to mind is the Jowai-Shillong road which has improved from the condition that it was since the writer was a kid. Add to that we have the Shillong bypass to help ease traffic congestion in Shillong. The pertinent question is about the quality of the state roads which are still in a very poor condition. The sub-standard quality of these state roads is because of the contractor-politician nexus. Even roads constructed under RIDF which is a loan provided by NABARD suffers the same fate because the construction was implemented by the state PWD. However, the quality of roads constructed under central schemes like NHAI and PMGSY which is being monitored by external agencies are much better than the state roads.

In the last 50 years many farmers have finally graduated from being mere subsistence farmers who grow food for their own use only, to engaging in commercial farming. Yet their income has not improved as expected because the market is still being controlled by the intermediaries or middlemen. A lot remains to be done to help the farmers which are also the largest work force in the state.

In the field of education too, the development and progress that we see is not because of the government but despite government intervention. In fact, had it not been for the involvement of the private agencies and primarily faith organizations, the state would not have seen progress in education as we are witnessing now.

Similarly in the health care sector, private agencies which include churches have contributed immensely in providing health care to the people. The government health care institutions particularly those in the rural areas, still lack necessary manpower, basic medical equipment like X-ray machines and CT-Scans among others. Government many a times even failed to supply basic drugs to these centers.

In the State's battle against poverty, it is not enough to put entire emphasis on rural areas and the farmers only. Meghalaya has grown by leaps and bounds and the state which started with three districts and their respective headquarters has experience exponential growth in the last 50 years. From three there are now 12 districts with equal numbers of headquarters in the entire state. In all these emerging urban areas, the number of urban poor has also increased. In the near future the Government needs to put more efforts in tackling the problems faced by the urban poor too.

Meghalaya has done well in providing education from lower to secondary level but higher education is still beyond the reach of the poor sections of the population. The need of the hour is for the State to make higher education free and accessible at the door step of the people.

In providing health care the government needs to ensure that PHCs and CHCs have the required manpower and also equip the centers with the necessary medical infrastructures. The PHCs and the CHCs should also be able to provide medicines to the people who visit these centers.

For the State to be able to develop and rid itself of PID problems, its people need to wholeheartedly engage in the democratic process at all times. Right now the people of the state engage in the democratic process during election only - once in five years that is. The duty of the citizen is to engage in the democratic process and question their leaders all the time. Meghalaya can only reach its full potential when we have legislators who understand their role and responsibilities as leaders of a democratic state. For Meghalaya to develop, the people should understand the basic principles of democracy - that democracy is the government of the people, for the people and by the people. The people need to understand that they are the masters and they should always put their leaders to task. The new slogan for the people of the state should now be "No Development No Rest."

Hhmohrmen67@gmail.com

Netaji statue, merging jyoti spark flames

By Shivaji Sarkar

Never before has a national memorial to soldiers or a national icon sparked major controversy as the decision to extinguish the 50-year-old eternal flames –Amar Jawan Jyoti – at India Gate or the installation of the Netaji statue at a disputed canopy once occupied by the statue of the British ruler, George V.

Earlier, a proposal to install Mahatma Gandhi's statue there was not considered befitting his stature and abandoned. Now how could the statue of a national icon like Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose be installed there? A storm rages.

As India Gate was a memorial for the 80,000 Indian soldiers killed in wars in Europe, Persia, East Africa and Afghanistan, the Jyoti - four flames - was lit at its arch in 1972 by the then prime minister Indira Gandhi to commemorate the victory against Pakistan in 1971, creation of Bangladesh and tributes to the soldiers.

The dispute now is sparked by an apparent targeting of the Congress at the height of the elections to UP and four other states. West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee is the other target whose Netaji tableau for Republic Day parade was rejected and the centre is trying to claim credit for Netaji's legacy.

The Government says that although the Congress Prime Minister might have lit the flame in 1972 but never cared to put the names of the 3,843 soldiers who died in the 1971 war. The National War Memorial next to India Gate is the first national monument, Air Marshal BR Krishna, chief of integrated defence staff, merging the flames at NWM stresses. The government says that it has names of all soldiers who sacrificed their lives till recently.

An unseemly situation is developing. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi slamming the government says that flames are for our soldiers and would be lit again. "This is insulting history and memory of the martyrs of the Bangladesh war. It is a shocking outrage", says former Congress minister Anand Sharma. Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan says it's "unnecessary controversy" and the opposition lacks knowledge of history.

The Congress is accusing the present government of not giving due honour to leaders like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi even as BJP appropriates freedom fighters like Vallabhbhai Patel, BR Ambedkar and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose.

Beyond politics, people in Delhi feel that the memorial is to Indian ethos and soldiers of the same army regiments whether in the British Indian army or succeeding Indian army. It is a continuation of the same army that boasts of its heritage since the East India Company days. The Amar Jawan Jyoti is supposed to be historic and should have continued. Many Hindu shrines, including Badrinath, have such jyoti lit continuously for centuries.

It is also being echoed that now it is not the same jyoti at NWM. The nation has to respect, honour and be proud of its heritage. Doing anything new is not a novelty. Let the nation think, consider, discuss and then do. The Government says that dignitaries cannot pay tributes at two shrines. People wonder why suddenly the decision to install the Netaji statue being carved out of black granite in Telangana is being announced without a discussion. Discussions clear doubts.

The statue of George V was removed in 1968. A number of times there were proposals to have Mahatma Gandhi's statue there. In 1991, Former Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar wanted the canopy demolished and a Gandhi statue there. But for various reasons, and one of it that since the canopy housed a colonial occupier, who was removed by Indian freedom fighters, a statue of an Indian leader would be inappropriate and insulting. So Gandhi was never given that place. Netaji has been raised to an icon by RSS executive member Indresh Kumar who initiated an event in the Andamans to celebrate Netaji's freeing of the island and setting up of the first national Azad Hind Government every December end. Prime Minister Modi has taken it forward. Still many are not comfortable with Netaji's statue being placed at its present space. Most senior leaders feel he should have an independent place and not a "tainted" one.

It would have been better to put up the Netaji statue at the centre of Rajpath, opposite the VIP masthead where the national flag is hoisted, commanding the Central Vista. The look would be magnificent and the locale better than at the far end corner of Rajpath, where the canopy of the colonial occupier is.

But it is more than that. Modi wants to trounce Mamata Banerjee. In 2021, he tried by having the 125th birth anniversary celebrations on the eve of the Bengal elections at Kolkata's Victoria Memorial, again an incongruous British symbol. Mamata had stolen the show then. Now the government rejected her Netaji tableau and wants to install the Netaji statue quickly to spite her. Would that help the BJP?

Unseemly battles do not behove a great nation. But politics today has touched a new low.

Letters to the Editor

Sins of racism and xenophobia

Editor,

I am writing to respond to these powerful words of D. Bhattacharjee in a letter to the editor, in ST, Jan 22:

"Legacy of such hate crimes is continuing for over forty years with the tacit support of the Police, administration and civil society. No doubt there will be feeble 'strong condemnation' from few persons and the Police will try to catch the 'miscreants' or 'misguided youths' without any result. I therefore, urge the minority populace of Meghalaya to reconcile to the fact that if they are to stay in Meghalaya they have to bear such assaults and violence at regular intervals as they have experienced all these years without any qualms and not to expect any justice from the administration or solidarity from the civil society."

How incredibly sad that the plight of minority Indians in Meghalaya has not essentially changed in the decades since the sixties, in undivided Assam, when Bengalis (in particular) and others were fair game for bullying and assaulting by locals, through pogroms in which neighbours would turn into enemies. Without being cynical about human nature I wonder if capitalism and modernity will solve this problem of violent xenophobia. When we are busy making money in honest ways, we are forced to interact with "alien" others and to sublimate our violent propensities.

Recent violence in Shillong against minority non-tribals is a reminder to Meghalaya on its 50th anniversary of the original sins of this state -- racism and xenophobia -- a direct fallout of lethal identity politics...

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Assault and abuse of non-tribals in Meghalaya

Editor,

The so-called term non-tribals pertains to Meghalaya as anyone who is an outsider and does not share the physical looks and are unwelcome in this state. For decades, the non tribals have been living in fear and dare not open their mouth against the systematic abuse and assault perpetrated on them by most of the local tribals of Meghalaya. In fact, they derive pleasure by beating and abusing the non tribals and think it consolidates their community and are far superior to them in every way. The point is even after attaining 50 years of statehood, the tribals of this state has not developed any empathy towards the non tribals. Being a Khasi myself, several times I have overheard the bitter comments and abusive words against the non-tribals here in Shillong. My understanding is that majority of the tribals do not like the non-tribals because they are living in "our land" and are sustaining themselves on our land, water and food. So we are the providers of everything to them and so they must accept and tolerate any thing we do to them. By the way, we did not create this land, rivers, forests etc. It belongs to everyone. Education seems to have made hardly any impact on our mind to show respect and love towards the non-tribals. On the other hand, it is the non-tribals who are sustaining the tribals of this state by their hard work and by paying income tax. The government salaries taken by the tribal staff and other workers, including those in government are due to the income tax paid by them. We don't pay income tax, although if we want to we can, as no law prevents payment of income tax if somebody wants to do so. In fact, we feel proud in not paying income tax and by taking all the social and economic benefits. I can site innumerable instances where the non-tribals actually sustains the running of this state. At the end, I hope better sense prevails upon the tribals in this 21st century to accommodate everybody for growth and peace in the state. Please think again and again before you raise your hand on the non-tribals.

Yours etc.,
Donald Swer
Shillong

Meghalaya Police, please introspect!

Editor,

Yesterday as I was returning home, I was halted in front of Civil Hospital as my vehicle registration ended in an odd number, on a day reserved for even number vehicles. As I was in possession of a (very hard to get) vehicle pass, I was waived on. But in the few minutes I was at that check point, I was dismayed to see the apparent glee with which the police were collecting fines, so much so that the officers' radio crackled with congratulatory approval from his superior for the job they were doing.

Might I remind the government that while they are eager to take our money at every turn through taxes (yes, everyone pays taxes in some form) and fines, stopping us from working to earn that same money is a self-defeating exercise. The odd-even rule for private vehicles is a bizarre solution in a place like Shillong where public transport is pathetic at best, and shows the intellectual shallowness of the bureaucracy to just copy/paste solutions from other cities without thinking if the measures are suitable here. Rather, efforts might yield better results with strictly enforcing mask mandates, which are a joke at the moment.

While I do not blame the police for doing their job, I humbly and gently would like to remind them of the increasing lawlessness in our city...a local man beaten to death walking home from hospital, non-tribals beaten in front of police stations, vehicle thefts, drunken driving accidents, and a general feeling of insecurity amongst our citizenry. I need not even go back to the tragic incident of last August to point out the incompetence in the Department. I sincerely hope for all concerned that the MLP introspect on what their core duties are, instead of taking pleasure in penalising people trying to make a living in these hard times.

Yours etc.,
V Khongwir
Via email

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

" We the People' are the prime movers of the Republic."

— Ram Nath Kovind

The Shillong Times

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Policing in Meghalaya

POLICING is a state subject and there are significant variation across states. While bigger states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal's police forces are all extremely understaffed with less than 100 police staff for 100,000 population, the only states with police forces that meet the global standards are those in the insurgency-affected states in the North-East and Punjab. In Meghalaya the total sanctioned strength of Meghalaya Police is 12,911 personnel, with an actual strength of 10,956, thereby leaving a gap of 1955 unfilled posts. The police-to population ratio in Meghalaya is 310 meaning there is one police personnel for every 310 citizens. The United Nations recommends a police-population ratio of 222.

In the last financial year an amount of Rs 80 crore was allocated in the state budget for strengthening police infrastructure. It is difficult to know how and where this money has been allocated and what infrastructure has been strengthened. In most states of the country the police suffer from being under-funded and overburdened. This means that both core police activities (enforcing daily law and order) and more long-term criminal investigations are compromised. This does not appear to be the case with Meghalaya. So, what is the impediment to good and responsive policing in Meghalaya? Why are conviction rates so low? Without a social accountability platform it is near impossible to hold the police to account for its lapses and abysmal performance. It is also a fact that the police in this country and in Meghalaya in particular have been used as tools by the political executive and police too have learnt to believe they are accountable to their political masters than to the public.

Indeed, lack of accountability within the police force is a burning issue. Repeated Police and Administrative Reforms Commissions have proposed the need to prevent undue political influence on the police but to no avail. The obvious solution to this menace is to limit the political executive's control over the police - a point underscored by various committees and the Supreme Court in their recommendations for police reforms over the years. These have remained in the realm of recommendations only.

About two decades ago some public-spirited DGPs had proposed citizen-centric measures and tried to build a police-public relations platform. This is the best way to deal with man-power shortage. Citizens could actually assist police in providing key information (intelligence) but this is possible only when there is mutual respect between citizens and police. Such is perhaps not the case today. Police today seem unable to arrest criminals and the fault entirely theirs, ranging from non-performance to corruption at all levels and high-handedness which remains unchecked.

When Stalwarts leave this Earth...

By Deepa Majumdar

Two stalwarts passed away within ten days of each other – Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Shillong's musical maestro, Neil Nongkynrih. Having met neither, I can only surmise their greatness from their words and deeds, as reported by others. In these dismal times, when the world seems so bereft of hope, both touched me by their deeds. Like faith, hope nourishes the souls of man and the world.

They say we die when our work is done and our karma fruitions. Desmond Tutu passed away on Dec 26, 2021 at the ripe age of 90 and Neil Nongkynrih, on Jan 5, 2022 at the untimely age of 51. Although of different temperaments and talents, and from different continents, cultural backgrounds, denominations, and generations, these stalwarts shared three things. Both were devout Christians, both had uncommon wisdom, and both inspired the young.

Archbishop Tutu had many virtues. Besides his impish sense of humor, he had the courage to always speak truth to power. He also had a keen sense of social justice. It was as if separation of church and state never applied to him. This old adage makes sense most of the time, for church and state have different goals and purposes. Mixing the two leads to explosive violence in both aspects of politics: statecraft and protest-politics. Applied to statecraft, this mixture produces explosive theocracies, unless the theocrat at the helm is an extraordinary saint, like His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama. Applied to protest-politics, which can be violent, even when secular, this mixture brings greater violence. But at higher levels, religion inspires and purifies protest-politics, as exemplified by the lives of the great princes of peace – HH the Dalai Lama, M. K. Gandhi, and Dr. M. L. King.

To this list of august personages we might add Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who ennobled protest-politics and humanitarian work, inspiring us by his ideal of forgiveness and his impish humor on colonialism. On forgiveness, he said: "... when I talk of forgiveness I mean the belief that you can come out the other side a better person. A better person than the one being consumed by anger and hatred. Remaining in that state locks you in a state of victimhood, making you almost dependent on the perpetrator." On colonial Christianity, he quipped: "When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land." Described as the Conscience of South Africa, and as one of the slayers of Apartheid, Desmond Tutu chaired South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which heard the testimony of around 21000 victims.

Described as a "miracle of the modern age," TRC is unique in the history of the world. As a measure of restorative justice, healing, and redemption, it surpasses the punitive post-WW II Nuremberg trials. Under TRC rules, perpetrators of Apartheid crimes were asked to confess their horrendous crimes fully, truthfully, and publicly. They were given the option of asking for forgiveness and amnesty from prosecution. Equally, victims of these political crimes received the opportunity to tell their stories, hear confessions, and (as Tutu said), "unburden themselves from the pain and suffering they had experienced." To some, this must have been a travesty of justice, because it meant that not all perpetrators faced penalties. But justice has myriad faces, of which, one is repentance and redemption. Unlike punitive-retributive justice, restorative justice, is, as Archbishop Tutu said, "concerned not so much with punishment as with correcting imbalances, restoring broken relationships – with healing, harmony and reconciliation." When a perpetrator confesses and a former victim forgives, a miracle takes place: the miracle of true justice that happens through the redemptive power of forgiveness. This is restorative justice at its best. In a world of vengeful protest politics, Archbishop Tutu enabled this miracle, not just by chairing TRC, or by writing in its 7-volume report, but by insisting on the power of forgiveness, weeping publicly with a victim, and resolving, thereafter, to never again weep in public, as this diverted media attention away from the victim. It is therefore hardly surprising that Archbishop Tutu was like an older brother to HH the Dalai Lama. To see these two august personages and Nobel peace laureates, tease each other and banter like two mischievous boys, is to relish the holiness of true friendship, which always presupposes holiness. By their lives and deeds, these majestic men vindicated the Nobel Peace Prize Committee for past lapses in judgment in awarding this prize to unworthy recipients (Obama, Suu Kyi).

I have always associated with Shillong, the quality of longing, which comes in myriad shades. Longing for earthly riches, or power, represents cruder levels of this quality. In my childhood, I saw in Shillong, another crude expression: a futile longing for the nether side of western lifestyles, vocations, professions, possessions, cultural expressions, and mindsets that proved the fullest success of Europe's colonial intent, which was to reproduce in the brown and black man, an inferior clone of the white man, robbing the former of being and soul. But unlike these cruder levels which are insatiable, the keenest, most nameless, and highest, most satiable of all forms of longing is the existential yearning that dogs our heels from the day we are born. A yearning that makes us long for the great Unknown, even as it enables us to tap into our innate holiness, this longing makes us religious in the deepest sense possible, erasing the sting of the death instinct, and enabling us to approach death with repose and God consciousness. It was as if the wind rustling through the stalwart pines of Shillong whispered this highest longing, which was to rise from the depths of time to break though the thin fabric of the phenomenal world and touch the bright stars of eternity and the numberless numinous verities. Thus, although an agony, this highest longing trembles with ecstasy.

Without ever having met him, I felt intuitively that, like many great artists, Neil Nongkynrih suffered this exquisite existential longing, which could not be assuaged even by music, the greatest of the arts. Although solitary, death is to be distinguished from mystical ascent, which, in the word of Plotinus, is the rise of the alone to the Alone. Neil captured both solitudes, in his haunting song on the afterlife, a song brimming with longing: "I want to go to another world where I'll have to go alone... This world, this world it calls me." Like a true artist, he lived essentially and unconventionally, breaking conventions with the ease of the truthful, who neither rage, nor weep, but glide from truth to higher truth. To admire Neil, because he returned to his roots in Meghalaya after years in the west is inadequate. People leave India for different reasons and return for different reasons. One size does not fit all. Neil's return home was in answer to a higher calling, which not everyone experiences. To admire Neil for his exemplary work with the youth and his praiseworthy charitable works is also inadequate. Even admiring Neil for his exceptional musical talent is inadequate, because, for every talented person, there is someone more talented. Moreover, talent and character are distinct. There are two greater reasons to admire Neil. First, because he seemed to understand that all talents are gifts from God, who lends us these gifts for the greater good of mankind. In these times, when modern man prostitutes the arts for name, fame, and money, Neil understood that the purpose of music is to do good for mankind, unlike Hitler, who used music for evil. He also understood that great works happen by the grace of God who enables them, that all success is mandated from above, and that in the end, we are mere instruments of something higher. But second, because Neil successfully resisted the temptation of narcissism and false love in modern fandom, which, like all of social media, is cult-prone. Upholding the virtue of humility, he was able to digest the phantasm of fame.

The collective consciousness, which alters like a chameleon, is yet, always in a state of moral balance, harmonizing its myriad shades, which range from the highest good to the darkest evil. If, despite possessing nuclear arsenal, we have not yet destroyed ourselves or this planet, this is because the greatest among us uplift the collective consciousness, redeeming the evil intents of others, thus restoring balance. But what happens when august personages like Archbishop Tutu and Neil Nongkynrih leave this earth? What happens to the gaping hole they leave behind? To the believer, the answer is simple. The grace of God replenishes this earth by bringing other great souls to continue the work of redeeming the collective consciousness.

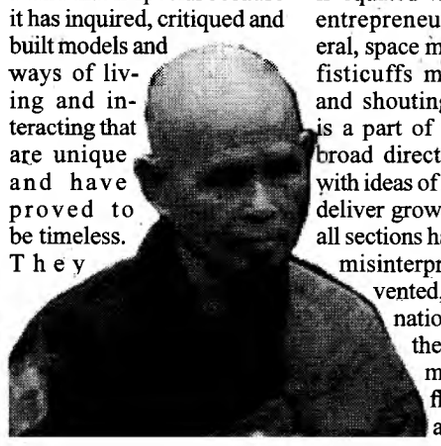
May Desmond Tutu and Neil Nongkynrih rest in peace. May our mourning never hold them back as they journey through the afterlife.

The significance of Thich Nhat Hanh

By Jagdish Rattanani

The world bowed over the weekend to remember and thank Thich Nhat Hanh (Thay) for his life of service, for his teachings that have transformed the lives of millions of people and for his messages that will continue to inspire and guide humanity long after his passing on Jan. 22, at age 95. The tributes and ceremonies, from Plum Village in France, where his movement centred around "Engaged Buddhism" is headquartered, to distant global corners, tell us not only of the deep respect for the Vietnamese monk of mindfulness but also the hunger in the world for a new leadership that can guide us to a new path of peace, interconnectedness and compassion. As Rahul Gandhi said in his tribute: "His gentle words on peace, gratitude and non-violence will ring true forever."

These qualities that will ring "forever" mark the currency that India has traditionally minted and offered to the world. These are India's true gold reserves, accumulated over a long tradition in a land that is special because it has inquired, critiqued and built models and ways of living and interacting that are unique and have proved to be timeless. They come from teachers, philosophers and mystics who have dwelt on the truth and have given us spiritual knowledge and practical advice, then and now. From the ancient Indian texts, the wanderings and insights of Gautama Buddha, the poetry of Kabir, the traditions of the Sikh gurus and more recently to the collection of ages of wisdom presented in the struggles and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, this is India at its best. Thich Nhat Hanh said it in these words: "Those who killed Mahatma Gandhi... they had a lot of anger, violence, ignorance and the wrong perception. Mahatma Gandhi is still alive and he is stronger than before."



There is a story told by the Master about the time he was speaking to journalists in India in 2008. It merits recounting given the uncertain times we live in, times when force or violence appear to speak louder than peace and non-violence. This was a day news came in of a terrorist attack somewhere in India. How does a journalist report the bad news, the violence, the destruction that must find space on the front pages but constitutes material that can only feed into more anger and despair?

Writing in his book 'The Art of Communicating', Thay explains: "We should reflect and discuss events in a way that will not increase the despair and the anger in people. Instead, we can help them understand why things happen, so their insight and compassion increase. We can make a big difference with the practice of looking deeply. The solution isn't to hide the truth." He captured these and other thoughts in a message that can become the hallmark of all good journalism, and will help call out the hatred that is being spewed these days from many media outlets: "You have to report in such a way that we don't water the seeds of fear, anger and vengeance in people."

In essence, these are Indian messages that we need to rediscover and re-engage with because they have been lost in the land of their birth. The India of today is an India sliding down from the high standards that has made the nation standout and become known for its many gifts. We cannot deny the blemishes. But we cannot but be proud of the richness. Today, we can see the direction that the nation has been set on isn't the one where moral standing is enhanced. This is certainly seen in the way the narrative of India has been changed in a lightning-fast timeframe but this slide to rancorous divisions, a readiness to tear down the neighbour, didn't begin today or in recent times. We have been on the downhill journey for a while; recent events and narratives have only hastened the trajectory.

India's fall is mirrored across many facets today: the growing inequality, the violence against the downtrodden and the minorities, the rise of the hate speech, the ugly spats force-created on television, the demonisation of dissent and a manner and way of speaking that has violence woven into it. It is not just the politics that is bad. Our television shows promote insults as comedy, making fun of others has become a ticket to stardom, running down others is equated with celebrating entrepreneurship. In general, space must be wrested, fisticuffs must be shown and shouting down others is a part of the game. The broad direction that began with ideas of liberalisation to deliver growth in service of all sections has been twisted, misinterpreted and reinvented, to make this a nation of the few by the few, while the majority look on flummoxed. The abortive attempt at pushing farm laws told us how policies are pushed without the buy-in of people.

What is the way out? How does Thay inspire India? As a report pointed out, "Engaged Buddhism arose as a Buddhist response to the widespread trauma— including colonialism, war, social and economic injustice, environmental degradation, genocide, totalitarian government, and the suppression of religion— that has accompanied the advent of modernity in some Asian Buddhist countries." These are the very ills that have invaded India, as we moved away from our roots – non-violence, welfare of others and an inner quest, which is no different from the ideals of Engaged Buddhism or of Gandhi's song (authored by Narsinh Mehta) vasihnava jana to.

We must note that while he has spoken often of India and has travelled across the land and visited India thrice, Thay's influence and reach in popular perception has been limited here. The Ethics Committee of Parliament was set up in 1997 following talks between the then Vice President K R Narayanan, India's first dalit Vice President and later President, and Thich Nhat Hanh, to oversee the moral and ethical conduct of the members and to examine the cases referred to it with reference to the ethical and other misconduct by members. We can see from the tributes, the respect and the outpourings of love that the path that the world respects and wants to follow is the path that India has traditionally owned and built, that masters like Thay have preached and the world has listened. This is the 'superpowerdom' of Thich Nhat Hanh. The ideas at their core are also Indian wealth that we seem willing to trade for pebbles and other castaways. This is the fate of India in the current times – from a leader for all ages to a nation that thinks it got powerful when all it did was barter its glory at the altar of a figurine of Superman.

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

Letters to the Editor

A Cry In The Wilderness

Editor,

Apropos to the letter, 'Stop the unprovoked assault on non-tribals' by D. Bhattacharjee (ST Jan 22, 2022),it is painful that after the era that we are too readily and determinedly trying to forget, has come back to haunt us once again. Many non-tribals had to sell off the homes they had peacefully lived in for decades and flee to Calcutta. And for what? For a small spark that by good human reasons could have been extinguished! More saddening this time is that the assault took place in front of the police station. Republic day is just a few days away and the preamble to the Constitution that assures us Justice - social (to live in harmony),economic (to help one another) and political (this is for politicians) rings loud and clear.

In the pre-independence era our people, the Khasis and Jaintias had regular haats (markets) with Bengalis every 8th day along the Darrang to Borghat border. And not to forget our strong academic and medical bonds in the era of LMP and LMF certified doctors (from Medical colleges in Calcutta), treating people in villages as well as Shillong. What we are today is the result of the brotherly relations among all sections of society then.

If politicians could shun the caste and religion divide during elections and concentrate on building the pillars of a strong democracy to uplift the poor and needy and to value education left orphaned for too long; and if our elders take pains to bring peace there is no reason why those golden days of friendship and feeling of safety in any locality with greetings and smiles, cannot be restored. And lest we forget, the assaulted don't want a tit for tat resolution. Rather they portray a totally different picture of wanting to calm things down. Let us hope and pray, for it is said, 'More things are wrought by prayers than the world ever dreams of'

Yours etc.,
W.Passah
Nongkrem

Of Communal Violence

Editor,

Communalism was and continues to be one of the major challenges to democracy in our country. Peace Committees can be set up in which individuals belonging to different religious communities can work together to spread goodwill and fellow-feelings and remove feelings of fear and hatred in the riot-affected areas. This will be effective not only in diffusing communal tensions but also in preventing riots from breaking out. There is a need to initiate the process of de-communalising the people at all levels via education. Value-based education can instill compassion and empathy which can minimise the possibilities of the impact that any kind of communal polarisation can have on people. Pluralism and unity witnessed from the struggle for India's independence can be emphasised upon. Leaders with communal ideas and ideologies pressurise the government to act in a manner which is always against the principle of secularism. It is here that intellectuals and voluntary organisations can be most effective.

There is a need to strengthen cyber-security architecture. Social media platforms should be asked to regulate hateful content and generate awareness about rumours and any kind of content that can incite communal tension. While we hope that the law enforcing agencies would find out the actual culprits and administer the severest of punishments, we would also like to appeal that we as a society should pause to think why such incidents keep on occurring from time to time. These are not issues that can be explained away by applying a religious veneer to the incidents. Nor can the responsibility be laid entirely at the feet of our education system. The causal factors should not be glossed over. We need to understand the dynamics and inner workings of communal politics, and do something about it. We need to organise inter-communal and inter-faith dialogues to press home the message of communal harmony. Fixing this situation will need a whole-of-society approach, as experts aver, and which we endorse, rather than just a law-and-order approach.

Maintaining communal harmony and respecting pluralism in a country as diverse as India can be a challenge. However, it is important to address the collective conscience of people of the country to uphold the constitutional values like fraternity and secularism. While on the one hand, this can take into consideration the insecurities of the people, on the other hand, it can significantly contribute to the nation-building process. A strong nation, which is built by the contribution of communities working together for its prosperity can further contribute to the maintenance of global peace and harmony.

Yours etc.,
Mr. Alert Archie Rymbai
Shillong -14

History of Shillong etc.

Editor,

Apropos to Gary Marbaniang's letter on "Case of illogical conclusion" (ST Jan 20, 2022), a reply to his two remarks on this writer's letter published earlier (Jan 19, 2022) are necessary. To his first remark that "a follow up letter today which totally erased the Khynriam from the history of Shillong" may be answered that the letter was concerned only with the history of the name of Shillong Peak which is ancient and not with the modern history of Shillong.

His second remark is, "I just feel that the letter written by Prof. Passah from Jowai (ST 19, Jan. 2022) borders on ethnocentrism. Let us not sow seeds of division especially if those seeds are sown on grounds of illogicality." This writer is sorry that he finds it difficult to debate on someone's feelings. It is doubtful that Marbaniang is a student of history and a trained researcher on the subject. Nevertheless, he could join the discipline now and this writer wishes that he writes a parallel paper on the issue and presents the same in a proper forum. That would help in collaborating and sharing data and information for writing the ancient and medieval history of our race/tribe which has not been attempted by anyone so far.

Yours etc.,
Prof P.M. Passah,
Moosalyngkat, Jowai

Assault Condemned

Editor

The recent unprovoked attacks and assault on innocent by-standers and shopkeepers in the heart of Shillong is highly condemnable. Such attacks continue to instil a sense of fear and insecurity amongst citizens. However, to insinuate that an entire community is responsible for such acts without proper evidence is unwarranted. It is deeply disturbing that none of the pressure groups have tried to come up with a platform to reach out and find solutions to such incidents. What kind of learnings and social ethics will such acts bring for the future generation? No wonder many parents do not want their children to grow and work in a society that is gradually turning into a ghetto. Hope the law catches up fast with such elements who tarnish the image of the state.

Yours etc.,
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar,
Via email

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" Socialism is simply Communism for people without the testosterone to man the barricades."

— Gary North

The Shillong Times

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Morale, bureaucracy

PREDICTABLY, a row has erupted over the move by the Union Government to change rules that would allow it to summon senior IAS officials to Delhi for deployment in the central service without nod from the states. What prompted the Modi government to do this is an acute shortage of senior-level hands to run the administration that's infamously in slow mode. The shortage at the central level was caused by a cut in annual recruitments to the Civil Services, since the 1990s, to a level of less than half of the normal intake of 160 a year. What should have happened along with an ever-widening role for governmental intervention in varied sectors was to have raised the number of annual recruitments or given massive promotions from among the ranks to create a larger workforce at senior levels.

With all the big talk about the high merits of the civil service recruits, the facts on the ground are the Indian bureaucracy is below par when it comes to performance. In recruitments, bookish knowledge about mundane aspects of life is the yardstick and there are wheels within wheels in interviews. Young officers taking up top positions have little understanding of administrative matters but hold forth. Highly experienced officers down the line help them grasp the lessons of governance. Several IAS officers are, admittedly, highly intelligent and can quickly grasp matters. At the same time, there are a larger number of officers who exist at lower levels with great administrative acumen but cannot grow beyond a certain level. There are a few who are conferred IAS ranks, but these are mostly based on their political influence. Put together, the morale of the bureaucracy is low. They have become corrupt due to the evil influence from wayward politicians. In postings at top levels too, political influence is what matters and not merit or integrity. Those who dance to the tunes of politicians climb up the ladder.

Several non-BJP state chief ministers have taken objection to the central move to change the IAS rules. There are the usual taunts about the Centre taking away the "rights" of states and "hurting" the federal character of the Constitution. In fact, no change is possible in this country without a flurry of protests. The Centre must take decisions in the best interests of the nation. If there's a shortage, it is not a bad idea if large-scale promotions are given to efficient junior-level officers and they are admitted to the IAS rank to perform bigger tasks. This will raise the morale of the bureaucracy too.

Nothing Communal in the Sit-In Protest

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

Violence is the dreaded tool kit not just to silence critics, but also to subjugate an entire community to perpetual servility. The contemporary examples of such violent subjugation can be drawn from West Papua whereby the indigenous peoples' cry for self-determination is being met with violent military atrocities perpetrated by the Indonesian Army. For nearly two hundred years the indigenous community here in the Hynniewtrep Land also must have faced the same fate at the hands of the British Empire. However, available literature like u Nongïalam Khristan (1902-1937) showed us a different picture - that the British were good masters, unlike other writings which opined that the British, especially the Christian Missionaries were solely responsible for eroding the culture and diminished the indigenous faith following. Today, as we celebrate the 72nd Republic Day we also witness the atrocities against religious minorities like Christians and Muslims, Tribals, Dalits and the poor in different parts of the country. Not to speak of the illegal incarceration of intellectuals, political dissenters and the imposition of draconian laws like AFSPA in the North East, UAPA and Sedition.

The recent sit-in protest by the elderly couple in the city to protest against the rising crime of physical violence on shop keepers, labourers etc., had generated reactions from known quarters. What is deplorable are the statements made by a few public representatives- Dear sirs, I do not buy your irresponsible and immature statements and there are many like me who will never entertain your pointless arguments. I did visit the protest site on Sunday very early before I went to Church and for a while I engaged with a few protestors, including the couple and also expressed my solidarity. No doubt, there were posters around which had numbers written on them and one may easily decipher that those numbers were a reference to those years and events where there had been violent fights between groups of different communities in Shillong. For example, there was a poster which had 1979 written on it and at the same time we cannot supress the fact that in 1979 there were violent clashes in different parts of the city and unfortunately many innocent people were injured, many lost their homes and belongings and even their lives. In fact, as a society we had left the past behind and had moved on.

What the couple did was the least that they can do within the framework of the Constitution to convey their angst and desire for a just and peaceful Meghalaya. And I can say that there is nothing communal in it, unless we wish to see it that way. The rise of violence and crimes in the city are matters of great concern and this has to be addressed and confronted from all fronts, politically, socially and legally. Of course, the law enforcers have to be swift in their actions and also the judicial process of conviction has to be time bound in specific cases.

On the political front we have to be mature and honest enough to decry violence and exploitation. Also, as citizens we should no longer fall prey to the double-speak of our politicos. For long these politicos have been using/abusing communal politics towards their own gain and have been double speaking on delicate matters like communal clashes to meet their own selfish ends, but not realising that they are endangering the lives of many. On the social front, one may not find so much fault on the common people as there is an element of fear which has seeped in and been internalized through decades. There are many upright and honest people in the society who do not subscribe to violence as a mechanism to defend and preserve one's racial identity, however they are afraid to stand up for fear of repercussions from criminal elements who take advantage of the volatile situation. On the other hand, the silence is not always good. At times we need to rise above communal or parochial mindsets and call out the perpetrators.

The honourable representatives or others may have argued against the sit-in protest as they apprehend a communal backlash. Perhaps, in the first instant the violence of stabbing which had happened recently is a case of isolated crime and has to be addressed according to the law of the land. But there is also a context to it that one needs to understand and engage with. Frequently, there are instances of "targeted violence", on residents whom we consider as the "others", by unknown 'miscreants.' Thus comes the role of the society and the law to identity who these "unknown miscreants" are who roam around freely in the city and commit such heinous crimes? Are they tribals or non-tribals who want to disturb the peace or a mixed group or members of an organized gang who earn a living by killing people? The society must call out these "unknown miscreants," and in a close-knit society or a city of the size of Shillong it is not difficult to know who these elements are. How weak is the police intelligence or the law that they are unable to nab nor prosecute these "unknown miscreants" who have been putting the lives of residents, both indigenous and non-indigenous, in danger for so long?

Violence is exploitation and the powerful will always use violence to supress and exploit the weak. In an era of neo- liberalism the worst form of violence is economic exploitation and to achieve economic control the people or community in power will not hesitate to use political and physical violence against anyone, including their own, who stand in the way. Remember, economic exploitation or economic violence has no communal colour and it is between the exploiters who control the economic means and the exploited or the slaves. Therefore, there was no community group which stood up when the Khasi residents of Umsawli (NST) were evicted from their lands, except Agnes Kharshïing who was punished for the same and went to jail.

I have witnessed first-hand how the rich or powerful Khasi grabs the land of a poor Khasi and when the poor Khasi goes to the community or "Shnong" leaders with papers and documents to reclaim their land they pay no heed to the cry of the poor Khasi because it involves the rich and powerful tribals. The matter becomes worse as the poor Khasi cannot afford litigation and will eventually lose the hard-earned property. Again, a Khasi pregnant woman was pointed a gun against her for no reason by her affluent Khasi male neighbour, but when she tried to talk and seek solace from other neighbours, they turned their backs on her while they hugged and talked good about the gunner. In fact, there are similar stories of exploitation and violence being perpetrated by rich tribals on poor tribals. Therefore, such violence has to be condemned and the poor should be protected at any cost.

It is also to be mentioned how unemployed educated tribal and non-tribal youth are being cheated left and right by people in power who promised them better jobs and a bright future. But Meghalaya has degenerated into the lowest form of governance in which for a grade IV job one has to exchange hands and there is a systemic failure in job recruitment and appointments. Apparently, there is also a job for sex which is prevalent. Aren't such violence of the worst kind against our youths and the people that our representatives should be bothering about?

Violence is a crime against God and there can be no peace if justice is not given. As a Khasi tribal I will not change my tribality and will continue to stand against any majoritarian forces that may try to annihilate the tribal rights and tribal way of life. At the same time as a member of a tribal majority in the State it is my bounden duty to engage with diverse communities and also to stand up when they are being exploited and treated with violence. I also want my community to progress but not through violence and exploitation of the weak. Truth and reconciliation based on justice is the only way forward.

Violence is always destructive and S.J Samartha aptly penned the lamentation of Pharaoh's daughter against violence saying,

"(Moses) without you there would have been no exodus/And no ten commandments/Now tell me Moses/ In order to liberate your people/ Was it necessary to kill/ All our firstborn baby boys/ Including my own?"

Immediate causes of our Hill State formation

By L. Kharlukhi (Ex-MLA)

Based on my experiences during the course of my active participation in the Hill State Movement, as an Organizer of the Non-Violent Direct Action (NVDA), especially during the periods from the late sixties and thereafter, I feel it obligatory on my part to share those experiences with the upcoming generation of our Khasi, Jaintia and Garo people. As one of the Volunteers of the NVDA, under the banner of All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC), I had the privilege of being the Secretary of the NVDA, Mawlai Circle, right through until the time of my resignation along with the other volunteers/organizers of the NVDA at the time, in protest against the intention of our leaders then to welcome the idea of the Autonomous State within Assam.

The ardent and earnest support of all the Rangbah Shnong (Headmen) of the villages in Mawlai under the influence of (L) Mr. M. Kharkongor, who was then the Rangbah Shnong, Mawlai Iewrynghep and who also was the Chief organizer of the NVDA, Mawlai circle, had generated unprecedented support of almost all the people residing in the Mawlai area. The shadow of (L) Mr. Hopingstone Lyngdoh, who was then the MLA of Nongstoin constituency under which Mawlai area falls; the presence of (L) Mr B. B. Lyngdoh, MLA Nongpoh constituency, who was then residing in Mawlai, (Mawdatbaki) area with his family, had no doubt added fuel to the fire of the Hill State movement and more so after the coming into being of the Assam Official Act recognizing Assamese as an Official language of the State of Assam, in the year 1960.

The repercussions of the Mawlai circle's method in the Movement had immediately echoed to every corner of Khasi and Jaintia hills, especially when leaders like (L) Prof. G. G. Swell, (L) B. B. Lyngdoh, MLA Nongpoh constituency, (L) H. S. Lyngdoh, MLA Nongstoin, (L) Hoover Hynniewta, MLA Shillong, (L) S. D. D. Nichols Roy, MLA Cherra, (L) Edwin Bareh, MLA Jowai, (L) Prof. R. S. Lyngdoh, and many other prominent personalities of the Hill State Movement at that time, were greatly encouraged to take the Movement forward with the active support they got from the people at that time. It is worth mentioning here that as far as Garo hills is concerned, everything was worked well under the able leadership of (L) Capt. W. A. Sangma, who was then MLA of Garo hills.

The Tura Conference of the APHLC that took place at that time, took a landmark decision to accept the Autonomous State within Assam as declared by the Government of India on January 13, 1968. The leaders of the APHLC then reasoned that the acceptance was justified on considerations that the Autonomous State would be a stepping stone towards a full-fledged Hill State. It goes without saying that the vehement opposition of the rulers of Assam, a stronghold of the Congress Government then and the indecision of the Home Ministry of the Government of India then, had a negative impact upon the Movement for a separate Hill State.

It is worthy to heap praises on our leaders and the people, especially the volunteers of the Hill State movement, who had sacrificed their lives for the meaningful struggle and movement, until the time of the harvest which materialized fully on the January 21, 1972.

Going back to what had already been said, the Hill State Movement witnessed a the pinnacle of our tribal genius as was evidenced in our leaders and our volunteers as well. The convincing movement of our leaders and people had impressed our rulers at the Centre, especially (L) Mrs Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of our country. We should not forget that the support and sympathy we got not only from the leaders but the people as well, from different regions of our country, India, had a lasting impact and led to the immediate realization of our cherished dreams.

The seemingly flare-up of the Hill State Movement especially the emergence of the second line of leaders in the course of the Movement had pressurized our leaders to find an early solution to the problem so as to quench the fire of political fervour before it took a violent turn. Hence, something was better than nothing, as the saying goes. The situation warranted the expulsion of (L) Mr H. S. Lyngdoh, the then Chief Organizer of the NVDA, from the APHLC because he was seen as the one who spearheaded the move against the idea of an Autonomous State. He was blamed for the resignation from the NVDA (APHLC) of the thirteen organizers/volunteers of the NVDA, Mawlai circle, the chief of whom were (L) Mr. M. Kharkongor, Rangbah Shnong Iewrynghep, (L) Mr. B. G. M. Syiem, Rangbah Shnong Phudmawri, (L) Mr. S. Kharkongor, Rangbah Shnong Umjaiur, (L) Mr. P. Kharlukhi, (L) Mr. B. R. Kharlukhi, Mr. S. D. Khongwir, Mr. A. Basaiawmoit, Mr. L. Kharlukhi, (L) Mr. S.D. Basaiawmoit, (L) Mr. I. War, (L) Mr. T. Roy, Mr. M. Wahlang and others. As a consequence, the APHLC then was virtually split into two, namely, those for and against the Autonomous State.

However, hectic political transactions/negotiations took place between the two factions from time to time but uncompromisingly. As a result, the Hill State Volunteer Adhoc Committee (HSVAC) came into existence under the leadership of (L) Mr. H. S. Lyngdoh with a mass following that was exhibited on the April 2, 1970 when the Prime Minister came to Shillong to inaugurate the Autonomous state christened Meghalaya meaning, 'the Abode of the Clouds', which was initially proposed and vehemently supported by none other than (L) Prof. G. G. Swell.

On that day, the volunteers and supporters of the HSVAC publicly demonstrated against the Autonomous state in front of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by means of a Black Flag demonstration that lined up right from Umshyrpi bridge up to the entrance of the inauguration meeting at Cricket ground, Laban, where (L) Mr. Syrtok Nongrum, an organizer of the HSVAC with few of his followers presented a Black flag to Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi who received it seriously and smilingly. The slogan, 'No Hill State, No Rest', filled the air all along the way of the Prime Minister and her entourage.

The Hill State movement then became a two-pronged struggle between the APHLC on the one hand and the Hill State Peoples Democratic Party (HSPDP) which came into existence as a result of the HSVAC on the other. History had been a blessing in disguise because of the fact that the rapid developments of the Hill State movement had borne fruit at last. The sagacity and dynamism of our Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi was seen when she took upon herself the responsibility of solving the Hill State Peoples problem by taking the portfolio of Home Ministry which hitherto was full of hesitation and fear from taking action over our Hill State demand. The tribal genius as was displayed by our leaders and the effective and reasonable support we had from the people, especially the youths had raised us up to the level of being responsible Indians in our land, that is, Meghalaya.

In conclusion, let the upcoming generation dedicate itself towards Meghalaya, a state of Pride, Glory, Honesty and Hard work, free from all kinds of Social, Economic and Political vile. Long Live Meghalaya!

Letters to the Editor

Reading habit on the decline

Editor,

Is the habit of reading books gradually declining? The answer is simply 'yes'. The decline is compounded by the Covid19 pandemic necessitating online mode of classes and examinations. This changing attitude and behaviour among students is worrisome for both parents and teachers. Reading is the gateway to success in education. The many advantages of reading have been well-documented. From exposure to a wealth of knowledge to enhanced language skills to improved understanding of the world and its many cultures. It has personal values too. It is a door to almost all knowledge and vocations. Failure to read paves the way for all kinds of catastrophes in society. However, nowadays, reading is considered a pressure inducing activity rather than a pleasurable one. This attitude towards reading has become a serious problem since a lot of people do not realize the value of reading for scholarly pursuit or pleasure in their lives. Both young and old prefer to spend time with their smartphones, watching TV, gossiping and many other things instead of reading which is important to their personal well-being and development, and enhances their knowledge.

In Dallas, Earning by Learning Programme is being implemented to encourage reading among school kids. Under this programme, the school pays two dollars for each book they read. To collect the cash incentive, students have to take a computerized quiz to prove they've read the book. This programme worked best with second-grader in an underachieving Dallas School.

Students who miss the chance to connect with books in their initial stages of life will find it difficult to obtain good reading habits in their later years. Let's build the affection for books, read books and stay intellectually active.

Yours etc.,
Dr Omarlin Kyndiah
Via email

Misleading facts on Covid19

Editor,

Apropos "Some facts about Covid19" dated 22nd January 2022, I was highly amused to see that under the label "facts", Mr Sukrit Sabhlok's letter is little more than an amalgamation of various disproved unscientific claims that have been floated in the last two years. It was an entertaining yet saddening example of the sheer amount of false information plaguing the discourse around Covid.

Firstly, Sabhlok dismisses Covid as a threat because statistically, the chances of a random person dying from the virus is extremely low, especially in the absence of any other condition. It is really depressing that two years into this pandemic, some people still don't grasp the actual danger posed by Covid. The fact that Covid has low lethality has always been known, and lethality has never been its biggest threat. The threat of Covid has always been its extremely high infectiousness, the fact that it transmits between people extremely fast. Even with a low severe case rate, this leads to hospitals being choked with Covid patients, and erases our access to other critical health services. For example, in a region with high Covid cases, someone involved in a car accident would not have access to critical care. If someone has urgent chemotherapy scheduled, that would be postponed. If someone suffers a stroke and needs a hospital bed, he would be out of luck. It may have low lethality, but Covid kills access to every available health service, as is unfortunately occurring due to Omicron right now in much of the West, particularly the US.

Secondly, Sabhlok argues against lockdowns by saying that between 1900 and 2019, no research paper recommended mass scale lockdowns. Well, obviously, since that period did not have a pandemic of the scale we are facing today, lockdowns were not a prime topic of interest or attention. Sabhlok subsequently throws out a random figure of "two million people dying due to lockdowns" without any source for his claim. It is unclear what he is trying to achieve through this point.

Thirdly, Sabhlok cherry-picks Sweden and the US state of South Dakota to back his false claim that they are outperforming places with Covid restrictions. In Europe alone, countries like Germany, which have had extensive lockdowns, significantly outperform Sweden on both Covid cases and deaths per person, so Sabhlok is completely wrong there. Further, 41 of the 50 US states have performed better than South Dakota in Covid cases per person, and 31 of the 50 have been better in deaths per person, so again, he is completely wrong there.

Lastly, the Great Barrington Declaration that Sabhlok mentions is sadly yet another example of hilarious misinformation. This declaration is completely unverified and full of false signatories, to the point that it originally featured names such as "Dr Person Fakename" and "Dr Johnny Bananas" among its "expert" signatories.

In this pandemic-stricken world, a healthy discussion on the required extent of Covid restrictions is essential to balance safety and normal life, but arguments full of falsehoods and misinformation are of no value in this debate.

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

Will schools defer offline classes please?

Editor,

The world is shaken by an unprecedented pandemic and all of us have gone through loss during this period. We are slowly graduating back to normalcy but the fright of this virus is still real. I strongly feel for the students who have lost their precious years of nourishing education to this pandemic. I understand the need to bring the education system back on its feet but the question is when.

In just a couple days we have seen a huge spike in the number of Covid cases. The Government has ensured that only online classes be allowed but in a prestigious school like St. Edmund's, offline classes are seemingly forced upon students. I am a proud alumni of the institution, and have always valued and been proud of the school's decisions but with the outbreak of Omicron cases I find it hard to abide by the school's decision to hold examinations for the Higher Secondary students offline. As a concerned parent, having senior citizens living at home with us, I try my best to avoid public events and I ensure my children do the same. Being kids, social distancing is hard to follow and because many of the kids their age are not vaccinated fully, opening of schools for offline interaction may not be such a wise action at this point in time. We parents should be given a choice whether we want to put our children in such a place or not. I reiterate that the interaction between a student and teacher is very important, but we have to find new strategies of doing so and not risk exposing our children to these uncertainties. I found that other schools are taking a different route, being online and with the current spike in cases, this is perhaps the best resolution.

While I don't blame the school for doing their job, I hope they see the seriousness of this issue and the attendant risks. I humbly and gently remind them of the devastating rise in cases in the state as well as the entire country and to reconsider and give the students and parents their freedom to choose.

Yours etc.,
A Concerned Parent,
Name withheld on request

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

"Land and sea, weakness and decline are great separators, but death is the great divorcer for ever."

— John Keats

The Shillong Times

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Cruel joke by Railways

IN an unprecedented manner, the Railway Ministry has ordered suspension of an examination this week – after massive protests by applicants and the burning of a train in Bihar. The process of recruitments for some 35,000 posts in non-technical popular categories would be resumed after a newly appointed panel studies grievances of the applicants to "effect remedial steps." It was appreciable on the part of the Railway ministry to intervene and act fast; but the question is, why have things come to such a pass. This casts a shadow, again, over the efficacy of the railway board that held the examinations. The main grievance of the applicants – numbering over 1.25 crore, was the holding of a second stage examination this week after the results of the first stage was released 10 days ago. It is noted that there was a reference to only one examination in the recruitment notice issued in 2019 – and a second exam was superimposed on the applicants after the results were out. This is another reflection of the unacceptable manners in which the Railway ministry and the board function. The fact of the matter is that things are topsy-turvy for decades now in relation to Indian Railways that has an ill-reputation for its slow-moving coaches and fast-paced corruption.

Narendra Modi as Prime Minister inherited a chaotic, slow-moving railway enterprise and he hardly did anything to improve its sad plight other than introducing some run-of-the-mill steps in the past seven years. Notably, during this period, what was most noticeable was that the railway minister was changed repeatedly. The railway board is known for its hugely corrupt practices and the Railway ministry itself is in the dock – as was also amply demonstrated in the Pawan Bansal corruption case during the UPA-II term. Modi promised Bullet trains – what Japan introduced three decades ago and China later did one up on Japan with trains running on Magnetic Levitation technology. India, where the railway network was established by the British much before China had, is still archaic in its approach; speed being improved from 80 km per hour to 120 km, while China now has trains running at speeds of 500 km per hour. One can only pity the plight of the millions of educated youths who waited for two years to pass the examination and get into jobs. Their hopes were shattered within days after the results of the first test were released. This was a cruel joke. This surely is not what governance should be. In fact, it is a case of governance failure in the Railways ministry.

Is Anyone Listening?

By Br Solomon Morris

Principals, Teachers, Parents, Caregivers and other stakeholders do read this article about children & their lives during the on-going pandemic.

Two fine young boys, Carl and Robert, (names have been changed to protect the identity and respect the privacy of the children concerned) came to see me the other day in school. While chatting, I noticed that one of them was chewing gum. Normally, children are aware of their decorum and manners and if they do forget, their peers would remind them about it. In this case, none of them were aware. Something has changed.

One fine day, I received calls from parents who asked me to speak to their 8 and 10-year-old sons. They wanted me to use my authority to rein them in. The boys were on their mobile phones for hours on end; they were ill mannered and aggressive if asked to give up the mobiles; they missed their meals; they refused to help out at home with the household chores; they got up late and were generally irresponsible and callous.

In order to assess the effect of this pandemic on the learning gaps, I asked three or four smart boys presently in Class 8, to solve the Class 6 Mathematics paper. The results astounded me! They scored less than 40%!

The effects of the pandemic, much like the virus, are creeping stealthily into the lives of our vulnerable children. Like the line in Paul Simon's song, "silence like a cancer grows", disturbing changes in behaviour is spreading among our children like the dangerous cancer.

I watched the young students coming in for their ICSE exams which were held in November. There was something missing in these boys: the smiles, the sparkle in the eyes, the ebullience, the spring in their steps, their joy of being with their companions. They looked listless and mechanical in their gaits.

I am worried. I feel for our children. I want to do something to help them. I did some serious reading on the adverse effects of the pandemic on the lives of the children across the world.

So, what are some of the effects of the pandemic that we should be concerned about?

1. 'Closing Schools Closes Lives' (Prof Russell Viner, President of the Royal College of Paediatrics & Child Health)

The closure of schools is, of course, damaging to children's education. Because schools are not just a place for learning. They are places where kids socialise, develop emotionally and, for some, a refuge from troubled family life. Prof Viner goes on to say the pandemic has caused a range of harms to children across the board from being isolated and lonely, to suffering from sleep problems and reduced physical activity . .

2. Mental Health problems on the rise

Due to the lack of outdoor activities and a structured lifestyle, children are getting restless and bored. They lack focus in their lives and are busy with their mobile phones and other screen time activities. This often leads to family tensions, feelings of isolation from friends and loneliness. There is often a lack of purpose and they seek refuge in online gaming and cut themselves off from other people. They live in their own world completely oblivious of their surrounding concerns.

3. Children with Special Needs Suffer Silently

While most students have had routines disrupted, the children perhaps most affected by this disruption are special needs students. One of the strategies that works best for them is a structured routine. And that is not there. It is now the job of the parents to establish a structured routine for them. The parents of special needs children have struggled through trial-and-error process to find out what works and what doesn't, to encourage their children to engage with virtual education.

4. Children living in rural areas and belonging to low income group are affected the most.

It is the disadvantaged children who pay the greatest price, as they will fall the furthest behind, and have the fewest resources available to 'catch up' once the pandemic threat has passed. Our children of Providence School are facing huge problems and some have dropped out of school as they need to work to support their families. We have a school called Edmund Rice School Mangkara in the remote area in the West Khasi Hills about 15 kms from Kynshi. This school educates the poorest of the poor from the surrounding villages. The lockdown has hit them hard and children have forgotten what they learned earlier.

5. Academic Fall out

Online classes are no substitute to the regular classes. What we have seen is that children are forgetting what they already know – a regression that will be much harder to remedy. Since there is no face-to-face interaction like in the normal classroom situation where dialogues, debates, and normal discourses between children and teachers happen, children are losing their conversational skills. They are not able to express themselves. Online exams are generally based on MCQs and as a result children are not writing enough. The writing skills have deteriorated and children don't want to write anymore. They find writing to be tedious and time consuming. Reading habits are on the decline.

Getting children to sit still and study even for an hour is becoming a challenging task for parents and teachers. Procrastination is on the rise and quite a number of our senior boys have not submitted their projects on time. The habit of daily study is missing and children have lost the healthy competitive edge that we normally find in the engaging classroom situation.

The best learning takes place in the classroom situations, where children learn from each other and from their mistakes. Very often what the teachers find difficult to explain is easily decoded by the children who help each other in a spirit of give and take.

Online classes are not the best platforms for asking questions especially by the shy ones. A lot of questions remain unanswered and doubts never clarified. As a result, the learning gaps increase.

The lack of opportunity for intellectually nourishing activities like music lessons, co-curricular activities, overnight Campfire Trails summer camps, picnics and Creation Week activities seriously hamper the learning experiences that are not found in the text books.

6. Arrested development

For children or adolescents of any age, the uncertainty and the loss of their own freedom will be hard to process and could lead to long-term behavioural problems. It's also unclear how the isolation and physical distancing may influence the development of socio-emotional skills, like regulating your feelings, exercising self-control and managing conflicts with your peers. The reflections of older students show that friends played a central role in handling problems and maintaining a positive outlook on life. Value Education and Life Skills classes could be of great help where teachers take on the responsibility to address and care-front these issues.

Only with a concerted effort from parents, teachers, social workers, psychiatrists and administrators can we be sure that children of all classes can emerge from the crisis ready to cope and thrive in the post-Covid-19 world.

7. Living in close proximity in families

Lockdown did help families to bond closely as more opportunities were created to share leisure activities or do housework and small household repairs together. Children described growing closer to their families but also suffering from having to live in such close proximity all the time, especially with younger siblings. Some children also wrote about tensions and feelings of isolation in the home, not being able to share personal matters in a trusting atmosphere, being pressed to do too many home chores on top of managing schoolwork, and missing out on parental attention. They regretted not being able to see close relatives, including grandparents, parents who were living apart from them or who had to travel to work, and were concerned about their welfare.

8. Online Classes – Strenuous for most students

Children of Junior & Senior classes find it difficult, and physically straining, to sit at the computer all day. They face problems with self-motivation, school assignments and homework. Students complain that they can't get out of the house and meet up with their friends. The routine gets them down as there is no physical activity. Sleep problems are on the rise. For some senior students, not knowing whether they would be able to graduate with good results and continue their education in high school is the greatest source of distress, far exceeding fear of the virus.

Conclusion

From their academic success to their social skills and mental health, the pandemic is a crisis for today's children – and the fallout may follow them for the rest of their lives. When today's children and adolescents grow up, will they see themselves as a "lost generation", whose lives will forever fall in the shadow of a global pandemic?

As educators involved in our children's lives, we need to do something to alleviate these problems. We need to come up with creative solutions to tackle these problems. Parents, Teachers, Counsellors, Special Educators, Caregivers and School Management need to work together and support each other. I believe we can make a difference if we have the will and the passion to do something practical and beneficial for our children and young students.

(The writer is Principal, St. Edmund's School, Shillong)

Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose in Shillong (June 12, 1927)

By Wandell Passah

The 125th birth anniversary of Subhash Chandra Bose was commemorated on January 23, 2022. It is thus time to retrospect on his Shillong connection as collected from excerpts of history books.

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose was once closely connected to Shillong, the then capital of Assam and earned enormous popularity among the people here irrespective of tribe, caste and religion. His tremendous influence on the youth of Shillong ignited their spirit of patriotism to join the freedom struggle. Many joined the Azad Hind Fauz led by Netaji.

It was June 12, 1927 when Subhas Chandra Bose first came to Shillong to convalesce from an illness. He was sent to Shillong from Mandalay jail as his weight had abnormally reduced. He was under the supervision of Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy who later became the first Chief Minister of West Bengal in independent India.

Netaji stayed in 'Kelsal Lodge' in the European Ward (at present known as Oakland), and was there until October 18, 1927. He was under the medical supervision of Dr Pulin Bihari Dev, the only MBBS of Shillong at that time. Dr BC Roy used to come from Calcutta to Shillong to visit Bose in 'Kelsal Lodge'.

During that long stay, though Netaji had no interaction with the people of Shillong, he was not deprived of the love and affection of the then Shillongites. Nabin Bordoloi and Tarunram Phukon, two young political leaders from Assam, occasionally gave him company. Some kind-hearted ladies would send him home-made food. Among them, two prominent names were Begum Akhtar-un-Nessa, wife of Haji Mowla Bux of Rockwood Cottage and Kusum Kumari Gupta, wife of Binode Gupta of Kench's Trace.

In September 1938, Netaji came to Shillong as the President of the Congress party and stayed in 'Asely Hall' (near Earl Sanatorium, adjacent to Ward's Lake). It was a critical time for Assam as Sir Sadullah was determined to form the Muslim League Ministry in Assam. But Netaji came as a saviour and vehemently objected to the decision. Despite various political activities, Netaji had close interaction with the people of Shillong. He was cordially invited by many organisations and delivered patriotic speeches in Polo (near Matri Mandir), Opera Hall, Khasi Durbar Hall, Jail Road field, Hari Sabha in Laban and Hindu Mission, Anath Ashram Complex, Lower Mawprem.

In the Opera Hall gathering, Jorjina Hazarika, a student of Lady Keane Girls' College, felicitated Netaji. In the Khasi Durbar Hall gathering, Netaji was felicitated by Khasi leader Rev JJM Nichols Roy and others. In his speeches Netaji lauded the patriotic spirit of the people of Shillong and encouraged them to gear up to struggle for freedom. (Ref:- শলিং-এর বাঙালি সমাজরে অবদান by Prof. Shyamadas Bhattacharjee).

A little girl then, Kalpana Barua, of Laban Assamese Girls' High School, was so excited to hear of Netaji's visit to Shillong (1938) that she started dreaming of how to meet and greet him. She managed to collect Rs 75 from relatives and friends to offer to the great leader. Rs 75 was a big amount at that time. Kalpana accompanied her father to the Hindu Mission Complex gathering to meet Netaji. When she offered the bag to him, he eagerly asked her what to do with that money. The little girl replied promptly, "Spend on the service of Mother India". Netaji was so impressed that he remained speechless for some time. He patted her with warm affection and encouraged her to be a brave girl. She was none other than Kalpana Gupta (Barua), the first lady journalist of Assam.

Another remarkable and exceptional reception was offered by St. Edmund's College. It is learnt from the description of Brother Viera, the college principal of the 60s that, other than the students and faculty members, some distinguished British Officers were also present in that meeting. In that gathering Netaji said, "Yes, I am a patriot, I love my country. If patriotism and terrorism are synonymous, then I would never object to be abused as a terrorist. My only question is: why should our country remain under the yoke of a foreign rule? Freedom is the birth-right of an individual. So, as soon as possible, the British should quit our country. We will rule our country ourselves. Even if we have to take up arms and plunge into the fight against British rule, we will do it. I reiterate, we do not have any animosity against the British. They can stay in our country at ease but not as rulers."

Everyone was mesmerised by Bose's magnetic personality and outstanding oratory; even the British Officers were highly impressed. The Edmundians greeted Bose with a beautiful garland made of 'Forget-Me-Not' that carried the message, 'We shall never forget you'. The humble present of Rs 75 from a school girl and the garland of Forget-Me-Nots, to the greatest son of India, the only freedom fighter who was sacrificed at the altar of martyrdom from Shillong, must be cherished with humble pride.

The Government of India has stated that henceforth January 23 should be merged with the Republic Day celebrations. A hologram of Netaji is now kept in the canopy that once housed the statue of King George V (Opposite India Gate. The statue was removed in 1960).

January 23 last was a momentous occasion as we learnt of Netaji through his great grand-nephew, Professor Sugata Bose, a renowned historian. Through the virtual interview of Vishnu Som, NDTV at the time of unveiling the statue by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, we were told the story of Netaji's great escape from house arrest in Calcutta on December 5,1940. In the escape drama that shook the British, a car driven by Prof Sugata Bose's father took Netaji to Dhanbad then to Gamoh from where they took a train to Peshawar. There Netaji disguised himself as Md. Ziauddin, an insurance man.

Netaji's death in a plane crash on August 18, 1945 is shrouded in mystery. His submarine voyage to Berlin in dangerous waters infested with British ships and submarines saw Netaji unmoved. He, in fact fumed at the nervous reporters who missed his military instruction to the Nazis in the battlefields (as told by Captain Moozerberg).

The most remarkable ending to the interview were the words of Prof Sugata Bose who said, "Yes holograms with or without the mortal remains are immaterial. On Netaji's birthday, we ought to celebrate his life, his services, sufferings and sacrifice. And from history we learn that Netaji laid down his life at the altar of the freedom struggle on August 18, 1945."

Today we must set aside all controversies and unite people of different religious and linguistic groups to ensure equality among all. Let us not just adore Netaji in holograms of gold or granite, but more importantly let us do away with hate speeches and actions emanating from different platforms that are hurting the nation. Let us rebuild the legacy of India which Netaji had always dreamt of.

In these horrifying times when history is being distorted for political gains and unsavoury fears of bygone colonization where even symbols are not spared; where even the history curriculum in schools is in danger of distortion, the dreams of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose must be fulfilled. This will perhaps be the best hologram ever that India can award to our hero.

(The writer is Ex-HOD, Electronics Department St. Edmund's College, Shillong)

Letters to the Editor

Response to a concerned parent

Editor,

I empathize with the parent who wrote to the Shillong Times, Jan 26, 2022 with the request "Will schools defer offline classes please?". I am guessing that her/his child is a higher secondary school student at St Edmund's, which is conducting offline exams. I too have a child in Class 12 in Army Public School, Shillong, and she attended offline exams last week. Yes, we are all concerned about the health and safety of our children and about the vulnerable elderly at home. No need, actually, for anyone to write an anonymous letter on this topic.

But a humane attitude takes into consideration the well-being of all. Hundreds of millions of children have lost out on their education because of the pandemic and many of them will never go back to school or recover lost years of learning. The majority are children from poor families. More than us middle class parents, they need to take risks and make more sacrifices to send their children to school. Now they have been denied even that opportunity.

The letter writer says the question is "when"? Well, the answer to that is a clear "now". UNESCO has stated recently, "As of today, schools are shut, affecting over 156 million students. This should not go on. Schools should be the last to close and the first to reopen. Reopening schools for in-person learning cannot wait. It cannot wait for cases to go to zero."

The World Bank has advised, "There is no justification now for keeping schools closed in view of the Covid-19 pandemic and even if there are new waves, closing schools should be the last resort. There is no evidence that reopening schools has caused a surge in Covid cases. Schools should be the last places to shut their doors and the first to reopen with appropriate infection prevention measures."

According to the WHO, "School closures did more harm than good, especially to children's mental and social well-being. We can't repeat the same mistakes. There is no relation between opening schools and the spread of Covid. Reopening schools cannot wait for all teachers and students to be vaccinated. All schools should provide in-person learning as soon as possible, without barriers to access, including not mandating vaccination prior to school entry".

It was heartening to hear what the state education minister, Lahkmen Rymbui said yesterday, "Children need offline classes. Classroom teaching must return. What I see is that children are now psychologically prepared to go to their classes to learn". There is no risk-free situation. Even in normal times, we worry about children catching infections, road accidents on the way to school, or playground injuries.

All schools must reopen now, for all grades, and in all parts of the state.

Yours etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor,
Via email

Online examinations a farce

Editor,

In my last letter published in your esteemed daily, I expressed my views on the use of unfair means by students in the online, at-home exams conducted by NEHU for undergraduate students. This time for the Odd Semester Examination, NEHU is again going to conduct a sit-at-home examination. I don't prefer to call it an online mode of examination, because it is not a remote proctoring examination. For fair examination remote proctoring is also key to monitor the examinee's behaviour to prevent malpractices. For example, some online examination proctoring software can access the examinees' webcam, microphone, browser activity, and keyboard and mouse to monitor their behaviour during the exam, and any suspicious behaviour is reported to test administrators for review.

I understand NEHU does not have such a system in place to maintain transparency and fairness in an online at-home exam, where candidates sit in their homes or together with classmates to write exams. In such a situation, copying in examinations goes on unchecked. This is such an unfair mode of examination. I am also given to understand that answer decoding will not be in place again this time. Answer scripts will be evaluated in the respective colleges. This is again unjust. Given this opportunity, some colleges inflate the marks to the advantage of their own students. In the last year's admission to Postgraduate Courses in NEHU, if one files an RTI one will find that in most of the Departments, the majority of admitted candidates were from a particular college.

While we understand that due to the current surge in Covid19, the University has to go for online examinations, the least University can do to minimize this unfairness is to go for decoding of answer scripts as practiced under normal situations. In the previous year's so-called online examinations, in spite of the disparity in evaluation, students are not permitted to apply for re-evaluation, which is against the norms of the University.

Getting a degree takes a great deal of time, effort, money, and dedication. But students cannot be at the mercy of the incompetent new normal examination system of NEHU.

Yours etc.,
John A Mylliemngap,
Via email

Give the 'Devil' his Due

Editor,

Even though the state of Meghalaya still has many more miles to go in terms of overall development, appreciation should to given to this Government led by Chief Minister, Conrad K. Sangma and his team for their efforts in trying to solve two very thorny and long pending problems, the boundary problem with Assam and the Them Iew Mawlong problem. In the interest of our State, I wish them success.

Yours etc.,
Michael N. Syiem,
Via email

"That some achieve great success, is proof to all that others can achieve it as well."
—Abraham Lincoln

The Shillong Times

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Governance is serious business

THE statement made by Deputy Chief Minister, Prestone Tynsong that those having a problem with illegal coal mining should either go to the National Green Tribunal (NGT) or the Supreme Court smacks of arrogance borne out of the knowledge that the MDA Government is invincible. That Tynsong should respond to the UDP, a coalition partner in the present dispensation with such nonchalance shows that he has scant respect for the chief alliance partner. The prime responsibility of any government is to govern which means that the rule of law should prevail. Since the MDA Government took over the reins of governance in 2018 there have been several mining accidents where dozens of miners were killed. The NGT had banned coal mining since April 2014. But there is no oversight body to check illegal coal mining. It carried on unabated and transportation was facilitated by the arms of the state. Anyone who dared to blow the whistle on this illegality faced physical attacks. If people in the Government are themselves involved in perpetuating criminal activities, then who is going to check crime? No wonder the Police Department is now at its nadir as far as crime prevention and arrest of criminals is concerned.

Of course, Tynsong's riposte is acerbic considering the Home Department is held by none other than a UDP, MLA and the same party is demanding stringent investigation into illegal coal mining and transportation. Coal mining is a touchy subject as the powerful ministers of the MDA Government belonging to the National Peoples' Party (NPP) are themselves in the coal business which in turn funds the NPP and the elections. To disturb this delicate balance would go against the interests of the ruling party and Government. It's a catch-22 situation. The NPP is fighting elections in Manipur this year. Next year Meghalaya and Nagaland are poll-bound. In Meghalaya the NPP will be facing anti-incumbency. This means spending more money to convince voters to elect its candidates. Without coal and coke money, there is little or no income from other sources. And the fact is that without money winning elections is well nigh impossible. Hence coal mining will have to carry on via subversive means.

It is not just the UDP that is concerned with illegal coal mining. The All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) MLAs led by former Chief Minister, Dr Mukul Sangma had visited the coal mining areas recently and found freshly dug coal as certified by geologists. Tynsong is therefore defending the indefensible and virtually admitting that his Government cannot stop rat hole coal mining – which is the most profitable business and requires the least investment. Tynsong is actually telling the UDP, "Go deal with it!"

Eri Silk Industry: A pathway to Atmanirbhar Bharat

By Bhogtoram Mawroh and Aurilia Tariang

Last year, the Government of Meghalaya declared Raid Nongtluh Umden-Diwon as the first Eri Silk village of the State. This was in recognition of the work done by the village in the field of Eri silk garments production which is quite popular nationally as well as internationally. Eri silk, known as the father of all forms of cultured and textured silks, is one of the four types of natural silk produced in the world. It comes from the Samia cynthia ricini worm which is found in Meghalaya apart from Assam (Eri is derived from the work 'erranda' an Assamese word for castor on whose leaves the insect is fed) and Arunachal Pradesh in the North East and certain parts of China, Japan and Thailand.

Rearing and weaving of Eri silk has a long history in the State. When the British first arrived in Meghalaya rearing of Eri silk worms and manufacture of Eri silk garments was recorded as an important economic activity by PRT Gurdon in his 1917 seminal work 'The Khasis' amongst the Khryrwang and Nongtung villages of Jaintia Hills. The prominence of Umden-Diwon located in the present day Ri Bhoi therefore appears to be a recent activity which must have emerged from the interaction between the Khasis and Karbis. In the book, it is the Karbi, not the non-Pnar Khasis, who greatly desired the Eri silk threads for weaving their striped cloths. The non-Pnar Khasis instead obtained their silk cloths from either the Assam Valley or Jaintia Hills. Personal discussions with some Karbi villages in Bhoi revealed that they knew and had exchanged knowledge about Eri silk with adjoining Khasis villages. Staying in close proximity with each other and the fact that in many cases Karbi identity merged with that of the Khasi must to have led to the spread of Eri silk among the communities in Ri Bhoi, Umden-Diwon being one. Umden-Diwon are however not the only Bhoi community who are involved in Eri. A very important cluster is also found in the Bhoirymbong area with the effort of some individuals being very important in the development of the Eri silk industry in the area.

Kong Rikynti Syiem is a resident of Khweng (a village in the Bhoirymbong CD Block) who has her own enterprise known as M/S Rikynti Training and Weaving Centre. In the past rearing of Eri silk worms was done by only a few households in the village. In such households at least one member also knew how to spin the threads from the cocoon. This thread was then used for weaving clothes which were meant only for the family members. One of the fond memories Kong Rikynti has of her grandmother was of her weaving clothes for her children and grandchildren (with Kong Rikynti being one of them). Inspired by the knowledge and skill of her grandmother Kong Rikynti was motivated to carry on this tradition.

In 2005 with the support of (L) Bah Tenny Lyngdoh, DSO of Sericulture Department Kong Rikynti received trainings, demonstrations and exposure on rearing, spinning, dying and weaving from Raid Iapngar Handloom Centre. She also sought the help from experienced artisans like Kong Tran from Umden especially about the various parts and accessories associated with the loom. Initially she was working on her own but after a couple of years she began to hire community members to help her with meeting her orders. The raw materials, i.e., cocoon were also sourced from the village itself and in case of shortage from the neighbouring villages that rear the Eri silk worm. In the past the cocoons were sold by the villagers to a middleman in exchange for dried fish. This continued till very recently when money became the medium of exchange. With a view to expand the business she took a loan of Rs. 6000 from the SHG of which she was a member to help in setting up a shed (apart from the one she already had) that could fit 2 looms and 4 spinning machines. The DHO (District Handloom Officer) Nongpoh also provided one loom as a grant. Sensing the need to support his wife with the growing business, Bah Jalong Lastnokhel (the husband) quit his job in the Police Department to help with the work. Using the floor loom had started to take its toll on Kong Rikynti's health. Bah Jalong also came up with the method to ease the strain by raising the loom and making the seats with bamboo.

Like any enterprise especially based in rural areas, the biggest challenge is the market. In the early days demand for Eri silk was a not very high, averaging only 2 to 3 products per year. To ensure that the business remained afloat, apart from Eri silk Kong Rikynti also used cotton and wool to make bags, garments, etc. She received a subsidy from the State Government in the form of a loom priced at Rs. 10,000 which also greatly helped in keeping the enterprise going. Around this time Kong Rikynti began collaborating with non-profit agencies like MRDS (Meghalaya Rural Development Society). This then brought her into contact with NESFAS who began giving her platform to showcase the Eri silk work.

In the Mei Ramew Festival held in St Edmund's in 2013 Kong Rikynti was able to able to showcase the products and demonstrate the various processes involved in the production of Eri silk. She also got the opportunity to attend the International Terra Madre held in Italy where she was able to sell some pieces. At another exhibition held in Kathmandu, Nepal, the Chief Secretary of Nepal also bought an Eri silk muffler from her. She also attended many exhibitions conducted under the DC office. All these exhibitions allowed her to form a network of customers, agencies and other organizations. Gradually the products began receiving interest allowing groups like NESFAS to place orders. At the same time, she continued to receive trainings for improving her skills. These ranged from a couple of renowned designers from abroad along with designers from Delhi, GIZ (a German Development Agency) and from the Raid Iapngar Cluster through the Scheme provided by the Textiles Department of Government of Meghalaya.

Almost a decade after she started the business Kong Rikynti has started to see the fruits of her labour. She receives national and international buyers from places like Kerala, Bangalore, Delhi, and countries like Japan and Cambodia. Her daughter also began taking interest in the work and is now playing a big role in running the family business through online platforms like Instagram. Covid-19 did affect the business but since the restrictions were eased business has started to pick up and orders are coming in.

The journey of Kong Rikynti, which is still continuing, has a lot to offer to local entrepreneurs who are looking to build something for themselves. It was the love for her grandmother that prompted Kong Rikynti to enter the business. The support from individuals (which included her husband who left his job to support her) and institutions, both government and non-government, was crucial for her to continue in the business especially during the initial stages. Diversification (use of wool and cotton apart from Eri silk in the early stages) and building networks were important strategies she used, especially the latter, to gradually build a reliable clientele. All the while she continued improving her skills. But maybe the most important lesson for all aspiring entrepreneurs here is the patience and perseverance she showed in continuing with the business for many years. Presently, there is a lot of emphasis on 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' which wants to create a more self-reliant nation by focusing on local resources. The Eri silk industry of Meghalaya is a very good example of such a vision and entrepreneurs like Kong Rikynti, are important guides of how to achieve it.

About the authors: Bhogtoram Mawroh is a Senior Associate, Research and Knowledge Management at NESFAS and can be reached at bhogtoram.nesfas@gmail.comAurilia Tariang is a Field Coordinator at NESFAS and can be reached at aurilia.nesfas@gmail.com

Round The States

By Insaf

AIS Rules Change: States say 'No' to Centre

As India celebrates its 73rd Republic Day, Centre-States relations take another hit. The federal structure is being subverted again, is the charge against Modi government. Opposition is mounting against New Delhi's bid to change the All India Service Cadre Rules, wherein the Centre seeks to give itself 'unilateral powers' to pick and choose any AIS officer(s) working in the States to be withdrawn from their services in the State of their allotment and brought to the Centre without the concurrence either of the officer concerned or of the State Government that the officer is serving. This change, say opponents may appear to be a minor, technical one, but it 'hits at the very core of the constitutional scheme of Indian federalism.' On Thursday last, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee shot off a second letter to Modi saying "the Centre was taking the matter to further non-federal extremes!" Other State governments opposing the move are Maharashtra, Odisha, Jharkhand, whose CM Soren has written to Modi saying 'bury' the 'draconian' amendments which if carried out would strike at the "very root" of "federal governance." Surprisingly the NDA ruled States such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Meghalaya, find the present system fine.

The Constitutional Conduct Group, of former bureaucrats, has put across a forceful argument against the Centre's proposals, which the States could ditto. It says: in a federal structure of Union of India, the Union and States exist as distinct and separate entities, though they work in tandem to subserve common constitutional objectives. The AIS constitute the administrative framework for this unique relationship between the two levels of government and give it stability and balance. Maintaining this balance is critical to good governance and guarantees members of the AIS their independence and their ability to speak their mind. The proposed amendments fundamentally alters this relationship and makes a mockery of the delicate federal balance that the AIS are designed to maintain. For it's possible that AIS officers may view the interests of the State as secondary and subordinate to the Centre and to the political regime in power there. Plus, AIS officers working in the State will be reluctant to take any decision or action against the wishes of the political party in power at the Centre for fear of being summarily transferred to the Centre and harassed there. This will undermine the ability of the State governments to implement their policies and stand up against any arbitrary diktats of the Centre. Need more be said? Will the Centre pay heed?

The proposed amendments fundamentally alters this relationship and makes a mockery of the delicate federal balance that the AIS are designed to maintain. For it's possible that AIS officers may view the interests of the State as secondary and subordinate to the Centre and to the political regime in power there.

Punjab Cong CM Face?

Punjab has the Congress high command in a bind. Who should be its chief ministerial candidate—Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi or State party President Navjot Singh Sidhu? Both are keen to be declared as the CM face saying two people cannot lead but only one. And true to his style, Sidhu literally cornered Rahul Gandhi on Thursday last at the virtual rally in Jalandhar, saying he doesn't want to be 'showpiece', a CM face needs to be declared. Tough call alright, as Rahul too admitted that not the grand old party's style. The party, he said, "will go to polls with a CM face and a decision will be taken soon after consulting party workers.' Will it and how, is the big question for differences within the party and the two aspirants appear far from over. And though both are said to have given the assurance that 'whoever leads, the other will put all his energy behind him,' nothing can be put past Sidhu. Remember, the high voltage drama where he eventually bowled Amarinder out. And while he would want the confusion be removed, it's easier said than done. Despite Channi humbly saying "I don't want any post. Make anyone CM, Channi will accept it wholeheartedly and campaign. This is Punjab's requirement." No, it's Congress' requirement. Will it ride the tide?

UP Students' Protest

The timing couldn't have been worse for the BJP in Uttar Pradesh. The issue of unemployment finally comes into spotlight in the poll-bound State. The beating up of students by the police in Prayaraj for reportedly trying to stop a train there to protest against the Ministry of Railways recruitment process has caught the Yogi government on the wrong foot. It had to react promptly and suspended three policemen, appealed to students to be patient, as say 'every student is our family', as the focus on campaigning now gets shifted, with Opposition taking it up forcefully. This despite the fact that protests in UP are far less vociferous than in Bihar, where empty coaches of a stationary train in Gaya were torched, students blocked rail traffic between Gaya-Jehanabad, among other form of protests in Patna, Sasaram and Bhagalpur. But it isn't going to the polls. Yogi and team may be wary of the protest turning into a students' movement with focus on youth joblessness, for so far his concentration has been to pursue the Hindutava agenda. The Railways forming a committee and giving its recommendations by March 4 doesn't give much hope either as student unions see it as a conspiracy to postpone the issue till the elections in the State. How the Opposition cashes on, is worth a watch.

Jharkhand's World Record!

Jharkhand hasn't done its homework right. It has the "world record of longest continuous closure of primary schools." Economist Jean Dreze, wrote to Chief Minister Hemant Soren on Thursday last warning of the "catastrophic state of elementary education" in the State. The worst aspect of the crisis, he said "is not economic or even the health crisis, it's the schooling crisis." And though the economy may pick up and adults will return relatively soon to their normal lives, children "may pay the price for their entire life. A small minority of privileged children are able to continue studying online during this period, but online education doesn't work for poor kids, most have been virtually abandoned by the schooling system for two years." In age group of 8-12 years the 2011 census was 90%-odd and by 2020 most kids that age must have been literate. But a survey today of kids among poor Adivasi/Dalit families reveals "a majority have lost the ability to read a simple sentence."

When schools reopen, many will recover their ability to read and write, but "many will not — they will become de facto dropouts." Thus, he suggested: plan for a "massive literacy" campaign for primary school children in next two years, 'to ensure no child in Jharkhand is deprived of a chance to learn to read and write.' Plus have adequate provision in the forthcoming Budget. Will Soren heed for Jharkhand's children? ---INFA

Letters to the Editor

In gratitude!

Editor,

I want to acknowledge and thank Sir Glenn Kharkongor for affirming my thinking and echoing my sentiments of the importance of offline classes. I can see how passionate he is about education and his heart is definitely in the right place. 'All schools should provide in-person learning as soon as possible, without barriers to access'- I couldn't agree with him more. Thank you Sir Glenn and I liked the way he so gently clarified about the schools. St. Edmund's School (ICSE) & St. Edmund's Higher Secondary School (MBOSE) are two separate schools run by the Christian Brothers.

Yours etc.,
Br. Solomon Morris,
Via email

Can parents think beyond exams?

Editor,

Strange situations bring strange behaviour in humans and Covid has certainly turned everything on its head. A letter dated January 26, 2022 said, 'Will schools defer offline classes please?' and categorically named St Edmund's Higher Secondary School stating that "offline classes were forced upon students." The school session ended on December 17, 2021 and the new session was due to resume on January 17, 2022 but in 'compliance' with the government's order to extend the winter break, the classes for class XI were scheduled for January 27, 2022 so how, when and what classes were happening for this child when the campus was shut and teachers on holiday, is a mystery to me.

With regards to offline exams for class 12, the scheduled time-table for the said exam was announced to the students in the first week of December 2021. Any student and interested parent associated with our institution would know that exam timetables are always announced one month ahead so ,yes, we have been really myopic not to foresee the spike in Covid cases. Unfortunately, nobody is ever certain in Covid times; at best we can only plan. But did the offline exam happen? The answer is NO and not because of anybody's painstaking concern but with what the government had to say. The parent talked of the need for safety and distancing of the children. Perhaps if parents' interests in their children's went beyond exams and marks then you would know that, we have temperature checks at all our entrances every day for every shift and strict monitoring on using a face mask at all times for students. We are one of the few schools or only school that had two shifts of classes and our teachers repeating themselves twice over to teach the same topic to different groups of students. Why did we do so? So that each child sits on a single desk; being physically distant from their classmates! This year during the board exams, besides, letting one student sit on a bench we even had a bench between a candidate in front and the one behind. All these arrangements have been made despite having a fairly huge campus, just so that there is enough space for physical distancing among students.

At the start of the pandemic the teachers on their own took classes on zoom and GoogleMeet and in a matter of a few months into the new normal we have a technology team, our own app and classes streamlined on Microsoft Teams. Online exams for us did not happen with offline submission of scripts but online as the word literally means. If the child took the exam (because they had the choice to take it or not), the report card and the scripts are available on the app for your perusal.

Since I would not have the honour to know the concerned parent I have illustrated the functioning of your child's school for public reading and I hope that has bridged the communication gap from all sides. A little delay in postponing the exam dates only because we were waiting for orders does not entitle us to this berating. Graduating into normalcy in Covid times also means, taking each day as it comes because we just do not know how the game would change in a matter of few seconds.

Yours etc.,
A concerned member of the Institution,
Name withheld on request

Anti-microbial Resistance: Are we ready?

Editor

Living in the age of pandemic we have witnessed the rise of science and the fall of political might. COVID-19 has exposed the weakness of the health care systems but also opportunities galore especially with the coming in of Artificial Intelligence (AI) but the most serious threat which we have forgotten to address is the rise of antimicrobial resistance. Diseases which were once thought to have disappeared are rising with a vengeance.

The area of concern has always been the easy availability of drugs(medicines) without the need of prescription which is rampant in a country like ours. The Logical Indian in its article, 'Anti-microbial Resistance: A Global Threat That Can Set The Medical World A Hundred Years Back' warns about ignoring it at our own peril.

Time is of the essence and the need of the hour is the contribution of stakeholders from the medical community, researchers, science journalists and the will of the political machinery. In a state like Meghalaya which has a depressing health care system the health department should not wait for the eleventh hour to bring a silver bullet but should start filling the gaps starting with the control of use of antibiotics and promoting healthier lifestyles.

The book 'An Elegant Defense: The Extraordinary New Science of The Immune System' by Matt Richtel reveals the importance of our defense mechanism through stories of four main characters which is a learning tool for us.

Yours etc.,
Christopher Gatphoh,
Shillong-10

God doesn't play dice with the universe

Editor,

The infinite cosmos and its creation are still a complete mystery. No philosopher has been able to fathom this uncanny creative phenomenon. Scientists are still exploring with their limited tools. But what is that it is governed by a Super-intelligent Power which does not make mistakes. As inhabitants of this dot-like planet earth we humans live for a maximum of 100 years. Our end may come any time. Surprisingly, some feel that while on this earth they are free to do what they like including inflicting harm and hurting others, instead of comforting the aggrieved. If one does good to others, certainly one will be rewarded in good time by that Super-intelligent Power. This is a fundamental "belief" of almost all religions on this planet. Christ preached that man should always strive to be compassionate and humble.

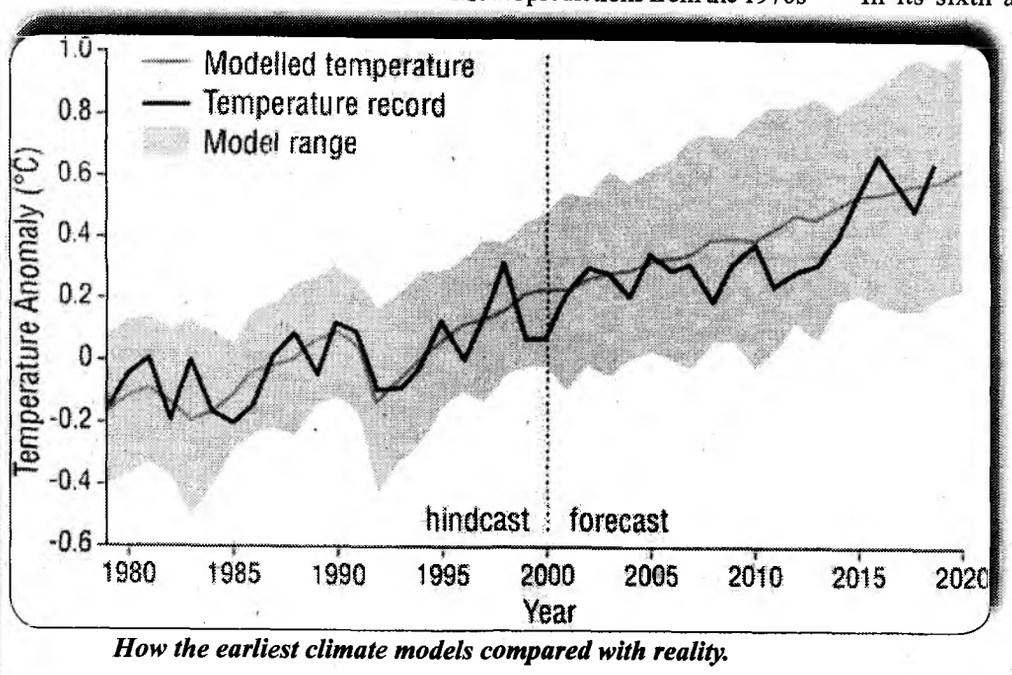
What are the consequences of hurting others? Will we not get hurt back at any point of time as a reward? Certainly, our bad deeds will come back and haunt us in various ways. We may hurt our fellow brothers in certain ways but Nature has "infinite ways" of hurting us. Even Newton's third law says, "for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."

All philosophers have concluded that we are nothing but the "resultant outcome" of our past deeds. Every action of ours finally determines our destiny. Nature warns us to watch our every action and thoughts. Can we have a pleasant future if we bruise someone's heart by bearing malice against them? The hammer of the "laws of karma" will fall hard on us. We may escape the police lathi or the punishment awarded by the courts of justice, but we cannot escape the laws of nature. It surely cuts us to size. Often, we are guided by our narrow pursuits and ambitions and may have become "blind" to the ethics that govern us and therefore become insensitive and hurt others. In this materialistic mission, we often lose our human compassion and sell our inherent virtues as commodities. But it is inevitable that our abusive and unrighteous action contaminates our thought process, ultimately making us weak. This in turn corrodes our spiritual strength.

Though we attempt to avoid earthly retribution, the guilt of our wrong actions unmistakably weigh us down. The retributive consequences we face in life may not be understood by us, but Mother Nature is unsparing. We are fully accountable for our thoughts and actions. We should stop blaming others. Perhaps that is why the great thinker Albert Einstein once exclaimed --- 'God does not play dice with the universe.'

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

Climate change models – Our best hope for understanding the future



How the earliest climate models compared with reality.

By Mark Maslin

It's a common argument among climate deniers: scientific models cannot predict the future, so why should we trust them to tell us how the climate will change?

This trope recently surfaced in an interview with Canadian psychologist and author Jordan Peterson on Joe Rogan's podcast. According to Peterson: "There is no such thing as climate… climate and everything are the same word." Faced with the impossible task of including "everything" in their equations – and predicting what will happen weeks and months from now – the world's scientists are incapable of modelling the climate accurately, in Peterson's view.

As a scientist whose research involves modelling the climate on a global and regional scale, I can say with confidence that this interpretation is wrong. Here are just three reasons why.

Muddling weather and climate

Deniers often confuse the climate with weather when arguing that models are inherently inaccurate. Weather refers to the short-term conditions in the atmosphere at any given time. The climate, meanwhile, is the weather of a region averaged over several decades.

Weather predictions have got much more accurate over the last 40 years, but the chaotic nature of weather means they become unreliable beyond a week or so. Modelling climate change is much easier however, as you are dealing with long-term averages. For example, we know the weather will be warmer in summer and colder in winter.

Here's a helpful comparison. It is impossible to predict at what age any particular person will die, but we can say with a high degree of confidence what the average life expectancy of a person will be in a particular country. And we can say with 100% confidence that they will die.

Just as we can say with absolute certainty that putting greenhouses gases in the atmosphere warms the planet.

Strength in numbers

There are a huge range of climate models, from those attempting to understand specific mechanisms such as the behaviour of clouds, to general circulation models (GCM) that are used to predict the future climate of our planet.

There are over 20 major international research centres where teams of some of the smartest people in the world have built and run these GCMs which contain millions of lines of code representing the very latest understanding of the climate system. These models are continually tested against historic and palaeoclimate data (this refers to climate data from well before direct measurements, like the last ice age), as well as individual climate events such as large volcanic eruptions to make sure they reconstruct the climate, which they do extremely well.

No single model should ever be considered complete as they represent a very complex global climate system. But having so many different models constructed and calibrated independently means that scientists can be confident when the models agree.

Model predictions from the 1970s and 1980s compare stunningly well with the warming trend that actually occurred over the last four decades. And scientists have been continually testing and improving these models ever since, meaning their predictions are a very robust outcome of our science.

Errors about error

Given the climate is such a complicated system, you might reasonably ask how scientists address potential sources of error, especially when modelling the climate over hundreds of years.

The biggest source of uncertainty in all climate change models is how much greenhouse gases humanity will emit over the next 80 years. Scientists account for this by working with economists and social scientists to build scenarios of the future with different emissions trajectories.

We scientists are very aware that models are simplifications of a complex world. But by having so many different models, built by different groups of experts, we can be more certain of the results they produce.

All the models show the same thing: put greenhouses gases into the atmosphere and the world warms up. We represent the potential errors by showing the range of warming produced by all the models for each scenario.

In its sixth assessment of the science of climate change, published in August 2021, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change stated that "it is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land". How human activity will continue to affect the climate is a difficult question primarily because we do not know how the world will respond to this crisis. But we can count on models, which have a proven record of accuracy, to help us navigate what the future is likely to hold.

What is most worrying about this kind of climate change denial is that it still gets airtime. Shows like *The Joe Rogan Experience* can host guests peddling misinformation about climate change or the pandemic just to get a ratings boost. Spotify, it's reported, paid US$100 million (£75 million) for Rogan's podcast in 2020 and the platform has over 380 million users.

Joe Rogan surely does not need a bigger audience or a bigger pay packet, so why not have credible experts on who actually want to help build a better, safer, and healthier world? This is what listeners want to hear about – real problems, real facts, real solutions.

(Mark Maslin is a Professor of Earth System Science at UCL. He is also a Founding Director of Rezatec Ltd, Co-Director of The London NERC Doctoral Training Partnership, a member of Cheltenham Science Festival Advisory Committee and a member of the Climate Crisis Advisory Group.)

Books with the India twist

As the sunny rays of winter pour through our windows, curl up on your reading chair and indulge in these bingeworthy reads.

Bose: The Untold Story of an Inconvenient Nationalist
by Chandrachur Ghose

New information throws light on Bose's intense political activities surrounding the revolutionary groups in Bengal, Punjab, Maharashtra and United Provinces, his efforts to bridge the increasing communal divide and his influence among the splintered political landscape; his outlook and relations with women; his plunge into the depths of spirituality; his penchant for covert operations and his efforts to engineer a rebellion among the Indian armed forces. With this new information, what appeared to be dramatic now becomes more intense with plots and sub-plots under one man's single-minded focus on freeing the motherland and envisioning its development in a new era.

Was Bose really a Nazi sympathiser? Knowing very well about the strong public opinion that existed among the political leadership and the intelligentsia in India against Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and imperial Japan, why did he risk his own political image by allying with the Axis powers?

Pacey and thought-provoking *Bose: The Untold Story of an Inconvenient Nationalist* will open a window to many hitherto untold and unknown stories of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose.

The Puffin Book of 100 Extraordinary Indians

100 inspiring stories of outstanding achievements! T*he Puffin Book of 100 Extraordinary Indians* is a celebration of achievements and personal stories of those who forged new paths for themselves and others in a way that it continues to affect modern lives.

Written as short anecdotal biographical sketches, the book presents the lives of scientists, doctors, activists, painters, sportspeople, dancers, political leaders and many more from different walks of life.

Featured in this collection are names like Irom Sharmila, Dutee Chand, Bhagat Singh, Gauri Sawant, Virat Kohli and Sundar Pichai.

Whether they climbed the heights, swam the depths, mastered science or track and field, picked the baton of education or activism - each of their stories is replete with big and small victories that continue to inspire.

A Little Book of India
by Ruskin Bond

As India completes 75 years of independence, we bring to you a slice of our beloved country in the words of our favourite author, Ruskin Bond.

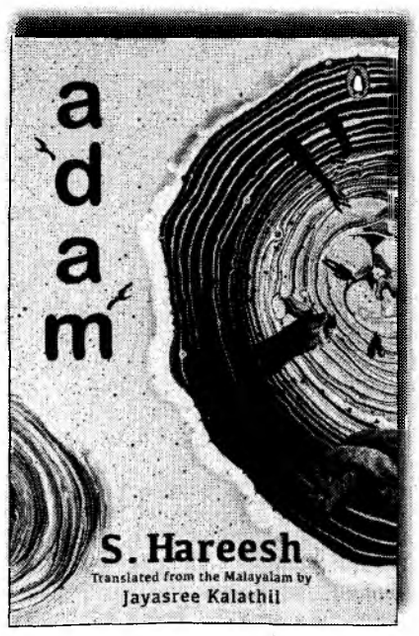
Drawing on his own memories and impressions of this unique land, he pays homage to the country that has been his home for 84 years.

Bond talks fondly about the diverse elements that make up this beautiful land – its rivers and forests, literature and culture, sights, sounds and colours.

A Little Book of India is an amalgamation of the physical and spiritual attributes of our homeland, and takes you on a journey filled with nostalgia and devotion.

Adam **– A short story collection by S Hareesh**

Four Belgian Malinois puppies, raised by an ex-serviceman, who end up in four different life situations; two men who play a game



made out of death notices clipped from newspapers; a man who exploits his friend's disability to satisfy his own bestial needs; a government employee who is intoxicated by the taste of wild meat and sinks deeper and deeper into the toxic world of hunting; two buffaloes who break away from their butcher, leading an entire village to chase after them; an old man who rejoices in the death of a sworn enemy who was once his friend.

S Hareesh's *Adam* explores the more difficult of human emotions – lust, anger, jealousy, vengeance and greed.

Translated from the Malayalam, the collection presents nine unusual stories about ordinary people, their passions and their diverse destinies in a world where humans, animals and nature collide.

Hareesh's unique style of storytelling, which mixes astute social observation with an irreverent and sarcastic tone, makes these stories invigorating, and pushes the craft of the short story to new and refreshing realms.

The Authentic Yoga Book, Brings Yoga Closer To One and All

Heartfulness launched *The Authentic Yoga* originally written by PY Deshpande with additional content by Heartfulness Guide - Daaji, that includes the Foreword and a new chapter presenting the yogic practices in the light of Heartfulness for everyone to benefit from Yoga directly.

The book gives a deep insight into the true state of Yoga in finding unity within body, heart, and soul in totality that can rightly translate us into being 'human'. *(IANSlife)*

Khushwant Singh's *The Opium Toffee* to go 'green'

In a first-of-its-kind initiative, the Hoshiarpur Literary Society has collaborated with the Punjab Forest Department to plant saplings in their endeavour to eliminate the carbon footprint of Khushwant Singhs upcoming novel, *The Opium Toffee*.

Every publishing activity leads to the release of greenhouse gases, and the major contributors are carbon dioxide and methane.

The Forest Department carried out the plantation drive at its nursery in Muallanpur, near here. The department planted 1,500 saplings, including species like Shishma, Kanakchampa, Rajhain, Sukh Chain, Australian Kikar, and Kaindu.

According to author Singh, this noble idea came from a conversation with a friend from the organisation, Sustain to Survive.

"Once he made me aware and calculated the kind of CO2e (carbon dioxide and other gases) a book produces, I wanted to mitigate the carbon footprint of the novel and approached the Hoshiarpur Literary Society and the Forest Department to help me in taking this initiative.

"The Principal Chief Conservator of Forests was very receptive to this idea, and I am sure that the step that we have taken will find roots, and many such initiatives will follow. Steps like using recycled paper, energy-efficient printing methods and usage of less toxic printing ink are some of the immediate remedies that the publishing industry can adopt," Singh said.

"Even though it's challenging to arrive at an exact figure, rough estimates suggest that 15 trees over their lifecycle can offset one tonne of CO2e. Keeping in mind the various steps involved in writing and publishing, the mortality of plants in forest conditions etc., I figured that 1,500 trees would be a safe figure to plant," he added.

The Opium Toffee will be formally released in February. It is a love story set in Punjab and London of the 1980s. It is a story that traverses through love, drugs, betrayal, politics and fanaticism and opens a window to that disturbing phase in India's history.

"Wanted to mitigate the carbon footprint of the novel and approached the Hoshiarpur Literary Society and the Forest Department to help me in taking this initiative"

– *Khushwant Singh*

Keroscene Films has already optioned *The Opium Toffee* for a cinematic experience. This is Singh's third book to be optioned for a movie.

Omung Kumar is adopting his biographical work on veteran marathon runner Fauja Singh into a biopic. At the same time, his previous novel *Maharaja in Denims* is being adapted into a film by Guneet Monga, the producer of *Lunch Box* and *Gangs of Wasseypur 2*.

Singh has also authored *The People's Maharaja*, the authorised biography of former Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh.

"We are very proud of this initiative. The Hoshiarpur Literary Society has always taken the lead in bringing important narratives to the society," said Sanna K Gupta, President of the Hoshiarpur Literary Society.

"Through this tree plantation drive, we plan to sensitise the writers and the publishing community about GHG emissions that the publishing industry creates. We will soon hold a seminar as well as write to all the stakeholders in the writing industry to consider the options to help build a carbon-neutral world," Gupta added. *(IANS)*

Spotlight on lost glory of India's diverse folk music

The 4th season of #MeForMyCity focuses on the theme, *Meri City Mera Music* (My city my music). The two-month-long campaign started in December and aims to create a social awareness movement for people to reconnect to nations diverse culture and heritage by exhibiting India's musical diversity. The campaign will provide a platform for budding singers across the country to showcase their talents.

This is Canara HSBC Oriental Bank of Commerce Life Insurance's flagship campaign. The world has gone through a very tough time recently owing to the pandemic, and the campaign has been launched keeping in mind the magical power of music, for music knows no boundaries, no language, no age and can at the same time, soothe the mind and heal the heart!

Commenting on the initiative, Anuj Mathur, MD & CEO, Canara HSBC Oriental Bank of Commerce Life Insurance stated, "MeForMyCity has been our flagship campaign to help people connect better to their cities and inculcate a sense of belongingness. In the fourth season of this ongoing campaign we want to focus on the lost charm of regional music from various parts of the country and create a platform to help us connect back to our roots and facilitate a cultural revival. With the launch of this campaign, we aim to showcase the musical treasure of India and bring back the lost glory of India and exhibit India's musical & cultural diversity."

The four key celebrities associated with the campaign are Salim Merchant, Papon, Lakhwinder Wadali, Hamsika Iyer and Mame Khan. This interaction would serve the purpose of understanding the current scenario of folk music in India, its role in mainstream music, the scope for growth and learning, the role of Canara HSBC OBC Life Insurance in reviving India's music and other such areas of interest.

IANSlife caught up with Salim Merchant to find out more about this association:

Everyone was very hopeful that things would go back to normal in 2022 ... but with this third wave it seems a distant dream at the moment?

Salim: I don't believe it's a distant dream as we hope for things to return to normal soon. As mentioned by health experts, this specific wave is not that deadly and as a country, I am certain we are going to bounce back, especially in the music industry. Events, concerts, and tours will soon take a rebound this quarter itself. In fact, my sibling and I have so far conducted four private concerts with our scheduled shoots and recordings being completely arranged. While there was a sudden outbreak of COVID-19 towards the beginning of January, we are hopeful of things going back to normal, and industries resuming, soon.

Virtual/online sessions and performances played a huge role in democratizing music and the performing arts, making them accessible to all and catering to a wider audience, do you agree?

Salim: As going digital becomes the new normal, I believe the virtual and online sessions are here to stay. Moreover, they have contributed towards empowering artists and performers to freely express themselves and connect with a wider spectrum of audiences through digital media. We are certain that it is only going to expand from here on and motivate hidden artists to come out and build their own legacy. Even though our lives will be back to normal, the digital connection that the pandemic has bridged between people will last forever and ever.So, that's a great thing that has happened in the past couple of years.

We've all learned how to use technology in a very strategic and comprehensive way which has, in turn, proved to be beneficial and engaging for not only the performers but as well as the audiences. For instance, the MeForMyCity digital campaign launched by Canara HSBC OBC Life Insurance is focusing on the lost charm of regional music from various parts of the country and offering a platform to help us connect back to our roots and facilitate a cultural revival, all through virtual means.

Music trends reflect the mood of the nation. What in your opinion is trending and why?

Salim: I've always noticed that people who create music have tried to create timeless music. Personally, we've always believed in making music that has a long-lasting quality and it has really worked for us because the music that has a trending quality sometimes trends for a very short period and then dies its natural death. But when you make music, which has a long-lasting and timeless quality be it folk music, devotional music or something that is connected to our country's culture, tradition, history, it stays with an individual forever and builds a deep connection on an individual level.

When it comes to live performances what do you most enjoy and what gives you that high as a performer?

Salim: When it comes to live concerts, I really love songs that have patriotic quality especially when you bring the tri colour on stage and sing songs like *Chak de India* or *Maula Mere Lele Meri Jaan*. These songs give out a very strong message of brotherhood, togetherness, our cultures and the nation standing in solidarity.

This is something that gives me a lot of happiness and has become a huge high for me.

What are you most looking forward to in the coming year and what can fans expect?

Salim: In 2020, we revived the tradition of creating folk music in the popular form called Bhoomi which is basically a movement that resonates with India's culture, tradition, folk, history and devotional quality from different parts. In 2021 we continued the tradition of Bhoomi and got a lot of love from our fans and our listeners.

This year as well as the coming years we will continue waving the flag of Bhoomi because this project brings me immense pleasure, lots of happiness and satisfaction.

We have been performing this project successfully for the past two years and I hope to continue this in the coming years as well. This is something that our fans and our listeners can look forward to.

Lastly, tell us about your association with Me For My City and with the Canara HEBC OBC Life insurance.

Salim: Me For My City 4.0 campaign launched by Canara HSBC OBC Life Insurance is a unique initiative that I am associated with. It is a wonderful opportunity for people to showcase their folk music talent on a bigger and grander scale. Season 4 of the campaign themed *Meri City Mera Music* is aimed to bring back the spotlight on the lost glory of India's diverse folk music. What's unique about this platform is that famous folk singers of India - including Lakhwinder Wadali, Mame Khan, Papon and Hamsika Iyer are associated with it and these talented singers themselves will search for hidden talent across the country. *(IANSlife)*

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi ***Sunday, JAN 30, 2022***

Moon opposite Mercury on your solar return chart will give mixed results. Your government related work will get struck. You could also face problems from higher authorities. Tax related matters could be reopened again. You will be working with dedication, devotion and sincerity yet things will not go your way easily. Your enemies/conspirators will remain active and will try to harm your interests and reputation. But you will not give up easily and will fight till the end. Gradually things will start getting better. New investment/business opportunity will keep coming. You need to take all decisions carefully. Job offers will keep coming. Your financial position will remain normal and you will have to work hard to earn money. Those who were planning to go abroad for studies/job/business need to relook again. Time is not that favorable. those who are in a relationship will face some tensions.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

It will be a very important week for you. You will be in a carefree mood and will remain busy in roaming around eating and dining with your family. It will do a world of good for you as you get time to take a break from work. You will be open-minded and will do your work with lot of devotion. Your bosses will praise your efforts. You will also turn spiritual and will feel connected to God. You will earn well and will be attracted to materialistic objects. You will be sensible in your approach and will read lot of good literature. You will also have plans to buy a new vehicle, house and clothes. You will be humble and gentle in your dealings with other people. You will make lot of good friends.

Taurus: (April 21- May 21)

It will be mixed time period for you. Half of the week will be spent in a grand manner but, the other half might not turn out as you expect it to be. You will be in a dilemma. You will like to change your job but will be reluctant. You will be surrounded with difficulties. It will be wise to take counsel of your close friends and than decide what to do next. You will also overcome tensions in your job/business. There will be lesson for you to learn from it. But you will be successfully able to complete a work that you had wanted without facing any obstacle. You will be successful in love affairs. There will be peace at home. You will also meet a special person who will change your life for good. There will be something new at home with regard to your children or your business.

Gemini: (May 22- June 21)

Your hard work will be duly rewarded. You will also not let any task unfinished. You will make good progress in job/business. You will plan to buy something new for your house. Your enemies will get defeated. You will be able to fulfill your objectives. Your enemies and opponents will feel helpless before you and will get defeated. Your long lasting worries too may end. You may come in contact with some VIP through tele communication channel which will prove useful to you later on. You will also get involved in religious and spiritual activities. You may visit a religious place to seek mental peace. You may get good professional opportunities. You will also get success in departmental or competitive exams/interviews. You will also discuss something important with your spouse. You will love reading books and watching movies.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

It will be a wonderful week for you. You will complete your work with sincerity. You will also achieve lot of name and fame. You will also interact with people a lot and will have direct conversation with the people. You will have much more authority than before. You will have an all favorable time. Financially you will be much secure and stronger. At homes, you will have auspicious functions. You will have a swell time. You will spare some time to be with your elders. Your noble deeds will bring you lot of name and fame. Your disputes with brothers are likely to end. Your terms with the spouse or others will also improve. You will enjoy a very progressive phase in your life. Your family will be your top priority. You may start a partnership business to enhance your business field which shall prove fruitful in every way. If in service you could be transferred to your chosen place.

Leo: (July 23- August 23)

The tide is favorable for you this week. Your fortunes will rise and you will make progress in your life. You will have financial gains in your job/business. But your sky-rocketing expenses will put you in a spot. You need to control them. You will fulfill your professional and social commitments. You will also avoid a conflict with your colleagues. You will overcome all problems intelligently. You will also enjoy love ties with your partner. You could gift him/her a costly and valuable item. Guests will arrive at your home and you will treat them quite lavishly. Venus and Jupiter may brighten your personality impact and help you earn quite handsomely as well. You may get an exhilarating news from your progeny. You will also do well in interviews/exams. You will have a grand time with your family members.

Virgo: (August 24- September 22)

At times we find ourselves on the cross-roads. People from whom we expect a lot let us down. But it also gives us a chance to realize our own worth and potentials. And prove our worth in front of everyone. Thus you will find new vistas of hope. Even though you will come into a world of hard realities yet it will give you some practical and much needed lesson in life. Family members will be proud of your performance. You will be the pride of your family. You will also not rest till you have finished the tasks you have undertaken. Your efforts will win praise from all quarters. You will reach the pinnacle of your career. You will have monetary gains too. You can also attend some auspicious function like marriage or birthday party. You will share special relations with your spouse/partner. You can get promoted in your job and you will add yet another feather to your cap.

Libra: (September 23- Libra 23)

There are money gains indicated this week. Your name and fame will increase and you will put your best efforts in work. Jupiter is active and it will give you lot of benefits. You will work in team spirit to accomplish your goals. The excellent results which you will be getting will make you feel a lot better. You will face some opposition from your opponents but the support you get from your colleagues will not allow situation to overpower you. Old bitterness between siblings will come to an end. Women will be able to establish a balance between work and recreation. You will be full of self confidence and self belief in your own abilities. You will have gains and profits in your business. Your monetary condition will also get better. You will bring future plans into play.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

The passage of time is very favorable for you. Your knowledge will get enhanced. Government related work will get completed. But think twice before starting any new work. Take advice from your seniors who will guide you on the right path. You will feel energetic and full of confidence. Your zest and zeal will be unmatched. You will have monetary gains. You will be sensible regarding your career/business and will take decisions accordingly. You will also have to take a tough decision in your business dealings. You will get peace of mind. You will also get good results of your work. Although you will not do any new work, but you will concentrate or your old job. A pilgrimage trip with family can be planned. You will share good bonding with your siblings. You will be very ambitious about your children's career and will plan accordingly.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 23)

Your fortunes will be on the rise this week. Your hard work will finally pay off and your financial problems will be resolved one by one. You will enjoy good understanding with your spouse/partner. Joy and cheer will prevail in family ties. Conditions at work will be positive. You will get opportunities for progress. The orbit of Moon in your sign will be auspicious. There will be perfect bonding with your love partner and you will understand each other's feelings. You will be able to find a solution to your pending problems. You will do certain work as if on a mission and the situation will be beneficial in business. A meeting with an influential person will open the doors of success for you.

Capricorn: (December 22- January 20)

The time is beneficial from all angles. You will make lot of progress and it will be beneficial from all angles. You will have financial gains. Your income will get doubled. There are chances of new job offers. You will also undertake expansion of your business. Those unemployed will not be disappointed this time around. A major problem will also get averted but you will have to sacrifice a thing dear to you. You will enjoy wonderful bonding with your mate. There are chances of engagement, marriage taking place. You will also come in contact with those who are very concerned about your interests. You will also make plans to change your house, office and shop. Disputes regarding your house, office etc. will come to an end. You will also focus on your studies.

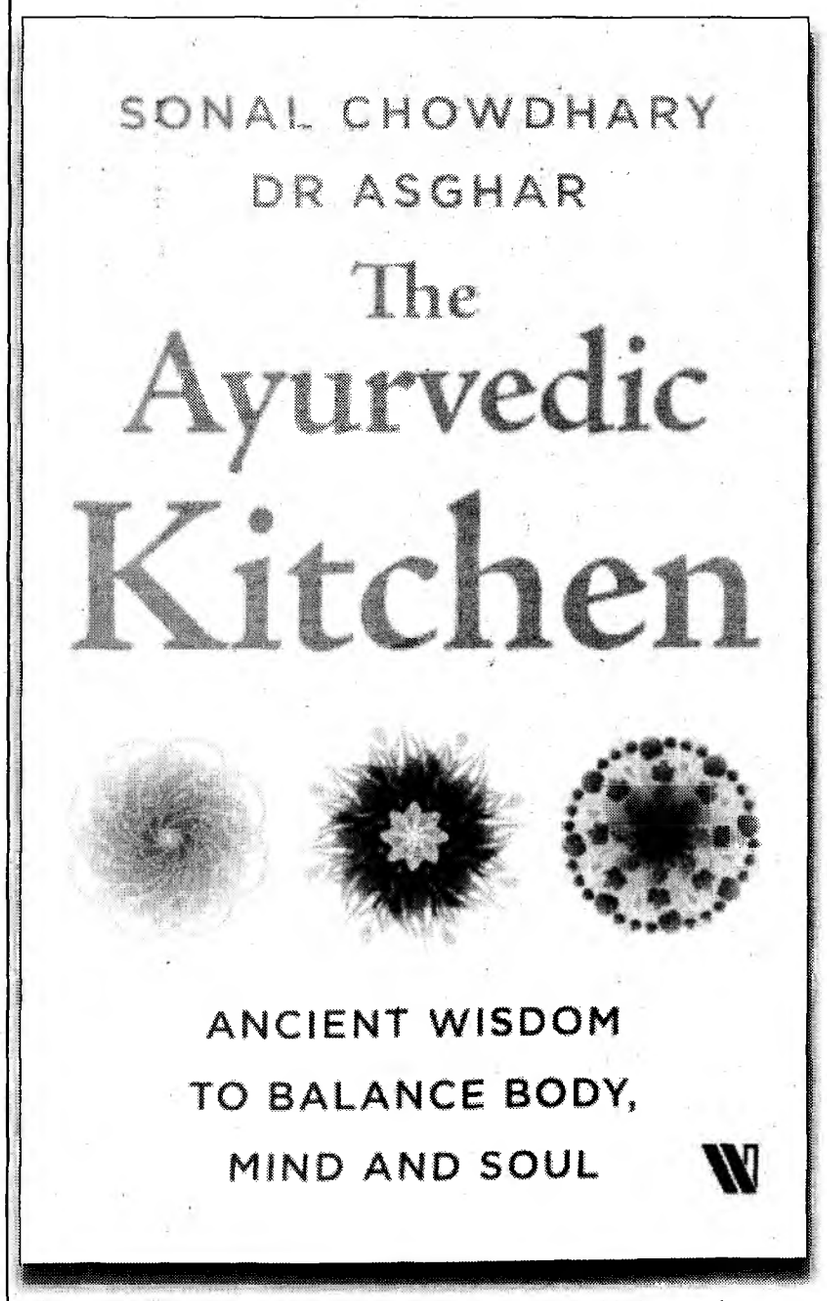
Aquarius: (January 21- February 18)

You will be enthusiastic a lot. Since the conditions are favorable so things will work out. Your work plans will work out nicely and money that was struck somewhere will be released. The differences you have with your neighbors will come to an end. You will visit relatives and will have lot of happy moments to enjoy. Your works will get completed. If you are unmarried then there are chances of your engagements or marriage getting fixed. You will be busy with entertainment and leisure. You will be able to strike a balance between your work and family. You will also meet lot of interesting people. Your opponents will be unable to challenge your supremacy. Your tension at work will get removed. Students will perform well in studies. You will also get new investment opportunities to make money.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

There are chances of gains and profits for you this week. You will discharge your responsibilities very well. You will be able to handle the situation very well. You will also establish a balance between your home and office work. You will also be the recipient of a large amount of money. You will also get support of your better half. Your elders in the family will bless you. You will be troubled in your work due to some reason which you will be unable to understand. There will be improvement in your health. If you are planning for the future take care of all situations. How you present yourself will be an important factor. The differences with your brothers will come to an end. You will receive costly gifts. You might be a guest in some party or function also. There will be peace, harmony and happiness in the home.

AYURVEDA IN YOUR PAN



With the idea behind the book to present Ayurveda in a simplified, contemporary and relatable manner to ensure that the reader can incorporate Ayurvedic principles in their daily cooking and food habits to achieve optimum health, authors Asghar and Sonal Chowdhary say that this system considers food as the first medicine, and in these times of the Pandemic, it has become even more important to stay healthy.

The duo, whose book *The Ayurvedic Kitchen* (Westland Publishers) recently hit the stands stresses that recent times have proven that the best defence against the virus is immunity.

"There is a lot of buzz, curiosity and a variety of readily available information on the internet regarding the same. People try different ways to boost their immunity but unfortunately, the information available on the web gives a blanket approach for everyone. With this book, we want the reader to have an individualised approach as per their own constitution and genotype (which they can know using the Dosha Quiz in the book) and help them understand ways to include immunity-enhancing foods in their diet," Asghar said.

They say the book is for anyone who is looking to reset their food habits which are in sync with their own body, mind and health.

"It will be useful to ayurvedic consultants, nutritionists, dieticians, therapists, as they can guide their patients towards a healthier food approach as the recipes and food items scientifically connotes calories, effects on doshas, seasons and also their nutritional benefits," said Chowdhary.

Both believe that contrary to popular perception, the young are getting more inclined towards natural ways of healing.

"Millennials are increasingly getting aware that natural forms of healing are better as they have minimal or no side effects. They are happiest when diseases are cured with fewer medicines or by practising proper diets or regimens," asserted Chowdhary.

Asghar adds that when one looks at the pathology of diseases, many of them occur owing to incorrect diets and skewed daily regimes – something which Ayurveda sheds much light on.

"Well, the result of wrong eating habits are quite visible to everyone. Lifestyle disorders are on a rise and they are directly linked to incorrect eating habits. The result of these habits have started to build fear in most people and they have started taking more interest towards natural ways to combat the present condition."

Chowdhary added that fitness is becoming important for this experimental generation who are keen to try alternative natural ways and work more towards prevention than looking for cures.

The authors also say that in this time and age, it is paramount to think about the integration of different medical systems that can instrumental in making people healthier.

"This will definitely overcome the lacuna or limitations of all systems," Asghar concluded. *(IANS)*

"What is pride? A rocket that emulates the stars."

—William Wordsworth

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Ukraine again

VLADIMIR Putin is obviously bent on getting Ukraine dancing to his tunes after a 30-year lapse when, like other former USSR constituents, this province too got separated into an independent entity with a professed pro-US tilt and strong backing from the West. His slogan vis-à-vis Ukraine is "One people, a single whole," meaning it ought to be with Russia. The US suspects an attempt at annexation of Ukraine by Russia after it moved over one lakh of troops, military weapons, rocket launchers and missile systems to the border.

President Joe Biden warns that his military will challenge Russia. The scenario is perceived to be the worst since the end of the Cold War, a season of relative peace. Biden is threatening Putin with the largest offensive since WW-II if Russia opts for a military confrontation. The eastern Donbas region of Ukraine along the Russian border is where the heat will be felt first and worst also because pro-Russian militants are active there. NATO forces have moved in there in anticipation of a Russian offensive. Putin had targeted Ukraine seven years ago when he took control of its Crimean peninsula, but the resistance to this aggression continued in the form of a localized war for years. What comes as a dampener to Putin's plans on Ukraine now is a threat from the West, principally the US, that any aggression would involve a huge economic cost to Russia. More specifically the threat is that the nearly 800-km-long newly erected Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline meant to take gas from Russia to Germany will be bombed. Germany already gets half of its energy requirements from Russia via the Nord Stream 1 pipeline as per an existing pact. Alternatively, Germany could look to the Gulf for gas.

A confident Putin says Russia's further response would be based on the US response to its main demand that Ukraine should not be included in the NATO military force of the US and its allies. Notably, Putin gave strong leadership to Russia for the past 22 years. This stability contrasts with democracies, including India, which should necessarily see a change of government every five years. In China too, the Communist Party is having uninterrupted control of the governance, facilitating vision and long-term planning. By contrast, the policies pursued by successive US presidents, drawn from Democrats and Republicans, have their ups and downs. The US is no more a "rising" power. The UK is also seeing frequent change of prime ministers, though Germany under Angela Merkel had a season of stability and growth. For now, Ukraine will pose new challenges to the western world.

The 80:20 election and what it means for India

By Rajdeep Sardesai

Yogi Adityanath has never hidden his saffron robes in politics. Which is why it wasn't a surprise when the Uttar Pradesh chief minister called the elections in India's most populous state as an '80:20' battle, an obvious reference to the Hindu Muslim population ratio in the state. '80 per cent are those who are supporters of nationalism, good governance and development, the 20 per cent are those who are against the Ram Janmabhoomi and sympathise with terrorists," argued Adityanath. Rarely has a chief minister attempted to shape the political discourse in such brazenly communal 'us' versus 'them' terms but then never before has a monk who till not too long ago spearheaded a Hindu militant group become chief minister. In a sense, Adityanath is only setting the template for the 2022 elections, one where religious polarization and identity politics is a key factor not just in UP but across the battleground states.

The chief minister set the tone for dog whistle politics when in September last year he claimed that 'only those who used to say "Abba jaan were digesting ration earlier", a clear barb aimed at Muslims and an implicit reference to the so-called appeasement politics of his predecessor Akhilesh Yadav. When the Taliban marched into Kabul last August, he warned of stern action against home-grown 'Talibanis' who were cheering the armed militia. In fact, in the last five years, the Yogi government has repeatedly invoked national security and anti-terror laws to stereotype Muslims as 'criminal minded'. From a crackdown on 'illegal' slaughter-houses to confiscating property of anti-CAA protestors to legislation aimed at policing inter-faith marriages, the Yogi government has invested a fair amount of its political capital in attempting to create a 'Hindu Rashtra' laboratory where Muslim citizens are 'shown their place'.

A recent UP government ad ominously pushes an open Islamophobic propaganda: in one frame, there is an image of a young man with a vicious look throwing a blazing petrol bomb; the other is of the same man with folded hands, seeking pardon. It is meant to convey a post 2017 transformation in UP since Yogi came to power where '80 per cent' law abiding 'nationalists' no longer have to fear from the '20 per cent' 'rioters' who have been taught a lesson in Yogi Raj.

This '80:20' majoritarian narrative is built upon a history of conflict-ridden three decades wherein Uttar Pradesh's turbulent politics has been tied into combustible religious and caste vote banks. The rise of the BJP in the 1990s as party of unflinching Hindutva aggression saw a reaction in the form of caste consolidation led by the Samajwadi party and Bahujan Samaj party. Both these caste-based parties, one led by a Yadav, the other by a Jatav, saw the Muslims as their 'natural allies'. The competitive courting of Muslim voters, often through

local Islamic clerics and district strongmen with criminal records, made it easier for the BJP to prey on the fear and insecurities of Hindus.

When an Akhilesh Yadav, for example, chooses to invoke Muhammad Ali Jinnah in the same breath as Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru and Patel, he only gives an opportunity to the BJP to accuse the Samajwadi party leader of 'glorifying' the founder of Pakistan only to woo Muslim votes. So what if the average UP Muslim, socially discriminated and economically struggling, has far graver life and livelihood concerns than seeking to 'celebrate' Jinnah? The terrifying demonization of the UP Muslim as an 'anti-national' citizen is complete. Which might also explain why an Asaduddin Owaisi with his strident oratory is positioning himself as a 'protector of Muslims": his incendiary rhetoric in turn only boosts the BJP's 80:20 messaging.

Ironically, Adityanath's 80:20 formulation comes at a time when the BJP is battling to retain its crucial non-Yadav OBC voters who comprise nearly 35 per cent of the electorate. The idea of a 'political Hindu' monolith is being challenged by the growing assertion of smaller OBC parties who feel stifled by the BJP's upper caste driven social engineering. Interestingly, Akhilesh Yadav is trying to stitch together a rainbow coalition of these parties but whether this grouping can offer a sustained challenge to the BJP's Hindutva plus welfarism model of governance is uncertain.

But while UP's divisive politics gets even more hyper-polarised, the worry is that the communal contagion is spreading to other poll bound states. It is no coincidence that the controversial dharma sansad was held in Hardwar in Uttarakhand: many of the sadhu-sants accused of hate speech are close to the ruling BJP establishment there. In Punjab, the aftermath of the prime minister's security lapse in Ferozepur, has seen the BJP's hyper-active social media armies launch a sinister campaign that draws tenuous links between protesting Sikh farmers and Khalistani groups yet again. With the Akalis no longer its allies, the BJP is consciously attempting to woo its Punjabi urban Hindu voter by stoking fears of a revival of Khalistani backed terror and targeting the Channi-Sidhu led Congress for being soft on national security. The result could be a dangerous re-opening of fault-lines that had been supposedly mended in the last two decades in a vulnerable border state.

Why even in tiny Goa, a state that has for decades been a symbol of relative communal peace, past frictions between Hindu and Catholic communities are getting revived. BJP's original Goa mascot, the late Manohar Parikkar, had made a sustained effort in the 2012 elections to reach out to the Church, a move that saw seven out of eight BJP Catholic candidates emerge triumphant and the BJP win a majority on its own in Goa for the first time. Now, against the backdrop of the recent attacks by Hindu militant groups on church halls in neighbouring Karnataka and the sustained campaign against missionaries in the guise of harsh anti-conversion laws, the BJP is finding it very difficult to earn the trust of Goa's large Catholic population. The result is a creeping return to the party's Hindutva agenda to safeguard its core Hindu vote: chief minister Pramod Sawant has called for rebuilding temples destroyed by the Portuguese 500 years ago.

Indeed, for leaders who have no serious answer to the real issues of our times – be it jobs, education, corruption or public health – there is always heightened religious identity based on past animosities to fall back upon. The 2022 elections may end up then offering another chilling glimpse into the future, one that pushes the country closer to a state where religion based majoritarian politics increasingly calls the shots.

Post-script: Being fought in the shadow of Omicron, the 2022 election campaign is expected to have a major digital footprint. Which poses a big challenge: just how does the Election Commission intend to check the hate factories that thrive in the digital world. For starters, the commission could answer a simple question: is Yogi Adityanath's 80:20 remark not a clear violation of the Model code of conduct that prohibits 'any activity' that creates hatred or tension between communities? Its time for the EC to rediscover a spine.

(The writer is senior journalist and author. Mail: rajdeepsardesai52@gmail.com)

India's Green Verge

By Chiranjib Haldar

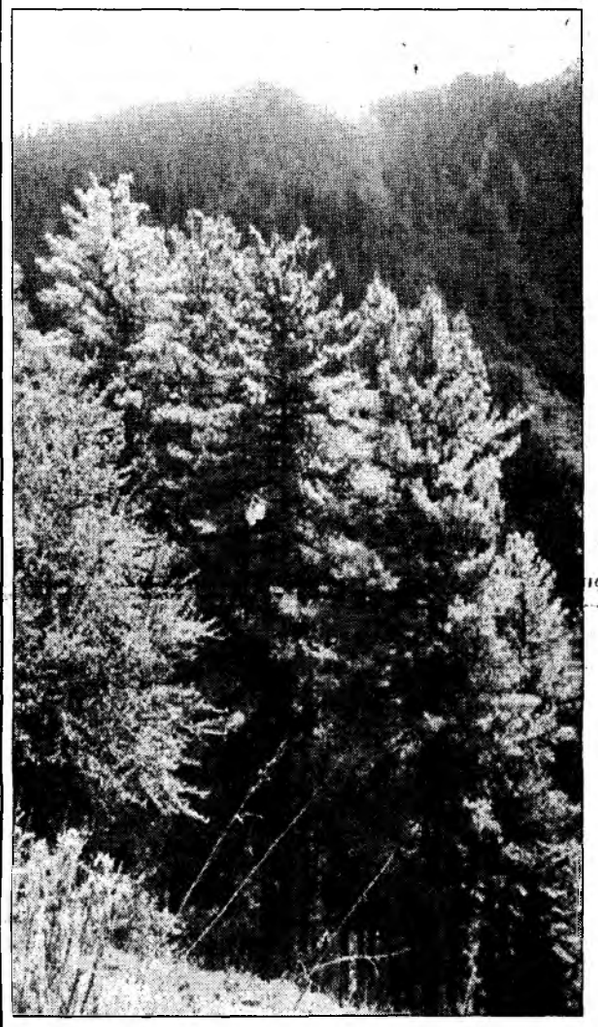
The biennial India's State of Forest Report 2021 has grabbed eyeballs among policy planners, environmentalists and citizens. Numerically, India has recorded an increase of 1,540 sq km in its forest cover, which many citizens & some ecology cynics have been lauding as India's progress in the right direction. But a thorough analysis of the figures and growth in numbers of our forest cover reveals a myopic scenario. Our forest expanse has increased by just 1540 sq km in two years, albeit due to plantation and agroforestry. And if we delve into the findings, there is not much to cheer about because 'forest cover' translates to any piece of land measuring a hectare or more with a tree canopy density of more than 10 per cent. This covers all land, irrespective of legal ownership and usage. So, the report does not mean only those areas recorded as pristine forests in government records.

Before assessing the key takeaways from the Forest Report, it is pertinent to note that India's total forest cover is 713,789 sq km or 21.71 per cent of our total geographical area. As per the National Forest Policy, 1988 India's goal has been to bring one-third or 33 per cent of its geographical area under forest cover. This was also one of the key targets enlisted in the Strategy for New India@75 document released in December 2018 by the NITI Aayog. India has faltered on a number of parameters. As many as 11 states have actually lost their forest cover.

The Forest Survey lists four categories of forests as very dense with canopy density of 70 per cent or more, moderately dense with canopy density between 40 and 70 per cent, open with canopy density between 10 and 40 per cent and scrubs which have a canopy density of less than 10 per cent. The first category or pristine natural forests account for just 3.04 per cent of our total forest cover. As much as 55,430 hectares of woodlands across the country was approved for non-forestry use under the Forest (Conservation) Act,1980 between 2018 and 2021, according to data presented by the Union Ministry of Environment.

Thus, India's forest cover surge is a curated version and not as rosy as it sounds. The quintet of states - Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Odisha, Karnataka and Jharkhand - which have actually contributed the lion's share to the net increase in forest cover have done via plantations and agroforestry. In the past decade (2011-2021), the country has actually slashed 4.3 per cent of its area under moderately dense forests. According to ecologists, it is disappearing of these moderately dense forests nestled close to human settlements and hamlets that bleed the environment most. We need to wrest this immediately. Environmentalists have been highlighting this threat since future amendments to the Forest Act,1980 may further intensify diversion of forest land for non-forest use.

India's mountainous states, already bearing the brunt of climate change have also shrunk in their forest cover. Jammu and Kashmir has lost very dense forest canopies and only marginally increased its commercial plantations. Himachal Pradesh has also reduced its open and moderately dense canopies, especially those close to human habitat. Mapping the climate change hotspots in the country to future time period scenarios, the report predicts grim scenarios. It projects Himalayan states and union territories like Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand recording average rise in temperatures and simultaneous decrease in average rainfall. And the report forecasts an increase in average rainfall in North Eastern states too and peninsular India.



Not everything is hunky-dory for those apprehensive of our fragile environment and ecology. Every North Eastern state, traditionally flag bearers of green expanses, has been consistently losing forest cover. The current report and the preceding 2019 Forest Report also highlight this. Shifting cultivation practised in many North Eastern states and unplanned development agenda are reasons attributed for this decline. Equally worrisome is an overall decadal decline in forest cover across India's 52 tiger reserves and its sole Lion Conservation Area of Gir in Gujarat. Our two most wetland populous corridors of Sunderbans in West Bengal and Kanha in Madhya Pradesh have also witnessed a waning of their green spans in recent years. Forests are the biggest terrestrial carbon reservoirs, but become a source of Carbon Dioxide and other greenhouse gases if they are destroyed. Appropriate mitigation measures to protect our forestry and biodiversity are the need of the hour.

Chiranjib Haldar (9831143930) 1D, Vinayak Garden,41B, Simla Road, Kolkata - 700006

(The writer has been contributing to leading national dailies and premier publications including The Shillong Times for many years and has had substantive stints in broadcast media.)

Letters to the Editor

Resume offline classes

Editor,

Firstly, I would like to thank Br. Solomon for his very informative article that examined and highlighted how the pandemic has affected the lives of children. Secondly, I would request him (being a reputed educator) or anyone else for that matter who can do so, to provide some solutions or strategies by which parents/ guardians/ care-givers can reduce the impact of the pandemic on the children. Most of us have never had to spend so much time with the children at home so the pandemic has been a learning curve for us as well. Some guidance or tips on how to keep the children focused and engaged will be greatly beneficial. While the resumption of offline classes is the best solution, in the absence of that availability we must think of ways in which we can keep children focused and physically and mentally healthy.

Yours etc.,
Mohona Sukumari,
Via email

Kudos Naveen Patnaik!

Editor,

On the auspicious day of Christmas, 2021 the Home Ministry, most likely at the behest of the Union Home Minister Amit Shah, has inexplicably ordered to revoke the registration of the Missionaries of Charity due to the alleged 'adverse inputs' which implied that the Kolkata- headquartered organization 's license under Foreign Contribution Regulation Act for receiving donations from abroad would be halted forthwith. This hard-hearted measure of the saffron government could mean that the functions of Mother Teresa 's mission of compassion for the sick and the dying would be literally compromised!

However, close on the heels of such uncompromising announcement by the Modi dispensation, there was a silver lining of hope in store for the Missionaries of Charity in the noble form of Naveen Patnaik, Odisha's Chief Minister where he earned nation-wide goodwill by declaring on the January 4, last that he can't see the logical corollary of the Center in withholding donations in favour of the helpless victims, the sick and those on their last breath. Thus, Patnaik sanctioned Rs. 78.76 lakh from the Chief Minister 's Relief fund to meet the exigent needs of the Missionaries of Charity of Odisha. Additionally, to ensure that the said authorisation becomes result-oriented, Patnaik has directed all the District Collectors of Odisha to scrupulously take follow-up action that the deserving inmates accounting for 900 of incapacitated souls taking refuge in the thirteen institutions of the Missionaries in Odisha did not suffer for lack of care and nurturing .

In this context, Sr Stany Rose, the head of the sisters of Charity in Odisha has said, "We are indebted to the Odisha Chief Minister for his support, which is as material as it is moral. We never ask for money, but people and organizations do donate after seeing our welfare work for the helpless and the destitute."

While taking into account the foregoing narrative, I am reminded of St Luke's gospel indicated at 19:40 which delineates a triumphal entry of Jesus into the gate of Jerusalem, where the people in multitudes have sung aloud in praise of Jesus. The Pharisees, seeing such unprecedented joy of the masses, demanded of Jesus to stop such ground breaking excitement. And Jesus retorted, "If these people keep silent then the stones will cry out in praise." No wonder, the Odisha Chief Minister has single- handedly dared to wink at the policy of the Modi Government. The nuanced humanitarian understanding of Naveen Patnaik has indubitably won public approbation across the board. Alas! I thought that such mission mode could have been initiated from a Christian state like Meghalaya!

Yours etc.,
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Via email

Delay in completion of Shillong-Sohra road?

Editor,

Through this letter, we would like to draw the attention of the State Government, the Public Works Department (Roads) and all concerned authorities about the delay in starting the work for improvement of the distressed road pavement of the Shillong - Sohra road from Umtyngngar to Mawsmai in Sohra under the Systematic Maintenance Programme of PWD (Roads).

The foundation stone for the project was laid on March 3, 2021 by Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong. But nearly a has passed and sadly only some portion of the road has been laid with Semi-Dense Bituminous Macadam as per the specifications of the project. We could see that only some portions of the road at Mawjrong, Laitryngew and Umstew have been partially paved, that too not up to the expected standard.

The worst portion of the road from Umtyngngar to the spot where stone mining is going on has not been blacktopped. Further, from Mawjrong to Sohra Rim potholes have become a nightmare for commuters. Similar is the case with the portion of the road from Lad Iew Sohra to Pomsohmen and also from Lad Thanad at Saitsohpen to Mawsmai.

People commuting through Shillong - Sohra road including tourists are finding it hard to negotiate through the large potholes along the way. This may also lead to road accidents resulting in injuries and fatalities. We wonder if the reported amount of Rs 12 crore sanctioned for this road maintenance project was meant to be wasted. With monsoons arriving in a few months from now, the whole project would come to a standstill.

We request the authorities including the PWD (Roads) and the MLAs and MDCs of Sohra and Shella constituencies respectively to look into this matter and direct the contractors to execute the work on a war footing and also to ensure that good quality pavement through Semi Dense Bituminous Macadam as sanctioned under the project is laid for the benefit of the people, commuters and tourists.

At the same time, we would like to mention that any delay or faulty execution of this road maintenance project may compel us to take the matter to the appropriate court of law by way of Public Interest Litigation (PIL).

Yours etc.,
James K. Sawian &
Bankhraw Kupar Lyngdoh
Residents of Sohra,
Via email Editor,

Reservation versus Competition

Editor,

A young agricultural student, Banrilang Pynrope has shaken the conscience of many like-minded people who till a few weeks back were unaware of the flawed state reservation policy that was prevailing. Let us understand the history in context of the damage reservation has done to this great nation while others have moved forward. It was in 1933 that the British PM Ramsey Macdonald introduced this "divide and rule policy" in the form of Communal Awards wherein selective positions were made available to Europeans, Indian Christians, Sikhs, Dalits, Hindus, Anglo -Indians etc. It was done purely to 'reward' and foment communal division. It is unfortunate that even after Independence we had to depend on this colonial system which has taken a toll on us.

The state of Meghalaya is a victim of this malady which is why though we have a number of enterprising, intelligent people yet they all fight for seats on the basis of reservation as tribals. The world is getting very competitive and everything is based on merit, skills, personality, aptitude, intellect and knowledge not on reservation. No corporate in the world or in India will give employment based on reservation. Hence I feel that this system should be done away with. This will allow our young people to explore and bring out their talents and skills in such competitions because they have it in them!

Yours etc..
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar
Via email

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