

"Liberty may be endangered by the abuse of liberty, but also by the abuse of power."

— James Madison

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Lessons from Wayanad

THE landslide that hit Wayanad, a hill station in Kerala has claimed over 100 lives. The local media in Kerala claim that the number of casualties has gone up to 150. Extremely heavy rainfall, a fragile ecology particularly vulnerable to landslides, and steadily increasing population all combined to trigger multiple landslides in Wayanad district on Tuesday. Experts say it is the biggest landslide related disaster in Kerala till date going by the number of people dead. Wayanad district received more than 140 mm of rainfall in the 24 hours between the mornings of Monday and Tuesday, about five times more than what is expected, data from India Meteorological Department (IMD) showed. Within the Wayanad district, several areas reported more than 300 mm of rainfall during this period. Now that disaster has struck scientists from the National Centre for Earth Science Studies based at Thiruvananthapuram have stated that there should be restrictions on land use and the general regulations taking into account the ecology have not been implemented.

The possibility of these landslides, in view of the expected rains, had been predicted by the IMD a couple of days ahead of the event. But with no mitigation plan in sight little could be done to save lives. Scientists say that there is need to assess how much rains result in saturation of the soil level in different areas and then define rainfall thresholds for landslides. Also, there is need to map out the routes that landslides are likely to take after they have been triggered. The susceptibility maps are there but the route maps were missing. Route maps would have enabled the scientists to mark out areas which should be out of bounds for settlements or any activities. Madhav Gadgil, former head of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Committee has earlier warned that this region could be wiped off the map if another landslide occurred. The panel headed by Gadgil had classified the region struck by Tuesday's landslide as highly sensitive. Gadgil said the area which had been used by the British to grow tea now has quarries, resorts, artificial lakes and people who violated building laws. Gadgil had visited Wayanad in 2019 and warned that the Western Ghats were severely degraded and that if no action was taken, Kerala would face disaster within four to five years. His predictions hold true but the Government of Kerala ignored these warnings until disaster struck and claimed over 150 lives.

Closer home, the earth cutting activities around Pynursla areas to make way for the Shillong-Dawki highway seem ominous. There are landslide warnings every 500 metres. It is not known if any warnings have been given by geologists and ecologists on the impending disaster of cutting through unstable mountains. Add to this the thousands of quarries that have mushroomed across Meghalaya and we have a disaster in the making. But does anyone really care?

On Hello Meghalaya

By Avner Pariat

In recent years, the proliferation of Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms has revolutionized the way we consume media. These platforms, which deliver content directly to viewers via the Internet, bypass traditional cable and satellite television. While global giants like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+ dominate, the Indian ecosystem has also seen the likes of Hotstar, JioCinema etc sprout out over the past decade. These have been encouraging but there's also been a lot of talk and a growing realization of the need for OTT platforms dedicated to local level creators and regional audiences. An OTT platform designed along these lines might not be just a good initiative but a transformative one.

One of the most compelling reasons for a local OTT (LOTT) platform is the promotion of cultural diversity and representation especially to a non-local audience. Mainstream media often overlooks the rich tapestry of local cultures, languages, and stories. A LOTT platform can showcase regional

films and videos might be just what we need.

Much of the government publicity on Hello Meghalaya has been around the fact that it will cater to local tastes and preferences. Though there is some socio-cultural value in creating this LOTT platform. I am not putting much stock into this aspect because the audience here might not be as financially lucrative as a national or international audience. But regardless, the app has had 1 lakh downloads so far so it might be able to do well financially in the long run but that remains to be seen. Many other LOTT players from across the country have also attempted to do something similar and the verdict is still out on their success. So, we must approach this with a grain of salt. What might be interesting is if the operators of Hello Meghalaya might be able to converge other applications into the LOTT

platform thereby creating a "super app". Again,

is more valuable nowadays than gold so this LOTT platform might be able to provide the owner and creators with access to viewer analytics. This would give them a peek into valuable insights such as audience preferences, viewing habits, and performance metrics. This information could aid the stakeholders in refining their content and better understanding of their audience.

In spite of the loud critics (who have no other role in life but to be opponents of anything done by the government) I tend to agree that in the long run this platform would help to not only preserve but also expand the scope and breadth of local languages and cultures. People learn through what they absorb and if they absorb their own language or culture through this platform then nothing like it. I am wary of one thing though. The fact that this is run and owned

by the government might mean that only certain types of films and videos might be supported. That is worrisome. Governments are not usually known for promoting non-mainstream alternative content. Not here anyway. I had a small role with the Swedish Broadcasting (SVT) two years ago and I was pleasantly surprised that a state corporation would produce the type of content we had on our schedule at the time. I wonder what the Hello Meghalaya policy towards edgier types of content might be.

Much of the real work for Hello Meghalaya might be in the ecosystem it builds around the app itself. It is a good start to create and maintain an app but supporting local talent, including writers, directors, actors, and production crews would

be more important. This is why the financial outlay for film and video production should be considered with some seriousness. Creators here are hard pressed for money and having a dedicated fund for the purpose of financing films and videos (think Films Division, under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India) should be of prime importance. This not only helps in retaining talent within the state but might also spill over into attracting investments. Moreover, local creators, who might struggle to find a footing in the competitive global market, can find a more accessible and supportive environment to hone their skills and gain recognition. YouTube is not going to cut it. It is EXTREMELY competitive and the algorithms are downright punishing. So, this might be a better alternative.

Additionally, a LOTT platform democratizes the process of content creation and distribution. Traditional media gatekeepers, such as large production houses and TV networks, often determine which content gets produced and distributed. This can limit opportunities for independent and emerging creators. Hello Meghalaya might lower these



narratives that resonate with more "adventurous" audiences, who might actively look around for content from other parts of the globe. For me personally, the greatest value of such a platform might actually be in the salient purpose it would serve in keeping local films and videos onto a single accessible digital storage space. I remember how hard it was for us to find a good print of the first ever Khasi feature film called Ka Synjuk Ri Ki Laiphew Syiem (1981). We had to go hunting for it from one filmmaker's house to another before we managed to get a very bad copy of it eventually. This LOTT platform might allow us to never repeat that unfortunate situation again. A future-proof online home for Meghalaya's

this is all beyond my technical knowledge but the fact that 1 lakh people are convinced enough to download Hello Meghalaya is no small achievement. It might be a means towards behavioural modification as well. In the days after World War 1, the US government managed to get a population which had almost no knowledge of the stock market to start buying stocks because it had got them to buy war bonds during the war years. This Hello Meghalaya might be something along a similar vein - getting a population which has little knowledge of digital transactions to start making said transactions. I don't know. I am just musing to myself at this juncture but the possibility remains. On a similar note, data

barriers, allowing more voices to be heard. By offering a direct-to-consumer model, creators can maintain greater control over their work, fostering innovation and creative freedom. The last point is extremely important.

Finally, apart from entertainment, LOTT platforms can play a crucial role in disseminating educational and informative content. From local history and geography to practical information on agriculture, health, and governance, these platforms can serve as valuable resources for local communities. By partnering with educational institutions and local experts, Hello Meghalaya can provide content that not only entertains but also educates and informs.

The Political Dimensions of Food

By Unmana Chakraverty

Food has long been a subject of global challenges and a crucial political tool, particularly in developing countries. Over time, it has not only remained a political issue but also contributed significantly to reinforcing stereotypical gender roles. Despite its importance, this topic is seldom addressed in prime-time debates or other public forums.

In India, over time there have been various conflicts and controversies related to food consumption and production, such as the meat bans across various states and the farmers' protests in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. Media portrayals have also reinforced stereotypes associated with specific foods and the people who consume them. For instance, meat or non-vegetarian food is often linked to Islam and Christianity, leading to the misconception that adherents of these religions can never eat vegetarian food and will always prepare non-vegetarian dishes at home. This has resulted in hesitancy among individuals from different religions or castes to eat at one another's homes.

Gender stereotypes are also evident in social dining situations; for example, when a group of friends dines at a restaurant, a girl eating more than a boy is viewed unusually. People often compare men's and women's appetites, suggesting that men can eat more, making it surprising or overwhelming to see women overeat men. Food stereotypes and dynamics have been present in India since ancient times. In ancient India, people consumed natural foods like fruits, vegetables, meat, and fish.

According to an article published in IndiaNetzone, the discovery of fire led to the ability to cook vegetables and meat. Notably, in ancient times, there was no differentiation among food items, as survival was the primary concern, and food was not linked to gender, caste, religion, or politics. Over time, people learned about cropping, farming, and agricultural cultivation, leading to the production of rice, wheat, and pulses. It is believed that cooking mutton and chicken was influenced by practices from Thailand, and complex religious practices eventually introduced distinctions between vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods.

The arrival of Islam in India around 1100 AD brought dietary changes, such as the prohibition of pork, deemed 'haram' in Islam. Meanwhile, Hindus, who worship the cow, refrained from eating beef, which is consumed by Muslims. This created focal points for political and communal conflicts. Over time, food was categorized into three types: Satvik, Rajsik, and Tamsik. Satvik food, associated with purity and goodness, includes fruits, green leafy vegetables, and milk products. Rajsik food, linked to passion and activity, consists of spicy, salty, and stimulating items. Tamsik food, connected to lethargy and dullness, includes meat and alcohol.

The sepoy mutiny in 1857 started due to the controversy that the bullets of Enfield Rifles were made of cow and pig fat which had hurt the religious sentiments of the soldiers in the British army. This led to the outbreak of the sepoy mutiny in 1857. Food has always been a politically charged topic in our country where different political parties try to use food as a political strategy to win votes in places where they think they can dominate by causing communal conflicts. In February 2021, the Karnataka government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), enacted the Karnataka Prevention of Slaughter and Preservation of Cattle Act, 2020. This legislation bans the slaughter of cattle and focuses on their preservation. In contrast, meat bans

have historical precedents in other states like Maharashtra, where the Congress-led Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) implemented a one-day meat ban in 1964 for the Jain festival of Paryushan Parva. The debate over meat bans remains a contentious issue in Indian politics, with varying positions taken by different political parties, hence it should be noted that it is not just BJP that has tried to instrumentalise food as a political tool, but different parties have tried to curb the freedom of choice in food.

Until recently, the controversy over food has primarily centered around beef. The cow is considered sacred by Hindus, and its slaughter has been prohibited in most Indian states for a long time. However, the conflict over beef has escalated since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government came to power in 2014. The ruling party has closed slaughterhouses in its stronghold states, and Hindu right-wing groups have violently targeted Muslim cattle farmers.

The recent farmers' protests in 2021 and 2024 have also created a lot of stir in the country where the farmers from Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana were protesting for the legalization of MSP (minimum support prices). These protests have posed a great challenge to the Modi government, hence once again bringing food, economy and politics under the same umbrella (Alluri, 2022).

In Indian and Pakistani societies, food has significantly contributed to the distinction between men and women. A Hindi proverb states, "Mard ke dil karaasta uske pet se hokar jaata hain," which translates to "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach." This phrase, frequently used in television shows and films, implies that women are expected to cook delicious food to win a man's affection, regardless of their other qualities. Additionally, there is a prevalent belief that women should have smaller appetites and avoid spicy food, unlike men. These stereotypes perpetuate gender inequality, even in the realm of basic human needs like food.

Beyond gender stereotypes, food can also contribute to misleading narratives in cinema and art. In Bollywood films, non-vegetarian food is often linked to villainy. For instance, in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film Padmaavat, Ranveer Singh's character, Alauddin Khilji, a ruler from the Khilji dynasty and the film's antagonist, is depicted as consuming large amounts of chicken. Such subtle details often go unnoticed by the general audience but are scrutinized by film critics and scholars. For example, an article by Vishal Menon in Film Companion discusses this issue, questioning why non-vegetarian food is associated with evil in the media, despite the majority of the Indian population consuming it. Menon cites a scene from the 2023 blockbuster Jawan, where Sanya Malhotra's character, Dr. Eram urgently calls the health secretary for oxygen cylinders, portrayed as a Christian man, is shown eating a chicken leg-piece during this crucial moment. This was a highly emotional scene, and the portrayal of the health secretary eating meat while ignoring the plight of children in the hospital was meant to emphasize his callousness. Over a period of time there have been numerous elements in Indian society that have been testimonial to the fact that food is a very dynamic subject and goes beyond being just a matter of basic need and survival.

(The writer is pursuing Master's in Media and Communication studies from Christ University in Bengaluru)

Letters to the Editor

Embracing natural farming in Meghalaya

Editor, Meghalaya, the "Abode of Clouds," is celebrated for its scenic beauty and rich agricultural traditions. Recently, the State has seen a growing movement towards natural farming, a shift driven by the need for sustainable and environmentally friendly agricultural practices. Meghalaya has adopted the "Meghalaya State Organic and Natural Farming Policy 2023" to become a national leader in organic farming. On January 9, 2024, Dr. Himanshu Pathak, Secretary of DARE and Director General of ICAR, inaugurated the B.Sc. (Hons.) Natural Farming degree program at the College of Agriculture, Central Agricultural University, Imphal, Meghalaya. Natural farming avoids chemical fertilizers and pesticides, instead using organic inputs and traditional methods. Natural farming reduces input costs, enhances soil health, stabilizes yields, and commands premium prices. It improves self-sufficiency, diversifies income, lowers health costs, benefits from government support, and boosts market access. Natural farming also resonates with Meghalaya's cultural values, where communities have long lived in harmony with nature.

Meghalaya's hilly terrain, rich soil, high rainfall, and moderate temperatures create ideal conditions for natural farming. Traditional

practices like 'jhum' shifting cultivation, mixed cropping, and indigenous knowledge enhance sustainability, biodiversity, and soil health, allowing diverse crop cultivation while reducing the need for chemical inputs and irrigation. These sustainable practices not only protect the environment but also improve the livelihoods of small farmers, contributing to the state's overall economic growth.

Padma Shri awardee Subhash Palekar is popularly known as "Krishika Rishi" by many farming communities in India. He is an agricultural scientist who pioneered the concept of Natural Farming in the country. Additionally, natural farming helps preserve local seed varieties and encourages the use of local resources, making farmers more self-sufficient. The central government has supported this transition through initiatives like the Mission Organic Value Chain Development for North Eastern Region (MOVCDNER). These programs provide essential training, financial aid, and market connections, ensuring that organic farming remains sustainable and profitable. As Meghalaya continues to adopt natural farming, it sets an inspiring example for other regions. The state's dedication to sustainable agriculture promises a healthier and greener future, securing food security and environmental health for future generations. Through the promotion and adoption of natural farming, Meghalaya is building a robust agricultural system that respects its natural heritage and ensures ecological balance for the years to come.

Yours etc., Ibalahun Nongbsap, Via email

MPSC: With great Power comes great Responsibility

Editor, Following the release of the MCS (Prelims) 2023 supplementary list, a number of circumstances have arisen. In my opinion, if someone had complaints about the MPSC, they need to have addressed the Commission and sought detailed clarification. Since the candidate who filed the petition claimed to have been wronged, they had every right to do so. When the results were announced, any candidate who thought they had passed the cut-off would undoubtedly examine their scores and look for an explanation because they would be concerned. Errors can occur in MPSC test questions, just as they happen in other reputable exams like UPSC, SSC, NEET, GATE, and JEE. Although MPSC committed a mistake, I believe that by admitting 62 applicants rather than only the petitioner, they have done right. Since the MPSC is a constitutional body and has demonstrated transparency in a recent case when it took the subject seriously and sought an expert review, no one can contest the MPSC's judgment. According to the KSU Education Secretary, they tried to find out why, in the absence of such a system, the MPSC had approved the petition in the first place.

The answer is straightforward: since each State Public Service Commission has the authority to accept and administer justice to anyone who approaches them, an irate candidate who felt confident that he or she had cleared would surely be unhappy and would petition the Commission. The MPSC is not an exception if other state public services commission tests, including central exams like the SSC, allow for answer challenges.

Even though the Commission made mistakes, they were rectified, and it takes time to go over the contested responses. It cannot be eliminated in a single day. I concur that a resolution should have been reached by March, the earliest possible time, in order to avoid elections. It became much longer when the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) was put into effect. I would prefer that KSU petition the MPSC to allow only those candidates who successfully challenged incorrect answer keys and received their meritorious marks to be allowed to write their exams since they had found out the mistakes instead of allowing everyone to rewrite their exams. The answer keys should also be posted on the website after exams are over, giving candidates two weeks to contest answers if they so choose, provided they can provide supporting documentation.

Finally, the MPSC should change a regulation that would otherwise charges of Rs 50 -100 for each question that is challenged in SSC and NET exams

Yours etc., Samuel R Marak Tura Town -1

Non-resumption of 5th semester classes in Umshyrpi College

Editor, I am writing this letter to express my concern about the prolonged closure of Umshyrpi College after the 4th semester exams held in the month of June. Other colleges in Shillong affiliated to the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) have already resumed classes for the 5th semester from the first week of July whereas the resumption date for classes for Umshyrpi College is still unknown. As a student, I am confused as to why the administration of Umshyrpi College is not resuming classes for the 5th semester students since classes for the Higher Secondary section and the NEP batch are already in session. This prolonged closure is really affecting the students of 5th semester as it delays the academic calendar making the students from Umshyrpi College lag behind their counterparts from other colleges.

We are in the month of August and till now no notice has been issued for resumption of classes. In the coming months, several co-curricular activities are expected and in such a scenario the academic syllabus cannot be completed owing to the protracted delay in resumption of classes.

The students would appreciate it if Umshyrpi College would resume classes for the 5th semester students as soon as possible keeping

in mind the welfare of the students.

Yours etc., A concerned student of Umshyrpi College, Name withheld on request, Via email

Compromised tourism sector

Editor, We cannot let Assam assert so much power over our tourism. Why should it be that just because HNYF checks Assamese tourist cabs, that tourism should take a hit? I'm not supporting HNYF but just making a point that the whole tourism industry cannot be so compromised. Is it the Assamese media, or the word on the street that is deterring tourism? It is utterly silly that tourists should stop visiting just because of a scuffle between HNYF and Assamese cab drivers. This is not acceptable. Our tourism is based on our own natural bounty. It should not be compromised by any section of tourists. We do need the Umroi Airport to develop faster and better to bypass Assam totally for our tourism. Otherwise, we need a strong government that will ensure that Assam cannot hamper our tourism in any way. It is our right to see how best our state and our people benefit from it.

Yours etc., John Saitkhuid, Shillong

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"The things you're closest to are often the things you know least about."

— Matthew Desmond

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Revisiting reservations

IT is nobody's argument that the reservation policy for jobs in government service as also in education has, over the past three-quarters of a century, significantly helped achieve its aim of uplifting the socially backward and downtrodden sections of the population. Most of the government jobs are vested in the hands of specific segments of the population and the scenario has not substantially changed between the time of Independence and now. In this context, Supreme Court Judge Justice Pankaj Mittal has called for a relook at the reservation system, saying that other methods are needed to uplift the downtrodden among the SC-ST-BC populations.

One cannot ignore the fact that smaller segments from these communities have benefited from the quota system and are occupying government jobs or even parliamentary and legislative positions. Accusations are that the entire system of recruitments and the criteria thereof have been tweaked in favour of the upper layers of the society. While there is substantial representation to SC-ST segments in parliamentary politics thanks to the quota system built into the Constitution by its main architect BR Ambedkar, they are hardly seen in the upper layers of the bureaucracy. As things stand, they will not be found in significant posts even 100 years after Independence. Justice Mittal also rightly noted that the benefits of reservations are appropriated by the emerging well-off segments of the SC-ST-BCs. As a result of the flaws in the quota system, it is noted that the judiciary is saddled with petitions. This "could have been avoided if a robust reservation policy was followed from the very beginning instead of making piecemeal changes." The view is also that the reservation system revived the caste-based considerations, rather than the society seeking to move away from it.

It is submitted that "reservation can instead be on the basis of economic or financial factors." In fact, the Centre has introduced 10 per cent reservations for Economically Backward Classes, meant exclusively for the forward castes. This reduced their resentment against the quota system. The other side is not amused at this. The reservations for BCs under the Mandal Commission recommendations led to massive protests, based on which the politics in the northern states changed phenomenally since the 1990s. The 10 years of the Narendra Modi-led government steered clear of socially hot topics and avoided confrontations. While this ensured peace except in the issue of CAA or NRC, most subjects that require urgent attention or periodic changes remain unattended. The first priority of this government is survival and winning of elections. This is resulting in a feeling that this government has no character. It survives on gimmicks and lip-service to the poor.

Migrants, Migraines and Miscreants!

By Pynshailang Lyngkhai

In a tragic turn of events, the recent "alleged" killings of migrant workers in Meghalaya have shocked me, the state and the nation, casting a spotlight on the persistent issues of violence and tension in the region. On July 6, 2024, the bodies of four unidentified individuals were found in a village of East Jaintia Hills. This incident not only devastated the affected families but has also raised questions about the concerns of migrant workers and their safety in the state.

In view of the recent events, the Khasi Student Union (KSU) has intensified its activities by establishing the Inner Line Permit (ILP) check zones across the Khasi Jaintia Hills with an aim to regulate the entry of non-locals into the regions, ensuring compliance with the ILP system—a mechanism designed to protect indigenous communities by controlling migration and over-population. Now, the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system is an offshoot of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, 1873, by which an "Inner Line" was prescribed for the tribal areas. To put it in simple terms for a "few" out there, it was originally conceived during the British Colonial Era as a protective mechanism aimed at regulating the influx of non-indigenous people into certain north-eastern states of India. It is like an exclusive club membership, but instead of VIP access to a fancy lounge, you get to enter and work in places like Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland. Meghalaya, however, remains an outlier in this north-eastern ILP club. Despite fervent appeals from the local "bodies" and political leaders, the State has yet to see the implementation of ILP. The absence of this regulation is akin to leaving the front door open during a party—everyone's welcome, but managing the crowd becomes a nightmare.

The absence of the ILP in Meghalaya has stirred a complex pot of socio-economic issues. On one hand, the open-door policy attracts a steady stream of migrant workers, essential for sectors such as construction, etc. On the other hand, it fuels anxiety among local communities who fear being outnumbered and losing their cultural identity. Again! It is a bit like hosting a potluck where everyone brings their own dish—some contributions are delightful, but too many chefs spoil the broth. Without ILP, the state struggles with unchecked migration, leading to strained resources, increased competition for jobs, and heightened social tensions.

The recent tragic incident underscores these challenges, revealing that there is a simmering discord beneath Meghalaya's picturesque surface. But would things be different if ILP is actually implemented? Would it change... anything? Well for instance ("hypothetically"), implementing the Inner Line Permit (ILP) in Meghalaya might seem like a

very straightforward solution to control migration, but it could also open up a can of worms—or rather, a bag of beet nuts. Firstly, imagine the logistical nightmare. Setting up ILP zones would be like trying to organize a surprise birthday party for someone who already knows about it—everyone's on edge, and the element of surprise is lost. Political executives would need to roll out a whole new system of permits for checks, and balances. The queues at ILP checkpoints could rival those at a new trendy café in Shillong, where the line is out of the door and everyone's complaining about the wait. For local businesses, the

stopping people left and right to check work permits that are not technically required. It is like checking for a license to sing in the shower—completely unnecessary and baffling to those who just want to go about their work. These checkpoints, intended to preserve local culture and control migration, often end up creating more confusion and resentment. Migrant workers, who are already vulnerable, now have to navigate these checkpoints, adding another layer of stress to their daily lives. It is as if they have been thrown into a real-life game of "Survivor: Meghalaya Edition" where the challenges are endless



ILP might feel like getting stuck in a traffic jam on the way to a crucial meeting—frustrating and potentially costly. Many rely on migrant labour for their operations, and a stringent ILP system could mean fewer hands-on-decks, slowing down everything, even construction projects. The joke would be on them as they scramble to find local workers willing to take up these jobs, only to realize that most prefer the comfort of their homes over hard labour.

TOURISM!—a vital part of Meghalaya's economy, could also take a hit. Imagine tourists trying to navigate the ILP system like it is an escape room challenge—they might just give up and head to more ILP-free zones. It's hard to enjoy the serene beauty of the Living Root Bridges when you're tangled in red tape and paperwork. Then there's the potential for increased corruption. ILP implementation could turn into a game of "how much to pass, go?" with some officials pocketing bribes. In a state known for its laid-back vibe, the introduction of ILP might inject an unwanted dose of poverty and tension. So, while the rest of the country might be chuckling at Meghalaya's attempts to regulate its borders, the locals could be left asking if the cure was worse than the disease.

And now, as if the tragic killings of migrant workers and the lack of an Inner Line Permit (ILP) weren't enough, Meghalaya now finds itself grappling with a massive migraine of political executives and social headaches. First on the list of headaches are the Bouncers, who have taken it upon themselves to set up ILP check zones. Picture this: a bunch of enthusiastic self-appointed security guards

and the rewards seem out of reach.

Then there's the never-ending debate over the ILP itself. Implementing ILP in Meghalaya is like debating whether to install a sprinkler system in a rain forest—sure, it might help in certain situations, but it feels a bit redundant and over-the-top. On one hand, proponents argue that ILP is necessary to protect local interests and manage migration effectively. On the other hand, critics point out that it could stifle economic growth and create unnecessary red tape, turning everyday activities into a nightmare.

Without ILP, the state faces issues of unchecked migration and cultural tensions. But with it, it could become an administrative quagmire, where everyone's energy is spent on paperwork and checkpoints rather than productive activities. It is a classic Catch-22 situation, where any solution seems to bring its own sets of problems. The ripple effects of this migraine-inducing situation are felt throughout the state. Local businesses worry about the impact on their workforce, as migrant workers are essential to many industries. Meanwhile, the social fabric of Meghalaya is strained as local communities and migrant workers navigate their uneasy coexistence. The recent violence has only heightened these tensions, making it clear that a sustainable solution is desperately needed. However, finding that solution is proving to be as elusive as a good Wi-Fi signal in the middle of a monsoon.

The situation in Meghalaya is a tangled web of issues that collectively create a massive migraine for everyone involved. From the

bouncers' overzealous checkpoints to the never-ending ILP debate, the state is caught in a cycle of confusion and frustration. Addressing these issues requires not just policy changes, but also a healthy dose of patience, understanding, and maybe a few paracetamols. Because if there's one thing everyone can agree on, it is that this metaphorical migraine needs to be cured before Meghalaya can move forward in peace and prosperity. As if the migrant issue and the bouncers' overzealous checkpoints were not enough, we now have a third player in this chaos: the miscreants. These opportunistic troublemakers seem to thrive on the confusion and chaos, like mosquitoes at a summer barbecue—annoying, persistent, and always making things worse.

In the midst of the turmoil, these miscreants have seized the opportunity to stir the pot even further. From petty crimes to more serious acts of violence, they're like those pranksters who set off firecrackers in a crowded room—adding panic to an already tense situation. They exploit the lack of clear regulations and the stretch-thin law enforcement to create havoc, leaving everyone else to clean up the mess. It is easy for these troublemakers to slip through the cracks when everyone's too busy pointing fingers. The local authorities are tied up with trying to manage the KSU's checkpoint enthusiasm, while community leaders are caught in endless debates over the ILP. Meanwhile, the real culprit sneaks by, much like cats stealing food while everyone's arguing over dinner.

But let's not forget the real victims in all of this situation—the migrant workers—who came to Meghalaya seeking a better life, only to find themselves in a whirlwind of confusion and danger. The miscreants' actions add another layer of fear and instability, making an already difficult situation even more unbearable. Despite all the chaos, it is important to find a glimmer of hope and humour. After all, laughter is the best medicine—even for a migraine this big. So, as we navigate these turbulent times, let us remember to keep our sense of humour intact. Perhaps the next time you encounter a bouncer checkpoint, you can joke about having your shower-singing license ready. Or when discussing the ILP, maybe suggest a permit for smiling—because we could all use more of that.

(This entire article is intended to shed light on the serious issues facing Meghalaya, from the tragic deaths of migrant workers to the political and social challenges that need addressing. The aim is to inform and entertain, with a touch of humour to make the heavy topics more approachable. The deaths of the migrants should not be forgotten, and nothing said here should be taken too seriously or too lightly. The writer did not intend to offend any particular groups or individuals.)

Contribution of Tourism to the GDP of Meghalaya

By VK Lyngdoh

Tourism contributes to the Gross Domestic Product (A monetary value of all finished goods and services made) and overall economic health of a state or country. To assess the contribution of tourism to the GDP of a state or country involves considering several key factors:

1. **Tourism Direct GDP:** This measures the direct contribution of tourism to the economy, including spending by tourists on accommodation, food, entertainment and transportation.

2. **Employment Generation:** The number of jobs created directly and indirectly by the tourism sector, including those in hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, and other related services.

3. **Tourism receipts:** The revenue generated from international and domestic tourists, including spending on goods and services.

4. **Tourism Value Added:** The net output of the tourism sector after subtracting intermediate consumption. This helps in understanding the actual economic value generated by tourism.

5. **Foreign Exchange Earnings:** Revenue earned through tourism, which can significantly impact the balance of payments.

6. **Contribution to Government Revenues:** Taxes and fees collected from tourism-related activities, such as hotel taxes, airport fees, and sales taxes on tourism services.

7. **Infrastructure Development:** Investment in infrastructure like airports, roads, and public facilities that support tourism and contribute to overall economic development.

8. **Tourism Satellite Account (TSA):** A standardised framework recommended by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) to measure the economic impact of tourism. It provides detailed data on tourism's contribution to GDP, employment and other economic indicators.

9. **Seasonality and Regional Distribution:** Understanding the seasonal patterns of tourism and its distribution across different regions helps in planning and managing resources effectively.

10. **Sustainable Tourism Practices:** Assessing the implementation of sustain-

able tourism practices and their impact on long-term economic growth and environmental conservation.

These factors collectively provide a comprehensive picture of how tourism contributes to the GDP and overall economic health of a state or a country.

I am inquisitive at finding out what the contribution of tourism in Meghalaya to the State GDP is. But it is very difficult to obtain the data on this matter given the fact that there are ten key factors as stated above to assess the contribution of tourism to the GDP of the State. However, I thank the Deputy Director Economic and Statistics, Meghalaya of the National Income Division (ND) for providing me the data which they have worked on their own in spite of their limited resources given the vastness of the factors involved to work out the estimates that tourism sector contributes to the State's economy. I was informed that during the COVID-19 years, the contribution of tourism was less than 1 percent of the GDP of the State. Tourism then picked up in 2022-23 to 2.49 percent which in monetary terms equals Rs 995 crore. This is a substantial sum and if tourism nosedives many who earn their livelihoods from it will be rendered jobless and their investment infructuous.

According to the Statistical Hand Book, Meghalaya, 2023, Directorate Economics and Statistics, Table 25.03 Hotel Occupancy Statistics shows that in 2018 Meghalaya had 502 hotels which remained the same till time COVID 19 struck. The numbers have gone up to 550 in 2021 with 63 % of the Hotels located in Shillong. In 2022 the number went up to 727 in the State. Surely it is a huge investment made by both the private and the government sector. Statistics also indicate that in 2020, when COVID 19 struck occupancy nosedived to -98 percent and recorded just 27,045 tourists visiting the state. It further picked up in 2021, recording 1,54,820 which is up by 472.45 % and in 2022 it went up to 9,44,865 that is up by 510%. Recent press reports indicate that booking has slumped to 30%. This means that there is a reduction to the tune of 233% when compared with the occupancy rate of 2022. This is alarming. It is important to note that tourism flourishes if safety is top class. The tertiary sector of the economy that is tourism has a huge potential to grow and thrive in Meghalaya.



Letters to the Editor

Daily unannounced power cuts: Why make fancy promises?

Editor,
Despite repeated assurances from the Power Minister, Mr. A.T. Mondal, that there would be no power interruptions, it is utterly frustrating to witness daily unannounced power cuts. It is even more frustrating that the Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited (MeECL) has not issued any notifications regarding these outages, yet residents are experiencing power cuts for a minimum of 2-3 hours daily in urban areas and 4-5 hours in rural areas. This has been happening without fail for a few months now.

After a season of heavy rainfall, the government has claimed that the reservoirs are full, citing that the state received 117.32 cm of rain between June 1 and July 3, which is 44% more than normal. Given these conditions, it is perplexing and unacceptable that the people of Meghalaya are still subjected to these daily power outages.

What does it take for a government of the 21st century to ensure 24x7 supply of electricity? While the government is busy making umpteen numbers of new bodies and organisations every year in the name of growth and supporting it with fancy policies, how does it plan to attract investments into the State when it struggles to provide the most basic utility? The current situation is untenable, and the people of Meghalaya deserve answers and a prompt

resolution to this ongoing issue. Perhaps they will only be brought to shame when there's a power outage during one of their music shows.

Yours etc.,
Patrick Kurbah,
Via Email

Turmoil in the Middle East

Editor,
We might be immune from repercussions as the Middle East boils, but it is a tinderbox waiting to explode and spread across, as borders become uncontrollable because of the global complexity in economy and employability. It does say a lot about national security. In just hours, from Beirut to Tehran, targeted assassinations of a high-profile Hezbollah commander Faud

Shukr and Hamas political wing chief, Ismail Haniyeh has brought the central focus to a long war in the Middle East and the geo-political map which will change and repercussions felt in Asia where a sizeable presence of foreign fighters are willing to fill the emotional vacuum. The backlash in Bangladesh was just a small example as to why disturbance in geoeconomics can hit markets like India where recently fish prices in Kolkata took a beating including medical tourism in India, the bulk of which arrives from neighbouring countries. Trade and security is an unpaid debt which needs to be balanced at all costs. Principal stakeholders should not play the vote bank card because stoking the embers will give non-state actors who are maligning to take the higher ground. Bertil Lintner, in his book 'Great Game East'

weaves the narratives of history, culture and borders, giving examples of Asian giants like India and China where mismanagement in leadership is a definite suicide for the survival of a nation.

Yours etc.,
Christopher Gathphoh,
Shillong-10

Embracing minimalism in the modern era

Editor,
I am writing to share my thoughts on the relevance of minimalist living in our fast-paced, materialistic world. As we navigate the complexities of the modern era, adopting a minimalist lifestyle can offer profound benefits for individuals and society as a whole.

Understanding Minimalism
Minimalism is more than just an aesthetic trend; it's a mindset that encourages intentional living. Its roots trace back to thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau in the 19th century, who promoted simplicity and solitude as paths to enlightenment. Over time, minimalism has expanded beyond art and design to influence many aspects of our lives.

The Modern Minimalist
In today's digital age, the modern minimalist embraces simplicity. They understand that true wealth is not found in accumulating possessions but in cherishing moments and experiences. Rather than measuring success by material gain, they value the present moment and find contentment in small, everyday events. By decluttering their lives—both physically and mentally—they create space

for what truly matters. **Benefits of Minimalism**
Reduced Stress: Minimalism reduces the mental burden of excess stuff. When we focus on essentials, we experience less stress and anxiety.

Environmental Impact: By consuming less, we contribute to sustainability. Minimalists prioritize quality over quantity, supporting eco-friendly choices.

Financial Freedom: Minimalism encourages mindful spending. Cutting unnecessary expenses frees up resources for meaningful experiences.

Enhanced Well-Being: A clutter-free environment promotes mental clarity, creativity, and overall well-being.

Applying Minimalism: We can incorporate minimalism into various aspects of our lives. At home we can declutter spaces, donate un-

used items, and create calm environments.

We need to limit screen time, unsubscribe from digital noise, and focus on meaningful online interactions. In consumption we choose quality over quantity and invest in versatile items, and avoid mindless shopping. As we deal with information overload, consumerism, and environmental challenges, minimalism offers a refreshing perspective. Let us embrace simplicity, appreciate life's moments, and contribute to a more balanced and mindful society.

Yours etc.,
Pankaj Kumar
Shillong

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"Peace without justice is tyranny."

— William Allen White

The Shillong Times

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Social Justice – An Imperative

THE recent Supreme Court ruling of August 1, has permitted sub-classification of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes with the intention of granting separate quotas for those more backward within these communities. The 7-member bench comprising Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud along with Justices BR Gavai, Vikram Nath, Bela Trivedi, Pankaj Mithal, Satish Chandra Sharma, and Manoj Misra, saw a majority of six judges in favour of sub-classification, with Justice Trivedi dissenting. Justice B R Gavai observed that, "the State must evolve a policy for identifying the creamy layer even from the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) so as to exclude them from the benefit of affirmative action." The term creamy layer which refers to those from among the SCs and STs who have benefitted from the reservation policy and so too their children, was first mentioned in the Indra Sawhney ruling of 1992. Based on the recommendation of the Mandal Commission, the V P Singh government had on August 13, 1990, notified 27% reservation for Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (OBC reservation) in civil posts and services. This was challenged in the Supreme Court by Indra Sawhney and others

In November 16, 1992 However, a nine-judge Bench headed by Justice B P Jeevan Reddy, upheld the 27% OBC reservation subject to exclusion of the creamy layer, or the more socially, economically, and educationally advanced members among the OBCs. This was done in order to ensure that reservation benefits go to those who need it the most. The logic of determining the creamy layer was made by an expert committee headed by the retired Justice Ram Nandan Prasad, which was constituted following the Indra Sawhney judgement. Based on the committee's report (March 10, 1993), the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) listed six categories of people whose children would be considered to fall in the creamy layer. These are: Constitutional/statutory post; Group 'A' and group 'B' officers of central and state governments, employees of PSUs and statutory bodies, universities; Colonel and above in armed forces and equivalent in paramilitary forces; Professionals like doctors, lawyers, management consultants, engineers etc; Property owners with agricultural holdings or vacant land and/or buildings; and Income/wealth tax assessee

Justice Pankaj Mithal's opinion on the issue is that a child studying in St Stephen's College or any good urban college cannot be equated with a child studying in a rural school/college and that child cannot be grouped into the same bracket. That said, the apex court ruling leaves the final decision to states on whether to create a creamy layer exception and if so, how to do it. They will likely have to constitute a committee on the lines of the Justice R N Prasad Committee for OBC reservations. The judgement, delivered by Justice Pankaj Mithal argued that reservations should be limited to the first generation. Once a member of the first generation attains a higher status through reservations, the subsequent generation should not be entitled to the same benefits. The recent judgment bends towards ensuring social justice because today in tribal societies there is a yawning gap between the haves and have-nots. And it is only fair that those deprived since decades should get their share of the reservation quota. This is an imperative that can no longer be ignored.

Verdict allowing Sub-Quotas for reservation has potential political twist
Supreme Court's majority decision clears the way for structured reservation

By Dr Gyan Pathak

The verdict of the 7-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court of India allowing sub-quota within the overall quota for Scheduled Castes (SCs) has a potential to twist Indian politics in a new direction, since it paves the way for a new structured reservation policy for the country, not only for the SCs, but also for Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Castes (OBCs), and Economically Weaker Sections (EWS).

The Bench, comprising Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud and Justices BR Gavai, Vikram Nath, Bela Trivedi, Pankaj Mithal, Manoj Misra and Satish Chandra Sharma, by a 6:1 majority held that 'inadequate representation' of certain SCs across appointments in state services was a key indicator of proving 'backwardness' within the Schedule Caste. The States are required to prove an 'inter se' backwardness within the SCs in order to make reservations for a specific sub-classified group within the SCs.

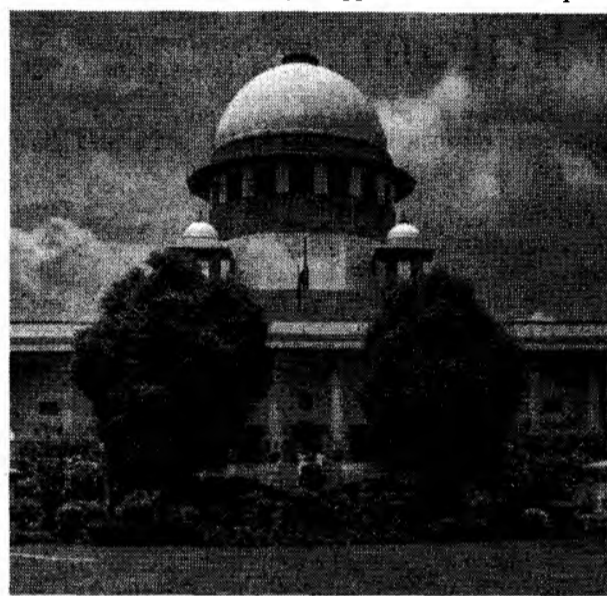
Six judges upheld sub-classification, with Justice Trivedi dissenting, which is indicative of the complexity of the issue that may bring several known and unknown factors in the way while implementing the verdict. The verdict has come after the court examined two key issues – 1. Should the state prove 'inter se backwardness' as opposed to the decision in Indra Sawhney vs Union of India which held that such backwardness is not required to be proven for SC/STs; and 2. Whether it is necessary to prove the 'inadequacy of representation' of the more backward within the Scheduled Castes?

The verdict has been generally welcomed since it is a well-known fact that there exist certain castes within a larger group of STs, SCs or OBCs which are more backward than the others. We already know the 'creamy layer' issue, a term that refers to the relatively affluent and better-educated members among the groups enjoying reservations.

The concept of creamy layer, however, is currently applicable for OBCs who are excluded from reservation benefits in government jobs and educational institutions to ensure that benefits of reservation go to the genuinely underprivileged sections of the OBCs. Families with an annual income above Rs 8 lakh are considered part of creamy layer. This income threshold is revised periodically. Children of high-

ranking officers in Group A and Group B services are also considered 'creamy layer' candidates and hence excluded from reservation. Additionally, children of professionals such as doctors, engineers, and lawyers with significant income and status, and of families owning large tracts of agricultural land beyond certain specified limits are also included in the creamy layer and excluded.

Though the concept of creamy layer introduced following a Supreme Court judgement in the Indra Sawhney case in 1992, does not apply to SCs and STs. However, 4 out of 7 judges in the Bench advocated for exclusion of the 'creamy layer' among SCs and STs, in the current Supreme Court verdict. It means, the impact of the judgement would be felt by



all groups presently enjoying reservation.

The verdict has opened the door for sub-classification within the classified SCs, STs, and OBCs on the basis of 'more backwardness' relative to other castes in the group. Government will need to prove it only on the basis of 'inadequate representation' to be sub-classified. It was made clear that while the state doesn't need data to prove the entire class is backward, it must collect data to show differences in backwardness within the class if it wants to sub-classify. There is an additional clarification that cadre can't be used as a unit to assess representation, since it may not display the ground realities. Hence adequate representation has to be based on effective or qualitative data as against quantitative data to ensure the quality representation of backward classes.

It is therefore clear that the sub-classification for pro-

viding sub-quota under the main-quota for SCs, STs, and OBCs is going to be a ticklish issue that will generate high social and political heat in the country, since the castes presently enjoying the benefits of reservation would not be easily ready to quit them in favour of other more backward castes among them.

More backward castes have already been demanding that they must be given reservation on the basis of their backwardness, since certain communities have already extracted all the benefits of reservations. Children from relatively well-off castes among STs, SCs, and OBCs bag all the reserved seats while children from less backward castes lag behind because they don't get educational and other economic opportunities to develop the

dominant castes among the SCs, STs, and OBCs. The RSS-BJP clan would try to gain ground among the new aspirant castes for sub-quotas by telling them how they have been cheated by their 'social justice' leaders and parties.

NDA allies on the other hand, such as JD(U) and TDP will play their social justice card comparatively better than the BJP. JD(U) leader Nitish Kumar had already got caste census conducted and got a legislation passed for 65 per cent reservation that has recently been struck down by the Patna High Court which was upheld by the Supreme Court of India. The latest verdict would pave the way for structured reservation in Bihar before the elections due next year.

TDP leader and CM of Andhra Pradesh Chandrababu Naidu has said that the state had introduced SC categorisation in 1997, adding that social justice should prevail. He said that TDP had already written a letter to the then Prime Minister on October 10, 2012, with an appeal to introduce a Bill in Parliament on SC categorisation to amend the Constitution.

Against this backdrop, the ruling establishment led by PM Narendra Modi, is likely to derive political mileage by introducing a Bill for structured quota regime in the country to win over its lost ground among the underprivileged castes that have been so far lagging behind the dominant castes and their political leaders representing the politics of social justice. BJP would like to criticise the former Congress government for not bringing such a legislation at the national level.

However, it would not be so easy for the BJP and NDA allies to derive significant political mileage against the INDIA bloc parties. For example, the Congress ruled Telangana's Chief Minister Revanth Reddy has already announced that his state will be the first to implement Supreme Court categorisation verdict. Rahul Gandhi and other political parties in INDIA bloc have been demanding the Caste Census to ascertain how much share every community have in the national resources.

India should expect a new socio-political twist in the months to come. Political parties will need to address their respective constituencies in the new light after the Supreme Court verdict, which may trigger a new socio-political alliance at the ground level too. (IPA Service)

Centre and BJP playing politics over wayanad tragedy
Kerala govt is engaged in massive operations to tackle the disaster

By P Sreekumaran

At a time when all energies should be directed to minimize the impact of the tragedy that struck Wayanad district in Kerala, the Bharatiya Janata Party is politicizing the tragedy to score brownie points. The blame game should have been avoided, at least for the time being.

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has rejected the claims made by Union Home Minister Amit Shah that the Left Democratic Front (LDF) Government in the State failed to act despite the Centre's advance warning that excessive rain would trigger landslides in the State.

In his statement made in Parliament, Shah claimed that Kerala failed to realise the gravity of the situation although the Union Government had despatched nine National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) teams to the State on July 23. Had those blaming the Centre heeded the warnings, the situation would have been different,

information presented by the Union Home Minister in Parliament is inconsistent with facts, Pinarayi asserted. This is not the time for blame game or political bickering, the CM opined.

The Army has intensified its humanitarian aid and disaster relief operations in Wayanad. In a commendable move, the army airlifted a bailey's bridge from New Delhi and fitted it restoring the snapped link between Mundakkai, which bore the brunt of the disaster and Chooralmala, rendering rescue operations easier. No amount of praise will be too high for the manner in which the army, navy and air force, Kerala police and other organisations have risen to the occasion in organizing and supervising rescue and relief operations. The death toll has risen to 297 so far and could rise further with the recovery of more and more bodies trapped under the slush and debris.

As expected, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan led from the front, coordinating



he added. Pinarayi countered this rescue and relief operations. The Chief Minister took time to visit the disaster-

"None of these agencies had issued a red alert before July 30, when the disaster struck. All that the IMD and the Central Meteorological Centre (CMC) had done was to issue an orange alert for Wayanad."

claim by saying that the NDRF had been despatched to the State at Kerala's specific request and not on the Union Government's volition. The State Government had also moved the force to Wayanad well in advance, he pointed out. The Chief Minister said the forecasts by the India Meteorological Department (IMD), the Geological Survey of India (GSI) and the Central Water Commission (CWC) were wide off the mark.

None of these agencies had issued a red alert before July 30, when the disaster struck. All that the IMD and the Central Meteorological Centre (CMC) had done was to issue an orange alert for Wayanad. The forecast was that the rainfall would be in the range of 115 millimetre to 204 mm. The actual rainfall was, however, much higher. The locality received 572 mm of rain in the 48 hours preceding the disaster. Nor was there an orange alert warning of heavy rain in Kerala between July 23 and July 28.

At 1 p.m. on July 29, the IMD issued an orange alert for Wayanad. The CMC sounded a red alert only at 6 am on July 30. The disaster struck at 2 am on that day. This makes it clear that the red alert came only after the disaster struck, the CM averred. As for the GSI, it issued a green alert for July 30 and 31, indicating minor landslides and rock bursts. However, by that time the disaster had already occurred causing the landslides.

Moreover, the CWC, which is responsible for issuing flood warnings, failed to issue any surge warning for the Iruvanji and Chaliyar rivers. This proves that the

hit areas as well. He has directed the health department to rush more forensic teams to Wayanad. Besides, a medical point, including an oxygen ambulance is being set up at the control room at Chooralmala provide emergency medical attention to those being rescued from the dirt and debris on the site. It is heartening to note that contributions to the Chief Minister's relief fund are pouring in from all sections of society. This represents a stinging snub to the campaign of calumny and misinformation being unleashed by vested interests.

The praiseworthy performance of Kerala is in glaring contrast to the apathy and lack of enthusiasm displayed by the Congress-led Karnataka Government while trying to save a lorry driver trapped under dirt in a flooded area in the state. A measure of the efficiency with which the Kerala Government rose to the occasion can be gauged from the fact that even the Leader of the Opposition who loses no opportunity to blame the State Government and criticize Pinarayi for everything that goes wrong was forced to praise the CM!

But then, this is not the first time that the CM and his Government have proved their mettle in the teeth of adversity. The remarkable way in which Kerala tackled and successfully tackled floods in 2018, Covid 19 and the recent outbreak of Nipah virus has earned praise not only at the national level but even from other countries and organisations like BBC and newspapers like the Washington Post and New York Times. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Time to identify the privileged among tribals

Editor,
The Supreme Court in its ruling of August 1, has rightly observed that a policy must be evolved by the State to identify the 'creamy layer' among SCs and STs and exclude them from quota benefits. Justice Gavi is right that this is the only way to achieve "real equality" as enshrined in the Constitution. 'Creamy layer' refers to a class of persons within reserved categories who are socially and economically advanced. At present, the concept of 'creamy layer' is applicable only to the reservation for Other Backward Classes. For OBCs, the creamy layer comprises households with annual income in excess of Rs 8 lakh a year. Justice Gavi brilliantly wrote in the judgement that, "Putting the children of parents from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who on account of benefit of reservation have reached a high position and ceased to be socially, economically and educationally backward and the children of parents doing manual work in the villages in the same category would defeat the constitutional mandate." This is a

landmark judgement by the Apex Court and is a victory of the constitutional mandate. The ruling should help the depressed class or downtrodden.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh
Via email

Medical doctors losing people's respect

Editor,
I agree with Salil Gewali's letter titled "Ethical Crisis in Medical Care," (ST July 24, 2024) and want to add my thoughts to it. It is sad to see that some doctors and private nursing homes in our state are also behaving unethically. These medical professionals, whom we trust with our health, seem more focused on making money than on caring for their patients.

Many people, including my neighbours and friends, feel the same way. They worry that some hospitals are keeping patients on ventilators for extended periods to increase medical bills, even when the doctors know that the patient has no chance of recovery. This is especially hard on families who are already struggling emotionally.

For poorer families, the situation gets worse. They

often have to borrow money to pay the hospital bills and even just to get the body of their loved one released after they have expired. This causes even more pain and stress for them. It is wrong that, in the name of medical care, these institutions are making things harder for people instead of helping them. For minor illnesses like coughs and colds or minor injuries, many doctors suggest long lists of unnecessary tests. For each test conducted by laboratories and nursing homes, doctors receive commissions. The government must take necessary action.

In conclusion, like Salil Gewali, I believe these medical practices have become a serious concern for poor people like us. We should all come forward to denounce such doctors who have abused their respected profession.

Yours etc.,
Marbud Pyrbot
Via email

India should leverage its demographic dividend in sports

Editor,
A country's number of medals in the Olympics

should ideally be in proportion to the number of young people in that country. India's position in demography is more advantageous than even that of China. It is a different story that China is now taking all round measures to increase its population.

In the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics, which was held later in July 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, India got 1 gold, 2 silver, and 4 bronze medals, closely followed by Hong Kong with 1 gold, 2 silver, and 3 bronze medals.

If we compare the number of young people in our country with that of Hong Kong, then we will realise that the latter is a success story that we should emulate.

But why is this difference? It would be totally wrong to infer that the difference lies in racial diversity. Black, white, yellow, and brown athletes have shown that talent is not a monopoly of a particular skin colour. They have totally debunked the theory of racial supremacy. So, the answer lies in somewhere else.

Only a small percentage of families in our country can afford to financially and logistically nurture the talent of their children. Now, imagine what would have happened if almost all the children of our country had the financial springboard either from their parents or from the state to aim for

medals at the Olympics. India would have been at the top in the Olympics had it achieved a high ranking like Hong Kong's fourth position in the HDI.

Here, a state can play a big role by trying to make an uneven field a little bit level playing, especially in regard to health and education. Those countries that give top priority on this issue, naturally score high on the human development indices. This is because the Human Development Index (HDI) is a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development like - a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable, and having a decent standard of living.

To become a competitive sportsperson, a child first of all needs good health and a decent standard of living, both of which are among the three key dimensions of human development. So, naturally there is a close connection between the rank of a country in the HDI and that of in the Olympics.

Now, let us compare a country's position in the medal standings at the last Olympics in Tokyo with its rank in the latest Human Development Index.

In spite of having the demographic advantage of a relatively young population, India has to content with just one gold at the Tokyo Summer Olympics. The reason

lies in India's lowly 134th position in the HDI.

China's second position at the Tokyo Olympics is reflective of its huge population. The United States of America with less population managed to surpass China to reach the top of the table because of its ranking of 20th in the HDI which is much better than China's 75th.

The third placed Japan at the Tokyo Olympics has an HDI rank of 24. Great Britain, having 15th rank in the HDI, got the 4th place in Tokyo.

The need of the hour is to rescue India from the abyssal 134th position in the HDI. It would help achieve the Olympic motto, 'faster, higher and stronger', in every sphere.

'Catch them young' is an unavoidable roadmap for a country's success in sports. The improvement in human development indices is in sync with this roadmap.

Just giving money and incentives to the sportspersons only after they get success in international arenas is like putting the cart before the horse.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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Oceans far less healthy sans sharks

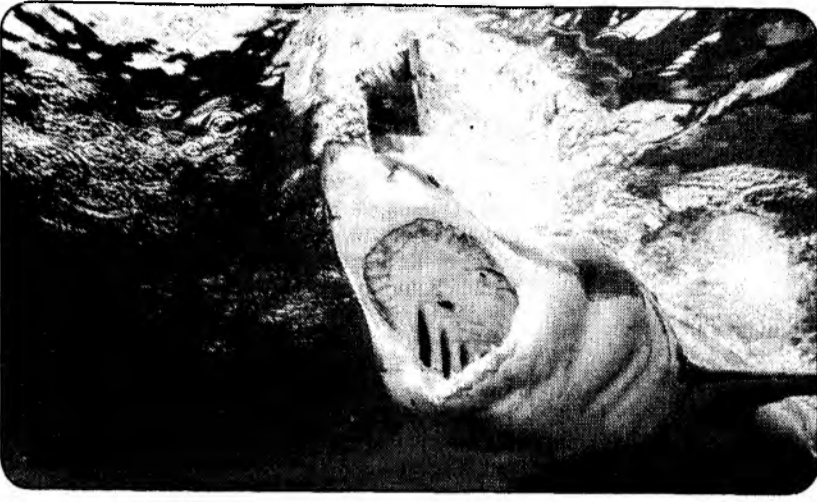
By Michael Heithaus

There are more than 500 species of sharks in the world's oceans, from the 7-inch dwarf lantern shark to whale sharks that can grow to over 35 feet long. They're found from polar waters to the equator, at the water's surface and miles deep, in the open ocean, along coasts and even in some coastal rivers.

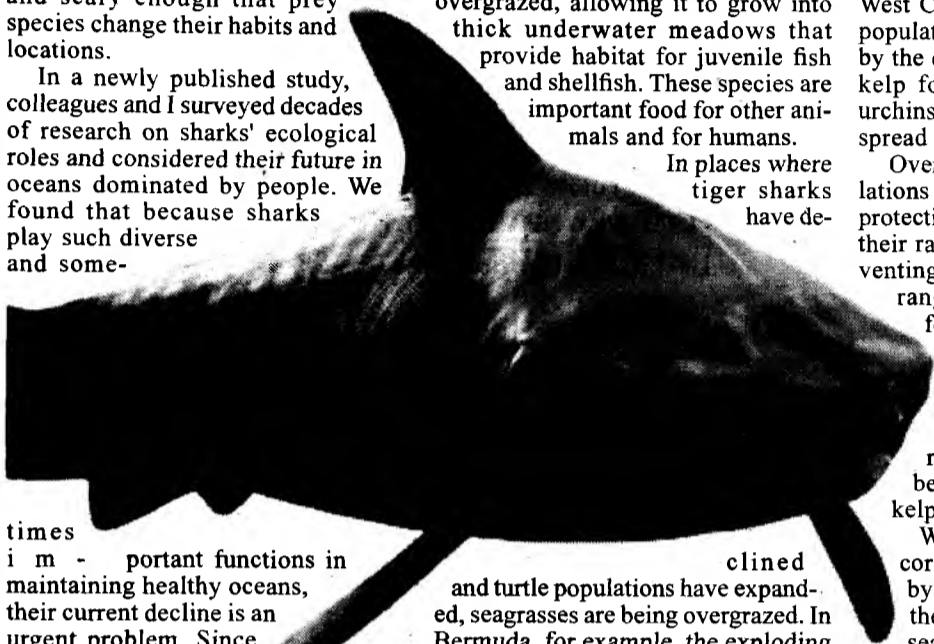
With such diversity, it's no surprise that sharks serve many ecological functions. For example, the largest individuals of some big predatory species, such as tiger and white sharks, can have an oversized role in maintaining balances among species.

They do this by feeding on prey and sometimes by just being present and scary enough that prey species change their habits and locations.

In a newly published study, colleagues and I surveyed decades of research on sharks' ecological roles and considered their future in oceans dominated by people. We found that because sharks display such diverse and some-



wide swaths of seagrass from being overgrazed, allowing it to grow into thick underwater meadows that provide habitat for juvenile fish and shellfish. These species are important food for other animals and for humans.



times important functions in maintaining healthy oceans, their current decline is an urgent problem. Since 1970, global populations of sharks and rays have decreased by more than 70%.

People are killing many types of sharks at unsustainable rates, mainly through overfishing. We see a need for nations to rethink where and how to conserve sharks for healthy oceans.

How sharks foster seagrasses

Along the remote coast of Western Australia, more than two decades of work shows that the mere presence of tiger sharks shapes the entire seagrass ecosystem by changing where and how big grazers, such as sea turtles and sea cows, feed.

Having tiger sharks nearby protects

In places where tiger sharks have de-

clined and turtle populations have expanded, seagrasses are being overgrazed. In Bermuda, for example, the exploding turtle population has led to an almost total collapse of seagrasses.

White sharks produce some of the same effects. Along the California coast, where white shark numbers are increasing, otters are spending more time in the safety of protected inland waters and less time in the open waters of Monterey Bay. The otters prey on crabs, which in turn feed on grazing invertebrates such as sea slugs that clean algae from seagrasses. More otters means fewer crabs, more grazers and healthier seagrasses.

Kelp forests and reefs

Kelp forests are dense stands of large brown algae that grow in shallow zones near coasts. Along the U.S. West Coast, overhunting drove local populations of sea otters to extinction by the early 1900s. This caused huge kelp forest losses by allowing sea urchins - a favorite food of otters - to spread and consume kelp.

Over the past 50 years, otter populations have rebounded with federal protection. But as white sharks expand their ranges northward, they are preventing otters from expanding their range because there aren't kelp forests for the otters to hide in.

The otters will likely expand their ranges only once kelp forests become established. This complicates restoration efforts, since otters won't be removing enough urchins for kelp to become established.

When sharks are present near coral reefs, fish avoid the sharks by sticking close to the safety of the reef. This reduces grazing on seagrasses and algae across wide areas. There is still much to learn, however, about when, where and how sharks might be important for coral reef health.

Working with local communities in coastal areas could build support for protecting these large ocean predators, much as conservationists are working on land to protect iconic predators such as wolves. Nations could build networks of large protected areas that forbid shark fishing, focusing on key areas where individual sharks may roam.

Research shows that sharks benefit from creating protected areas, limiting shark catch outside these zones and restricting use of fishing gear that does the most harm to sharks, such as gill nets and longlines. With a clearer understanding of sharks' ecological value, my colleagues and I hope to see focused action at all levels to protect these essential animals. *(The Conversation)*

Food and nutrient sources

Sharks can also be prey. Some, including large species like white sharks, are important food sources for some killer whale populations around the world. Smaller sharks, including blacktip sharks, can be key menu items for larger sharks, such as great hammerheads.

As sharks consume prey in one place and excrete waste elsewhere, they move nutrients throughout the ocean. In the Pacific, for example,

gray reef sharks move nitrogen from the offshore waters where they feed to the coral reefs where they spend their days, providing important fertilizer for ocean food webs.

In Florida's coastal waters, young bull sharks feed during brief visits to the ocean, then return to safer, nearly freshwater rivers, where they spend most of their time and release nutrients in their waste.

Sometimes sharks' presence helps other fish. In the open ocean, sharks' rough scales make perfect scratching posts for fish to remove parasites.

Protecting sharks' roles

Our review makes clear that sharks play diverse roles in maintaining healthy oceans. We see important implications for shark conservation.

Step 1 would be to set goals beyond simply ensuring that there are sharks in the oceans and to target species that have key ecological roles.

Within populations, it is important to protect certain types of individual sharks. For example, the largest tiger sharks are the ones that shape the behavior of turtles and sea cows, benefiting seagrass ecosystems. Intensive fishing worldwide makes it extremely challenging for large sharks that can live for decades or even centuries to survive and grow to ecologically important sizes.

Working with local communities in coastal areas could build support for protecting these large ocean predators, much as conservationists are working on land to protect iconic predators such as wolves. Nations could build networks of large protected areas that forbid shark fishing, focusing on key areas where individual sharks may roam.

Research shows that sharks benefit from creating protected areas, limiting shark catch outside these zones and restricting use of fishing gear that does the most harm to sharks, such as gill nets and longlines. With a clearer understanding of sharks' ecological value, my colleagues and I hope to see focused action at all levels to protect these essential animals. *(The Conversation)*

Author is the Executive Dean of the College of Arts, Sciences & Education, and Professor of Biological Sciences, Florida International University

Robocars promise to improve traffic

By Weizi LiAssistant

Robotic vehicles can optimize the flow of traffic in cities even when mixed in with vehicles driven by humans, thereby improving traffic efficiency, safety and energy consumption, my colleagues and I found. Robot vehicles are no longer a sci-fi concept: Cities around the world have been testing autonomous robotaxis since 2016.

With the increasing presence of robot vehicles in traffic and the foreseeable long period of transitioning from mixed traffic to fully autonomous traffic, my team and I wondered whether robot vehicles and their interactions with human-driven vehicles can alleviate today's notorious traffic problems. I am a computer scientist who studies artificial intelligence for transportation and smart cities. My colleagues and I hypothesized that as the number of robot vehicles in traffic increases, we can harness AI to develop algorithms to control the complex mixed traffic system. These algorithms would not only enable all vehicles to travel smoothly from point A to point B but, more importantly, optimize overall traffic by allowing robot vehicles to affect vehicles driven by people.

To test our hypothesis, we used a branch of AI known as reinforcement learning, in which an intelligent agent learns to maximize cumulative rewards through interaction with its environment. By setting rewards for simulated robot vehicles to prioritize goals such as traffic efficiency or energy consumption, our experiments show that we can effectively manage mixed traffic at complex real-world intersections under real-world traffic conditions in simulation.

Our algorithm teaches the robocars to optimize traffic flow by communicating with each other. The collective system of cars aims for smooth traffic flow even as each individual car decides when to enter an intersection based on its immediate environment. Because the robocars are dispersed among cars driven by people, all traffic is affected by the algorithm.

We found that when robot vehicles make up just 5% of traffic in our simulation, traffic jams are eliminated. Surprisingly, our approach even shows

that when robot vehicles make up 60% of traffic, traffic efficiency is superior to traffic controlled by traffic lights.

Why it matters: Traffic is worsening in every major city across the globe, leading to significant economic and environmental costs. It is one of the most challenging problems society faces today. Current traffic control methods, such as traffic lights, have limited effectiveness in reducing delays and congestion.

AI-driven robot vehicles offer a potential solution, but existing studies often assume universal connectivity and centralized control of all robot vehicles, a scenario that is not likely to materialize anytime soon. The transition to fully autonomous traffic is likely to be gradual, resulting in a prolonged period of mixed traffic with both robot and human-driven vehicles. This led us to develop control algorithms that use robotic vehicles to harness the societal benefits of autonomous transportation systems without requiring all or even a majority of vehicles to be autonomous.

What other research is being done: Recent studies have demonstrated the potential of mixed traffic control in scenarios such as ring roads, figure-eight roads, highway bottlenecks and merges, two-way intersections and roundabouts. However, these scenarios typically lack real-world complexity and only involve a limited number of vehicles that need to be coordinated. Our work is the first to demonstrate the feasibility of controlling mixed traffic via robot vehicles at real-world, complex intersections. Being able to control traffic at these intersections is an essential step toward citywide traffic control.

What's next: We plan to expand our framework to incorporate additional driving behaviors for robot vehicles, such as frequent lane-changing. We also plan to test our approach on a variety of intersection types, and we want to test our approach under real-world vehicle-to-vehicle communications. Ultimate goal is to achieve effective and efficient mixed traffic control at the scale of cities. *(The Conversation)*

The author is Professor of Computer Science, University of Tennessee

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, August 4, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon trine Rahu on your solar return chart which is good. It is going to be an excellent year ahead. You will face challenges with confidence. And will remain in a positive frame of mind. You will be ambitious and goal oriented. Your perfect planning will have the backing of others. Your bosses will keep giving support and encourage you to implement new ideas. You will come up to their expectations. You could be promoted and given additional responsibility too. New job offers too will come. Financially you will get much stronger. Those in politics, social service, academics and media will make good progress. Students will get admission in courses of their choice. Relations with soul mate will remain perfect.

This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) This is a favorable time for you and will provide a boost to your career and professional life; a phase that gives you fame. Joy is ahead supporting you in every field of life as you make progress. Now you have courage and vitality to activate your plans so take advantage. Your influence among people and in gatherings is remarkable you will enjoy good relationships with professional associates and in your circle of close friends. Your business proposals will get highlighted and you will have new contracts at your doorstep. Health will improve if you take requisite care.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You may be able to draw attention to yourself in the progress of your career during this phase. If looking for betterment or a job switch, you may get a chance in the first half of the week. Your financial requirements may soon be solved. Chances of social interaction and family gatherings among family and loved ones will give happiness and joy. You may go for a short personal journey or professional trip. Your family members may be a bit demanding. Health of self or mother may require your attention. Take care in travel and pay attention to travel details.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Being intensely perceptive you are able to make the most of opportunities that come your way. You may get better chances of improvement in money matters in the second half of this week. You will be able to present your views convincingly and hold your own in group discussions moreover these ideas will be well received. You may purchase some artifacts for your home or jewelry. Your attention will be focused on matters related to family, entertainment or children's career. You are more expressive and forthcoming in personal relationships. If you are going to purchase a home, make financial enquiries and look at your budget first. Avoid taking loans for some consumer item. Your health may improve but that of your life partner needs some attention.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) The planetary position reveals that monetary matters and financial situation need basic care. You may get engaged in some unusual deal that may not be profitable for you. Some mischievous person may deceive you in some dealings related to money matters so exercise due care. If you play your cards right you can work on projects that are already in progress, and finish these with a flourish at your work place. There are balanced energies within you which are reflected in personal relationships and creative ventures. Your special skills bring appreciation. Take care in family relations take a soft stand to keep away the conflict raised by misunderstandings in family and avoid hasty decisions. Self care will do wonders in tackling health problems.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Your prospects in fields related to education, research work and admission in professional courses is better. Your imagination is ignited and those in films, sports or music will do very well. Your creativity gives impetus at your work place and you are spurred to redecorate your home. Research your financial options, think long term and plan accordingly. Your friends and well wishers will extend a helping hand towards you. You make romantic gestures and draw your beloved closer to you. There are good chances of a marriage proposal materializing if unmarried. You may have to undertake travel connected with some concern or issue and you will be happy to know that things are working as per your plans.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 23) Be prepared for a complete change in matters related to your profession, residence or career. You may think of purchasing some property and you will consult this issue with your family. It will help you in getting financial aid from there. You may have some sudden unforeseen expenditure. There may be chances of minor conflicts at work place with colleagues

try to keep away from indulging in any conflict. Relations with family members and loved ones remain stable. You find love in a friendship and this friendship flowers into a beautiful affair. You take a short break which rejuvenates you and affords you a new vision to make future plans. Your health needs care so exercise due caution and focus on your dietary habits.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) Some good opportunities come across in your professional life and the planetary configuration will be quite inspiring which will enable you to mark fulfilling achievements in many areas. Futuristic plans will be made and financially you will do well. Being intensely perceptive you are able to make the most of opportunities that come your way. You may get sudden chances of improvement in your career. It is time to let your hair down, relax and also let your impulsive side come forth. You may experience a state of self enlightenment and it will be useful in achieving peace of mind. Health will remain good.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 23) A phase for financial gains is ahead and you will land a deal with lucrative financial gains with ease. Professional and career goals may be achieved if you take timely action and avoid inopportune delay. You may benefit from some long term investment. You are spiritual and religious and you might find someone with a similar nature to accompany you towards a new goal and you will feel inner satisfaction. You will find solace with your family or at home and you will want to devote some time with children to rejuvenate. A hectic schedule will keep you on your toes. Health will be good.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) There is a great opportunity for you to find stabilization drawing from the strength of the people around you. You will enjoy your work and get benefits from lucrative financial deals. Your dynamism and positive outlook help you deal with a heavy work schedule. You intuitively understand the working of colleagues at your work place however do not over estimate your powers to control others as it may lead to an unfriendly atmosphere so take care in dealings. Health of children should be looked after. In the hustle and bustle of activity do not ignore signals sent out by your body; give it due attention and care.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) The combination of stars indicates mixed results for you. This is likely to give you some unusual circumstances in your professional life. Matters relating to finances will give you delayed results and the projects at your disposal may not be completed in time. Those in the creative field will find that their creativity is peaking all of a sudden and they will prove their mettle convincingly. You will be caught up in a heavy work schedule but will handle it all with seeming ease. An affair is also indicated for the unattached and those in a relationship will strengthen their bonds with their beloved taking the relationship to the next level. Travel will provide you with excitement and fill you with new hope as you see new developments unfold. Health will remain stable.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You may have good chances of promotion in your career during this period and a congenial environment will prevail all around you. As a creative person you will find a way to do the things that you have been planning for some time. Financially you will do well but your extravagant nature will not allow you to save much. Some sudden expenditure may be required on the domestic front. Some property deal may give you profits in the near future. You will feel slightly tense in your dealings due to the volume and intensity of work. Children will do you proud. Health problems if any will get sorted out.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) It may seem as if all eyes are focused on you. Take note that others are going to be more appreciative of all that you do, and even openly acknowledge this. You will find that matters your way as you have your say. Your friends and well wishers will provide you tremendous support. New associations will be profitable and pave the way into new spheres. Your imagination will be flying high. Financially you will do well but your extravagant nature will not allow you to save much. If you've been thinking about sprucing up your home a little bit, this is the time to do it. Your sense of aesthetics is also high, and you might work wonders with your decorating. Romance is in the air and you will find yourself in the midst of an exciting affair. Travel undertaken during this period will benefit you in the long run.

CAPTCHAs and the struggle to tell real humans from fake

By Tam Nguyen

CAPTCHAs are those now ubiquitous challenges you encounter to prove that you're a human and not a bot when you go to log in to many websites.

Websites and mobile apps have long been attacked by bots on a massive scale. Those malicious bots are programmed to automatically consume a large amount of computing resources, post spam messages, collect data from websites and even register and perform user authentication.

This state of affairs led to the introduction of CAPTCHA, which stands for Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart.

As a computer scientist, I see CAPTCHAs as an effective shield for websites to prevent automated attacks, enhance cybersecurity and improve user experience - at least in the short term.

For example, denial-of-service attacks create a bottleneck and cause a web server to become overloaded and unresponsive. CAPTCHAs help stop automated bots from executing such denial-of-service attacks and even fraudulent activities such as sending spam messages and creating fake accounts.

Meanwhile, financial institutions rely on CAPTCHAs to protect against bots trying to steal clients' data. Additionally, CAPTCHAs improve the integrity of online voting and polls by preventing automated bots from manipulating results.

How CAPTCHAs work

CAPTCHAs are designed to show questions or challenges that are easy for humans but difficult for computer bots to answer. In practice, there are several types of CAPTCHAs: text-based, image-based, audio-based and behavior-based.

Text-based CAPTCHAs have been very popular since the early days of the internet.

This CAPTCHA type requires users to read a distorted and complicated image of text and enter the answer into a text field. A variant of text-based CAPTCHA asks users to solve simple math problems like "18+5" or "23-7."

However, it was recently solved by advanced optical character recognition algorithms, thanks to the proliferation of deep-learning AIs.

When the text is tuned to be more distorted and more complicated, actual humans ironically fail to provide a correct answer.

Audio CAPTCHA plays a short audio clip containing a series of numbers or letters spoken by a human or synthetic voice, which the user listens to and then types into a provided text field.

The input is verified against the correct answer to determine whether the user is human.

Like text-based CAPTCHAs, audio CAPTCHA can be difficult for humans to interpret due to factors such as background noise, poor audio quality, heavy distortion and unfamiliar accents.

Image-based CAPTCHAs were introduced to make it more challenging for bots.

Users must identify specific objects from images - for example, selecting all image blocks containing traffic lights.

This task leverages human visual perception, which is still superior to most computer vision-based bots. However, this type of CAPTCHA also confuses people in many cases.

Behavior-based CAPTCHAs analyze user behaviors such as mouse movements and typing patterns.

reCAPTCHA, a popular behavior-based CAPTCHA, requires users to check the "I am not a robot" box. During this process, reCAPTCHA analyzes mouse movement and mouse click to differentiate between humans and bots. Humans typically have more varied and less predictable behaviors, while bots often show precise and consistent actions.

AI vs. human

CAPTCHA is one more battlefield in the seemingly endless battle between AI and humans. Nowadays, AI has become more advanced, using modern techniques such as deep learning and computer vision to solve CAPTCHA challenges.

For instance, optical character recognition algorithms have improved, making text-based CAPTCHAs less effective.

Audio CAPTCHA can be bypassed by advanced speech-to-text technology.

Similarly, AI models trained on vast image datasets can solve many image-based CAPTCHAs with high accuracy rates.

On the other side of the battlefield, CAPTCHA researchers have created more complex CAPTCHA technologies.

For example, reCAPTCHA assesses user interactions and computes their likelihood of being human.

Ironically, humans are helping AI solve complicated CAPTCHAs.

For instance, click farms hire a large pool of low-paid workers to click on ads, such as social media posts, follow accounts, write fake reviews and even solve CAPTCHA questions.

Their work is to help AI systems behave like humans in order to defeat CAPTCHAs and other fraud-prevention techniques.

The future of CAPTCHAs

The future of CAPTCHAs will be influenced by the ongoing advancements in AI.

The traditional CAPTCHA methods are becoming less effective, thus future CAPTCHA systems are likely to focus more on analyzing user behavior, such as how people interact with websites, making it harder for bots to mimic that behavior.

Websites might turn to the use of biometric CAPTCHAs, such as facial recognition or fingerprint scanning, though these raise privacy concerns.

CAPTCHA can be replaced by blockchain, which uses verifiable credentials to authenticate users.

These credentials, issued by trusted entities and stored in digital wallets, ensure interactions are performed by verified humans rather than bots.

Future CAPTCHAs might work alongside AI systems in real time, constantly adapting and evolving to stay ahead of automated attacks. *(The Conversation)*

The author is Associate Professor of Computer Science, University of Dayton

"He who has a why to live can bear almost any how."

— Friedrich Nietzsche

The Shillong Times

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Freebies and growth

PERIODIC reports that the World Bank, or various UN agencies, release on global growth and well-being of individual nations are documents based on research by specialists. While it is tempting for many to rubbish their views as "coloured perspectives of White supremacists," the authenticity of such documents cannot be wished away. A latest World Bank report perceives that it would take India another 75 years to achieve a quarter of US per capita income at our current growth trends and China could surpass this in a matter of 10 years. Set this against India's ambition of becoming a 'developed nation' by 2047—when we celebrate 100 years of its Independence.

There was a long lag for the past 12 years after the two Manmohan-led UPA terms raised the GDP growth rate to nearly 9 per cent. India is projected to grow at over 7 per cent this fiscal. During this period, the rich have become richer and the poor turned poorer in terms of their quality of life. China, on the other hand, achieved a high GDP rate for several years and then entered a phase where it sought a cooling off period and began keeping the GDP rate low. It is well-acknowledged that it can afford to do so. The Covid-19 phase saw major lull in the economic pushes of both China and India and yet the overall economy of both the nations showed signs of revival. The difference, however, is that India's boasts of economic stability and speedy growth under the Modi era are not matched by the realities on the ground.

It was the post-Liberalization phase from 1991 that saw India shedding the shackles of Socialism and raising the Hindu Rate of Growth of plus two per cent to seven plus. This term saw a relief from the Licence Raj and it became easy for entrepreneurs to set up units, which in turn provided more employment opportunities to youths. Today, as economists point out, the controls are back and the scenario has turned terrible. The "independent regulatory system has deteriorated into a system of overt and covert controls." Eagle-eyed bureaucracy and politicians are making hay. So many clearances are required to start even a small unit today. The manufacturing sector fails to take off and job-creation is a casualty. The central government has admitted that foreign direct investment flow to the country is not picking up, while increasing the flow is cited by the World Bank as a prerequisite to speedy growth. Huge sums are earmarked by governments here for welfare steps including subsidized ration, helping create a lazy generation. China makes its people work while India feeds its billion plus via welfare rations. Understandably, the productive sectors of the economy are under-performing.

Letters to the Editor

NESFAS's initiative in promoting natural farming

Editor,

This letter is in response to Ibalahun Nongbsap's letter on embracing natural farming in Meghalaya. She has rightly pointed out that the state's hilly terrain, rich soil, high rainfall, and moderate temperatures create ideal conditions for natural farming. She also mentioned the traditional practices like 'jhum' (shifting cultivation), mixed cropping, and indigenous knowledge enhancing sustainability, biodiversity, and soil health, allowing diverse crop cultivation while reducing the need for chemical inputs and irrigation.

We completely agree with her on all this and more. Understanding this strength that the state has in the realm of natural farming/regenerative farming/ or agro-ecological farming, the North East Slow Food & Agrobiodiversity Society (NESFAS) has been working on what it calls the 'Indigenous Peoples' Food Systems' or IPFS which works on strengthening the traditional food production systems of the Indigenous Peoples communities of North East India in general and Meghalaya in particular. Apart from jhum, the indigenous Khasi and Garo also practise, bun, homestead gardening, and wet paddy cultivation, without the use

of synthetic inputs while also harbouring a great deal of biodiversity in the natural system. The traditional cash crop systems, the bri/ plantation in which oranges and areca nuts are grown, are also done without synthetic inputs, unlike the palm oil plantation that was suggested by the Government of India. This is achieved through the landscape management system the communities have instituted.

Over the years, NESFAS has introduced various initiatives to strengthen the IPFS. Some of the prominent ones are initiatives like the Agro-ecology Learning Circle (where farmers are encouraged to solve problems of seeds, soil and pest, using traditional knowledge), seed banks (where traditional climate resilient seeds are stored), revival of traditional climate-smart and nutrient-rich crops like millet and many others, diversification of homestead gardens for food and nutrition security which includes the domestication of wild edibles, the introduction of the local pro-cum-bent model for the school mid-day meal programs (linking local agrobiodiversity with school meal to also enhance the livelihood of the local farmers), the establishment of Mei-Ramew cafes that serve traditional cuisines based on local agrobiodiversity grown without chemicals, supplemented with wild edibles from the surrounding landscape. The health and vitality of the local IPFS, is very much

North East Region deserves special consideration

By H H Mohrmen

The North East (NE) region of the country has always been portrayed as poor, backward, and neglected; hence, there is a need for special consideration to support the region. The region has never been projected as one that has something to contribute to the betterment of the country or the world at large. Its leaders are also to be blamed for always approaching the central government with a begging bowl for special treatment with special budget allocations. The debate was always along these lines that the region needs special consideration, but for what reason.

This year, the allegation was that the budget allocation for the region is peanuts, but we have a different take on this matter. Our argument is that the NE should be given special consideration not because of our weaknesses but because of our strengths. The NE should be considered for what it has, not for what it does not have to offer. Our strength is exemplary not only for the country but for the world. The region has what the world needs the most. The question is, what does the North East have that other parts of the country or even the world do not have?

The state on the easternmost edge of the country is Arunachal Pradesh, also known as "the land of the dawn-lit mountains." The state has a large part of its area under forest cover. According to the Forest Survey of India, Dehradun, the forest cover in Arunachal Pradesh was estimated at 66,430.67 sq km (India State of Forest Report 2021). The flora and fauna of Arunachal Pradesh comprise over 5,000 varieties of plants, more than 500 varieties of fauna, and over 650 bird species. Arunachal Pradesh is primarily known for its orchids, with over 500 distinct species. Its rich biodiversity is confirmed by the fact that until this year, the scientific community continues to discover new species from the state.

Assam, also called the gateway to the North East, has a forest cover of 29,237 sq km, making the forest and tree cover in the state 37.27% of the geographical area. Assam has 193 species of mammals, including 10 species of primates, more than 820 species and subspecies of birds, 185 species of fish, 405 species of butterflies, 115 species of reptiles, 46 species of amphibians, and 39 species of snails. Assam is also famous for its one-horn rhinoceros and national parks.

dependent on the health of the local ecosystem, NESFAS has also worked on the restoration of some of the degraded areas around the state and in strengthening the community landscape management system using the bio-centric approach of the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO). This is an integral part of the local governance system.

Coming back to natural farming guidelines, NESFAS pointed out that they do not take into consideration the farming systems practised by the local community, viz., jhum and bun which are rotational and therefore need revision. In the past, NESFAS was also in discussion with the government on the same issue. During the review of natural farming initiatives by the Central Government, NESFAS was found to be one of the few organisations that were reported to be working on natural farming in the region. As one of the members of the National Coalition of Natural Farming, they also discussed with the concerned official from the Central Government the implementation of the Mission Organic Value Chain Development for North Eastern Region (MOVCDNER).

NESFAS has also built a network of like-minded Indigenous Peoples' organisations from different parts of the world. It is currently working on a global study encompassing Indigenous Communities from India (Meghalaya), Kenya, Mexico

The forest and tree cover of Manipur is 77.20% of the state's total geographical area. The state animal of Manipur, the Sangai (Rucervus eldii eldii), is an endemic and endangered subspecies of Eld's deer found only in Manipur. Its original natural habitat is the floating marshy grasslands of the Keibul Lamjao National Park, located in the southern part of Loktak Lake, which is the largest freshwater lake in South Asia. Manipur has rich wildlife, ranging from big carnivores to micro-fauna, including tigers, leopards, clouded leopards, black panthers, Malayan sun bears, and Himalayan black bears. Migratory elephants have also been reported in some parts of the state. It is an important home for endangered and endemic primates such as the Hoolock gibbon, stump-tailed macaque, Assamese macaque, and pig-tailed macaque. Manipur is also home to six species of hornbills and four species of pheasants. The state falls in the East-Asian migratory flyway of the Amur falcon and many other migratory birds. Other important wild animals found in Manipur forests include the slow loris, pangolin, Himalayan yellow-throated marten, monitor lizards, hog deer, hog badger, and binturong.

Mizoram hosts numerous species of birds, wildlife, and flora. Mammal species observed in Mizoram forests include the slow loris (Nycticebus coucang), the state animal red serow (Capricornis rubidus), goral (Nemorhaedus goral), tiger (Panthera tigris), leopard (Panthera pardus), clouded leopard (Neofelis nebulosa), leopard cat (Prionailurus bengalensis), Asiatic black bear (Ursus thibetanus), and sun bear (Helarctos malayanus). The state is also home to many reptiles, amphibians, fish, and invertebrates. The forest cover in the state is 18,186 sq km, which is 86.27% of the state's geographical area. Mizoram is a habitat for eight species of primates such as the Hoolock gibbon (Hoolock hoolock), capped langur (Trachypithecus pileatus), Phayre's leaf monkey (Trachypithecus phayrei), stump-tailed macaque (Macaca arctoides), pig-tailed macaque (Macaca nemestrina), Assamese macaque (Macaca assamensis), rhesus macaque (Macaca mulatta), and slow loris (Nycticebus coucang).

About half of Tripura's land area is under forest

cover and the forest cover in the State is 7,725.59 sq km which is 73.68 % of the State's geographical area. There are also large tracts of bamboo, some species of which are believed to be endemic to the state. Animal life includes tigers, leopards, elephants, jackals, wild dogs, wild boars, serows (goat-like mammals), and various species of wild cattle, including gayals and other types of gaurs. According to a survey in 1989-90, Tripura hosts 90 land mammal species from 65 genera and 10 orders, including species such as the elephant (Elephas maximus), bear (Melursus ursinus), binturong (Arctictis binturong), wild dog (Cuon alpinus), porcupine (Artherurus assamensis), barking deer (Muntiacus muntjak), sambar (Cervus unicolor), wild boar (Sus scrofa), gaur (Bos gaurus), leopard (Panthera pardus), clouded leopard (Neofelis nebulosa), and many species of small cats and primates. Out of 15 free-ranging primates in India, seven are found in Tripura; this is the highest number of primate species found in any Indian state. The wild buffalo (Bubalus arnee) is now extinct. There are nearly 300 species of birds in the state.

Nagaland is home to a rich variety of natural, cultural, and environmental resources. The state has a recorded forest area (RFA) of 8,623 sq km, which is 52.01% of its geographical area. There are about 71 bamboo species, 12 cane species, 41 allied species, 346 lichens, and 103 Red Data Plants. The faunal diversity includes about 67 common wild animals, 519 bird species, 149 fish species, and numerous reptiles and amphibians. Nagaland is known as the "falcon capital of the world" thanks to the hundreds of thousands of Amur falcons that stop at Doyang Reservoir to feast on flying termites on their way from China and Siberia to Africa each year. Nagaland is home to 396 species of orchids, belonging to 92 genera, of which 54 have horticultural and medicinal economic importance.

The state of Sikkim has a large recorded forest land area covering 82.31% of its geographical area. Reserve Forest, Khamsal, and Gorucharan are the three categories of forests in the state. Sikkim's orchids are world-famous, with the state having 556 species of them. Sikkim has 150 mammal species, including the Bhar-

al, clouded leopard, fishing cat, golden cat, Himalayan tahr, leopard cat, lesser or red panda, marbled cat, musk deer, Nayan or Great Tibetan Sheep, pangolin, snow leopard, spotted langur, Tibetan fox, Tibetan gazelle, Tibetan wild ass, tiger, and Tibetan wolf. It has 552 bird species, including the black-necked crane (migratory), blood pheasant, lammergeier, large falcon, monal pheasant, peafowl, pheasant, and snow partridge. The state has 590 species of butterflies and moths, many of which are endangered. The forests of the state shelter more than 3,500 flowering plants, 352 orchids, 40 bamboo species, and about 800 medicinal plants. The state is part of the Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hotspot of the world.

Meghalaya has a forest cover of 17,321 sq km which 73.23% of the state's geographical area as on 2006. It is said that about 50% of the total number of mammals found in the entire Indian subcontinent can also be found in Meghalaya and its adjoining states in the North-East. Mammals such as Tupaia, Rhizomys, Cannomys, Chirodomys, and Micromys occur only in Meghalaya and its adjacent areas. Some of the most interesting animals found in Meghalaya are the Hoolock gibbon, the only tailless ape in India, golden cat, leopard cat, jungle cat, large Indian civet, binturong or bear cat, Himalayan black bear, barking deer, and pangolin.

The NE region is not rich in terms of activities that can contribute to the economy of the nation. In fact, the resources that the region has are best left untapped, but its richness lies elsewhere. It has not only a rich presence of biodiversity but large part of the region is still under forest cover.

The India State of Forests Report (ISFR) 2021 revealed that the north-eastern states have a total forest cover of 169,521 sq km, out of their total geographical area of 262,179 sq km. The average area under forest cover in all the states of the North East is above 70%. The region deserves special consideration because it still holds a very large collection of biodiversity, more than any other part of the country. The NE region needs to be rewarded by the country and the world at large for its ability to protect and preserve its forests and the environment. The region should be rewarded for the carbon that its forests can sequester, which is the region's gift to the World.

The irregular and prolonged power cuts have severely affected my ability to work efficiently. Without a reliable electricity supply, it is near impossible to meet deadlines, attend virtual meetings, and maintain productivity. This is not only a personal inconvenience but also a significant hindrance to professional commitments and livelihoods.

MPSC should come under scrutiny

Editor,

The protests by the Khasi Students Union (KSU) over the reluctance of the Meghalaya Public Service Commission (MPSC) to rectify the anomalies that were made public deserves applause. As rightly stated, if the UPSC can make public the score-sheets of candidates and hold in-camera interviews what makes the MPSC so sacrosanct that the same cannot be adopted and for what joy? It is a well known fact that political appointees are given charge of the District Selection Centres (DSCs) and MPSC which is why the deserving candidates do not get through and the result is that we get a compromised bureaucracy with zero understanding of what grassroots governance is all about. A state progresses when it churns out productive people in the government and not mere rubber stamps. Period.

Yours etc.
Dominic S. Wankhar,
Via email

Power outage in Malki area

Editor,

I am writing to express my deep concern and frustration regarding the frequent power outage in Malki area. It has become a regular practice of the Power Department to resort to load shedding or

some such procedure so that there is no electricity during the morning, evening, and late-night hours. This has had a tremendous impact on the residents, particularly those of us who work from home.

The irregular and prolonged power cuts have severely affected my ability to work efficiently. Without a reliable electricity supply, it is near impossible to meet deadlines, attend virtual meetings, and maintain productivity. This is not only a personal inconvenience but also a significant hindrance to professional commitments and livelihoods.

Moreover, despite these frequent power outages, the monthly electricity bills have not shown any decrease. It is disheartening to pay for a service that is not being adequately provided. The residents of Malki are being charged for a utility that fails to meet even the basic standards of reliability and consistency.

I urge the concerned authorities to address this issue promptly and take necessary action to ensure a stable and reliable power supply in the Malki area. It is essential for the well-being and productivity of the community.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Yours etc.,
Aiban Khraw Kuper Kharmary
Shillong

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Wayanad devastation manifests the wages of an unforgivable political sin

Lobbies have grips over administrations and policy apparatuses

By K Raveendran

The Union government's decision to issue a fresh draft notification for nearly 56,825 sq km of the Western Ghats as an Eco-Sensitive Area (ESA) in the wake of the catastrophic landslides that ravaged Wayanad, flattening entire swathes of settlements, markets, and public spaces can only be seen as a knee-jerk reaction, rather than a strategic, well-thought-out approach to the region's chronic environmental challenges.

The Western Ghats, a biodiversity hotspot and a critical environmental zone, have long been in the crosshairs of both developmental pressure and conservation efforts. The Ghats have been the subject of numerous environmental discussions and revisions over the years. The latest draft issued in July 2022 marked another iteration in a long series of notifications aimed at addressing the complex balance between

many respects, compromised the integrity of the original recommendations.

As the situation stands today, the notification of the Western Ghats as an ESA continues to be a contentious issue. The latest draft, which is ostensibly a response to the Wayanad landslides, reflects a superficial attempt to address a deep-seated problem. The landslides themselves are symptomatic of the broader environmental crisis affecting the region—a crisis exacerbated by deforestation, unsustainable agricultural practices, and rampant urbanization. Simply issuing a fresh draft notification does not tackle these underlying issues. Instead, it risks being seen as a performative gesture that fails to address the systemic failures in environmental governance.

The reluctance to fully implement the Gadgil Committee's recommendations has had far-reaching con-

The patronage extended by some state governments to violators, often motivated by electoral gains and economic incentives, has undermined genuine conservation efforts. This has led to a situation where environmentalists, like Madhav Gadgil, who advocate for robust protective measures, are often vilified and labelled as obstructionists or even "ecology terrorists" by those who benefit from the status quo.

development and conservation in this ecologically sensitive region. A five-member committee was formed to tackle the issues raised by various states, ensuring that discrepancies related to village names and ESA boundaries were rectified. Despite these measures, the persistent revisions underscore a larger, more troubling trend of stalling and superficial fixes rather than substantive changes.

The root of the problem lies in the broader context of environmental governance and political dynamics. The ongoing saga of the Western Ghats' notification can be traced back to the Gadgil Committee's recommendations in 2011. Led by eminent ecologist Madhav Gadgil, the committee proposed a comprehensive and stringent set of measures aimed at conserving the Western Ghats. The Gadgil Report highlighted the region's vulnerability and advocated for a robust protective framework, categorizing it into three zones based on their ecological sensitivity. This framework sought to restrict certain types of development in the most sensitive zones, ensuring that the ecological balance of the region was maintained.

However, the Gadgil Committee's recommendations were met with fierce resistance from various state governments, particularly Kerala. The states' objections were primarily driven by concerns over potential economic impacts and the possible curtailment of developmental activities that were seen as crucial for local economies. The political calculus behind this resistance was evident—balancing environmental concerns against the demands of local populations and the economic imperatives of their constituencies.

This resistance culminated in the formation of a second committee, led by K. Kasturirangan, which produced a revised report in 2013. The Kasturirangan Report diluted many of the original recommendations, relaxing several restrictions and reducing the extent of the proposed ESA. This compromise was seen by many as a capitulation to political pressure rather than a principled stance on conservation. The subsequent modifications failed to resolve the core issues and, in

sequences. It meant that illegal activities, including encroachments and unregulated construction, have continued unabated in sensitive areas. The patronage extended by some state governments to violators, often motivated by electoral gains and economic incentives, has undermined genuine conservation efforts. This has led to a situation where environmentalists, like Madhav Gadgil, who advocate for robust protective measures, are often vilified and labelled as obstructionists or even "ecology terrorists" by those who benefit from the status quo.

In the context of Wayanad's landslides, the real question is whether the latest draft notification will lead to meaningful change or merely serve as another delay tactic. The devastation witnessed in Wayanad was not an isolated incident but part of a broader pattern of environmental degradation that has long been ignored or inadequately addressed. The repeated cycle of issuing draft notifications, followed by revisions and stalling, suggests a lack of genuine commitment to addressing the root causes of the environmental crises affecting the Western Ghats.

Addressing the environmental challenges in the Western Ghats requires more than just issuing notifications. It demands a fundamental shift in how environmental policies are formulated and implemented. There needs to be a concerted effort to balance developmental needs with ecological preservation, guided by scientific evidence and long-term sustainability rather than short-term political and economic gains. The political will to enforce these measures must be matched by a genuine commitment to uphold environmental standards and hold violators accountable.

The Western Ghats' issues cannot be resolved by mere administrative gestures. A comprehensive and integrative approach is needed, one that respects the ecological importance of the region and incorporates the concerns of local communities while firmly committing to conservation. Only then can we hope to prevent further disasters and ensure that the Western Ghats are preserved for future generations. (IPA Service)

*"Strength lies in differences,
not in similarities."*

— Stephen Covey

The Shillong Times

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Community-led Tourism

THE State Tourism Policy 2023 is a comprehensive document based on ground research. In Meghalaya the tourism sector provides livelihoods to almost 50,000 people and is estimated to contribute about 4.1% to the State's GSDP. If appropriately developed, tourism can have several beneficial effects on the economy. The word "If" here is key to the sustenance of tourism in the state. So, what do the words "If properly developed," indicate here? Tourism requires strategic planning which cannot be driven by the need for quick returns on investments — a dictum which some tour promoters seem to believe is the sole purpose of tourism. The overkill on tourism sites which do not even have garbage management systems in place is one key area that tour promoters should be looking at. In several villages the work of cleaning up the mess left behind by tourists is that of ordinary citizens, mostly young people who have no stake in the tourism business but are doing it purely out of a social concern since they have to live in those places when the itinerant tourist leaves the place.

The Meghalaya Rural Tourism Cooperative Federation Limited was incorporated in 2013 under the Cooperation Department to provide financial support, guidance, technical skills, and management skills to all the affiliated Cooperative Societies undertaking rural tourism projects. Through the cooperative, the Government supports the construction of accommodation/homestays and other associated infrastructure such as markets across selected villages with high tourism potential. The ownership of these infrastructures lies with the local tourism cooperative societies, which are also in charge of the operations and maintenance of the properties. This arrangement is mutually beneficial except that not all tourist destinations are under these co-operatives. The Rural Tourism Societies that are working well are providing employment and entrepreneurial opportunities to hundreds of young women and men. Currently there are 36 Tourism Societies across the State. This is a model for community-led tourism. These Societies however have to internalise the meaning of 'sustainable tourism,' before rural tourism exceeds its carrying capacity.

What is also needed is short term training for local tourist taxi drivers who can also play the role of guides along with being tourist taxi drivers. This is integral to a good tourism experience. A driver therefore ought to know the history of the place he takes tourists to. He needs to read up and inform himself hence such guide books ought to be churned out by the Tourism Department. The word sustainable is linked to the environment which is and should be the highest priority areas since people of Meghalaya have to live and die here while tourists are fleeting visitors. The need to draw tourists here cannot be at the cost of the environment which is not replaceable. This is key to understanding the word 'sustainability.'

**Supreme Court's Landmark Ruling:
A New Lens for India's Reservation Policies**

By James Dkhar

In a landmark verdict, the Supreme Court has shattered the long-held assumption that Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are a homogeneous group. This decision has far-reaching implications for the country's reservation policies. It has the potential to reshape the way India approaches reservation and affirmative action. The court's decision stems from a long-standing debate over whether sub-categorizing SCs/STs groups is constitutional. Some argued it would lead to exclusion, while others saw it as a necessary step towards true equality.

The journey to this landmark ruling began in 2004, when the Supreme Court appeared to shut down the possibility of sub-categorization within SCs/STs groups, suggesting that it would infringe upon the President's powers. However, the current bench has now revisited this decision, clarifying that sub-categorization does not, in fact, encroach upon the President's powers under Article 341, which grants the President the authority to modify the list of SCs and STs.

The Supreme Court has now given the green light to sub-categorization, citing the need for "substantive equality". This means that instead of treating all SCs/STs groups as one, the government can now recognize and address the unique challenges faced by each sub-group. The court held that SCs/STs community is not a homogeneous class but comprising diverse groups with unique challenges. Historical and social parameters clearly demonstrate this heterogeneity. By acknowledging this diversity, the court has empowered states to sub-categorize SCs and STs, enabling targeted reservations in jobs and education. This move is a significant step towards achieving "substantive equality of opportunity". Sub-categorization will no longer be seen as a threat to the SCs/STs list, but rather as a tool to ensure that all groups receive equitable benefits.

The Supreme Court's verdict serves as a beacon of hope for marginalized communities. It is a reminder that true equality can only be achieved by acknowledging and addressing the diverse challenges faced by these groups.

The court has also emphasized the power of the State to sub-categorize, citing Articles 15 and 16 of the Constitution. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. However, it allows the state to make special provisions for the advancement of women, children, social and economic backward classes, and Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes. Article 16 states that there shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters of public employment. The State may, however, make provisions for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of backward classes, including the SCs and STs, which are not adequately represented in the services under the State. This power, however, comes with a caveat — sub-categorization

must not lead to exclusion or discrimination.

But what does this mean in practice? For starters, it means that sub-categorization must be based on solid evidence and can't lead to any group being left behind. The court has laid down clear guidelines for sub-categorization, emphasizing the need for an intelligible differentia and a rational relation to the object sought to be achieved. In other words, sub-classification must be based on empirical evidence and a clear understanding of the levels of backwardness within each group.

The Supreme Court has identified two crucial components — purpose and rational basis. Inadequacy of representation in services and the need for "effective" representation must drive sub-categorization. Socio-economic backwardness and disadvantage can be a criterion for sub-categorization. The Supreme Court explicitly made it clear that the sub-categorization within the SCs and STs communities should not be misinterpreted as creating further divisions or hierarchies.

Instead, the court emphasized that sub-categorization is a strategic tool to reach the most marginalized and disadvantaged groups within these categories. This clarification is a crucial step in ensuring that the affirmative action policy is implemented in the right spirit. By approaching a need-based approach the court guaranteed that affirmative action is directed towards those who have faced the most socio-economic challenges and historical discrimination. This nuance approach promotes inclusivity, recognizing that even within marginalized communities, there are varying levels of disadvantage. It is like acknowledging that within a single room, some people are closer to the door than others. The court's decision strives to address these disparities with precision, ensuring that the most vulnerable are not left behind.

Now that the Supreme Court's judgment has brought clarity to the sub-categorization within the SCs and STs, it is intriguing to explore and speculate its implications for Meghalaya, a state with a unique social fabric. Meghalaya has maintained a cautious approach to reservation, adhering to a long-standing status quo on the issue and avoiding any significant alterations to the policy. However, the quota among the three major tribes has remained largely unchanged since gaining statehood. The reservation policy has emerged as a critical and defining issue in Meghalaya's political landscape. The ruling government, seemingly hesitant to rock the boat, has adopted a cautious approach, maintaining the status quo and attempting to delay any significant changes. However, the court ruling has potentially disrupted this strategy, leaving the government with a shrinking timeframe to act.

With a view on the future political landscape, the reservation policy is poised to become a breaking point that

could irreparably damage the ruling parties' reputation and credibility.

The writing is on the wall — if this issue is not addressed with urgency and sincerity, it may prove to be a catastrophic miscalculation.

The trend is clear — the people are eager for a resolution especially the Khasi and Jaintia community. The longer the court delays, the more likely it is that this issue will dominate the political discourse, potentially boosting the popularity of the Voice of the People Party (VPP) among the electorate, and increasing their chances of becoming the dominant political force in the state.

It is in the best interest of the ruling parties, and indeed the people of Meghalaya as a whole, to address this issue head-on and without delay. By doing so, they can turn a potentially divisive issue into a non-issue, freeing themselves to focus on other pressing matters that affect the state. The clock is ticking, the fate of the ruling parties, and the future of Meghalaya, may depend on it.

Now, amidst this reservation conundrum, where do the Garo community stand? Initially, their stance may have been due to their own interest, but it was also rooted in the constitutional assumption that the Schedule Tribe classification was a homogeneous group. However, the court verdict has overturned this assumption, revealing the heterogeneity within the Schedule Tribe classification.

In light of this new precedent, it would be reasonable to expect the Garo community to reassess their position and consider the implications of the verdict. Nevertheless, if they continue this advocacy for the status quo, it implies a startling assertion — that their community is devoid of discrimination and inequality, existing as a utopian paradise where every individual enjoys equal opportunities and uniform growth and development.

In reality, every society is a complex tapestry of diverse experiences, socio-economic disparities, and unequal access to resources. The Garo districts, like any other region, are home to myriad stories — of struggle and triumph, of marginalization and empowerment. If they continue clinging to the status quo, the Garo community risks ignoring the very real challenges faced by their own people. They risk turning a blind eye to the disparities that exist within their own society, and the opportunities that are being denied to certain sections of their community.

Will the Garo community acknowledge the complex realities within their own society and strive to build a more just and equitable future for all? The decision is theirs, but its impact will reverberate through generations to come.

As Justice Gavi aptly noted in the judgment, "Putting the children of parents from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who, on account of benefit of reservation, have reached a high position and ceased to be

socially, economically, and educationally backward, and the children of parents doing manual work in the villages in the same category, would defeat the constitutional mandate". When the same opportunities are offered to communities with different levels of advantage, it can aggravate existing inequalities. Justice Gavi's statement is self-explanatory regarding sub-categorization.

Notably, the concept of the "creamy layer" is an advisory guideline, not a legally binding directive. Furthermore, as highlighted by Nath, "the criteria for exclusion of creamy layer for the purpose of affirmative action for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes could be different from the criteria as applicable to the Other Backward Classes".

Coming back to the political landscape, the court verdict on sub-categorization has ignited a new dimension in the reservation policy. The VPP has been vocal in advocating for change, while other parties have remained silent. However, the verdict may now prompt other parties to re-examine their stance. The Congress party, known for advocating for the poor and marginalized, is likely to join the chorus, making it difficult to imagine they won't embrace the Supreme Court's verdict.

The VPP's reputation as a crusader against corruption may resonate deeply with the Garo people. However, to truly make a mark, the party must balance the interests of all communities, including the Garo. By clarifying that re-examining the reservation policy is in the best interest of the Garo community, the VPP can dispel misunderstandings and build trust. With the Supreme Court's guidelines rooted in the Constitution, any changes will prioritize the well-being of all communities. Especially, the reservation policy is a shared and common interest for all the people of Meghalaya, transcending party lines and community divisions.

To reemphasize, the Supreme Court's guidelines require empirical evidence to support any changes in the reservation policy. So, as we navigate this complex issue, we must proceed cautiously. The evidence may reveal unexpected truths that challenge our preconceptions. It is essential to acknowledge that the data might not align with anticipated outcomes or societal expectations. In such instances, we must exercise prudence and approach the results with respect and impartiality. Ultimately, our decisions should be driven by a steadfast commitment to social justice and equality rather than emotional ruses.

In conclusion, Meghalaya's reservation policy has been a topic of careful consideration, given the diverse tribal communities that inhabit the state. The question remains — will Meghalaya continue to maintain its status quo, or will the Supreme Court's judgment pave the way for a new approach to reservation, one that addresses the unique needs and disparities within the state's tribal communities? It is a delicate balancing act, but one that could lead to more targeted and effective affirmative action policies.

**From Quota Stir to Chaos:
Bangladesh's Descent**

By Ajit Ranade

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has resigned and fled the country. How rapidly and suddenly her regime has unraveled. It started with an anti-quota protest. But more about it later. She had won her fifth term in office earlier this year. Her government won its fourth consecutive term, having ruled since 2009. She has been the longest serving leader since the formation of the country of Bangladesh. In her previous victory of 2018, her party the Awami League secured a landslide victory winning 288 out of 300 seats in parliament. She is the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, considered the Father of the Nation, who founded the Awami League in 1949. During Sheikh Hasina's last three terms since 2010, Bangladesh has had extraordinary economic growth during the decade, averaging around 6 to 8 percent per annum, peaking at 8.2 percent in 2019. Even during Covid the economy had a positive growth rate of 3.5 percent which then rebounded to 6.9 percent in 2021. Briefly Bangladesh's per capita income measured in dollar terms exceeded that of India.

The poverty rate since 2010 has fallen from 31 percent to 20 percent, and Bangladesh will graduate out of the "least developed country" category as per the World Bank by 2026. One of the spectacular successes of Bangladesh has been the export of readymade garments (RMG), in which it has now overtaken India and is the second largest exporter in the world. The RMG constitutes 80 percent of manufacturing exports, 11 percent to GDP, employs 2.5 million women, and attracts foreign direct investment.

But all this economic growth and resilience is for naught thanks to the meltdown due to countrywide rioting. Since 2022 the economy has been affected by high inflation (upward of 8.5) especially in food and commodities. That inflation is mostly imported, due to geopolitics and the conflict in Ukraine. As a result, the Bangladesh trade deficit has worsened, putting pressure on foreign exchange reserves and causing a stress in debt repayment. It is knocking on the doors of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for relief loans. The financial sector is very vulnerable. Income and wealth inequality has risen to unprecedented levels. And don't forget that Sheikh Hasina's party's victory earlier this year was marred by a boycott by the main opposition party, and a voter turnout of barely 40 percent. The turnout was 80 percent in 2018. This economic backdrop is important to keep in mind as we witness the large-scale riots and crumbling social order in our neighbouring nation.

The immediate provocation was the reinstatement of quotas in government jobs for relatives and descendants of freedom fighters of the 1971 liberation war. That initial quota was introduced in 1972 and was 30 percent. Over the years it expanded to nearly 56 percent. But there was increasing resentment against it. It was seen as detrimental to the interests of meritorious candidates. In 2018 due to widespread protests, mainly from young job seekers and students the quota system was scrapped. But there was an appeal against the scrapping in the High Court. This year in June the High Court reinstated the quota system, triggering nationwide riots, again mainly by the youth and students. This time since inflation and youth unemployment are high, there is economic aggravation add-

ing to the quota question. The protests have turned violent causing concern even from the United Nations. More than three hundred people have died, so far in the civil unrest. The government has clamped down harshly, imposing curfew, banning the assembly of people and suspending the internet. In a hasty decision the Supreme Court overturned the High Court judgement.

The government has banned the Jamaat-e-Islami, which is also blamed for inciting violence and for terrorism. The anti-quota unrest turned into an anti-government movement and political opponents took advantage of the deteriorating situation. Last year too there were violent protests against the Prime Minister and her party, ostensibly against alleged corruption. The protesters demanded the resignation of the Prime Minister, but now she has resigned and fled the country. Actually, the constitution of Bangladesh anyway does not allow political parties based on religion like the Jamaat. But it has managed to survive till date.

There are lessons from Bangladesh's descent into chaos. The anti-quota protesters felt that meritorious youth were being denied opportunities, because of quotas based on birth or blood relationships to freedom fighters. They see this as irrelevant in the present context. Besides, there was large-scale fraud in obtaining freedom fighter credentials and certificates. In India of being part of historically socially disadvantaged groups in society. But there have been instances of fake caste certificates for grabbing quota benefits. In Bangladesh, nearly 40 percent of the youth in the age-group of 15 to 29 are in the NEET category i.e. not in employment, education or training. Some 18 million youth are jobless. According to the Bureau of Statistics about 37 million people faced moderate to severe food insecurity in 2023. The government raised electricity and gas prices thrice within a single year, causing much hardship and inflationary burden. Amidst charges of corruption especially in government, inequality was rising. The wealthiest 10 per cent get 41 percent of the nation's income, while the bottom 10 per cent receive only 1.3 per cent. The conditions of high youth unemployment, out of control inflation, the deteriorating foreign exchange situation causing fuel prices to be raised, and worsening inequality was the recipe for a tinder box. Into this was thrown in the ignition spark provided by reservation which was reinstated by a court, even after it was scrapped back in 2018. And the other element of Islamic radicalisation, extremist ideology tapping into youth discontentment. How quickly a country which was coasting along for a decade of strong, export led growth with improvements in poverty as well as human development indicators and social capital, can crumble. But maybe we will see it bounce back and it will show the kind of resilience it demonstrated in its post Covid recovery. Maybe the extremist elements will be overpowered by larger sections of society with deep roots in Bengali and syncretic culture as well as democratic sensibilities. A stable and prospering neighbour that is Bangladesh is also in India's interest.

(Dr. Ajit Ranade is a noted Pune-based economist) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

MPSC's arbitrary decisions

Editor,
Adaptor of the news item under the heading "Nepotism" in MPSC exam sparks outrage" (ST - August 4, 2024), in this regard, the MPSC's refusal to disclose the marks obtained by successful candidates in the recently held MCS preliminary examination is arbitrary in light of the following court decisions:-

1. In September 2008 the Delhi High Court ruled that marks obtained by successful candidates in examinations conducted by a government body is a public document and should be revealed under the Right to Information Act. The Court ruling came after hearing a petition filed by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) challenging the Central Information Commission (CIC) order which

had directed the UPSC to reveal the marks of successful candidates in the preliminary Civil Services Examination to an RTI applicant who could not succeed in the above examination. Earlier, the UPSC refused to disclose the marks of the successful candidates saying that they could not be revealed to a third party.

2. More recently in a writ petition filed under Article 226 of the Constitution of India seeking information regarding marks obtained by other candidates in a public examination for Agniveer recruitment process, the Madhya Pradesh High Court directed the respondent (Government of India) to disclose the marks of all, emphasizing the public interest of transparency in public examinations. In this connection, the Court also observed that "All candidates had participated in a public examination. The said in-

formation has nothing to do with personal information of a candidate. Marks obtained by all candidates is public activity and each candidate has the right to know about the marks of all other candidates" (Aman Dwivedi vrs Government of India order dated 1st July 2024).

In the above case the petitioner had earlier applied for information under the RTI Act about the marks obtained by all successful candidates in addition to his own marks. The application was partly allowed and the petitioner's marks were disclosed while the marks of all other candidates were not disclosed.

In view of the above, a question arises as to why the MPSC is stubbornly hiding behind the same old willed fig leaf of "personal privacy" when the courts have clearly ruled in favour of transparency and fairness.

Hence, I request the KSU to take this matter to its logical end otherwise our young people will lose any hope left in getting justice.

Yours etc.,
Samuel Swett,
Shillong-2

Mawjymbuin Cave - A spiritual place for Hindus

Editor,
As a tourist from Shillong India traveling to Central India for the very first time, my holiday trip with my family gave me mixed experiences in the Home of Clouds. As we completed the first day by visiting the amazing Cherapunji, our taxi driver cum guide informed us about the speciality of the Mawjymbuin Cave where there is a structure resembling the Holy Shiv Ling, which is a symbol of Lord Shiv and is considered to

be the most sacred symbol in Hinduism. Furthermore, there is a natural dripping of water right on top of the structure throughout the year, even in the dry season.

Having heard this exceptional phenomenon and being a practicing Hindu, we made up our minds to travel to Mawjymbuin the next day to witness the amazing Mawjymbuin Cave, only to realize that reality was far more fascinating than the storytelling. The phenomenon was absolutely true, and we were literally engulfed with a divine feeling that this place is special on more fronts than one.

But after we completed the "Darshan" of the Holy Shiv Ling, I was curious to know why this incredible place is not known to the rest of India. I happened to ask the same to some other fellow devotees over there and learned that though people have been worshipping at this place since

decades, the District Administration and Local Panchayat are totally against any kind of activity, development, or endorsement of Mawjymbuin Cave with a religious point of view which I feel is not just unfortunate but also absurd at the same time for the following reasons:

1. If this place is being followed and worshipped by devotees for decades, how can their religious sentiments be trampled upon by not even allowing this to be recognized as a spiritual place? Why cant all stakeholders sit across the table with a common minimum program that makes it a win-win situation for all parties?

2. There is an NDA government in both Meghalaya State and Centre, which as a matter of principle, boasts to be the messiah of the Hindus. I would like to know what actions have they taken to restore the faith of the Hindus

in Meghalaya? Or are they giving step-motherly behaviour just because Hindus of Meghalaya don't give them a seat in Lok Sabha? Is the RSS also sleeping over it?

3. Religious Tourism has a market share of a mammoth 60% of the total domestic tourism in India, which amounts to Rs. 1.34 lakh crores till the year 2022 and is increasing by 16% annually. If tourism is the mainstay of Meghalaya's economy, why are we sidelining Mawjymbuin from this immensely potential opportunity to attract tourists? If this cave comes into the public domain of India, I affirm this site will be as popular as the Amarnath Shrine in Kashmir, which can change the fortunes of the local citizens of Mawjymbuin just like in the case of Cherapunji, where there are hundreds of homestays, hotels, etc., creating thousands of sustainable jobs. And with the strict Land

Transfer Act prevailing in Meghalaya by virtue of being in the Sixth Schedule, it will be only the local residents who would prosper beyond imagination.

All in all, I would like to conclude that it is highly unfortunate that the leaders of this state have underestimated the potential of Mawjymbuin Cave for reasons best known to them, but at the same time, I sincerely believe the points raised by me will be taken seriously by the various stakeholders for the benefit of their own people and maintaining the secular fabric of this nation.

Yours etc.,
Maahish Ujjain,
Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh

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

"All tyranny needs to gain a foothold is for people of good conscience to remain silent."

— Edmund Burke

The Shillong Times

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Hasina out, army in

THE situation is evolving after the hasty exit of Sheikh Hasina from Bangladesh as advised by the army chief Waker-uz-Zaman there. Obviously, the situation has gone beyond control and out of Hasina's hands as student protests against job reservations for Awami League families turned violent, and its ranks were infiltrated by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and pro-Pakistan elements too. The over-200 deaths in violence and police action in a matter of two months unsettled Hasina's administration. The order from the army chief to the prime minister to have an urgent exit left her with little choice and India was her obvious destination with a plan to seek asylum in the UK. She has been India's best friend in the geopolitical region for many years, having ruled Bangladesh for 20 years in two different phases, and her father having got support from India to break out of the Pakistani shackles and achieve an independent, sovereign status for what was till 1971 East Pakistan.

The Indian establishment was shaken but not shocked by the turn of events in Bangladesh. Hints are that India had cautioned Hasina against the appointment of Waker-uz-Zaman as army chief earlier this year by citing his perceived tilt towards China and Pakistan. As it turned out, he let the prime minister down at the most inopportune moment and declared plans to form an all-party interim government. This would mean the BNP and some pro-Pakistani Islamist parties too would be majorly involved in the interim government that would, sooner or later, oversee fresh elections to parliament. India is in touch with the military brass there and has strengthened its eastern border patrols. Meghalaya has declared night curfew along the border regions. Bangladesh cannot afford to take an anti-India stand, irrespective of who rules there. If the new authorities there opt to play the tunes of China or Pakistan, they are bound to face serious consequences since India has adequate firepower. How this is put to effective use is for the Modi government to decide. It has started the consultation process with the Opposition and the nation would stand united.

Pakistan cannot hope to reunify Bangladesh under it as the eastern entity has acquired the clout to carry on as an independent nation. Bangladesh made commendable economic progress though joblessness has emerged as a serious issue due to a slowing down of the economy, which was reflected also in the high inflation. The aspiration for government jobs increased there as private sector salaries remained static while the bureaucracy kept getting regular pay hikes. The scenario is similar to that of India, though public anger has not erupted into the streets here so far. The overall satisfactory performance of the national economy and control on inflationary trends here could be the reasons.

Homogeneity, Inter-se Social Backwardness and Tribal Society in Meghalaya

By Kitdor H. Blah

The Supreme Court in its judgment dated August 1, 2024 has ruled that SCs in the country are not a homogeneous class, and has allowed for sub-classification of SCs/STs for the purpose of reservation. The Supreme Court has done this in two ways – first, by overturning a previous Court ruling which said that the lists of SCs/STs as notified by the President represent a homogeneous class, and second, by providing evidence that SCs are not a homogeneous class.

Since the Constitution does not provide any criteria for identification of SCs/STs but they are deemed to be SCs/STs only by Presidential Order as per Articles 341 and 342, the Supreme Court had ruled in the past that this notification by the President created one homogeneous class of SCs or STs which is socially backward across the board. The present Court judgment says that while the President's Order did create a distinct class of SCs or STs, yet this does not mean that this class is one homogeneous class. The Court then argued that there is evidence that SCs are not a homogeneous class by two main aspects. First, that the degree of untouchability that the out-castes have historically faced has not been uniform. The Court stated that in the regions of present day Assam, Bihar and Orissa, the untouchability faced by the SCs may not have been to the extent that the SCs in the regions of Central India had faced. In the regions of present day Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, untouchability was such that the higher castes shunned any physical contact or close proximity with the out-castes, while in Assam, it was more occupational, where the out-castes cannot be served occupationally, such as to be ferried across a river or to have his hair cut, by a higher caste.

The second aspect of the evidence provided by the Court that the SCs are not a homogeneous class is that among SCs themselves, there is an internal social hierarchy such as between a Dalit priest and lower classes of Dalits, so much so that a Dalit priest may have more interaction with the higher castes than with the leather workers and scavengers in his own caste. This is what the Court calls "inter-se backwardness," or internal backwardness among the SCs themselves. But since the Court states in para 173a of the judgment that educational backwardness is caused by social backwardness, we can therefore read "inter-se backwardness" to mean internal social discrimination. And

this internal discrimination may be a causal factor in the inadequate representation of the lower classes of SCs in public services as noted in para 173c.

Having argued that the lists of SCs/STs do not represent a homogeneous class and that SCs are not a homogeneous class, the Court then argued that sub-classification of SCs for the purpose of reservation is thus allowed. However, the Court ruled that this sub-classification of SCs must be based on certain criteria. The first of course is that there must be demonstrable data that one caste is comparatively less backward than another; and the main data for this is that one caste is inadequately represented in public services as compared to another caste. The second criterion is that this comparative backwardness or inadequate representation of a caste must be demonstrated to have been caused by inter-se social backwardness or internal social discrimination among the SCs as stated in para's 174 and 177.

This means that sub-classification is justified if the inadequate representation of a caste is a result of that caste being socially discriminated against by the other because of its group identity, such as according to occupation or untouchability. This comes back to the Indra Sawhney judgment which says that Article 16(4) speaks of social backwardness, and not merely economic or educational backwardness, because in the context of India, economic and educational backwardness is caused by social backwardness. The Indra Sawhney judgment also ruled that Article 15(4) made the social backwardness of the SCs and STs to be unquestionable. Therefore, according to the present Court judgment, and in line with the Indra Sawhney judgment, the sub-classification of SCs too for the purpose of reservation is justified if the comparative backwardness of a caste is due to social backwardness.

What then is the relevance of this Court judgment for the State of Meghalaya? Based on the above considerations from the judgment, it would not be appropriate to call the structure of the Meghalaya Reservation Policy a "sub-classification" because this would imply that the state has created different classes of SCs/STs based on inter-se backwardness or internal social discrimination. The breakup of quota in the Meghalaya Reservation Policy was based on the

population of the reserved communities as stated in the policy itself. So this is a unique policy of the state that cannot be related to the sub-classification as defined by the present Court judgment. It is not equivalent to the reservation policy of the state of Andhra Pradesh, which created 4 different classes of SCs, namely, SC-A, SC-B, SC-C and SC-D, or to that of the state of Punjab, which gave preferential reservation to two particular castes. However, what may be relevant to the state in the present Court judgment is the ruling that the lists of STs and SCs as notified by the President represent a non-homogeneous class. This is relevant because the breakup of the reservation quota in terms of population implies that the STs/SCs are not homogeneous.

There cannot be a sub-classification in the state of Meghalaya either, because there is no social discrimination of any class based on group identity. If there is comparative backwardness in the state, it would not have been caused by inter-se social backwardness. Having said that, it is interesting that the base census data provided by the VPP to the expert committee shows the population ratio of the Khasis and Garos as 45% and 32% respectively, while the data provided by GHADC MDC Rinaldo K. Sangma shows the representation of Khasis and Garos in public employment as 61% and 35% respectively, which means that there is no inadequate representation or comparative backwardness between the two communities. When we consider also that the social backwardness of STs is based on their geographical isolation, we do not find any evidence of varying degrees of isolation among the STs in the state of Meghalaya or in the whole of the excluded areas of Assam, and especially not since Independence.

The second part of the Court judgment is regarding the exclusion of creamy layer in SCs/STs for the purpose of reservation. If the Court judgment regarding sub-classification of SCs/STs hinges on inter-se social backwardness of a class, the judgment regarding exclusion of creamy layer hinges on social advancement, i.e. that the members of a class have become so socially advanced because of economic and educational advancement, that their connection to the rest of the class, is broken off. However, the Court stated that in view of the unquestionable social

backwardness of the SCs and STs, the parameters for exclusion may not be the same as that of the other backward classes. This means that economic advancement alone cannot be an adequate parameter. A certain monthly income for a member of the ST category in a city like Mumbai gives no social advantage as compared to someone with much lower income living in a smaller city or rural area. It may also be difficult to assess the income of agriculturists, although land holding may be taken into account. It may even be that the children of government employees living in the city may find it harder to acquire land as compared to agriculturists living in the rural area. The Court cited the example of children of IAS officers as being economically advanced. But our own Khasi and Garo communities have just had a discussion on not being able to produce IAS officers at present. Is such a creamy layer preventing the rest from becoming IAS officers? Will the exclusion of such creamy layers make it easier or harder for the community to produce IAS officers? Will it advance the community as a whole or deter it?

We should also look at the good social mobility in our community. We have never been a casteist society. We have been an egalitarian society and are very much a classless society. It is not necessarily true that a person living in a rural area must do worse in education than a person living in the city or that the son of a government employee must necessarily do better in education than the son of a farmer. Do we presently not have lecturers and professors who are children of farmers? We do. So, it is not so simple to create parameters for creamy layer in our societies, especially since the Court has stated that income alone cannot be the yardstick. It is hard to find evidence that those who have been employed in public employment have suddenly become so socially advanced, so as to form a separate class from the rest of society. Lastly, there was a news report in The Economic Times and Times of India which showed that a chunk of SC/ST jobs remain unfilled each year, which may mean that there is no creamy layer that is deterring the social advancement of the rest of society. But it definitely means that having a creamy layer will have a negative effect on the social advancement of the society of STs as a whole. Excluding the children of government employees the right to reservation may stunt the growth of the tribal societies as a whole and may even reverse it. It may not be wise to entertain it at this time.

Meghalaya education: To catch up with the demands of time?

By Isaid Khongjee

It's hope-inspiring to see the headline in this paper titled: "Meghalaya likely to adopt bookless education system". (ST July 23, 2024) especially when it comes from the education minister of the state. It's a historic move in the right direction. Though disagreeing with the "bookless education," the "open book exams," is key to the much-needed change.

The emergence of social media and other information platforms like YouTube has taken the learners by storm. Everywhere, parents and teachers nowadays grumble that their wards do not read at all; but this is not surprising. We are an integral part of modern development; thus, lamenting the inevitable is futile. The ball is now in the court of all involved in the business right from the policy makers, the planners, and down to the implementers who are the teachers.

The following are the snags which need an ironing out:

1. **rote memorization:** Here it's still a common practice that students are fed with notes, denying them the idiosyncrasy of problem solving, much against the diversity of human ecosystem multiplied by individual potentials. One wouldn't be wrong in saying that this is a systematic killing machine. At times I asked myself if this was purposely designed to make us lag behind others. Till date we never had a mechanism that will induce reading. So, under the prevailing condition, we can say that the system itself implicitly suggests that no student needs to buy books, but why do they? One can't help wondering what makes us so comfortable examining our very writings reproduced by students during exams. This is a simple question which any sensible person can grasp. When will we stop tantalizing unrealistic, facile, fleeting, short term winnings before the young ones? I found it's interesting and meaningful chatting with people who learned on their own in any trade. For them the environment such as guides, books are only a suggestion to the secrets of the mind; for them, learning is an evolution – subsequently, we see a transformed individual. Through this prism we know why our moral, social, environmental values keep on failing us. At the bottom lies the, "all we know, are the acquired values," not intrinsic to us. We were being led into alienating the inner values involved in us. In majority of institutions students know the essence of the nature better than about themselves! But the values we practise! Right now, we need a living, organic knowledge. In this frontline, we can now say – "the minister realized the dire need to arrest the culprit".

Being aware of the ramifications of the above, with the exception of few, this is still unknown to parents. For them just seeing their wards with the notes in their hands, or texts in front of them, or hearing them speaking some English is convincing enough that they are learning. But, is education only about these? Surely not, the result day tells it all. For those passing the exams, it's time for celebration; the others have to whine; and the cycle of hope and hopelessness goes on while the law of diminishing returns has already been evolving to manifest. In the end, after we've done the studies, we realize we are unemployed; but we can't go back to restart again as the age has advanced (for those seeking white collar jobs). What a waste of resources!

Rigarole of Inspections: While writing this, I was

informed of the inspection, due on August 30. We the teachers suddenly were to familiarize ourselves with the sort of questions we're about to face from the experts. That's a great thing indeed! But I would suggest that the admins be asked first as to whether the school has any learning objectives in place to guide the teaching-learning, learning outcomes, and the assessment of learning. It's a matter of surprise also that suddenly the RUBRIC assessment and Blooms' Taxonomy have become topics of discussion, and up to the point of seeing them in lesson plans. For these, I have a congenital problem of not believing in whatever appears in writing for I've seen that anyone can do the writing for anybody. Further, if we say we have such a philosophy of ours and that they are in line with the NEP, we must do some rethinking. To answer this only one question would suffice: - "Does the education system provide the mechanism, and do we the teachers have the time to do all the above under pressure of the rat race? No amount of inspection will ever reform this fate. Unless and until the school admins are true educationists, nothing will change. We the teachers also have to place ourselves on the learning curve. The notion of "teachers are born" demands a re-examination.

A ray of hope on the horizon: In the midst of the darkness looming large over us, the breezy air came blowing and it oozed out of the quintessential wisdom and gut of the minister of education. It is the "Open Book exams" as he mentioned. It's the starting point of all discussions on the topic, it's the key into all the paradigms of education. Where shall we the implementers start from when it comes to effect? Here it goes- Last time I happened to meet a Professor at NEHU. In the course of the conversation, I said – "it is more difficult to set the questions than to teach?", to which he also said the same thing. Why do we need this? -

1. The goal is to get a child involved in reading and comprehending the content read. This is a must.

2. Questions be set in such a way that any verbatim answer becomes impertinent to the question. Not understanding the question only leads to irrelevant answers. So, reading, and comprehension are the basics of learning.

Based on this, what we have to understand is - even getting a partially correct answer deserves a pat on the shoulder (forget the grammar and vocabulary) - after all, there's only one truth under the sun; under this, truths differ only in degree, not in kind. This shall motivate and sustain the motivation, and once it has started, negative feedbacks are unwise. After they acquire the interest, we can go for more, challenging tasks such as - analysis, correlation / applying the previous learning experiences, or applying the known principles to solve a novel problem. Building a relationship between more than one component is what demands the higher level of mental activity. Then we can lead them on to the prediction or extrapolation and so on and so forth as the subject and the context dictate.

Now that the stage is set, the remaining task to attend to the subtle workings of the minds and hearts like never before, lies in our hands. A floodgate of opportunity was opened for us to become involved in those evolving humans. Hoping there's no turning back from here!

(The writer is a school teacher)

Letters to the Editor

Mawjymbuin Cave nothing to do with religion

Editor,
Propos to the letter to the editor in the Shillong Times, dated August 6, 2024, by Aashish Ujjain, on Mawjymbuin Cave in Mawsynram, which classes the structure as 'Holy Shiva Lingam,' I would like to clarify that the structure is a "Geological Structure," known as 'Stalagmite.' Geologically, the area where the structure is located is a limestone formation, where water seepage takes place through cracks present in the limestone formation for millions of years. The water seepage through cracks dissolved the limestone into solution, and the flow leads to deposition of the solution as rock mass and formation of two structures: the 'stalagmite' hanging vertically from the roof and 'stalagmite' deposited on the floor. There is every likelihood that the upper 'stalagmite' was easily destroyed due to its weight and its hanging position. The Mawjymbuin Cave is of 'Geological Importance' where thousands of students studying Geology course from different colleges and universities have visited, to witness the remarkable structure; the remnant of millions of years of 'Geological Phenomena' as part of their

field and study tour program. Let "Unity amidst diversity" be a strong foundation in our life so that we can make a strong and united India. Yes, a number of tourists visit Meghalaya daily, but please verify the origin of any tourist spot you admire before expressing your religious sentiments in the media. The three points made by Ujjain are all besides the point. There is no such thing as religious tourism in Meghalaya and dragging politics into a tourism issue shows bad intent.

Henceforth, in order not to create more confusion on the structure, may I request the guides of the stake-holders of Mawsynram Tourism to focus on the Mawjymbuin Cave, as a tourist spot of Geological Importance and not an Ancient Shiva Lingam.

Yours etc.,
Dr Eladbor Laloo,
Via email

Mawsynram Dorbar bans prayers at Mawjymbuin Cave

Editor,
On the above topic I would like to remain anonymous as I belong to a particular community. What the Mawsynram Dorbar has done is a welcome move and

should be strictly adhered to. The yatra may be well organized but the people who majorly participate in the yatra do so with the sole motive of picnic when such yatras should be as minimalistic as possible. The Mawjymbuin Cave is held to be a sacred site of the tribal community so it shouldn't be acceptable in the first place to conduct such yatras as these can lead to permanent changes in the ecology of the place.

Many of the tourist places have been trimmed and distorted to suit the comfort of the tourists. But is Meghalaya only a picnic spot for people to come here to overeat, over-drink and over-consume? An environment should be created so that only tourists who step out of their comfort zones and come here for an immersive experience of the beautiful and sacred Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Mawjymbuin Cave sacred for Khasis

Editor,
With reference to the letter by Aashish Ujjain (ST August 6, 2024) I would like to say to him and to all the Hindus that Mawjymbuin Cave is not a spiritual place for Hindus. The Cave and U Mawjymbuin are natural phenomena created by The

Almighty God of the Khasis (U Blei U Nongthaw U Nongghub). They were created for the Khasis, for Ka Ri Khasi and for Ka Bri U Hynniew Trep. So, it is the right of us the Khasis to protect and safeguard what The Almighty had given us.

Yours etc.,
Wallambi Rani,
Upper Shillong

Dramatic escape from Dhaka

Editor,
Sheikh Hasina Wazed is a political phenomenon who has guided the rise of Bangladesh from a rustic jute producer into the Asia-Pacific's fastest-expanding economy over the past decade, a secular Muslim in colorful saris who fought hardliners, lifted millions out of poverty and deftly kept both India and China on her side. However, these economic gains came at a considerable cost where critics were silenced, press freedom suffered, and civil rights were systematically suppressed as Hasina consolidated her position as the sole centre of power. This unexpected development in Bangladesh serves as a stark reminder and also a lesson that resonates not only in Bangladesh but across the globe that economic progress alone cannot sustain a leader's popularity in the

face of eroding democratic values and civil liberties.

Yours etc.,
M.Haque, Advocate,
Shillong -6

Flooding due to poor drainage

Editor,
I am writing draw attention to a serious issue that has been persistently affecting my residence due to the poor drainage system near the market in our area at Nongpoh. The drainage is frequently blocked by waste, which causes water to overflow and flood my house during heavy rains. This flooding has caused considerable inconvenience and poses potential health risks due to stagnant water. The stagnant water can become a breeding ground for mosquitoes and other pests, increasing the risk of disease. Additionally, the flooding has caused damage to my property, resulting in financial losses. Every time it rains heavily, my family and I are on edge, worrying about the inevitable water intrusion and the damage it brings.

Beyond the immediate physical and financial impacts, this issue has also taken a psychological toll on my family. The constant fear of flooding during the rainy season has made it difficult for us to live peacefully.

We have had to rearrange our schedules and take preventive measures, such as moving furniture and valuable items to higher ground, which is both exhausting and disruptive.

I understand that managing drainage systems and ensuring they function correctly is a complex task that requires coordination and resources. However, I believe that regular cleaning and maintenance of the drainage system could prevent blockages and significantly mitigate the flooding problem. It would be beneficial for the community if the drainage infrastructure could be reviewed and potentially upgraded to handle heavy rainfall more effectively.

I hope this letter will raise awareness about this issue and encourage collective efforts to improve the drainage system in our area. Addressing this problem would not only alleviate the immediate flooding concerns but also enhance the overall quality of life for residents who are similarly affected.

I trust that highlighting this issue will prompt the necessary actions to bring relief and improve the situation for all affected residents.

Yours etc.,
DB Dikhar,
Nongpoh

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"The moment when you feel like giving up is right before your breakthrough."

Victoria Arlen
The Shillong Times

Much ado about a stalagmite
MEGHALAYA has several limestone caves with ornate stalactites and stalagmites. As explained by experts, stalactites are cave formations that hang from the ceiling, while stalagmites are those that stand up from the ground. It is coincidence that only the stalagmite at Mawsynram has been associated with the Shiva Lingam. The reason probably is because it is not located too deep inside the cave but is located at the entrance to the cave. Similar stalactite and stalagmites are seen inside the Mawmluh cave which has become important after geologists certified it as the indicator of a phenomenon that began 4200 years ago and is now named the "Meghalayan Age" since when the earth experienced an abrupt mega-drought and cooling around the globe. The drought and the cooling lasted two centuries and severely impacted agricultural-based societies that developed in several regions after the end of the last Ice Age. It resulted in the collapse of civilisations in Egypt, Greece, Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, and the Yangtze River Valley. Evidence of the 4,200-year climatic event has been found on all seven continents.

The International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) is the largest and oldest scientific body in the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) and the official keeper of geologic time, i.e. it precisely defines units (periods, epochs, and age) of the Geologic Time Scale. This was how the Mawmluh Cave in Meghalaya was discovered to have the elements for determining this particular geologic event. Located at an elevation of 1,290 metres, Mawmluh cave is one of the longest and deepest caves in India and provides important record of Holocene palaeo-climate and palaeo-monsoon since they are not subjected to diagenesis, erosion and terrestrial deposits. The conditions in Mawmluh were suitable for preserving chemical signs of oxygen transition in ages. In subsequent years there is no knowing as to what other elements of geological importance will be discovered from the other caves located in different parts of Meghalaya. Hence it is important to ensure that these caves are not destroyed by anthropogenic activities.

Geologists advise that stalactites and stalagmites should not be touched, since the tools used are formed by minerals precipitating out of the water solution onto the existing surface; skin oils can alter the surface tension where the mineral water changes or flows, thus affecting the growth of the formation. It is this aspect that needs to be borne in mind and the geological sanctity of the caves should be maintained. It is not necessary that everything be linked to religion which then leads to overcrowding of destinations. There is a limit to how many footfalls the Mawsynram cave can take without adverse impacts on its formation. Besides, there are no amenities and the open fields become defecation spaces. It is critical therefore that the State Tourism Department takes stock of this situation and decides which places are open to tourists and which are best left alone because of their historicity and scientific importance. The controversy should end there!

A distasteful parody but what about other insults?

By Albert Thyrniang

July 26 marked the opening ceremony of the Olympics in Paris, France. Olympics opening ceremonies are always grand spectacles of vibrant cultures of the host countries and the sporting prowess of the participating nations. People still reminisce the Beijing Olympics, China (2008), London, England (2012), Rio, Brazil (2016) and the COVID dogged Tokyo, Japan (2021) Olympics - all unique in their own ways. The stand-out performance of the Paris Olympics this year, however is the mocking Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples as portrayed by Leonardo da Vinci, the Italian High Renaissance painter and sculptor. It was unthinkable that the biggest sporting extravaganza was used to ridicule the most popular personality of all eras. Instead of Jesus, sat an oversized woman in the middle of the long table. Instead of his apostles were trans-women who exaggeratedly dressed as females, called drag queens. A blue naked man clad only with a garland of rose from his shoulder to the hip came to the party. The quadruple display was a weird sight to those ignorant of the Last Supper. But to the millions of Christians world-wide, it was a shock. They barely could believe what they saw on the biggest global stage. Post the inauguration was a massive outpour of outrage across all media. The parody, a deliberate exaggerated imitation was termed a blasphemy and a sacrilege. Bishops, preachers, priests, television hosts, social media creators, hosts of different shows lambasted the show.

The insult runs deep. It is particularly against the Catholics and the orthodox groups who uncompromisingly consider the Last Supper as the institution of the Eucharist. Eucharist is one of the central beliefs and is celebrated by male bishops and priests (ministers) alone. Catholics and orthodox churches still do not have female ministers because the twelve apostles (closest followers) were all males. Jesus did not choose any female apostle. Even now the churches' ministers are an exclusive club. So, the creators of the Olympic ceremony decided to ridicule this practice designated as the 'original teaching' of Jesus. The best way to do

so is, therefore, to turn Jesus' act upside down. Jesus himself becomes a woman and his male companions are LGBTQ+ activists. It now becomes an 'inclusive' community. The designers of the Olympic piece thought they would preach to the church instead of being preached. They fancied teaching the church a lesson. They pictured that it was a mighty occasion to lecture the church on including women and the LGBT+ community as ministers of religious practices. The mimicry was against the church for denying other sexes their 'rights' to be priests. The scorn was done in the form of near obscenity and sexually provocative gestures.

The unexpected reactions, including millions of boycotts forced the organisers to shift the narrative. They claimed the tableaux depicts the ancient Bacchanalia, the Roman festivals of Bacchus, the Greco-Roman god of wine, freedom, intoxication and ecstasy. Part of Greek mythology, the Bacchanalia were public and private rites performed by acolytes and priests (ministers) of the deity. Apologising for the offense, the planners clarified that the event was not intended to "be subversive, or shock people, or mock people" but to remind the world of the 'grand pagan festival connected to the gods of Olympus.' The creative team informed that the real inspiration came from the painting of the Dutch Golden Age painter, Jan Harmensz van Bijlert's "Festivity" or The Feast of the Gods of the 17th century.

The explanation found few takers for the simple reason that the similarities of the performance were much closer to Leonardo's 'Last Supper' than to Bijlert's "Festivity". The resemblances with the former are vivid but the semblances with the latter are obscure. The performers knew exactly they were up to. Even if the intention was to celebrate Bijlert's work, viewers have the right to interpret it as a derision of Christ's Last Supper at the Upper Room. Viewers, listeners and readers reserve the right to interpret an art in a way they deem fit. They need not and should not go back to the creator to ask for

an explanation. That's how art works. That's the beauty of art.

The haters of the religion know exactly whom to attack. They know where to scourge. Some years ago, when satanic worship was a menace in Shillong, a person was paid Rs. 50,000 to get a consecrated host from a Catholic church at communion. The host is priceless but Satanists put a price tag to 'Christ's body'. The sacred species was desecrated in indescribable terms. Did not the creators of the Olympic number have the same unholy intention?

The Last Supper could be mimicked for sure. Religion can be mocked no doubt. If it happens at a LGBTQ+ parade no one would have raised an eyebrow for everyone sees their anti-church and anti-religion stand. But the Olympics is not the platform to hurt religious sentiments. The grandest sporting event has nothing to do with religion. Then why make fun of it? As hinted above, the message the Paris Olympics wants to proclaim is inclusiveness. With this philosophy it embraced two 'male' boxers and permitted them to compete in the women's category. Algerian Imane Khelif and Taiwanese Lin Yu-ting. Both allegedly have XY chromosomes and men's level testosterone. Both athletes were ineligible to compete with women under the International Boxing Association (IBA) but on the pretext of inclusiveness and equality the Olympics have equated 'men' with women. Both the boxers have destroyed all women opponents on their gold medal march.

Inclusiveness is a catchy term and has its limits. Today gender is no longer a binary. They say it is merely a mental construct. No one knows how many sexes there are. So we have LGBTQ+! In a weird TV interview a seemingly trans-woman stated that even if Lionel Messi, Usain Bolt and Eloyd Mayweather underwent sex change they would be eligible to play with women, professionally, in their respective sports. We are living in a confused world. More confusion is sure to come as far as sexual identity is concerned. Certainly inclusiveness can't be

stretched too far in sports and in life. In religion and spirituality too unlimited liberalism is unrealistic. The Paris lampoon is this level of expectation.

It is within our rights to be offended by the Olympic shocker. But are we concerned about other insults too? In Kerala, in a diocese an ugly spat has been playing out in public between two warring groups consisting of priests and the faithful. A section wants the priests to face the public and the other section insists the celebrants should turn to the tabernacle. The two factions have reached an unforgiving enmity? Is this not an insult to Jesus? In the same state priests are suspected to be murdered in church premises by opposing parties. The mocking at the Olympics is better than these abominations.

In our state, in our region, in the country and in the whole world the Eucharist is insulted differently from the presentation by the drag queens and kings. The liturgical act is celebrated as a mere ritual devoid of any reverence and devotion. Priests deliver poor sermons. The pulpit is often used to vent one's anger at the faithful. Preaching is often a platform to exhort for generous donations and contributions. Many priests have two collections in a single service (Mass). These all give a sour taste instead of the compassionate voice of Jesus.

One of the quickest to condemn the Paris Olympics was the Chief Minister, Nara Chandrababu Naidu. However, the NPP president was pleased to see the gross mockery of the well-known song "I have decided to follow Jesus" by the East Garo Hills NPP leaders last year prior to the Assembly elections. They proudly sang, "I have decided to follow NPP. No turning back, no turning back." On social media, why was the Chief Minister not upset with his party workers? Why the double standards? Why condemn the Olympics only to impress Meghalaya voters? We too are awakened by the disrespect in the French capital but are indifferent to the same in our backyards. That's how hypocritical we have become!

India's concern for Bangladesh

By Satya Prakash Dash

The situation in Bangladesh has caused tension for South Asia, in general, and India, in particular. Bangladesh is one of the growing and prosperous nations in the South Asia with a strong economy under the able leadership of PM Sheikh Hasina from January 2009 till her forced resignation on August 5, 2024. She was earlier the PM during June 1996 to July 2001. Her combined period of twenty years of serving as PM is itself a history in Bangladesh. Daughter of the founder of Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Mujibur Rahman, Hasina took asylum in India from August 1975 to 1981, when late Indira Gandhi was the PM of India and was staying in Delhi's posh area in Pandara Road. Since then, Sheikh Hasina has developed a soft corner for India and was a dependable friend with all qualities of a good neighbour. India had resolved long standing border conflicts with Bangladesh during the premiership of Narendra Modi and Sheikh Hasina. The blossoming of the steady relationship between India and Bangladesh may have been an eye opener to some, and as it is alleged by her son Sajeeb Wazed Joy on the possibility of foreign influence to disrupt the environment of Bangladesh.

In an interview to Repub-

lic TV, Sajeeb Wazed Joy said that the BNP and Jamaat were heavily funded by Pakistan's ISI and there's also the involvement of the deep state in US. It is an irony that the same Pakistan anti-India feeling there within the probable next government mechanism. The BNP leader Khalida Zia has been freed from house arrest by the President of Bangladesh. She along

taken over from the protest movement that was started initially by the students. No doubt the movement was targeted at the reservation issue that was withdrawn by the High Court, but how the reservation issue converted into the demand for ouster of PM Sheikh Hasina is a matter to contemplate. Involvement of foreign hands is a definite truth behind the unfolding of the situation. The way the status of Bangladesh was pulled down reflects a sad story of the process of nation-building started by this great leader. Late Indira Gandhi's timely military action saved the people and a leader from Pakistan and for which Late Indira Gandhi was praised by none other than former PM Atal Behari Vajpayee. Muhammad Yunus, the Nobel Peace prize winner in 2006 for the Grameen Bank, and who is a coordinator of the students protest and is likely to lead the interim government in Bangladesh, had said in a recent interview to India TV that he sees the growth of SAARC in the context of South Asia. It is the same SAARC that is sidelined by the Narendra Modi government and replacing it with BIMSTEC. Interestingly, the latter does not include Pakistan and Maldives. Hence, the pointer to the fact as to how much

It is an irony that the same Pakistan was charged of genocide of the Bengali Muslims in Bangladesh leading to independence and formation of Bangladesh in December 1971 and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became the founder President of Bangladesh. It was the same US that sent its naval fleet into the Bay of Bengal to counter Indian forces, but had to remain silent due to the presence of the erstwhile Soviet navy.

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with Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest Islamist party Bangladesh, in all possibilities will be included in the new interim government, with the exclusion of the Awami party of Sheikh Hasina. Repercussions to this may be felt to the north-east India that shares a border with Bangladesh. There is already the tension of illegal migration from Bangladesh through the porous border. The connectivity measures that India had initiated through the ports of Chittagong & Mongla in Bangladesh will be affected together with the rail movement for transportation of goods and people. India has three trains running to Bangladesh, 1) Bandhan Express (bi-weekly) from Kolkata, 2) Maitree Express (5 days) from Dhaka to Kolkata, and 3) Mitali Express from Dhaka to New Jalpaiguri. The Siliguri corridor for surface transport is another potential area that may be under threat if China comes into the scene with increased influence on Nepal and Bangladesh. This possibility may not be eroded.

(The writer teaches NEHU, Shillong)

BSF role in Bangladesh liberation underplayed

Editor,
The editorial, "Hasina out, Army in" (ST August 7, 2024), made interesting reading. It is more than 53 years now that India liberated Bangladesh and the role played by the 'first line of defence' the Border Security Force (BSF) was immense in that 13-day war in December 1971 that ultimately liberated Bangladesh. My dad who was in the BSF was in that battlefield and narrated how cruel and inhumane were the Pakistani Army who engaged themselves in committing rape, murder, arson and genocide while the struggle to liberate Bangladesh was on. In the subsequent event the Indian Army took 56,200 km from Pakistan in 13 days and forced the surrender of 93,000 POWs and suffered minimum casualties. Three lakh Indian armed forces did not commit one murder or rape. Retired Deputy Inspector General, BSF SK Mitra who also fought in the war mentioned, "They (Pakistan Army) had ammunition that could have lasted them for three months. But a force that rapes women is an immoral force. And a morally defeated force can never win a battle."

If Bangladesh today takes an anti-India stand, irrespec-

tion of who rules there or opts to play the tunes of China or Pakistan they will be inviting trouble for themselves and face the consequences. I salute the 'first line of defence' the BSF who is maintaining vigil at the moment along the 4,096 km India-Bangladesh border in the wake of the developments in Bangladesh and wish them well. It is heartening that the Union Home Minister, Amit Shah has assured that no infiltration will be allowed. When one thinks of the creation of Bangladesh, one generally thinks of the 13-day war in December 1971. Little attention goes to the covert operations from March 25, 1971, when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared independence, until the actual war. Key to that was the BSF, largely unsung. Until now, Ushnor Majumdar has written, "India's Secret War: BSF and the nine months to the birth of Bangladesh" (Penguin), an action-packed recounting of key moments in that insurgency.

Rough road ahead for Bangladesh: Sinister forces at play?

Editor,
Those who cannot pay

heed to the past are doomed to repeat it - George Santayana. The compound raid at Sheikh Hasina's palace brings history to life, as non-state actors and militant outfits increasingly incorporate Bengali-style attacks into their playbook. Bangladesh's unemployment problem and unstable socio-economic conditions have become intertwined with the venomous grip of religious fundamentalism. At the backdrop of these events it is unknown and messages are confusing whether this chaos has been sponsored either by the Chinese or Pakistani deep state but the closeness of the ISI and DGFI cannot be overlooked. At this critical juncture diplomatic channels should be opened to find out Indian interests and embassy staffers who are sandwiched at Dhaka and elsewhere in the country. Several companies of Indian origin with a visible footprint have already suffered, including Adani Power, which penned a 25-year power purchase agreement (PPA) in 2017 for supplying 1,496 megawatts of power to Bangladesh. Levers of power at South Block should be calculated by understanding the porous borders of Assam, West Bengal, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Tripura, which it shares. A country known for its strong garment industry needs the world's attention to bring political stability and control the backfire which it can cause. The book "Many Rivers, One Sea: Bangladesh

and the Challenge of Islamist Militancy" by London based journalist Joseph Allichin reveals why this nation is caught between the devil and the deep sea and highlights the visibility of those scars.

Census survey an imperative

Editor,
I laughed when I heard the story about the head of a joint family who could not clearly answer how many members there were in his family. More often than not, he called even his own son by the name of his other son. He even failed to recognise a young member of the joint family. Although he had good memory he just didn't care to know and remember the composition of his family and even he pooch-pooched at the suggestion of keeping a register to note down the names and other necessary details of every member of the joint family. A similar situation has surfaced because of the delay in conducting the census. It has uninterrupted been conducted every 10 years from 1881 to 2011. The first phase of this decade's Census was expected to begin on April 1, 2020, but had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But even after the pandemic subsided there is no sign that

the census will start anytime soon.

In the absence of fresh data, government agencies are still formulating policies and allocating subsidies based on the data accrued from the 2011 Census. The government estimated that around 81 crore people required food assistance for 5 more years. However, the 81 crore estimate is based on the 2011 census. Economists pointed out that more than 10 crore deserving Indians would not get the benefit of the 5-year extension because of the government's failure to conduct the long-due population census.

A government cannot function without updating necessary and detailed data on the population of the country every ten years. It has been a practice for 140 years. The delay hinders the government from taking necessary action, and when action is taken, it has to be without proper planning based on the latest data.

The Women's Reservation Bill, for instance, was passed in the Parliament in September last year. It provides one-third reservation to women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. But it has two strings attached to it. The first one says it will wait for the census conducted after this bill has been published. Then comes the second string in the form of delimitation. It says that on the basis of that census report, delimitation will be undertaken to reserve seats

for women. To procrastinate in conducting census will further delay the implementation of the bill.

Recently, the Supreme Court passed a verdict allowing sub-classification of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the context of reservation. The Court, in that judgement, has directed the State to collect data on the inadequacy of representation in the services of the State because this is used as an indicator of caste backwardness. This is an important indicator of backwardness, no doubt. However, a caste census can only bring out the real picture of caste backwardness.

Caste hatred and caste nepotism are like fractures in our society. After a suspected fracture, a doctor always makes decisions after, doing at least an X-ray. Any action on caste reservation must similarly be taken after collecting necessary data by conducting a caste census.

A caste census will not add to the cost of conducting a census. A caste census can be done only by adding a question or two to the questionnaire for the census. No development intervention can be successful without accurate data. Hence a census now is imperative.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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"You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today."
— Abraham Lincoln

The Shillong Times

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Lessons from Bangladesh

THE turn of events in Bangladesh has taken India unawares. Chances of Delhi's own external intelligence failure cannot be ruled out. Yet, a positive thing for Sheikh Hasina was that she could be safely evacuated to Delhi and given breathing space. By all reckoning, she might now seek and find a safe space for her retired life, but not necessarily in India. Chances are that she might get asylum elsewhere and still continue to remain in Delhi on a visit status, also as her daughter is engaged by an international entity in the national capital. India's problems in giving Hasina asylum are easy to understand, it being Bangladesh's immediate neighbour. Since the interim government there headed by Mohammad Yunus is hand-held by the army, and its continuation for any stretch of time is likely, there is unpredictability about Bangladesh's future course. Conflicts between Dhaka and New Delhi could arise. Sheikh Hasina might be framed in cases in Bangladesh and the new government there, in course of time, could seek her deportation to Dhaka. India might not want a situation of throwing its long-time friend to the wolves. The asylum that Jawaharlal Nehru granted to the Dalai Lama after a Tibetan uprising against China hurt bilateral ties and led to the 1962 War.

The Bangladesh uprising had the unmistakable ISI stamp. Whether China, or even the US, was involved in it is a matter for investigation. Rumours spread that the student movement was infiltrated by pro-Pakistan Jamaat-e-Islami and ISI sleeper cells. Behind every disturbance in the Asian region, a US hand is always suspected in line with America's geopolitical ambitions and penchant to unsettle strong rulers. India, however, remains an oasis of peace as Prime Minister Narendra Modi had, in his three terms so far, avoided touching hot topics other than the CAA/NRC. He cut and ran when farmers stormed Delhi, and he scotched the farmer reform bills in one go. His style ensured stability but, under him, India failed to reform. GST was the only step forward in major reforms. Yet, facts that an aspiring India and its large armies of youth and farmers are not happy. A spark somewhere can lead to a fire and it can engulf the country as had happened in Bangladesh. Ensuring justice to every segment of the society is the principal job of any government. The subsidised ration scheme, introduced by the UPA-II, has been a solace to the BPL families. This could be one reason why the poor, getting a raw deal from governments dominated by vested interests, are not out in the streets in recent years. In the minimum, Modi should not take things easy here anymore. There are lessons to be learnt from Bangladesh's current scenario.

With Bangladesh ablaze, the Northeast India must be on high alert

Editor Bangladesh has plunged into unprecedented turmoil following Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's sudden resignation and fleeing her country. Well before early July, widespread violent protests had erupted across the nation, reaching a boiling point on August 5th. The upheaval, led by various factions, including some radical ones, has targeted political figures and institutions while also brutally attacking Indian students and minority communities. The wave of violence has hit historical sites, including those connected to the country's founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Why the Army Chief General Waker-Uz-Zaman suggested Sheikh Hasina resign is something that should put the Indian government on alert.

On Monday, August 5, the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum in Dhaka's Dhanmondi area was turned into a focal point of destruction. Jubilant rioters ransacked the museum, which is dedicated to the memory of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. With euphoria, they stormed the building, smashing exhibits and tearing down memorabilia. Some of the angry mob attacked a statue of Rahman, where protestors climbed atop it and hammered its head with an axe. Isn't this a clear attempt to wipe out

the legacy of Bangladesh's liberation leader, who played a pivotal role in the nation's independence from Pakistan in 1971?

The violence has not been limited to property and historical sites. Specifically, the violence has targeted and killed members of minority communities. Eyewitnesses report that several houses, business establishments of minority communities, and sacred places of worship were vandalized and set ablaze. The ISKCON temple, known for feeding lakhs of hungry mouths, was also vandalized and set on fire. The angry mobs targeted the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre in Dhaka, a prime hub for cultural exchange between India and Bangladesh. They mindlessly desecrated the bust of the revered U Tiro Singh. Shockingly, the rioters didn't stop there; they looted the center, named after the former Indian Prime Minister who was instrumental in Bangladesh's independence, and then set it ablaze.

Needless to say, at the heart of this chaos lies a deep-seated ideological rift. Besides political parties, some sinister factions within Bangladesh have stood against Sheikh Hasina's government, branding it as too secular and cozy with pro-Indian. The wave of violent protests clearly suggests not only political dissatisfaction but also a deeper cultural and ideological struggle within the country, which has all come into display. As Bangladesh navigates this unprecedented crisis, now under the care of Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, the international

Religion: Cause of division and discord in society

By Patricia Mukhim

If one were to look beyond one's immediate needs and check out what's happening not just in our immediate neighbourhood (Bangladesh) but in the UK, USA and the Middle East, amongst others, one cannot but feel the world coming apart. There are racist attacks on non-whites in the UK; Bangladesh looks like a horror movie with a shameful chapter of iconoclasm that is hell bent on destroying everything remotely connected to India, including the statues of Tagore and Tiro Sing Sycem at the Indira Gandhi cultural museum. The manner in which Sheikh Hasina's home was vandalised and turned upside down with bandits gleefully carrying away her kitchen implements and personal belongings, (lingerie included), furniture and anything they could lay their hands on, just makes one cringe. The anger is palpable but how did this anger suddenly become a full-blown volcano?

There are sane voices from Bangladesh that urge us not to look at the problems in that country through the prism of religion but to understand it from the incremental chipping away of democratic tenets. But are we sure that right wing Islamic forces don't have a hand in what's happening in the country today? And even if that were not the case, why is it that apart from the student protestors - the majority Bangladeshis - the elders and rational forces were unable to contain the violence? Why is it that at crucial moments of a country's journey, religion which is the hallmark by which that country is defined (Islamic nation) has failed to bring the healing touch? Why is it that religion has become a mere showcase - an external uniform as it were but does not touch hearts, much less impact the behaviours of people who profess it? And this is true of all religions today. While every religion is tending towards a more fundamentalist form, humanity seems to have become the casualty.

In our own country we have a strident form of Hinduism raising its ugly head and wanting to turn this country into a Ram Rajya and therefore trumpeting their agenda by hitting out at Muslims as if they are sworn enemies of the country. It would be wrong to as-

sume that this is not hurting Muslim sentiments and that they are taking it in their stride. The large majority of moderate Muslims who don't wear religion on their sleeves are deeply pained by the constructs that they are today defined by. It's almost as if they are responsible for whatever that's gone wrong or is going wrong with the country today. These merchants of rage don't stop to think that India has had Muslim Presidents, one of whom raised the stature of the country in the committee of nations having contributed immensely to the country's nuclear power. Hindu fundamentalists forget that there are patriotic Muslims who have served and continue to serve in the military services. And this sort of frenzy is allowed to take shape because the public discourse in India today is rife with crudities which constitute the tantrums of the merchants of rage.

If we believe that the country can progress with such divisive tendencies taking roots in our polity, we are delusional. This sort of ideology has no room for rational debates and discussions. If the soul of this nation has to repair itself, someone needs to press the pause button. But who will do it when the ruling party is benefitting from this religious polarisation? And the religion project is so entrenched today that people don't seem to care about the other aspects of their lives. Sadly, the moderate Hindu mind is equally tolerant of the immoralities of their own side. They seem to have given in and I dare say that the media too has joined forces in this Islamophobic tirade.

Coming to our own North Eastern states where the majority of the population in the tribal states are Christians, there does not seem to be any attempt to narrow the divide between different Christian denominations. In fact, there appears to be a new Christian sect that appears and preaches with greater ferocity as if the others before them have failed in their mission. This extreme form of Christianity is also a more militant form that tells their adherents that they should not accept the Aadhar Card for that, according to the Bible, is a number-based identity which

is satanic. Now how people come to such conclusions and how they are convinced that they can do without the Aadhar card in an age where every transaction including ones where government largesse such as health insurance and several other schemes designed especially for the poor, are distributed is hard to fathom. Is this not taking away the rights of the poor from accessing state resources? Is the church which preaches such absurdities able to provide for all the needs that the state attempts to provide? Sure, there are organisations that question the need for data privacy and all that and it can go on but not at the cost of depriving the poor of what they need most.

Growing up as Christians we were told that the Bible is the inspired word of God and that is why we dared not question anything in the Bible. In the past people who questioned anything about Christianity were called heretics and burnt at the stake. Religion demanded one's unconditional belief and even if one had a disagreement with any preacher/priest one did not dare raise one's voice for that is equivalent to heresy. But a question I have always had, since I have a questioning mind is this - Why is it that Jesus Christ never preached inside a church? He preached in the hills and dales and to people who were ordinarily dressed and could not afford to wear what is now commonly known as their "Sunday best." It often makes me wonder if a poor woman who did not have the apparel that many are clothed in, almost like a uniform, would dare enter a church today. What would Christ have told that woman or women today? Where would they have met Christ? I am sure Christ would have been in their homes if they had a place for him in their hearts. Church services today are so stultified that Christ himself would not choose to be there.

I decided to read up on writings about the notion of church and whether the Bible as it was first written even had the word "church" in it and what was the actual meaning of 'church' when and if Christ did use that word. Amongst the sev-

eral writings on the subject I came upon Dan Foster's essay in "The Good Men Project," where he says categorically that, "Church is not a building, a place, or an hour-and-a-half of dedicated time on a Sunday morning. Rather, the church is a universal community united around a common belief that cannot be contained within walls. It meets in coffee shops, on mountain tops, and around kitchen tables - as much as in grand cathedrals. Jesus never commanded people to "go" to church but to "be" the church. The word that Jesus used for "church" was originally a Greek term, "Ekklesia," which literally means "community" or even "society." In Ancient Greece, the Ekklesia was the assembly or gathering of free citizens to discuss, debate, and decide upon legal matters by democratic process.

The word "Ekklesia" was a compound word of two segments: "Ek," a preposition meaning "out of," and a verb, "Kaleo," signifying "to call." Together, it literally meant "to call out" or "called-out ones." So, Ekklesia meant both inviting people to form a group (the call) and the outcome of that invitation (the gathering of the "called"). Hence those listening to Jesus when he talked about "church" would have understood him to mean simply - "the community of believers." One thing is certain: when Jesus used the word, he most certainly was not talking about an institution with a building and a hierarchical structure.

Therefore, when Christ said to the apostle Peter in Matthew 16:18 that he would build his church through him, he was not talking about a brick-and-mortar project. He was talking about building a universal community of "Jesus people." Secondly, the church, as Jesus described it (particularly in Matthew 18), does not possess the kinds of power differentials that exist in many of today's churches.

To believe in anything unquestioningly is what leads to totalitarianism and this is what polarises societies because there is insistence that one's religion is the only true religion and hence all must follow that religion. True faith in God embraces humanity; religion on the contrary holds people hostage.

good evil, evil good, etc." (rough paraphrase).

The multiplicity of genders and sexual orientations we are witnessing today is nothing but uncontrolled lust. It is in the very nature of lust that when left unchecked, it dissipates into a multiplicity of expressions and orientations that enhance the will-to-profanity.

I am not a practicing Christian, but an nevertheless offended that a sacred symbol was thus profaned, whether intentionally or not.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Lachumiere no longer a safe locality

Editor, I am a resident of Lachumiere-Upper and through your esteemed daily, would like to bring certain anomalies prevailing at this locality for the past many years. I have been a resident of this locality since childhood and it brings me great discomfort to see the locality in shambles. Starting mornings, the road leading from Malki point towards the locality becomes a parking space for almost the entire day creating disturbance for the residents who use this road to drop their children to different schools in the city as the lane becomes too tight to manoeuvre. During the day, cars are parked in almost the entire lane from Malki Point to

Block-1 area by those who come to pick up their children from different schools around the locality. At night, this area is engulfed in darkness as there are no street lights and walking around these areas then becomes a risky affair as it is also a breeding ground for street dogs and other anti-social elements.

This locality has a Rangbah Shmoug, I believe, has not been in the best of health for months and is not seriously interested in the affairs of the locality. The last time I remember we had a general meeting and election of locality members was around, maybe, 10-15 years ago? How can it be possible that there has been no election of members since then and how can members hold the posts for that long without election?

People from other localities around the city say Lachumiere is a posh/hi-fi locality but I dread the day when they come here and stay for a day or two. Then they will know the reality of this place.

I love my locality and would love to see it get back its past grandeur. I sincerely urge the Dorbar of this locality to wake up from their slumber and correct the wrongs that are happening here.

I hope to see my locality get back its charm soon...
Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

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

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Invest in Your Children...!
Today's the day of the career dad and mom! Both work, both sometimes earn equal salaries, and both spend long hours away from home.

"Why do you work such long hours?" I ask.

"Bob, I want my kids to have a better life than I did," is the reply I get most often.

Let me tell you the story of a young lad called, 'Johnny the weasel!'

Johnny is fifteen years old, the second youngest in a family of three. He grew up in a large urban area. Johnny is one of those kids who has a room for himself, and most of the things money can buy, because there's enough money to buy all he wants.

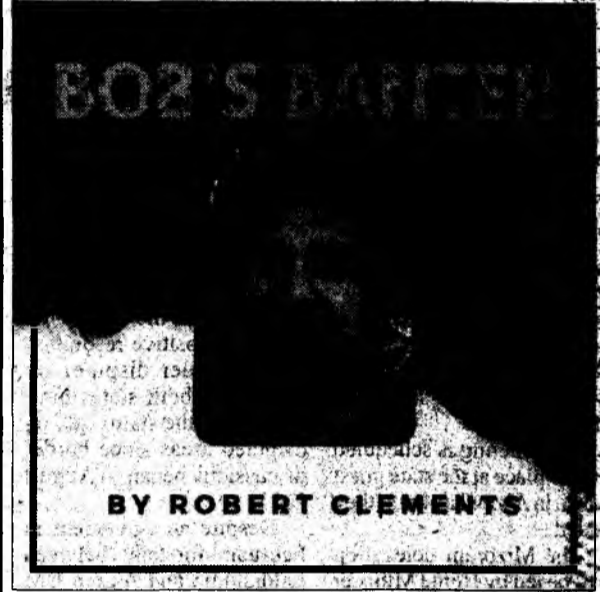
But at fourteen he was into housebreaking. As he was small and able to squeeze into small spaces the

to do with bringing up two daughters, who I have little doubt would have laughed if they'd known their dad thought he'd become proficient in a subject they still considered me a novice!

But it made me do a lot of thinking and something I realized at the end of gathering material for the talk was that unlike any other job on earth parenting is something which we are thrown into as fathers and mothers with no knowledge of what we are supposed to do.

Like Julie Andrews in 'The Sound of Music,' our refrain could be, "Totally unprepared am I!" Oh yes, totally unprepared our we with most probably the greatest responsibility on earth. Scary, isn't it?

Very often I've heard people talk about their terrible childhood and when I talk to their parents they told how those same parents



gang to which he belonged called him, 'the Weasel!'

Next it was into drinking and then into the joy of riding in stolen cars and soon he was well known to the juvenile court and was sent to the reformatory for six months.

His mother and father took time off from their busy schedules to attend the court hearings and pictures in the local papers showed them shocked and angry, "We gave him everything money could buy!" they exclaimed.

"We've been working our backsides off so that he and his siblings have everything! Why did he do this?"

A block away a new centre was opened by the authorities, it was designed for youngsters who were becoming hardened with crime, here, a team of professionals started studying Johnny, there was a nurse, a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a welfare officer, a house father, a house mother and so on.

They spend forty thousand pounds to keep him there. What they found was that if the father and mother had shared a little of the time they had for their jobs with Johnny, if they had been able to give him the love he was looking for, he wouldn't have grown up with the feeling of rejection, trying to get acceptance from the gang of wrong company he'd walked into.

I see this happening more and more in our developing nation and in households where money becomes the main objective. Sometimes it could also be time spent at parties, instead of with your children, winning and dining rather than putting them to sleep with bedtime stories.

And then the children are compensated with toys, games, later fast cars and faster motorbikes and one night when they do something illegal, or parents find they're into drugs, they cry in disbelief, "How could they do this to us?"

Ask instead, "How could you have done this to them?"

Invest in your children, not just your money, but your time! I remember, many, many years ago, a school down the road asked me if I would address parents on how to bring up children! Now those were years when I was more a writer than a public speaker and for a few moments pondered and asked myself as to how I'd been selected for the job, wondering if it had anything

invested time and money, love and affection to bring up their children.

So what went wrong? A small survey was done on children in which they listed ten qualities they wanted in parents. These young people, from 24 countries, agreed on these traits they believed were important for all parents to possess.

Here they are:

1. They want harmony. They do not want their parents to have unresolved and destructive conflict in front of them.
2. They want love. They wish to be treated with the same affection as other children in the family.
3. They want honesty. And to be told the truth.
4. They want acceptance. They desire mutual tolerance from both parents.
5. They want their parents to like their friends. They want their friends to be welcomed in the home.
6. They want closeness. They desire comradeship with their parents.
7. They want their parents to pay attention to them and answer their questions.
8. They want consideration from their parents. They do not want to be embarrassed or punished in front of friends.
9. They want positive support. They wish for their parents to concentrate on their good points rather than their weaknesses.
10. They want consistency. They desire parents to be constant in their affections and moods.

It appears that these children want what all of us want - respect, consideration and love. In fact, these work with "children" of all ages.

Let's give these ten points a go, shall we?
There's a big thought I want to leave with you before I close: As we see the turmoil and the quick exit of the prime minister in Bangladesh, let's realize that those behind it were students. Yes, it was teenagers and maybe those who were just past being children who rebelled against what they felt was injustice, and authoritarianism.

We don't want that anywhere else, do we? So let's start paying attention to our children before they react and respond in ways that are hardly peaceful..!

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

"Accept the challenges so that you can feel the exhilaration of victory."

— George S. Patton

The Shillong Times

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World Indigenous Peoples' Day

AUGUST 9, is significant because it is designated as Indigenous Peoples' Day by the United Nations. Such days are meant to draw attention to the continued plight of Indigenous Peoples across the world, many of whose lands have been colonised by Europeans and because of which they have been pushed to the margins.

Many Indigenous Peoples (IPs) still maintain a language distinct from the official language or languages of the country or region in which they reside; however, many have also lost their languages or those languages are on the verge of extinction due to eviction from their lands and/or relocation to other territories.

Closer home in Meghalaya, beyond the state capital and district headquarters the plight of IPs is visible and palpable. There is a high drop-out rate of literacy as rote and this illiteracy is not just about not knowing to read and write but also the ignorance about their basic rights and health practices.

Reservation Controversy: Could the Khasis lose their share?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

One of the sparks that led to the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government was her attempt to reinstate the quota system, which reserved 30% of the jobs in the civil service and public sector to the descendants of those who participated in the movement to free the country from Pakistan.

On the other hand, the BJP's allies, TDP and JD (U), have taken positions in opposition to the BJP's perceived or actual stance on reservation. Chandrababu Naidu, the head of the TDP, had promised to preserve the 4% reservations to Muslims under the OBC category in Andhra Pradesh.

The BJP denied the allegation that they wanted to change the Constitution, reaffirming their support to continue with reservations. However, they oppose reservation based on religion, claiming that this was a conspiracy to give the SC and STs to Muslims.

Chandrachud, upheld the validity of sub-classification within Scheduled Caste categories, overruling the five-judge bench decision in E.V. Chinaiiah v. State of Andhra Pradesh (2004).

The Chief Justice also wrote that in order for sub-classification to take place, the state will need to prove that there were varying degrees of backwardness and "inadequate representation" within the larger group.

While delivering the judgment, Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud made an observation that the rationale behind "adequate representation" was not just "numerical representation," but it primarily meant "qualitative representation."

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being violated? We will find out very soon.

The Chief Justice also wrote that in order for sub-classification to take place, the state will need to prove that there were varying degrees of backwardness and "inadequate representation" within the larger group.

The judgment also noted two different models of reservation: the exclusive model and the preferential model.

Without delving into the entire debate on the creamy layer, which would require another article, the two judgments are strikingly diverse. Bihar's attempt to reserve 66% of the seats for backward classes and upholding the constitutional validity of sub-classification within Scheduled Castes will have significant implications when the State Reservation Policy of Meghalaya is reviewed by the court.

AI-Driven changes in workplace must respect worker's rights New report warns of widening gap between high and low-income countries

By Dr Gyan Pathak

The Artificial Intelligence revolution could further widen the gap between high and low-income countries, a new joint report from International Labour Organization (ILO) and the UN Office of the Secretary General's Envoy on Technology has warned.

The report titled "Mind the AI Divide: Shaping a Global Perspective on the Future of Work" has also said that AI-driven changes in workplace must also respect worker's rights.

The report also noted two different models of reservation: the exclusive model and the preferential model. On paper, the current State Reservation Policy of Meghalaya claims to follow the first model (where seats reserved for a certain community, such as the Garo, if not filled, will be carried over to be filled by them in the subsequent year).

While AI will potentially affect many aspects of our daily lives, its impact is likely to be most acute in the workplace. According to an analysis undertaken by the ILO on the potential exposure of tasks to generative AI technology, clerical support workers are the most exposed occupational group with 24 percent of the tasks in these jobs associated with high level of exposure to automation and another 58 percent with medium-level exposure.

With respect to automation, the share of employment that is exposed is highest in Europe and Northern America, reflecting the greater economic and labour market diversification of these regions. In Latin America, Asia and Africa, the share of employment potential exposed to automation is much smaller, due to the greater share of workers employed in occupations that would not be exposed to generative AI technology such as in agriculture, transport or food vending.

Nevertheless, women's potential exposure to the automating effects of generative AI technology is much higher, due to their over-representation in clerical occupations. In most regions, the potential exposure of women is more than double that of men's exposure.

The analysis does not address the potential for new job creation. Thus, while middle-income countries such as India and the Philippines, are more exposed to the automating effects of generative AI technology in their call centre work, their digital infrastructure and skilled workforce can also be an asset for spawning the growth of complementary industries.

Another area of concern is about the impact of AI technology on working conditions and job quality when the technology is integrated into the workplace. While such integration into work tasks can potentially promote more engaging work if routing tasks are automated, it can also be implemented in ways that limits workers' agency or accelerates work intensity.

Concerns over AI's integration at the workplace have focused on the growth of algorithmic management, essentially work settings in which "human jobs are assigned, optimized, and evaluated through algorithms and tracked data".

Algorithmic management is a defining feature of digital labour platforms, but it is also pervasive in offline industries such as the manufacturing and logistics sectors.

Weather countries are more exposed to the potential automating effects of AI in the world of work, but they are also better positioned to realize the productivity gains it offers. Developing countries, on the other hand, may be temporarily buffered because of a lack of digital infrastructure, but this buffer risks turning into a bottleneck for productivity growth, and more importantly, for the future prosperity of their populations.

Apart from China and India, emerging markets have garnered only a small portion of global investment in advanced technologies. From 2008 to 2017, total venture capital flows to emerging markets, excluding China and India, amounted to just \$24 billion, while the United States alone attracted \$694 billion during the same period.

Ensuring inclusive growth in the future requires proactive measures to empower AI development in countries at the disadvantaged end of the digital divide, fostering digital infrastructure as well as AI skills, and promoting technology transfer and absorption.

Such digital skills can also enable a more positive integration of AI in the workplace, particularly when combined with social dialogue. Social dialogue in the design, implementation and use of technology at the workplace, as well as in the development of regulations essential for ensuring respect of workers' fundamental rights, is needed.

However, disparities in resources and expertise remain and can hinder AI development in the Global South. By leveraging their advanced AI ecosystems, the Global North can help bridge the gap and empower countries in the Global South to harness AI for sustainable development, while respecting their sovereignty and promoting local innovation ecosystems. (IPA Service)

Stop the divisive agenda

It is shocking that a little-known fundamentalist radical group from Assam called Kutumba Suraksha Parishad is talking rubbish about blocking the National Highway between Assam and...

anyone is the greatest danger of all. The Supreme Court has a set of guidelines on the designation of places of worship, perhaps they should read the law and the Constitution well.

Yours etc. Dominic S. Wankha Via email

Safety of labourers a state responsibility

Editor, It is a shame that without proper disaster preventive measures, construction workers are often forced to build, repair, or paint the outside wall of a multi-storey building, and pandal workers make a gigantic pandal. Recently, Adwaita Haia (44), a pandal worker, died after falling from a height of 28 ft while trying to tie a bamboo pole of a Durga Puja pandal in Kolkata without having any safety measures in place.

vided with mandatory safety ropes, safety nets, and other necessary safety measures, often insurance coverage. If we read reports like what has recently happened in Kolkata. The government must impose harsh punishment on the agencies for flouting the standard operating procedures so that no one can dare to play with the lives of poor workers.

Yours etc., Sujit De, Kolkata

Impact of tourism disruption in Meghalaya

Editor, It has been a week since the agitation that led to the halting of tourists from the neighbouring state in Meghalaya. This event has significantly disrupted not just the tourism sector but also the broader economy of the state.

of the city are empty. Hotels, which were fully booked just a week ago, now have vacant rooms. Guest houses and Home Stays - a vital source of income for many local families, are experiencing a sharp decline in bookings.

This agitation has highlighted the fragile inter-connectedness of our economy. Tourism is a critical driver of economic activity in Meghalaya, but it is deeply entwined with other sectors. When tourists stop coming, the ripple effects are felt across the board.

perity depend on mutual support and cooperation. In the long run, fostering a welcoming environment for visitors is essential for the state's economic health. We should all start being more open-minded and come together to find a solution that balances the concerns of the local community with the economic benefits of a thriving tourism industry.

Yours etc, Manisha M Patil, Via email

Illuminating the issue: Unreasonable electricity charges

Editor, I am writing to express my frustration and disappointment with the exorbitant electricity bills since October/2023, charged by the MePDCL, despite no significant increase in consumption, the bills have skyrocketed, causing financial hardship for me. It is a clear case of daylight robbery

lery when a basic necessity like electricity is priced out of reach for the average citizen.

The recent bills I have been receiving have been shockingly high with no clear explanation for the sudden surge in charges. I believe many others in the community are facing similar issues. I urge the electricity board to review their billing system and ensure transparency and fairness in their charging practices.

I request the authorities to look into this matter and take necessary steps to relieve the affected consumers. This letter also draws attention to an issue that affects ordinary, voiceless citizens who often don't know where to go and who to approach for such grievances.

Yours etc., C Sangma, Tura

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

How can we get the night sky back?

Only 100 years ago the Milky Way was visible from central Paris

For the more than 100,000 years humans have been on Earth, we have looked up at night and seen the stars and our celestial home, the Milky Way galaxy.

Cultures all around the world have stories and records incorporating this majestic, sublime sight.

However, nearly 3 billion people can no longer see the Milky Way when they look skyward at night. In turn, their connection to the cosmos - and to the sense of deep time it represents - has also been lost.

Light pollution is the culprit of this loss. But it is a relatively recent problem. In fact, roughly a century ago, the skies above some of even the biggest cities in the world were still dark enough to see the gaseous clouds of the Milky Way and the infinite specks of flickering light shining in the farthest reaches of the universe.

So, what happened? And what can we do to help darkness reign supreme again?

The long legacy of lights

Light pollution is the spill or glow of lights upward, into the sky.

Lights help us see on the ground. But for a variety of reasons - from poor design to inefficient lights and unnecessary lighting - light pollution in an area can grow fast.

Light pollution also comes from a variety of sources.

Much of it comes from streetlights. They contribute 20 to 50 per cent of the light pollution in a city. But they are not the only source. Others include floodlights from ovals, billboards and lights at our homes - both inside and outside.

At night, when we see a large building or empty apartment building with all the lights on inside and no shades or covers, that is light pollution.

A new problem

For thousands of years, humans have made detailed observations of the Milky Way - including even dark patches where dust blocks out starlight from behind.

For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia have thorough records of the Great Celestial Emu. This is formed by the dark dust lanes in the Milky Way from right near the Southern Cross constellation, an area called the Coalsack Nebula.

Roughly a century ago you could see sub-



lime sights such as this in the night sky while standing in the middle of the so-called "city of lights" - Paris.

In the late 1880s, through to the 1910s, French astronomer Guillaume Bigourdan observed many galaxies from the Paris observatory.

In 1917, he said you could see the Milky Way from the Paris observatory during summer when the sun was sufficiently below the horizon, about the position of nautical twilight - the time of night where when at sea, you can no longer see the horizon.

But it was around this period that light pollution started to become a problem in modern cities.

The Melbourne Observatory was established in 1863 but stopped doing astronomy in the early 1900s. This was partly because light pollution from Melbourne was hindering astronomers' ability to accurately observe the night sky.

ability to accurately observe the night sky.

In 1924, Mount Stromlo Observatory, located outside Canberra, took over observing the Milky Way. It was chosen for its remote location and dark skies.

However, by the 1950s, despite the Australian capital being less than 10 per cent of its current size and having less than 10 per cent of its current amount of light pollution, a new dark site needed to be found because the Milky Way was slowly being lost from sight. The site scientists chose was located eight hours away at Siding Spring Observatory.

However, even Siding Spring can now see the glow of Sydney - from 450 kilometres away.

What can be done?

By living our modern lives more intelligently, the Milky Way could be visible again from anywhere, including the heart of Sydney, Paris or Los Angeles - just as it was 100 years ago.

Shielding of lights is an important aspect. Instead of having an open light, flat lights or shielded lights that prevent spill upward are crucial. They direct light to the ground, and not up into the sky.

In Canberra, the Australian Capital Territory government and light operator Omexom have been changing streetlights to do exactly this - no upward spill, and controllable lights.

In doing so, Canberra has reduced its light pollution by about 30 per cent in only a few years.

Turning off - or dimming - unnecessary lights is also important. Canberra is also doing this. It has been dimming street lights down to 50 per cent of their total brightness in the middle of the night. In doing so, the city is saving energy - and reducing light pollution. For every 10 per cent we dim streetlights, we reduce light pollution by 5 per cent, as our forthcoming paper also finds.

The colour of light is another part of the solution. Instead of using bright white LEDs and cold-coloured lights, we can use warm-coloured lights, which are better for our eyes, sleep cycles, native animals - and for reducing light pollution.

With these simple measures, we can return to the not-so-long-ago time when we could see the Milky Way wherever we were standing on Earth.

We can regain the night sky. (*The Conversation*)

Passive smoking poses severe risks to children's health, experts warn

Passive smoking, also known as second-hand smoke, poses significant health risks to children, who are particularly vulnerable due to their developing lungs and immune systems, experts said on Saturday.

Passive smoking in children can result in respiratory problems, Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), ear infections, developmental delays, and future heart disease.

Preventing it entails keeping a smoke-free home, avoiding children, and avoiding public smoking areas.

Supporting cessation programmes and educating family members can also help to protect children.

"Passive smoking in children can cause respiratory issues, SIDS, ear infections, developmental issues, and future heart disease. Preventing it involves maintaining a smoke-free home, avoiding children, and avoiding public smoking areas. Supporting cessation programs and educating family members can also help protect children," Ravi Shekhar Jha, Director and HOD, Pulmonology, Fortis Escorts Hospital, told IANS.

"Passive smoking exposes children to harmful chemicals, increasing their risk of respiratory infections, asthma, and SIDS. It can also impair lung development, leading to long-term health issues," he also emphasised.

The consequences of passive smoking are both immediate as well as long-term.

Short-term exposure can irritate the eyes, nose, and throat, as well as coughing, headaches, and difficulty in breathing.

Passive smoking over time increases the risk of developing serious conditions such as lung cancer, heart disease, stroke, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).



"The side effects of passive smoking are both immediate and long-lasting. In the short term, exposure can cause eye, nose, and throat irritation, coughing, headaches, and breathing difficulties. Over time, passive smoking increases the risk of developing serious conditions such as lung cancer, heart disease, stroke, and COPD," Kuldeep Kumar Grover, Head of Critical Care and Pulmonology, CK Birla Hospital, told IANS.

"Particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of second-hand smoke are infants and children, who are at higher risk for respiratory infections, asthma, ear infections, and SIDS," he also added.

Preventing passive smoking in children requires a comprehensive approach.

Maintaining a smoke-free home and car, avoiding smoking around children, and steering clear of public smoking areas are essential steps.

Educating the public about the dangers of second-hand smoke and encouraging smokers to quit are also crucial measures.

By combining legislative measures with public awareness campaigns, experts believe that the harmful consequences of passive smoking can be significantly reduced. (IANS)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, August 11, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon sextile Mercury on your solar return chart and this is going to be very favorable year for you. You will be making unprecedented financial gains and financial betterment is strongly indicated. It is going to be a golden phase of your life. You will be in a position of strength and will call the shots. Those in creative fields like writing, acting, dancing and fashion will make a lasting impression in their respective fields. You will also get job offers from abroad. Your love life will be excellent and you will get numerous opportunities to interact with members of opposite sex. You will enjoy all the attention that you get. You are likely to fall in love with a very charming person and could decide to enter into wedlock. You will also like to invest in a real estate, gold and bonds. You will also go on a foreign trip with your family. Auspicious functions will keep taking place.

This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) Your wits and luck will give you a fine combination which will prove to be excellent in your profession. You will have a very good scope for progress in your career and business. You would be caught up in a lot of activity on the professional front. Many things take shape and your image will enhance. Pending tasks will be completed and you will get a new spurt of energy and enthusiasm to get on to more projects and jobs. Your efforts are recognized as you bask in the glory. Those who are in a relationship will have a setback in their love affair. Sudden expenditure cannot be ruled out. Health must be looked after.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) Position of stars will give you some mixed results. You are hard working and sincere towards your profession but certain setbacks will force you to put some projects and issues on the back burner. You may invest money in some long term investments. You will have four programs at your disposal but take care of your luggage and self. You will try to be affectionate, caring and loving among your family members and loved ones. It will be advisable to rein your extra expenditure. Your health has been indifferent of late however you will feel energized and there will be an upswing in your energy levels. You will be eager to get back to your exercise routine.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Many new contacts have been made over the last few months and these new contacts will pay off. Changes are manifesting faster than you may realize. All this will certainly be exciting but you may feel a bit apprehensive however you cannot move ahead without taking some risks. On the personal front friends will cooperate immensely in fact some of this goodwill spills over to your professional field too and you reap benefits. Family ties will be stronger and you will find that you express your thought and feelings to your spouse further strengthening your relationship. Your health needs some care. You may join some gym or a fitness routine.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Your work, career and money related problems will require you to be more responsible and you may get some feeling of unrest at your work place. But it will be a temporary phase and you will have ability to come out of it. Presenting your ideas after taking into account all considerations and points of view will help you maintain good relations with your colleagues. Expenses slow down and you are in a position to consolidate and make investments. Your family and loved ones will have warmth, affection and respect for you. Health and vitality will remain to be good as you plan some outdoor activity with friends and family.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You may find yourself surrounded by sudden opportunities be it money, intimacy or relationship. Make hay when the sun shines, and utilize this favorable time and maximize gains. Travel plans take shape and materialize. For some of you overseas travel is not ruled out. Your family relations and contacts with loved ones will get reenergized. Socially, you are going to be very popular. There will be many social gatherings to attend and friends will constantly surround you. During the course of this you may meet a new and interesting person and you will form a special bond, which energizes you. Be ready for a joyous affair. You need to remain relaxed. You will feel listless and seem to lack energy.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 23) is a time when you get mixed results in matters related to your career finance or profession. Postpone a sudden trip for some time. Get rid of your negative thinking and approach and develop self confidence. Health related problems may influence your working so take care of health. You may find yourself to be in a phase of uncertainty and you will not have clear ideas

so concentrate upon the issue. You need to remain relaxed. You will feel listless and seem to lack energy. Travel will bring good luck and this travel could open up a few possibilities and to an extent some new avenues too, which will help you diversify

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) You will find yourself in an environment that is conducive to a much more creative mood and also provide you with requisite stability. Dynamic energy possesses you and you seek to channelize it in business ventures and interactions with peers and young at heart. You are judicious in matters related to personal affairs. Your focus is on getting to the heart of the matter and homing in on the truth. Financially this is a strong period where you will get good gains. Unexpected financial benefit could come your way. Emotions are on an even keel, as you feel loved in family relationships and share joy with your family members - a period of happy family life.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) A lot of new things will happen. There is bound to be success in undertakings so go ahead and put into action your well thought out plans. Those in the creative field will excel. Your image will enhance, as you are ready to reassess your goals and dreams. Something can upset you emotionally but you will overcome it very fast also. This is likely to be visible in both your professional and your personal life. You show love and care in personal relationships and get support and love in return as you infuse energy in your interactions with loved ones. Finances are stable and there are some gains. Your spouse or partner will provide you extra support and good advice. You find that you get cooperation from your friends

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You flower as an individual and share your vibrancy with people at work and in your personal life. Your potential is realized both by yourself and seniors as you manage professional matters with ease to get desired results. Peers stand by you as you make progress in your career. A previously unsung talent in the field of art, entertainment or media could come to light and you look to ways to train in this field. Family support is tremendous realize this and give back the love that you receive. You need to keep your emotional outbursts under control as you may be hurting some relationships. Timely medical advice is recommended.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You will experience some mixed results even as luck will favour you and tremendously boost your career. You will get an opportunity for overseas travel. You will prove your mettle and you will be recognized for your worth. This too will widen your horizons and put your career on the fast track. If you use all your senses to manifest the state of abundance you want to attain, and keep doing this regularly, you will eventually get what you want. Personal finances will stabilize and grow. However health needs due attention and cannot be ignored. Be tactful in your dealings with family members else some angry and hurtful words can be exchanged.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) The planetary configuration gives you strength to achieve something new in your professional life. Energy and strength along with your remarkable personality will draw the attention of people. Money and financial gains are ahead even as expenses could rise. Courage is needed to look at all the points of view and get a balanced picture before you take decisions and arrive at conclusions. An overseas trip is on the cards of some of you this will benefit you both professionally as well as personally. You will spend quality time with your family and strengthen your bonds with your spouse and children. Your health needs care and you need to look at your diet plan.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) There will be good chances for progress in your field of work or profession. You will insist upon innovation and these innovative ideas will catch the eye and imagination of others too. You bring forth your organizational skills to maximize your gains. There may occur some inevitable expenditure in your professional life but it will boost your gains therein. You may have some personal expenditure also. Travel is also indicated during this week and this will also help give a boost to your career. Exhibit patience in family relationships and avoid arguments. Your bonds with your children become stronger and they do you proud. You spend some romantic moments with your beloved. Health of life partner needs care.

How do breakdancers avoid breaking their necks?

For the first time, street dancers from 15 countries, in addition to one woman from the Refugee Olympic Team, will be competing for gold, silver and bronze, as breaking makes its debut at the 2024 Paris Olympics.

The sport has come a long way from its origins in the Bronx. But the body-contorting, mind-boggling moves that once could be seen only at playgrounds and block parties will now dazzle billions of viewers around the world.

If you're watching breaking for the first time, you might find yourself stunned that humans can even perform these moves without getting hurt.

Breakdancers - also known as B-boys, B-girls or breakers - don't just need to concoct creative moves. They have to develop incredible strength and body control to pull them off - perhaps none more daunting than the headspin.

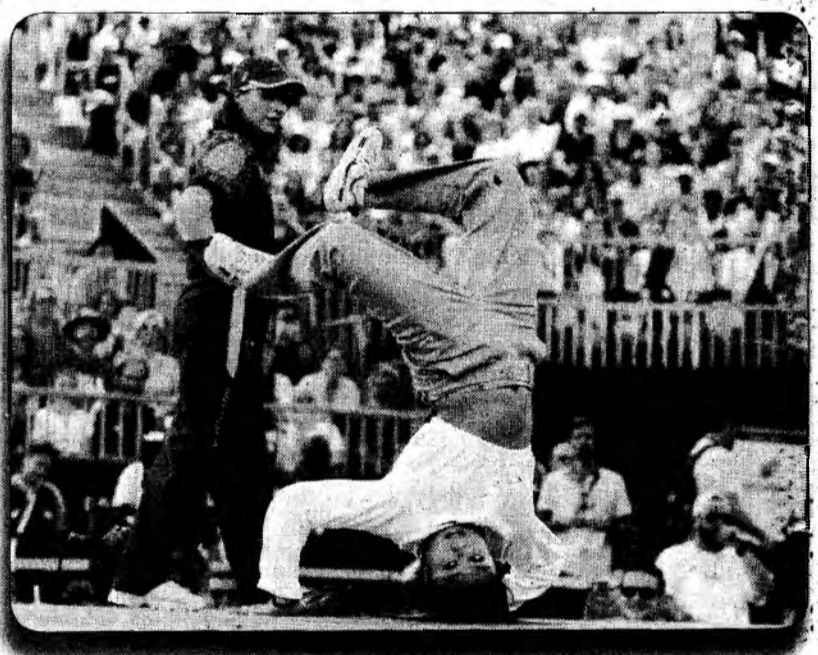
Nothing routine about breaking
Breaking is a form of street dance that developed in the 1960s and 1970s, drawing from hip-hop, martial arts and gymnastics.

At the Olympics, two athletes at a time will compete in improvised battles, in which competitors take turns trying to one-up each other with their best moves and style.

A panel of judges scores the dancers based on five criteria: originality, technique, musicality, execution and vocabulary, which refers to the range of moves deployed. It's somewhat similar to how gymnastics or figure skating are scored, but because of the back-and-forth between the two competitors, breaking involves far more improvisation.

Battles force the athletes to be extremely versatile; they must respond to their competitors, which means that those who have the most robust and varied training protocols are most likely to score the most points and walk away uninjured.

The headspin, in particular, requires powerfully built neck muscles



- and might leave some spectators scratching their heads. How can breakers spin on their skulls - supporting the weight of their bodies - without snapping their necks?

The biomechanics of headspin

While there isn't a lot of research on the specific mechanics of headspins, a spinning top can help explain how this amazing move is pulled off.

A spinning object maintains its state of rotation due to what's known as the conservation of angular momentum. When the object spins about a vertical axis, gravity does not act to slow it down or cause it to topple. It is only when friction slows the rotation, or the object starts to wobble, that gravity finishes that job and causes it to fall.

So, to perform a headspin, breakers must ensure they're spinning fast enough - and ensure their torsos are rigid enough. Maintaining a uniform spin requires stacking the torso as vertically as possible on top of the head and stiffening the neck muscles to support it - all while limiting any bend or strain of the neck.

Breakers can modulate the speed of the spin by bringing their arms

and legs closer in or farther away from the rotational axis. They can also stop, start or speed up by pumping their arms.

As a breaker spins, the rotational forces can actually reduce the downward pressure on the head. There can even be some sliding and shifting across the floor via the head.

Elite B-boys and B-girls make headspinning look easy, but it puts a lot of load on the neck and can risk serious injuries.

One study showed that while breakers didn't have more neck flexibility than nonbreakers, they did have significantly more neck strength in all neck motions and in holding the neutral position, which is critical for achieving a headspin. Another study showed that nearly half of all breakers report neck pain and strains.

There's even a term for a spinal cord injury caused by extreme strain on the neck from breaking that was first described in the New England Journal of Medicine in 1985 called "break-dancing neck." So, to all those competing on the world stage for the first time, break a leg - just don't break a neck. (*The Conversation*)

Quality is the soul of liberty; there is, in fact, no liberty without it."

—Frances Wright

The Shillong Times

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Regional power play

ATERAL relations in the geopolitical realm mainly encompassing the Indian subcontinent has remained fluid for a long time. With change of government in Bangladesh a week ago, the scenario looks more unpredictable. The country was often accused of meddling in the internal affairs of countries across Asia though China remained impregnable. The events in Bangladesh leading up to the sudden exit of Sheikh Hasina from power took place with stunning speed. Simultaneously, the anti-government protests built up strength even after the Supreme Court intervened and mostly suspended the reservation system. The student leaders insisted that they still wanted Hasina out. It is unclear yet to which all forces worked from behind the scenes for her ouster. The installation of an interim political figure, Mohammad Yunus, to head the interim government and hold fresh elections in the course of time, is now raising suspicions that the US played a role in this regime change. Sheikh Hasina has gone on record to suspect the US much in clear terms and said her refusal to concede certain demands of the Americans led to her ouster. She might as well be seeking to send out a message that her keenness to uphold national interests caused her this misery. Once the interim government starts taking decisions, its character would become clear as well. Its relations to New Delhi, Pakistan, China and the world would be closely watched. It is very unlikely that Yunus and the army would allow any space for Pakistan to hold forth in Bangladesh.

China apparently could not meddle in the affairs of Bangladesh though some funding for the student uprising suspectedly came through Chinese business interests. Put together, China and Pakistan could be a lethal mix. That was the backdrop of scenario that unfolded in the Maldives, leading to the discomfiture of India. But its president Mohamed Muizzu seemed to have learnt a lesson or two from his infatuation with Beijing. He is now in a mood to strengthen bilateral relations with India. So too with Sri Lanka, which had a season of intense engagement with China but ended up in a debt trap with Beijing, as has happened to Maldives too later. Colombo understands that Sri Lanka's relations with India, in the post-LTTE phase, must grow. Pakistan cannot be depended on to continue its close relations with China, as this suits both sides in their engagements against India. Nepal too had managed to play into the Chinese hands in recent years. The frequent change of governments in the region leads to policy shifts too. As of now, India is keen on building further on its India strategy. Afghanistan, released from US controls, is neither here nor there. The interplay of regional powers and global interests in the subcontinent would continue.

Narrative of the origin of the Jaintia Kingdom

By HH Mohrmen

The plains of Bangladesh, nestled at the foothills of Meghalaya, share a long and intricate history with the Pnar people of the region. Despite belonging to different ethnic groups—those living in the hills and those in the plains often crossed paths at various points in history. At one time, these two regions, the hills and the plains, were united under a single regime known as the Jaintia Kingdom. This unique kingdom, which has its origins in the hills, extended its territory down to the Surma River (Dutta SK, July 10, 1937, Jaintia Buranji, Introduction pp-v).

The Jaintia Kingdom was formed through the amalgamation of two kingdoms: the Jayanti Kingdom, believed to be an ancient realm in the plains, and the Sutnga Kingdom, which had its origins in the hills. The Jayanti Kingdom is mentioned in Pauranik literature, known for the shrine of Jayanti Devi, and is believed to have been a female-ruled kingdom referenced in the Mahabharata—against which Arjuna is said to have fought (Ibid). However, no historical records exist regarding the Sutnga Kingdom, leaving much of its history to the realm of legend and oral tradition.

In the Jaintia Buranji, it is recounted that the last ruler of the Jayanti Kingdom was a female queen who banished her husband. With the help of her favoured deity, she turned her shadow into a woman, who then transformed into a fish and swam upstream to where her exiled husband, Landhabar, lived. Landhabar caught the fish from a nearby river, and it later transformed back into a woman, whom he then married.

An intriguing aspect of this history is that both the hill kingdom of Sutnga and the plains kingdom of Jayanti share similar origin stories. The story of the Jaintia Kingdom is well-documented in the Jaintia Buranji, which recounts the tale of an ancient female-ruled kingdom mentioned in scriptures. The Buranji contains multiple versions of the kingdom's origin story, while the Pnar people of the hills share a similar story in oral form. This version, with its tribal nuances, is connected to many natural phenomena that still exist today. For instance, the Waikhyrwi River, from which Lo or Lot Ryndi caught the legendary fish, still flows today, as does the Thlumuwi River, where the woman is said to have disappeared. These are just a few examples that illustrate the enduring connection between the region's geography and its cultural history.

According to the Jaintia Buranji, the Jaintia Kingdom, with its capital at Jayantiapur,

was an ancient realm ruled by a series of Brahmin kings, starting with Kedaraswar Rai, followed by Dhaneswar Rai, Kandarpa Rai, Manik Rai, and finally Jayanta Rai. Unfortunately, Jayanta Rai had no sons, so the Goddess Gauri blessed him with a daughter instead, whom he named Jayanti. Jayanti was then married to Landhabar, the son of Chandabar, the royal priest. Landhabar was an accomplished scholar, endowed with all the good qualities, and he was called Landhabar because he had no siblings.

The marriage between Jayanti and Landhabar was solemnized, and Jayanti served her husband faithfully. Subsequently, a ceremony was held to enthrone Jayanti, and she was bestowed with the title of Rani Singha. However, Landhabar's fate took

The chronicle clearly mentions Sutnga as the name of the place where Landhabar lived with his adopted family. Coincidentally, the Buranji also mentions a stream near Sutnga with the same name, and in the oral narrative, Lo Ryndi caught the fish known as 'Ka Li Dakha' from Wah Waikhyrwi, a river near Sutnga.

Landhabar met the elderly couple and introduced himself by saying, "I am Landhabar, I have no one." The couple, who lived alone, invited him to stay and work for them, promising to treat him as their own son. He was later known as the son of the Sutnga, and there is a stream near where they lived that is also known as Sutnga. Among the Pnar, there is a tradition called 'chong bro', wherein a person stays and works for a family and, after a long time, is accepted

"The Buranji contains multiple versions of the kingdom's origin story, while the Pnar people of the hills share a similar story in oral form. This version, with its tribal nuances, is connected to many natural phenomena that still exist today. For instance, the Waikhyrwi River, from which Lo or Lot Ryndi caught the legendary fish, still flows today, as does the Thlumuwi River, where the woman is said to have disappeared."

a tragic turn when he was cursed by the Goddess for attempting to embrace her. As a result, all his knowledge of the scriptures was taken away, and he was condemned to live an ignominious life as a "miechha"—a term used in ancient India to describe non-Aryan, non-Hindu tribes who were considered sinful. Landhabar, now stripped of his scholarly abilities, became uneducated, leading an irreligious and vagabond life. (Genesis of the Jaintia, The Jaintia Buranji pp. 26).

Jayanti Devi eventually chased Landhabar away after he tried to force himself on her during her menstruation. He then wandered aimlessly, living the life of a vagabond until he arrived at the home of a Garo man named Sutnga. (SK Dutta, in the Introduction to the Jaintia Buranji, mentioned that the name Garo was used by the inhabitants of Kamrup when referring to their Khasi neighbors to the south (ibid pp. vi). This aligns with the oral narrative that claims the Pnar's hill kingdom was earlier known as the Sutnga Kingdom. However, there is no evidence that the Garos ever lived in the Sutnga area, so it is possible that the Buranji mistakenly recorded the Pnar as Garos.

as a member of that family. 'Chong bro' is the tradition that needs further discussion and the Sutnga couple may have taken Landhabar as a 'u chong bro' in their family. Landhabar cared for the couple until they died, performed their last rites, and inherited their property. The villagers began to refer to him as Landhabar, the Sutnga Garo.

Meanwhile, Jayanti Devi was sorrowful for driving Landhabar away. She lamented her failure to fulfill her duty to her husband and prayed to the Goddess Mahamaya Bhagabati, requesting her help in saving her honour. The Goddess appeared in her dreams and promised to help her fulfill her duty by sending a mirror image of herself to Landhabar, who would serve him as his wife. The Goddess instructed that during her menstruation, an image of Jayanti, in the form of a girl, would emerge from her body and enter the water. A "Barali fish," a kind of catfish, would devour this girl, and then Landhabar would capture the fish in his "Khoka," an elongated conical fish trap made of bamboo, which he would set up in the Sutnga stream.

The girl, who would be

Jayanti's representation, would be born from the womb of the fish, and her name would be Matchyodari. She would be a faithful wife to Landhabar, and they would have a son. Jayanti would return to the Goddess only after she handed over the reins of the kingdom to her son. As foretold, during her menstruation, Jayanti went to bathe in the river, where her image emerged and was devoured by the fish, which then swam upstream and returned to the kingdom.

Landhabar Sutnga set his Khoka in the stream to catch a fish. It began to rain heavily, and the Barali fish that had swallowed Jayanti's image got trapped in the Khoka. In the oral narrative, it is mentioned that Landhabar caught her while fishing. He brought the fish home and hung it up before going to the field. On his way, another Garo named Bhabola asked him how he planned to eat such a big fish alone. Landhabar replied that he would let the fish rot and then fry one maggot each day to eat. To their surprise, when they returned home from the field, they found that food had been prepared for them. Landhabar then exclaimed, "I am Landhabar, I have no one, but who felt sorry for me and came to help me?" He surmised that it must be the sylvan god, or the sylvan god (ryngkew ki basa), who had come to help him. He consumed his food and drank his wine. The next day, the same thing happened. He ate his meal and kept quiet, then thought to himself, "If the fish does not decay while hanging, I should cut it into pieces." As he raised his machete to cut the fish, it broke into two pieces.

He then hung the fish and pretended to leave for the field. As soon as he saw Matchyodari emerging from the fish and cleaning the floor, he grabbed her and asked who she was. She replied, "Please keep quiet. I have come only for your happiness. Since we both have no one, let us live together. You no longer need to go to the field. I will provide everything we need. Do not ask any questions, just keep quiet." They both lived happily together.

They became successful and prospered in their lives, and eventually, a son was born to the family. Initially, Landhabar ruled over five or six villages, but as his influence grew, more villages accepted him as their chief, including those who initially opposed him. In the Pnar narrative that is how the kingdom started. According to the Buranji, he then marched to Sultanpur and took the title of Landha Sultan and another version says that Jayanti Devi adopted Landhabar son's and he later became the ruler of the Jaintia kingdom.

What it means to be a student on the move: Meeting challenges head-on

By Jason Pyngrope

My father, a Khasi from Meghalaya being employed in the corporate sector, moving has become an integral part of our lives as a family. In the past 11 years, I have undergone the rigorous and sometimes challenging process of relocation to different countries four times, with each move being a significant transition in my personal and educational

preparation. The international setting of Bangkok gave me exposure to a mosaic mix of cultures and ideas that further enhanced my learning experience and broadened my worldview.

The most recent one, in 2023, was the move to Qatar, where I am currently inside an American schoolhouse immersed in the delivery of the IB curriculum. Globally,

"Another level of complexity was added by the move to Norway in 2018. It was a British school, with its curriculum being quite different from the American system in which I had just begun to find my way. Not only was I to wrestle with the weather and language environment, but there was an even bigger problem: strict academic requirements. This change of curriculum allowed me to nurture different approaches toward education and further my intellect—because in the British educational system, much critical thinking and deep analysis were required."

life. Moving from India to Myanmar at the tender age of six threw me headfirst into an altogether new cultural and academic environment. The American school that I attended in Myanmar helped me learn to adapt to new modes of learning and interaction—conquering the difficult task of fashioning new friends and understanding different educational frameworks. This phase in itself was very formative for laying down the groundwork on how to adapt and thrive in varied situations.

Another level of complexity was added by the move to Norway in 2018. It was a British school, with its curriculum being quite different from the American system in which I had just begun to find my way. Not only was I to wrestle with the weather and language environment, but there was an even bigger problem: strict academic

the IB is renowned for rigorous and holistic education that goes beyond academic learning to include community service and personal development. This curriculum enabled me to think globally and act locally in producing a balance between academic rigour and social responsibility. The other cultural enrichment found in a diversified student body is opportunities for collaborative learning and cross-cultural friendship in Qatar. I was geographically mobile and a migrant moving through different educational landscapes, each carrying challenges and rewards of its own. It has been teaching me resilience, adaptability, and focus toward a world perspective by competing academically among foreign peers.

With each new relocation, lessons learned about myself and the world enlightened

"My experiences through various school systems have endowed me with a versatile skill set and an education profile unique in itself, being shaped by different global influences. This has been a challenging and enriching journey of change and adjustment. It instilled in me respect for diversity and strong skills to sail through the complexities of a globalized world. Further in my education, with these experiences in lifetime learning, I appreciate all that shaped me into a well-rounded, internationally-minded person for standing up to challenges and taking on opportunities lying ahead."

requirements. This change of curriculum allowed me to nurture different approaches toward education and further my intellect—because in the British educational system, much critical thinking and deep analysis were required. This phase of my life was about not just learning through textbooks but also about understanding diverse perspectives and enhancing problem-solving abilities.

In the middle of 2020, I made a mid-term move to Bangkok, where I was enrolled in another British School. This sudden shift required quick adjustments if I were to continue my string of preparation for the IGCSE examinations amidst new surroundings. The intensity required for such preparation demanded meticulous planning and an in-depth understanding of the learned subjects. This is where I additionally refined the skill of self-discipline and time management since there must be a balance between coursework and examina-

me that I had to adjust fast and not at a marked waste of time and energy. My experiences through various school systems have endowed me with a versatile skill set and an education profile unique in itself, being shaped by different global influences. This has been a challenging and enriching journey of change and adjustment. It instilled in me respect for diversity and strong skills to sail through the complexities of a globalized world. Further in my education, with these experiences in lifetime learning, I appreciate all that shaped me into a well-rounded, internationally-minded person for standing up to challenges, and taking on opportunities lying ahead.

(Jason Pyngrope is a 16 year old student currently studying IB Year 2 (equivalent to Class 12) at the American School at Doha, Qatar. He is interested in studying Economics at the undergrad and higher education level).

Letters to the Editor

Why the KYC for ration cards?

The Centre's "know-your-customer" for ration cards campaign deals a severe blow to poor and vulnerable people. The process requires 810 million ration card holders to appear in person for authentication. Food rights activists complained that it resulted in the marginalised sections, including migrant workers, elderly, and those with disabilities being left out of KYC.

The time frame for verification needs to be at least a month-long. It should also be door-to-door for those with disabilities. Haste can cause deaths like that of the 75-year-old girl, Santoshi Bari who starved to death because her parents failed to renew their ration cards with Adhaar cards for which they were denied ration. Instead of rushing into "know-your-customer" for ration

cards, the government should instead start "know-your-citizen" or census surveys.

Economists have pointed out that more than 100 million deserving Indians would not get the benefit of the 5-year extension of free ration because of the government's failure to conduct the long-due population census.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

The true essence of religion

Editor,
Patricia Mukhim's write-up 'Religion: Cause of division and discord in society' (ST Aug 9, 2024) makes one revisit the real meaning and true essence of religion. We are defined by the faith we follow either from birth or even out of a conscious choice we make to attach ourselves to a particular religious belief. I believe that no religion teaches wrongdoings and practices, for the word of God leads us to His door. Instead, religion should be a

means to allow humankind to lead a good, correct and pious life. The words good and correct are subjective. What is good and correct for one may not necessarily be good and correct for the other. However, believing that religion means being in close proximity with God, one understands that religion will not preach animosity and enmity, jealousy and pride, violence and bloodshed. All is goodness in the ways of God. We are all equal. There is no distinction, no division, no discrimination in the eyes of God.

If religion means being in touch with the Creator then the teachings of God must be followed in all earnestness. Right now looking at the way the world is in, we need to ask ourselves if we are God fearing people? At the rate at which there is so much hatred being spread around and claims made that one faith is superior to the rest, the very purpose of us humans being blessed with a mind to choose between what is right and what is wrong is defeated.

There is so much intolerance in the world today that we no longer see the face of God in our fellow beings nor do we fear God. The world is in chaos with people trying to outdo one another in a way that we no longer fear to hurt, kill and murder.

Going to any religious place of worship to pay homage to the Creator while failing to adhere to the teachings of God is nothing but hypocrisy. If it is not so then why have human values deteriorated beyond recognition? All does not seem well with the world yet one is hopeful that one day we will recognise the true value of religion wrapped in humanity.

Yours etc.,
Jenniefer Dkhar,
Via email

Stop spreading falsehoods

Editor,
Through this letter, I would like to refer to an article by Albert Thyriang titled, 'A distasteful parody but what about other insults?'

(ST August 8, 2024). There is a specific paragraph in that article that is very damaging. This is with regards to the female boxers Imane Khelif and Lin Yu Ting whom the author claimed are biological men. This is outright false and abhorrent. I do not know on what basis the author claimed that they are male when he himself said that they 'allegedly have XY chromosomes.' The false allegation that these female boxers possess XY chromosomes dates back to 2023 when they were disqualified by the Russian-led IBA on grounds that they failed 'unspecified' tests. Till date there is no evidence that Imane Khelif has an XY chromosome or elevated levels of testosterone. However, the damage was already done when individuals with huge following on social media began spreading falsehoods, and the masses picked up on these lies without checking the facts. The biggest culprit here has to be Imane Khelif's opponent Angela Carrini who posted a photo on her social media showing herself as a dainty woman squaring

up against a beast, supposedly Khelif. Carrini however apologized later but the damage was irreversible.

There is no denying that Khelif is an actual woman and her own boxing records can testify to that. She suffered nine losses in her career to other women. There are pictures of her childhood that show she is clearly a female. It is also insane to suggest that Khelif is a trans-woman when she comes from a country which is more transphobic than the people spreading these false allegations. This controversy has shown us how much false information can spread and the mental health damage it can cause to the victims. I hope that we can spend some time googling facts before spreading misinformation.

Yours etc.,
Heirtami Paswet,
Via email

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

"The Non-Conformist Conscience makes cowards of us all."

— Max Beerbohm

The Shillong Times

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Who's out to break the peace?
CLEARLY there are forces out there that seek to destabilize law and order in the city of Shillong. Hurling of petrol bombs at different places is meant to create panic and a climate of insecurity which in its turn has a snowballing effect on the economy particularly on tourism which has become a significant economic driver in Meghalaya. There is undoubtedly a huge constituency of youth out there that feels cheated by the system because they are unable to find gainful employment but there is also the shadow of a well-knit group of radicals possibly acting as mercenaries. Their aim could be to show the MDA Government in a bad light and to find weak links in the political chain to destabilise the present government. These are speculations since there does not seem to be any hot-potato issue other than the demand to rewrite the Reservation Policy on the basis of the population structure. This issue is now in a sort of limbo and those who have analysed the subject and don't rely on populism, understand that it is inalterable without some upheavals that could lead instead to the loss of even the current reservation ratio.

The problem with politics is that promises are made to impressionable minds without considering the consequences of such actions. Its inherently a kite-flying exercise and a sort of push by political leaders sitting in the opposition benches to see how far they can go. This inherently has been the bane of politics. The Reservation Policy is something that leaders from across the political divide had agreed to in the past. To open a war between the past and the present is to lose the future. A call to rewrite the Reservation Policy may have been a crackerjack idea for some political parties to win the last elections and they may perhaps win the next elections too but the fall-out when in the final analysis, the case goes to the courts of law, which will have to determine the outcome, may turn out unpleasant but de jure.

In the shabby world of politics attempts to dice and slice the polity pays more dividends than promoting the ideals of democratic tenets of unity amidst diversity, more so in a country marked by racial multiplicities. Creating a fear psychosis on unfounded hearsay that what belongs to the indigene is being appropriated by the non-indigenous, while it can win political brownie points is also bound to create cycles of violence. This has been witnessed in the past with no lessons learnt. Meghalaya keeps repeating the dark shades of a historical past — a past based on non-acceptance of pluralism — the sine qua non of democracy. Lessons from the democratic process inform that successful politicians are inherently insecure and they advance politically only as they placate, appease, bribe, seduce, bamboozle or otherwise manage to manipulate the demanding and threatening elements in their constituencies. This is what Meghalaya continues to bear witness to.

Hasina exits, India's neighbourhood policy sinks

By Nilova Roy Chaudhury

The family of Sheikh Hasina, the longest-serving prime minister of Bangladesh, has been at the forefront of the political life of that country since its creation in 1971, and even earlier. It is a sad reflection on the politics she pursued in the latter half of her tenure that she was forced to quit, at very short notice, and flee the country.

With her departure, the very legacy she sought to safeguard became the first casualty as her opponents vandalised statues and destroyed the monument where her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the man instrumental in the creation of Bangladesh, was murdered, along with 14 other family members. Hasina and her sister Rehana survived assassination because they were abroad.

It is a familiar, yet tragic nevertheless, tale of notions of indispensability of the individual and issues of personal legacy overtaking, with increasing repression, the greater good of the masses, or 'awam', which her party, the Awami League, was meant to represent.

Viewing everything in Bangladesh only from her narrow point of view, Hasina increasingly lost touch with the reality that the aspirations of the people, particularly the young generation. For them, livelihood issues and jobs are of much greater importance than the legacy of independence. Anyone opposed to her point of view was the enemy and, ironically, the use of the word 'Razakar' (a pejorative term from the dawn of Bangladesh's independence used for collaborators with the Pakistan army), to describe the youth opposed to her ignited and united them into a movement which she could no longer control. The departure of the elected autocrat which she had become has again thrown the populous nation into turmoil. The just formed interim government, with the respected Nobel Laureate Mohammad Yunus at the helm, has its work cut out to first restore the rule of law and then steer the

country towards a genuine, democratically mandated path of development.

The other crucial aspect of the developments that have overtaken Bangladesh is whether the country will retain its broadly secular credentials, or whether fundamentalist forces like the Jamaat-e-Islami will regain their hold over the country. The destruction of monuments and non-Islamic

The Indian government has, on the contrary, repeatedly thwarted any other government's attempts at criticism of some of its own anti-minority policies and actions as "interference in the internal affairs of India." In fact, chief ministers of BJP-ruled states routinely pursue "bulldozer" politics, targeted against offenders from minority communities, and even the Prime Minister

with the Indian government, proved very difficult.

India, which was once the most favoured nation among Afghans, became anathema after the CAA and, particularly, once New Delhi refused to help even friends when the Taliban took over power in August 2021. Expounding the benefits of the Hindu way of yoga in the Maldives saw a similar backlash, with a government severely critical of India now in power there. Similarly, for Hasina, associating with a government pursuing policies widely perceived as biased and disrespectful of Muslims, gave the Jamaat leverage to propound the theory that, under Hasina, Islam was in danger.

Inviting neighbouring heads of government for swearing-in ceremonies of the government while arrogantly and deliberately choosing to ignore their sensitivities is not good politics and, certainly, has not advanced India's much vaunted neighbourhood first policy. Bangladesh under Hasina was India's closest partner country in the region, but New Delhi chose to look away as she increasingly isolated herself from the majority of people in Bangladesh, feeling secure in the knowledge that her choices were limited.

The spectacular intelligence failure prior to August 5 is just another indication that India's 'nationalist' foreign policy has become so limited and inward looking that it missed all the red flags in the only country in the neighbourhood where it had multifarious assets. It now stands very isolated in a dangerous, unstable neighbourhood and every state, especially along this long land border, will be affected, adversely.

While Hasina awaits permission to move to where she will get refuge, New Delhi needs to introspect and, where possible, effect major course correction by proving its credentials with the people of Bangladesh.

(Nilova Roy Chaudhury is a senior journalist based in New Delhi)



shrines reflects a worrying trend that has overtaken the country as religion increasingly finds significant traction in politics.

India, which had invested most of its political and economic goodwill in the Hasina establishment, finds itself increasingly isolated, with its

has publicly made remarks that have caused concern.

The Indian government has chosen to ignore the fact that if today the Jamaat has regained a foothold in Bangladesh, it is in no small measure because of its own perceived Hindu majoritarian agenda. As the largest

"Viewing everything in Bangladesh only from her narrow point of view, Hasina increasingly lost touch with the reality that the aspirations of the people, particularly the young generation. For them, livelihood issues and jobs are of much greater importance than the legacy of independence."

'Neighbourhood First' policy now almost non-existent. Predictably, the BJP-led NDA government's reaction has been narrow and primarily confined to seeking the welfare of the Hindu community and their assets. As the Indian media escalates these concerns, there is little outrage, or even acknowledgement among them, that minority communities in this country are becoming less than equal.

country in the region, its majoritarian internal agenda sent ripples of unease across the neighbourhood.

Policies and legislation such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) really caught the then friendly governments of Afghanistan and Bangladesh and the Maldives in a difficult bind. Trying to explain to their people why Islam was being demonized with impunity in India, while maintaining close ties

and with the Christian mystics. But even here it is not Vedanta and Yoga in their traditional limits (their past), but widened and rid of many ideas that are peculiar to the Hindus.

He did not show any interest in the future of Hindu religion. Rather he said, "I have not the slightest objection to anyone here drawing inspiration from Islamic sources if they agree with the Truth as Sufism agrees with it. On the other hand I have not the slightest objection to Hinduism being broken to pieces and disappearing from the face of the earth, if that is the Divine Will. I have no attachment to past forms; what is Truth will always remain; the Truth alone matters."

The Ashram dining room is a living example of fraternity. People of different nationalities, race, religions, caste, creed, and colour sit together and take food.

All the people, be they in Bangladesh, Pakistan, or India, must remember that hate sets off a chain reaction and hinders a country's progress. No country can progress without fraternity. Let us listen to what Sri Aurobindo said, "If they (Hindus and Muslims) fight, neither are likely to gain but both to lose, even perhaps giving an opening to a third party as has happened before in their history."

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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

Political Upheaval in Bangladesh

By H. Srikanth

Following the political upheaval in Bangladesh, which culminated with Sheikh Hasina's resignation and exit, there has been an intense debate in India about the students' protest and its consequences. The virtual breakdown of law and order on August 5 leading to the looting of Hasina's residence and the sporadic attacks on the Hindu communities in certain districts received considerable media and public attention in India. Some national TV channels and social media have been carrying vigorous propaganda as if the political movement against the Hasina government was provoked by external forces. There was hardly any discussion in the mainstream media about the authoritarianism, nepotism and misrule of the Sheikh Hasina government, which killed over hundred students. The intense media propaganda has made the Indian masses look at the upheaval in Bangladesh as a communally motivated movement against the Indian state and the Hindu community. But there is little truth in such a narrative.

Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation state in 1917 after several years of popular struggle against Pakistan, which overlooked the linguistic and cultural aspirations of the Bengalese in East Pakistan. The Muslims and the Hindus in East Pakistan fought shoulder to shoulder against the Pakistani army and won independence with the help of India. Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, attained power with the promise of democracy, secularism and pluralism. However, within a couple of years, Mujibur Rahman became authoritarian and unpopular. He was assassinated in 1975 by ultranationalist elements with the help of a section of disgruntled Bangladesh army. After the military rule of over 15 years under Ziaur Rahman and Ershad, the semblance of democracy was restored in the 1990s with the rise of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by Khaleda Zia. Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina, emerged as the opposition party. Since then, the politics of Bangladesh revolved around the two Begums—Khaleda and Hasina. When the BNP was in power, Khaleda Zia did all that was possible to throttle Hasina and her party. When Sheikh Hasina came to power, first in 1996, and then continuously for four terms from 2009, she did the same thing to BNP and other opposition parties. Although political stability under the Sheikh Hasina government helped Bangladesh develop its economy, democracy became a casualty. Sheikh Hasina exercised full control over the army, police, election commission, bureaucracy and media, and put behind the bar all politicians, journalists and civil liberty activists opposed to her regime.

As most politicians were under arrest and political parties boycotted the elections, the general elections 2024 became farce and the election of Hasina for the fourth consecutive term lacked legitimacy. Hasina's close relations with Narendra Modi also created the public impression that Bangladesh was acting as a stooge of India. Added to it, despite economic growth, Bangladesh experienced inflation and unemployment—especially the unemployment among the educated youth. It was in this background that we need to see the students' agitation against the Hasina government's decision to introduce 30 percent reservation for the so-called wards of the martyrs. The move was viewed by the students and youth as an attempt to fill in the government jobs by the supports of Awami League. In the absence of effective political leadership and guidance, the students formed the coordination committee and organized the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement. Instead of sensitively handling the student protest, Hasina's government used police to quell the agitation and called the agitators opposing the quota as Razakars or anti-nationals. That further agitated the students turning the anti-reservation movement into a political movement demanding the

oust of Hasina's government, release of all political prisoners and formation of a new government. Moved by the death of over 100 agitating students, different sections of the people and different political parties in Bangladesh supported the student's demands. With the decision to march to her residence with the demands, there was little time for Hasina to maneuver the political situation and was forced to resign and flee.

With Hasina's exit, the state virtually disappeared on August 5 and the situation was taken as an advantage by hooligans and Jamaat elements. Although most people in Bangladesh were Muslims, all political regimes that ruled Bangladesh accepted, in principle, the idea of secularism. However, there were pro-Pakistan organizations like Jamaat-e-Islam, which were communal and wanted the country to become an Islamic state. But after the formation of Bangladesh, the hold of Jamaat has considerably reduced. They did not gain over 10 percent votes at any time in the elections. Although there were sporadic attacks on the Hindus and other minorities, there is a consensus in Bangladesh about preserving secular and pluralist traditions. Even the student leaders who led the agitation against Hasina clarified it was the movement of all Bangladeshis against the dictatorial regime and is not directed against any religious community. However, the political anarchy that ensued led to sporadic attacks on the Hindu places of worship and created a panic among the Hindus who were attacked and their property destroyed in some places. But, upholding the secular traditions, the students and even the Muslim clerics in different places formed committees to protect the places of worship. Muhammad Yunus, who took over as the caretaker PM, appealed to the people to end the attacks on religious minorities. The student leaders projected the attacks as conspiracy to defame the agitation and legitimize Hasina's misrule. Army is deployed in Dhaka and other places to deal with the communal tensions. They need to reach out to the interior places in Bangladesh. Let us hope the situation becomes normal soon.

The political upheaval in Bangladesh came as a rude shock to Narendra Modi's government in India. Hindutva elements in India are using the events in Bangladesh to rouse the Hindu sentiments to further their political interest. The public sympathy for the affected Hindus in Bangladesh will be used by Modi's regime to legitimize the controversial CAA. But India has to tread cautiously in dealing with the new dispensation in Bangladesh, where anti-Indian sentiments are growing. There is nothing wrong with giving temporary shelter to Sheikh Hasina. But it is in the long-term interest of India to disassociate itself from Hasina's regime. Smooth political transition in Bangladesh is good for India. Instability in the neighboring state will increase the threats of illegal migration, refugee problem and Islamic insurgency. On its part, the new regime in Bangladesh should also prove to the world that the political change would further the cause of democracy and secularism. The student leaders prove their secular credentials by coming out openly against those elements attacking the religious minorities. As caretaker government, Muhammad Yunus should act swiftly to stop the hooligans and the communal organizations from spreading passions among the people. The Army should take immediate action to restore law and order, and ensure justice to the religious minorities in Bangladesh. The Hindus in Bangladesh have every right to organize themselves against the communal attacks. But in their own interest, they should avoid reposing faith in the much maligned Hasina government. They should join hands with the secular Muslims and become an integral part of the movement for political change for restoration of democracy. It is in everyone's interest to see that the transition does not prolong the anarchy.

Letters to the Editor

Empathy the need of the hour

Editor,
The current upheaval in Bangladesh has unleashed the possibility of an influx of desperate refugees entering India illegally. They remind us of other desperate people, in other parts of the world — from those put into leaky boats to Europe, by people smugglers — to those risking their lives to reach America. They all share in common a tragic homelessness. They also share in common great resilience.

What should be the attitude of the receiving nations? Unfortunately, we are seeing growing cruelty and callousness, even in a prosperous nation of immigrants, like the USA. Mr. Trump gathers potential votes by spreading lies about illegal immigrants. Let us not forget that the legal is not the same as the moral, as Dr Martin Luther King pointed out in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Despair and homelessness make people heedless of the law. This is hardly the same as criminal lawlessness. Law-abiding conduct is a luxury few can afford when they are that desperate. To the refugee, the main goal is to survive — somehow. Nobody leaves their homes willingly. If they are leaving their homes to embark on a dangerous journey to a foreign land where they may be denied entry — it is evident that their homes are in turmoil.

It saddens me to see the attitudes of Meghalaya groups, like KSU and JNC towards the possibility of illegal influx from Bangladesh — as

if those fleeing violence are termite. This is inhumane. Granted one cannot help another, at the cost of one's own existence. But the fear of demographic extinction should take a backseat before an emergency involving the survival of desperate people fleeing murder and mayhem. It is sheer paranoia, extreme selfishness (the hallmark of identity politics), and unrelenting xenophobia, to think that granting refuge to desperate people will wipe out a community. Such attitudes are all the more reprehensible in a Christian state. Let us not forget these words of Christ, often quoted by Mother Teresa, "For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home." Today, Christ comes to us in the guise of the refugee!

If there is an influx from Bangladesh, those fleeing to India can be given temporary papers, and the basics of refuge, which is a fundamental human right that every human being is entitled to. At least in America, there is enough individuality to prevent xenophobic groupthink. In this same country, where Trump spews hatred towards illegal immigrants on a daily basis, humanitarian groups go to the same southern border to shelter and comfort those fleeing impossible home situations.

What, after all, is the need of the hour — granting refuge to a frail and frightened human being, or preserving an identity, which, the footfall of history can wipe out in the blink of an eye? To prioritize identities over refuge, it seems to me is selfish beyond belief. Those who engage

in such thinking (including Trumpsters in America) have never known what it is to lose a child during a dangerous journey to a new land, to no longer have a country or homeland, or to undergo hunger, thirst, illness, and danger of death, for days. Above all, those who are xenophobic to those in dire need have never known what it is to suddenly become homeless, in limbo, and impoverished.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Providing shelter to Sheikh Hasina amidst violence in Bangladesh

Editor,
The increasing violence in Bangladesh in the wake of the abrupt resignation and exile of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has spelled a nightmare for the minority communities. India's decision to offer shelter to Hasina is highly praiseworthy, underscoring the deep-rooted ties between the two nations. The fact that Hasina chose India as her refuge, despite many Muslim-majority nations, speaks volumes.

However, the situation on the ground in Bangladesh presents a grim picture. The brutal violence and killings, which are specifically targeting minority communities, stem from entrenched ideological divisions and much more. The radical forces that view Sheikh Hasina as an arch-enemy are growing increasingly furious, expressing their anger through

barbaric atrocities against these vulnerable groups.

In this volatile atmosphere, India must act cautiously. The country should carefully weigh the pros and cons before continuing to provide humanitarian shelter to Sheikh Hasina. Even Muhammad Yunus, the chief adviser of the interim government, considers Sheikh Hasina his enemy number one. The safety and security of millions of minorities are more important than anything else at this critical juncture.

Yours etc.,
Salil Grewal,
Shillong

Sri Aurobindo's humanism

Editor,
Our Independence Day coincides with Sri Aurobindo's birthday. Sri Aurobindo was born in Kolkata on 15 August 1872. He evolved a new method, which he called Integral Yoga, during his forty years in Pondicherry from 1910 to 1950. Some people wrongly tag it as a religion. But neither did Sri Aurobindo propagate a new religion, nor was he a practising Hindu, nor any other religion. He, himself, categorically debunked such notions in his two letters, dated 23 February 1932 and 17 November 1932, respectively ("Letters on Himself and the Ashram" by Sri Aurobindo, pages- 697 to 701). He clearly said, "I may say that it is far from my purpose to propagate any religion new or old for humanity in the future."

Sri Aurobindo was against orthodoxy in religion. He

"A failure is not always a mistake, it may simply be the best one can do under the circumstances.

The real mistake is to stop trying."

— B. F. Skinner

The Shillong Times

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India's Olympics brouhaha

AS the curtains fell on the Paris Olympics, the 17 days of awesome performances by highly energetic contingents from across the world ended with the usual medal tally -- in which the US and China bagged the top positions, winning 126 and 91 medals respectively. India ended up with six; one silver, five bronze and no gold. Curiously, by virtue of its one gold win, Pakistan finished 62 in the 2024 medal tally, leaving India further down at the 71st place. Even small countries in Asia performed better than India. South Korea won 32 medals, of which 12 each were gold and silver. Australia, with a population of 2.5 crore ended up with 53 medals, of which 18 were gold and 19 silver. At the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, India had won seven medals — one gold, two silver and four bronze — and ranked at 48. This time, the performance fell further. Through successive Olympics, the nation of 1.4 billion fails to make a mark. In Asian Games too, India continued having a modest show. What matters is performance -- not big talks for which we as a democracy specialize in.

Obviously, India's poor performance at such global events is proof of the long road ahead for it to traverse and reach up to what it hopes to be -- a Viksit Bharat or Developed Nation by Year 2047, a century past the Independence or Self-Rule. Drums of India readying to jump from fifth to third position in global economic power status in another three years are, sadly, tamed by the realities on the ground. It's all right for those at the helm to claim they are working wonders. The script is all too familiar from the time when Indira Gandhi promised 'garibi hatao' and won parliament elections in the 1970s. Some 80 percent of Indians today lead a hand-to-mouth existence, many not having two square meals a day. Large segments of the youths are not productively engaged and laze their time away. The 10 years of the two Modi-terms worked no wonders on the performance front of Indian youths, overall, as is evident from the Olympics show too. Narendra Modi quietly carried forward the archaic systems left behind by the UPA governments. There has been no palpable improvement in multiple sectors.

The meddling by politicians in sports bodies has been its main curse. This includes the IOA as well. They want to have a finger in every pie; and they would not allow professionals to manage the affairs of even talent-nurturing entities. The nation must create conditions to do better not just in Olympics, CWG and Asian Games, but in every sector of human engagement to realise the full potential of its youth and the goal of a Viksit Bharat.

NIRF ranking & NEHU's future trajectory, both intriguing factors

By Dr.S.Ravikumar

The higher education landscape is constantly changing as universities compete to build their reputations and solidify their positions in the academic world. Over the years, university rankings have sparked intense interest and debate, focussing on factors such as research output and efficiency. Research universities drive knowledge creation and sharing, which is critical to regional development. Increasing the representation of Indian universities in global rankings is a critical issue in higher education. The Indian government has implemented various policies and initiatives to promote the growth and development of research universities, such as the Institutions of Eminence scheme aimed at elevating select universities to global standards of excellence in teaching and research.

According to a recent analysis, top-ranked Indian universities based on research output and efficiency include the Indian Institute of Science, the Indian Institutes of Technology, and the Indian Institutes for Management. These institutions have consistently demonstrated strong research output and have effectively contributed to the country's socio-economic development. However, Indian universities' representation in global rankings remains a significant challenge, with only a few institutions, such as the Indian Institute of Science and a handful of IITs, appearing in the top global university rankings.

The Indian Institutes of Management have made significant research contributions in management and business fields, influencing policy decisions and enhancing corporate sector efficiency in India. As India focuses on developing its higher education sector, it is crucial to recognise and support the institutions driving progress and shaping the nation's future. Ranking universities based on their research and efficiency can help identify areas for improvement, further enhancing educational institutions' impact on regional and national development. Indian central universities play a significant role in shaping the country's educational landscape and contributing to its socio-economic development through research.

Indian higher education has long faced criticism for various reasons, including the poor quality of course content, shortage of skilled teaching faculty, lack of research interest, inadequate infrastructure facilities, limited financial support, uneven industry-centric skills, and inadequate international collaborations. To address these challenges, the Indian government has undertaken several initiatives, such as the Institutions of Eminence scheme, to elevate select universities to global standards of excellence in teaching and research.

The National Institutional Ranking Framework, established by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, ranks Indian universities and higher educational institutions. The country's higher education system faces challenges related to quality, research output, funding, infrastructure, and innovation

focus. Due to limited funding and resources, only 2.7% of India's over 1,040 universities offer PhD programs. Efforts are underway to enhance research infrastructure through initiatives like the proposed National Research Foundation; however, budget restrictions pose a challenge. It is critical to significantly increase research funding, introduce new initiatives, such as NRF, alongside existing schemes, and provide undergraduates with course-based research experiences. Upholding academic standards and processes will improve the overall quality of higher education in India.

The NIRF ranking system evaluates performance based on teaching, learning resources, research, graduation outcomes, outreach inclusivity, and perception parameters, but has encountered challenges regarding methodology transparency during the evaluation process. The government uses these tools to identify and support top-performing institutions. However, the endeavour of Indian universities to achieve 'world-class' status suffers due to a lack of funding and resources. Collaborative activities involving universities, industry, and the government are crucial drivers for economic growth, innovation, and the advancement of knowledge. Limited efforts have resulted in an institutional barrier between stakeholders due to their lack of understanding.

The Government of India has long prioritised an intense research and development environment, dedicating a significant portion of the national budget to fund initiatives across various sectors. While Union government funding for R&D has declined since 2010, business sector investment in R&D has increased substantially, potentially impacting the nation's competitiveness and ability to address societal challenges.

In 2020, the world's leading economy, the United States, invested \$708 billion in R&D projects, predominantly funded by government grants, companies, and non-profit foundations. While the fifth-largest economy is aiming to become third, India's commitment to R&D is commendable; its allocation for research and development has historically lagged behind global leaders. According to the latest available data between 2010 and 2020, India's gross expenditure on R&D as a percentage of its GDP averaged around 0.74%, significantly lower than the global average of 2.4%. The Indian government is focusing on increasing investment in R&D and innovation, building new research institutions, providing funding for private sector R&D, and fostering public-private partnerships to align with enhancing India's technological self-reliance in strategic sectors like defence, healthcare, and environmental sustainability. However, there are concerns about prioritising R&D over more immediate socioeconomic needs. Balancing investment in R&D with addressing pressing social challenges is crucial for

overall development. Ranking of Universities Based on Research, Efficiency, and Way Forward. The allocation for research and development by the Government of India has been a subject of ongoing discussion due to its significant role in shaping scientific and technological advancements. The higher education system in India is highly diverse, with institutions focusing on research, production, and human resource development. However, the sector faces challenges such as limited government funding for essential research efforts, faculty quality issues, syllabus standards, technological infrastructure limitations, and administrative policies that hinder overall quality. Creating an academic and economic environment that fosters knowledge-sector growth is critical. Additionally, the current situation presents challenges, such as the need for universities to offer PhD programs due to insufficient funding and infrastructure constraints. Nationwide financial challenges are affecting the ability of higher education systems to provide quality education opportunities amidst rising operational costs and increased demand for skilled professionals.

Another crucial issue plaguing the Indian higher education system is the chronic shortage of qualified faculty members in central universities. According to the most recent data, the average vacancy rate for teaching positions in central universities is around 35%. This shortage of qualified faculties has a direct impact on the quality of education and research output at these institutions. The reasons behind this persistent vacancy crisis are multifaceted. Recruitment and retention of talented faculty members are critical for the success of any university, as they are the backbone of the institution's academic and research activities. Unfortunately, the conventional university system often lacks a proper reward system to recognise and incentivise distinguished research contributions, adversely affecting faculty retention. North-Eastern Hill University has implemented various measures to strengthen its research capabilities and overall institutional effectiveness. In the first place, recent teacher recruitment has boosted every department's morale. These efforts include developing interdisciplinary research centres, enhancing research facilities, and promoting collaboration between industry and academia. The university has adopted and implemented NEP 2020, established a Research and Innovation Cell to manage, oversee, and assist research endeavours, organised frequent workshops and seminars to enhance research capacity, and devised methods for more effectively sharing research results.

The North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), in the picturesque region of North-East India, is a prime example of an institution struggling to gain a prominent position in national and international university rankings. As a central university, NEHU is well-positioned

to contribute significantly to the region's development through enhanced research and academic activities. This region of India faces unique challenges, including geographical isolation, socio-economic disparities, and limited access to higher education facilities.

The National Institutional Ranking Framework 2023 report ranked NEHU 80th under the "university" category, placing it outside the top 100 universities in the NIRF 2024 ranking. It marked a drop of 14 ranks from its position at 66th in 2022 and 59th in 2021. The NIRF rankings consider a variety of parameters, including teaching, learning, and resources; research and professional practice; graduation outcomes; outreach and inclusivity; and peer perception.

On these parameters, sixteen variables capture data. NEHU scored less than 50 per cent on nine variables, five of which were below even 20 per cent. During admission, allocating extra weight in terms of points or marks to NEHU-affiliated college students had a significant impact on regional diversity, creating an imbalance for those from other universities. NEHU must address each variable separately, focussing more on research and professional practice areas. We need to underscore the significant impact of research on ranking. In a peer group comparison, Tezpur University ranked 69 with 708 indexed publications in 2023, which garnered 1585 citations, with an average of 2.2 citations per paper, while NEHU ranked 80 with 418 publications with a citation of 599, with an average citation per paper of 1.4. The publication number indicates the article's quality and journal source. The strength of NEHU is women's diversity, with a score of 100 percent. However, improving research output and quality requires more than just this factor.

The challenges faced by NEHU in improving its national ranking are multifaceted. As previously stated, the chronic shortage of qualified faculty members due to high vacancy rates has a direct impact on the quality of education and research output. Recruitment and retention of talented faculty should be a key priority, along with creating an enabling environment that recognises and incentivises distinguished research contributions. Additionally, NEHU must address the specific variables in the NIRF ranking framework identified as areas of concern, such as research and professional practice, which account for a significant portion of the overall score. Considering the areas for improvement identified in the NIRF rankings, NEHU should focus on enhancing its research capabilities, developing strong industry partnerships, fostering an environment conducive to high-quality teaching and learning, providing better placement, and making every stakeholder in NEHU accountable for its rise or fall.

(The writer is Associate Professor, Department of Library and Information Science. Contact: ravikumarnehu@gmail.com)

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Happy Birthday India... There's going to be a lot of celebrations tomorrow as India celebrates her 77th anniversary of Independence!

In my very vivid imagination, many countries line up to greet the young seventy-seven-year old. "Happy Birthday India!" says China as it marches up with a jade bowl gift and a smirk, "May you become as great a super power as I am!"

"I already am," smiles India, "with a billion and quarter people who can think what they want, say what they'd like to and not get butchered in Tiananmen Square when trying to express themselves. I am a super power!"

"May your rulers rule long!" sniggers Bangladesh.

"Ah," smiles India indulgently, "they rule as long as my people wish them too, not like yours, overthrown by a treacherous army and college students."

Tibet who has been standing behind goes up to India, "I wish you peace my friend!"

"Thank you," says India hugging the bleeding country, "I wish you the same; that you be allowed to get back the freedom you deserve, that the great dragon bully who crushes your people will be thrown out and your Dalai Lama may return."

"But there is bloodshed in your country!" cries Burma, "People are lynched and raped!"

"But," whispers the young seventy-seven-year-old, "I have courts not guns. A constitution, not military law, and even if these courts take time, they bring justice to all!"

"Happy Birthday India," shouts the confident voice of the USA, "Didn't see any gold medals won at the Olympics though!"

"Ah no Mr America, we're too busy winning with IT and software and gearing up to beat your economy in a decade or two!"

"You have a million soldiers," says Russia after greeting India, "Send some over, we'll pay you good money."

"Ahno, bringing down legitimate governments is not our cup of tea Putin, even if you gift us an aircraft carrier free!"

"You are cheeky for a young seventy-one year old!"

"Seventy-one years of democracy gives you more right to be cheeky than a hundred years of dictatorial communism, right?"

And then the countries move aside with respect as somewhere up in the skies two men, long dead, walk together. One with a cigar stuck in an arrogant, determined bulldog face, the other, bespectacled, with only a loin cloth and walking stick, keeps abreast.

"Seventy-seven years Mr Gandhi! Are you happy you freed your nation from us?" asks the cigar smoking white man. The bent man with a walking stick looks down through the skies at the India he loves. "Yes," he says.

"Look at the countries around, my half naked fakir," says Churchill with a smirk, "at China, Korea, Malaysia, they have progressed far more than your people have."

Gandhiji smiles, "My people are free, their minds unshackled. No dictator, and you've just seen that happen, tells them what to do, no military ruler makes them shine his shoes, like you see in those countries!"

"And that?" asked Churchill pointing down, "Lynching and love jihad gangs?"

A tear rolls down the eye of the Father of The Nation. "As much as freedom moulds heroes, so also does it breed bullies," he says slowly, "but the wonder of freedom is that the heroes it moulds, are men of valour. Freedom lets their courage blossom and when they take on the bullies as they just did and won a bit, they will finally win like I did for the country. Men of courage are slowly being fashioned and they will soon be heard. It is the freedom I won for them that gives them mouths to speak." Bulldog Churchill looks at the people and back at his old adversary, and nods in agreement. They both stand ramrod straight as the national anthem is played, and as the Mahatma shouts 'Jai Hind,' he hears clearly next to him, the Englishman doing the same, and he smiles for a country he loved.

And finally I imagine that the seventy seven year old is interviewed by a TV channel: "How do you feel India?"

"Very, very healthy!"

"Any aches and pains?"

"A little here, a little there, one from an injury during the Emergency and lately by politicians trying to change the constitution!"

"Any memories you'd like to talk about?"

"Life is more or less the same for everybody isn't it? When you're a baby you act like one, I did. I was a child and I got knocked over by bully China, but today I am slowly growing into a world power!"

"How do you look at yourself now?"

"Strong! Vibrant! Young!"

"Anything you'd like to change about yourself in the next few years?"

"Oh yes, I would like every single individual, whatever caste or creed he or she belongs to, to feel safe with me, I would want the wealth people make to be spread a little more!"

"To the poor?"

"Yes, to the poor, and homeless, and those who still go hungry each day, may they also share in the benefits I have to offer!"

"Anything else India? Any advice to your people on your birthday?"

"Yes," sighs India. "Please stop trying to change my wonderful tapestry of colours, a tapestry made of saffron, green and white and a people who belong to every faith in the world! Stop trying to muzzle the press, because every newspaper you shut down or compromise, will have a hundred more springing up on social media voicing freedom thoughts!"

"That's stern advice India?" says the news anchor, and the world listens hushed, the birthday celebrant ends her celebrations and TV interview saying, "Today is a day you have a right to shout with joy and raise your voices in happiness, because you've possessively held onto the freedom you got seventy-seven years ago. We will celebrate many, many more, only if you guard and protect me not just from invasions outside but also from those who seek to destroy me from within!"

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

Letters to the Editor

Geo-politics & geo-economics define the Bangladesh imbroglio

Editor, Apropos of the editorial "Regional power play" (ST August 12, 2024), the power dynamics in South Asia are heavily influenced by the major rivalries between China, India and the United States of America. This is a case of the key players and their potential benefits. China has been increasing its presence and influence in almost every South Asian country and the Indian Ocean region. This expansion is part of its One Belt One Road initiative which aims to enhance trade routes and infrastructure. China's growing influence could provide it with significant strategic and economic advantages in the region. India as a major regional power is actively working to counter China's influence. India's strategic partnerships,

such as those with the United States and Japan, aim to bolster its position in South Asia. India's focus on regional connectivity projects and defence collaborations could enhance its influence and security. The United States of America is also a key player, particularly in its efforts to counter China's rise. By strengthening alliances with countries like India and engaging in regional security initiatives, the US aims to maintain a balance of power in the region which is very essential. Smaller countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan may benefit by leveraging the competition between these major powers. They can seek investment, aid, and strategic partnerships from multiple sources, thereby enhancing their own development and security. The interplay between these major powers will shape the geopolitical landscape of South Asia, with each player seeking to maximize its own benefits while managing rivalries and alliances.

India and Bangladesh share a multifaceted relationship characterised by strong historical, cultural and economic ties. Some of the key aspects of their relationship is that India is one of Bangladesh's largest trading partners. The two countries have signed several agreements to enhance trade and investment, including the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). India has also extended lines of credit to Bangladesh for various infrastructure projects. Both countries collaborate closely on security issues, including counter-terrorism and border management. They have worked together to address cross-border crime and improve border infrastructure. The sharing of river waters, particularly the Teesta River, is a significant issue. While there have been challenges, both countries continue to engage in dialogue to find mutually beneficial solutions.

India and Bangladesh are working on several connectivity projects to enhance regional integration. These include road, rail and maritime links that facilitate trade and people-to-people exchanges. The cultural and historical connections between the two countries are strong. There are numerous cultural exchanges and people-to-people ties are reinforced through tourism, education and other forms of interaction. The diplomatic relationship between the two countries is generally positive, with regular high-level visits and dialogues. Both countries aim to strengthen their partnership through various bilateral mechanisms. Overall, India's position vis-à-vis Bangladesh is one of cooperation and partnership, with both countries working together to address common challenges and enhancing their bilateral relationship.

The regional power play in South Asia, particularly the dynamics involving China, India and the United States, can indeed impact India-Bangladesh relations. Few ways this might happen: As China continues to invest heavily in South Asia through its One Belt One Road Initiative, Bangladesh has become a significant recipient of

Chinese investments. This could lead to a shift in economic dependencies and influence, potentially affecting India's economic ties with Bangladesh. India and Bangladesh have a strong strategic partnership, but the growing influence of China in Bangladesh could create a complex dynamic. India may need to enhance its diplomatic and strategic efforts to maintain its influence and ensure that Bangladesh remains a close ally.

The regional power play could also impact security cooperation. India and Bangladesh have collaborated on counter-terrorism and border management, but increasing Chinese presence in the region might necessitate a recalibration of security strategies. Both India and China are involved in infrastructure projects in Bangladesh. The competition between these two major powers could influence the pace and nature of these projects, potentially benefiting Bangladesh but also creating a balancing act for Dhaka. The broader geopolitical context might lead

to more nuanced diplomatic engagements. Bangladesh will likely continue to balance its relationships with both India and China, seeking to maximize benefits from both while maintaining its sovereignty and strategic interests. While the regional power play presents challenges, it also offers opportunities for India and Bangladesh to strengthen their bilateral relationship through enhanced cooperation and strategic dialogue.

Yours etc; VK Lyngdoh, Via email

along the Bay of Bengal, a recent news clipping from 'The Print' states 'St Martin's in Bangladesh — the tiny island that Hasina has accused US of wanting and its importance,' just shows how important strategic choke points are for US interests. A tourist spot could change the fulcrum of politics and geo-economics if they become SIGINT or listening stations keeping Myanmar which is blessed with rich reserves of jade, rubies and other gemstones or the One Belt One Road initiative by the Chinese within proximity. David Vine, in his book Base Nation, describes why the US military, through its expansion of bases, is a threat to the entire world.

These are few developments over the Northeastern part of where our porous borders are well connected and the staging ground for geopolitical rivalry. In 2023, Bangladesh, through a Russian company Rosatom, received a shipment of uranium for its \$12.65 billion Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, show-

ing how diplomatic relationships can stretch further. In the past few years, we had a share of luck over insurgency not gaining a foothold in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura as a result of Bangladesh cooperation, but as the world becomes flatter, geography can certainly determine our fate.

Yours etc., Christopher Gathpho, Shillong-10

Saint Martin Island: Power games along NE India

Editor, Military imperatives are shaping the current world order. The exit of the American might from Afghanistan was the beginning of private armies or contractors taking over policy making and conducting the business of war for resources. Shifting the orbit towards Southeast Asia

Correction:

In the article 'Political Upeaval in Bangladesh' By H. Srikanth (ST Aug 13, 2024) in the first sentence of the second paragraph, 'Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation state in 1971 after several years of popular struggle against Pakistan..... the year 1971 was written as 1917 through oversight. The error is regretted.

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

"Diversity: the art of thinking independently together."

—Malcolm Forbes

The Shillong Times

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Independence Day Musings

AS the country observes and not just celebrates its 77th Independence Day there is much to introspect about this day and its intrinsic meaning in our daily lives and our journey as a nation. To celebrate is to brush off the ugly facets of the stark realities that are the daily truths we negotiate. To observe is to do a reality check. India has left behind 76 glorious years with a mixed past. India's past is a history of different colonisers from the Mughals to the British. Many have paid a heavy price to free India from such colonisers. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre is a grim reminder of the brutality of the colonialists. But we cannot live in that past and regurgitate it. Those are realities that have to be dealt with and they are part of our agonising history. To wipe out history from our school and college textbooks because some feel that it's a shameful past and that those lessons need to be obliterated is fraught. Very often suppressing the past takes away the learnings from that period of history and could extract a price in the future. However, we cannot be consumed by the past, re-fight its battles or succumb to the sterility of vengeance. Not to remember the past or to be overwhelmed by memory are equally dangerous. Only by taking a balanced view of the past through conscientious but not obsessive lenses can we shun victimhood, accept divergent national narratives, and embrace decency in political speech and behaviour.

India was born in the cradle of democracy – its fight for independence having been won not by fire power but by the sweat, blood and tears of ordinary citizens and leaders who spent jail time but never gave up the fight. The country has now arrived at a point when it can showcase to the world that the democratic spirit that embraces a liberal worldview and is not inhibited and blinded by religious bigotry is alive and kicking. But is that the reality today? Since 2014 India has been ruled by a political party that seeks to assert its oneness of language, faith and culture – all of which run counter to the principles on which the country was birthed. The intent is to shut out criticism by exerting a tight grip on the freedom of expression which is a Constitutional guarantee. Philosophers across the ages have advocated diversity of thought and called it the most important aspect of diversity. That in essence is liberalism. It is a travesty that much of the conservative worldview consists of ideas known empirically to be false. India's ruling party is now at the cusp of leaning towards a conservative worldview. Is this what India needs for its citizens to progress? When citizens live in fear of retribution for speaking their minds, democracy is chipped away. The people of India need to reclaim the idea of true Independence on August 15 and not just fly the tricolour and be led by slogans mouthed by the Government. Like Bal Gangadhar Tilak said, "Freedom is my birthright. So long as it is awake within me, I am not old. No weapon can cut this spirit, no fire can burn it, no water can wet it, no wind can dry it." Jai Hind!

Sisodia bail reveals denial of right to millions of incarcerated undertrials

CJI stresses why judiciary must not be institution of judges, run by judges, for judges

By K Raveendran

When Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Justice DY Chandrachud says people are fed up with the way our courts function, there cannot be a more serious indictment of the judicial system. His assertion that the judiciary should not be an institution run solely by judges for judges is a significant critique that underscores systemic issues within India's legal framework. The perspective is not just a reflection of personal discontent but an observation that has been echoed in the Supreme Court's various judgments and statements over time.

system's failings impact those who lack the resources or visibility to attract immediate judicial intervention.

The issue of undertrial prisoners is not a new one, but it has gained renewed attention due to the Supreme Court's recent observations and decisions. In many instances, undertrials remain in jail for extended periods without even the commencement of their trials, highlighting a significant flaw in the justice delivery system. This problem is exacerbated by

and responsive to the needs of all individuals, regardless of their social or economic standing. No doubt, the challenges faced by the judicial system are complex and multifaceted. They require a concerted effort to address both immediate concerns, such as the plight of undertrials, and long-term structural issues. Efforts to streamline the judicial process, increase the number of judges and court personnel, and enhance procedural efficiency are crucial steps in this direction.

including scheduled castes and tribes, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These individuals often lack the resources to secure legal representation or bail, leading to prolonged periods of incarceration without trial.

The issue of undertrials is compounded by the systemic problem of securing bail. Thousands remain in prison not because they are convicted, but because they cannot afford to arrange the security required for bail. The inability to post bail often stems from financial constraints, making it nearly impossible for many to secure their release. This



CJI Chandrachud's remarks, made at an event commemorating the week-long Special Lok Adalat at the Supreme Court last week, are particularly poignant when placed in the context of the court's recent actions and observations. In the latest instance, the Supreme Court came down heavily against the denial of the right to a speedy trial to Delhi deputy chief minister, Manish Sisodia, who had been entangled in a legal battle that drew considerable attention. His case, while attracting significant media coverage, serves as a potent illustration of broader systemic issues. The Supreme Court's decision, therefore, is not merely about his individual rights but also a broader commentary on the judicial process.

Sisodia is, of course, a high-profile person, but consider the plight of millions of faceless undertrials languishing in Indian jails either without proper trial or the means to secure bail. Most of them, often from disadvantaged backgrounds, find themselves trapped in a legal limbo, with their cases delayed indefinitely. This situation is a stark reminder of how the judicial

delays in the judicial process, a shortage of judicial personnel, and systemic inefficiencies that prevent timely adjudication of cases.

In this context, CJI Chandrachud's remarks reflect a critical need for reform. The judicial system, as it stands, appears to be struggling under the weight of its own procedural delays and inefficiencies. The criticism is not just about individual rights but about a systemic failure to deliver justice in a timely manner. The broader implications are significant. They point to a need for systemic change, addressing not only the procedural delays but also the inherent inefficiencies that plague the system. The judiciary's role is not just to adjudicate but to ensure that justice is delivered fairly and expeditiously. When systemic issues undermine this role, it erodes public trust and confidence in the judicial process.

The judiciary must strive to be an institution that upholds the principles of justice for all, not merely a body that operates within the confines of its own procedural framework. The focus must shift towards making the system more accessible, efficient,

Additionally, addressing the root causes of delays and inefficiencies, such as outdated procedures and inadequate infrastructure, will be essential in creating a more effective judicial system.

Recent statistics underscore the gravity of the situation. As of 2023, approximately 70 percent of India's prison population consists of undertrials. This staggering figure highlights a critical issue: a large proportion of individuals in Indian jails have not yet faced a trial. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), more than 2.5 lakh people were undertrials as of the latest data. Many of these individuals have been in prison for extended periods, often exceeding the duration of the sentence they would have received if convicted.

The demographics of these undertrials reveal a troubling pattern. A significant number of them come from underprivileged sections of society. Studies have shown that poverty, lack of education, and socio-economic disadvantage are closely linked with prolonged detention. Many undertrials are from marginalized communities,

financial barrier exacerbates the issue of overcrowded jails and contributes to the prolonged detention of individuals who may eventually be found innocent.

The plight of undertrials is a stark reminder of the judicial system's failings. The system's inefficiencies not only deny individuals their right to a fair and timely trial but also perpetuate a cycle of disadvantage that disproportionately affects the poor and marginalized. The inability to secure bail due to financial constraints underscores a significant barrier to justice and highlights the need for comprehensive reform.

Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach. Reforming the bail system to ensure that it does not disproportionately penalize those who cannot afford it is crucial. Additionally, streamlining the judicial process to reduce delays and increase efficiency is essential for ensuring that justice is delivered promptly. Investments in legal aid services and support for marginalized communities can also help mitigate some of the systemic barriers faced by undertrials. (IPA Service)

Rage versus Reality

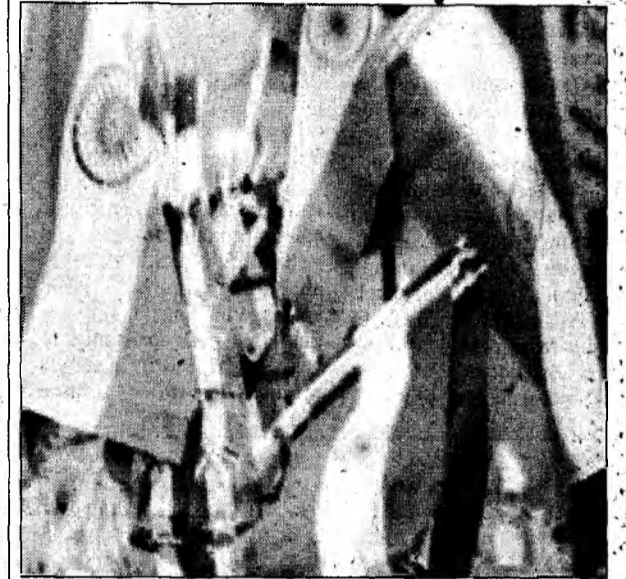
By Dr. Benedicta Sthuti Kumar

This evening, as I flowed along with the traffic on NEEPCO Road, I stopped right next to a street vendor and his stand of Independence Day merchandise. Flags bearing the tricolour stared down at me in multitude, and I surprised myself when I let out a deep sigh. I felt, what I can only describe as, conflicted.

I know how this symbol of my country is supposed to make me feel. I know how it has made me feel in the past. I have a vivid memory of being

on their way; our flawed health system that turns away women in labour for lack of an Aadhar card and on and on; the list of flaws drones. The conflict in me definitely includes frustration, and on some days, all-out rage.

Maybe, just maybe, this is what India needs from me - the rage! Maybe she's demanding dissatisfaction over resignation. Maybe frustration will force me to work harder than patriotism can.



twelve and standing at attention in a neatly pressed brass band uniform, my snare drum strapped to my waist. It was a Republic Day assembly and the speaker quoted Nehru, "The children of today will make the India of tomorrow". That was probably the first time I felt a sense of duty for something bigger than looking after my little brother. The speaker talked about the brain-drain and, looking at all of us, said, "Children of India, we need you." My mind was made up. Before I could ever venture outside the borders of my motherland, I knew where I would always return. This flag and the country it represents were my responsibility, for better or for much worse.

A few years down the line, even while the rich sights of London, New York and Amsterdam were dancing

Let me not forget that rage on its own is a forest fire, dangerous and consuming all in its path whether good or bad. How do I wield it? How do I make it a hearth, an essential, bringing warmth and light to the coldest, darkest corners? I do this by tempering rage with reality.

The news reports and the injustices are real, but the reality few see is the people I meet in rural India. There is the eight-year-old girl in the Meghalayan village on the Bangladesh border who jumps out from behind a mud wall of her house to scare me and flashes the brightest smile. My guide tells me she can't hear or speak. Then there is her mother who makes me drink at least three cups of, what has to be, the sweetest tea in the world, a gesture that

"The news reports and the injustices are real, but the reality few see is the people I meet in rural India. There is the eight-year-old girl in the Meghalayan village on the Bangladesh border who jumps out from behind a mud wall of her house to scare me and flashes the brightest smile. My guide tells me she can't hear or speak. Then there is her mother who makes me drink at least three cups of, what has to be, the sweetest tea in the world, a gesture that means a lot more when I'm told that sugar doesn't come cheap for the family. Of course, I must mention the Anganwadi worker who just spent her whole day walking around villages with me, translating and assisting, while her youngest was at home with a temperature of 103°F. Every person is a new story, a new sacrifice."

temptingly before my eyes, I kept hearing it. "Children of India, we need you" like a clarion call straight from the lips of Mother India herself. No longer a child but newly graduated and raring to go, I came back ready to serve wherever I was needed.

It's been six years now, and as I stared at the flags on the vendor's stand, I didn't try to fight the conflict. "Does India really need me?" "Can you help someone who doesn't want to help themselves?" I allowed myself to ruminate. The rose-coloured glasses and castles in the air had long been smashed and thrown away. Any adult in India has their eyes wide open to our flawed governance that can simply move the goal posts to create "data-backed" claims that all Indians are thriving; our flawed political system that allows for the weaponisation of religion and the demonisation of minorities; our flawed justice system that checks a rapist's parentage, pats them on the back and sends them

means a lot more when I'm told that sugar doesn't come cheap for the family. Of course, I must mention the Anganwadi worker who just spent her whole day walking around villages with me, translating and assisting, while her youngest was at home with a temperature of 103°F. Every person is a new story, a new sacrifice.

This is the India I know now. The clarion call is coming from them, the ones who don't yet get a piece of the pie. Their faith in the future and their genuine kindness temper my frustration and make it usable. Conflict is a good thing. The conflict of rage and reality, of politics and people, of passion and compassion, is a dual motivation placed into my hands and yours. It is placed as a tool and we will use it to shape the India of tomorrow, just like Pandit Nehruji said we would.

(The author is a One Health Fellow at The Indian Institute of Public Health, Shillong.)

Letters to the Editor

BJP needs to adopt a new parliamentary vocabulary

Editor, The Waqf Amendment Bill has been referred to the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) which is against the culture of the BJP in its previous avatar when 146 members were suspended from Parliament before important Bills were bulldozed. Now it's a coalition government and the BJP cannot take unilateral decisions. It was because the BJP earlier was a single party majority that it could pass bills on core issues such as abrogation of Article 370, constructing the Ram temple at Ayodhya and Triple Talaq. Now the BJP has to mend its ways of functioning in the present scenario.

It is a known fact that the BJP would lose its raison d'être and relevance if there were no Muslims for it to target in the pursuit of politics which was evident from the just concluded parliament elections. As far as the present Bill is concerned the ill-intent of the government in bringing in the Bill is evident in the slew of amendments proposed. Due

to this reason the Opposition parties demanded that it be sent to the JPC and the Government had to accept that. A law should not be a ploy for transferring lands in the possession of Muslims to rich individuals/companies like Adani and Ambani and such other corporate honchos. The Bill provides for representation of non-Muslims in the Waqf Council and the state Waqf boards. This is resented by many Muslims leaders. By this logic, non-Hindus should also be represented in organisations that govern temples and which own temple properties!

The mind boggles at the BJP's conception of 'inclusivity'! The Bill assigns a pivotal role to a 'full-time chief executive officer' as a government appointee and a government representative; it amounts to interference in the internal affairs of a religious community. The most consequential amendment is the one that repeals Section 40 of the existing Act and strips the Waqf Board of its power to decide and declare if a property is a Waqf asset or not and vests the power in the District Collector. It is a clear instance of implementing Hindutva agenda in the name of correcting past mistakes but such conceptions should not poison the minds

of Muslims as this is harmful in a democratic country.

The passage of the Bill, after scrutiny by the JPC seems a distinct possibility, given that the BJP and its allies like the JD (U) and the TDP are on the same page on the issue and even Chirag Paswan had his own reservations. But then, it is inevitably likely to be struck down by the Supreme Court as unconstitutional as we had seen the apex court striking down many decisions of the Government. It is the general impression that a contentious bill to amend 44 sections of the Waqf Act of 1995 is nothing but a direct interference in another's religion and those amendments are not acceptable to many Muslims. Hence the Bill has been referred to the JPC. We also have to bear in mind that Mamata Banerjee is against any JPC and the same is the case with the NCP. Sharad Pawar says that in any JPC the majority will be from the ruling party and whatsoever the ruling party wants the same will be done. The example before us is that of Mahua Moitra. The Government knows very well that the Waqf Board owns a lot of land and the intention is to grab the land by amendments in the Waqf Act.

The Government says its

aim is to reform the registration process for Waqf properties through a centralised portal but it has not gone well with the Muslims. It is the duty of the Government to remove doubts from the minds of Muslims. It is precisely because of such misunderstanding that the farmers' agitation has continued for more than a year now. During the agitation many farmers lost their lives. The agitation is still carrying on for the past few months.

Now the Muslims are frustrated about the Bill and are opposing it because the intention of the Bill is to sell land belonging to the community and in the interest of the BJP Party and its leaders. The meaning of Waqf itself is to dedicate one's own property in the name of God for religious and charitable purposes and Waqf properties are private and self-acquired properties of the followers of Islam. Muslims believe that introducing the Waqf Bill in the name of reforms is nothing but cheating.

During an hour-long discussion on the introduction of the Bill, the Opposition members said that the proposed legislation violated constitutional principles of freedom of religion and criticised the inclusion of non-Muslims in the Waqf Boards. The

reason the Bill was referred to the JPC is because the Opposition parties called it anti-federal and unconstitutional. The Government claims that it is to ensure that the inheritance rights of women are not denied and that it also provides for the establishment of a separate Board of Waqf for Bohras and Agha Khanis.

Opposition parties cited Article 14, 25 and 26 to oppose the Bill. They said that the provision that non-Muslims can also be part of the Council is a direct attack on the faith and freedom of religion. The Opposition parties said that now the BJP is going for Muslims, next they will target Parsis, Jains and Christians. The Bill violates federal principles since land as stated in the 7th schedule is a state subject. Also, many old mosques are in danger now. Suddenly there is a PIL and archaeologists are sent there and they discover there was a temple before the mosque was built. This modus operandi has caused hate, division and anger among the people of the country. Agitations are now happening in many states. This is certainly not a good omen for India!

Yash Pal Ralhan, Via email

Repair & life extension of Umiyam Dam

Editor,

The repair and life extension works of the Umiyam Dam, being the lifeline for us in Meghalaya has finally been completed. This is a very commendable job executed by the Team of MeECL led by a most competent Minister. As one who has carried out design and construction of several dams and power houses I know the extreme pain and whole-hearted commitment that the Honourable Minister had to take in getting this work done. This could be one of the best things to happen here. Congratulations to him and his team.

For further growth of the Organisation may I suggest that the Honourable Minister apply his kind attention to similar works needed in the Power Houses, besides taking care of leakages in the water conductor system and not least the welfare of the employees posted in the Power Houses.

Yours etc.,
Utpal Moral,
Shillong

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"A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way."

—John C. Maxwell

The Shillong Times

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Uninspiring I-Day address

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi's address to the nation from the ramparts of Red Fort on Independence Day was the first after his reinstallation in the post for the third consecutive term. The speech on expected lines lacked zest. There were no major announcements; only listing of his government's achievements for over a decade, some 'plans' that were unveiled and remained unaddressed in the past, and the usual taunts against the opposition. On such solemn occasions the Prime Minister would do well to unveil his vision for the future, like new initiatives to achieve the Viksit Bharat 2047 goal, more measures to uplift the poor and ways to address critical issues of joblessness and the nation's fall in productivity.

Modi harped on the topic 'One Nation, One Poll' though he had set the ball rolling in his first term and appointed a panel to take recommendations. While the Ram Nath Kovind panel gave its report, nothing moved further. Another was the PM's return to the Common Civil Code theme. He skilfully refashioned it as a 'Secular Code to replace a communal code', meaning the Muslim Personal Law. Rather than using this as a stick to beat Muslims with, the endeavour's positive side needs to be highlighted and pursued. Population control is a national requirement but such efforts by governments get stuck in the 'right' being claimed by a community citing the special constitutional privilege. This is as ridiculous as the Special Status that Kashmir enjoyed for long decades, and under the cover of which terrorism thrived there. The government must work steadfastly for a national consensus and carry the Opposition parties too along to control population growth.

Modi again harped on the theme of fighting corruption, but his track record in the last two terms has been abysmal even as he claims to have "waged a war" against corruption. Arresting or jailing some major opposition figures like Arvind Kejriwal or Hemant Soren was fine even as a political motivation was suspected in such actions. Those siding with the government or those funding the BJP have been left untouched or are handled with kid-gloves. A tendency of selective amnesia was evident in the way the central agencies went about doing their job. CBI and ED have turned into laughing stocks under Modi. Most corrupt elements remain untouched and corruption in the bureaucracy is at its worst. Modi has all along been comfortable with this and no hard-edged action came from him. Modi's exhortation to draw in one lakh youths to public platforms from apolitical families, to check the sway of dynasties in politics, is well appreciated but, like charity, this too should begin with his own party. At ground level, BJP often encourages such dynasties and their offsprings.

Letters to the Editor

Hawkers: The new offenders in town

Editor,

I am writing out of concern for the increasing number of hawkers in Laitumkhrah. While I understand that these individuals are trying to make a living, their presence on the main road has created several issues affecting the quality of life for residents and commuters alike.

Firstly, the hawkers have taken up a significant portion of the pavement, making it difficult for pedestrians to walk freely. This is particularly concerning during peak hours when the road is already congested with vehicular traffic and students. As a result, many pedestrians are forced to walk on the road itself, putting their safety at risk. Hawkiers near "The Hui", the parking lot, Kalpataru, Beat House, Lew Shillong, and other places along the main road have taken up both sides of the pavement so when we have to walk, we have to walk in between their shops. Cars are being blocked by pedestrians and hawkers. Students are worst affected because they not only have to walk but they have to watch

their siblings and friends, and they have to carry such heavy bags and not just one school bag but four if you count theiffin bag and sports bag (sports equipment, gym clothes and all).

Secondly, the presence of hawkers has led to an increase in litter and waste along the road. Despite their efforts to keep their areas clean, the accumulation of discarded packaging, food waste, and other dirt has become an eyesore and a health hazard. This not only detracts from the overall cleanliness of the area but also creates an environment conducive to the spread of pests and diseases. Many of these hawkers have no sense of personal hygiene whatsoever. I have seen the men pee near their stalls and then serve their customers without washing their hands, spitting kawai everywhere, etc. The women, though they are cleaner still use their fingers and hands to mix their tobacco (kheleh-khoi, raja, etc.) spit kawai, put the tobacco in their mouths, do up their hair, check their fellow women for lice, touch shoes and other dirty things on the road. There is no clean and proper place for the women and men to urinate or wash their hands even.

Moreover, the hawkers often block entrances to shops and residential buildings, cafes, and even the road, causing inconvenience to both business owners and residents, students, and vehicle drivers. This obstruction has led to conflicts between hawkers and the rest of the world! Further escalating tensions on the main road. I have seen the hawkers show no respect to anyone, whether the person is old or young; they litter the streets with their thermocol boxes, vegetable debris, bones, and such from the meat they sell. Laitumkhrah is a place where many outsiders, whether they are from Mawlawi or Bhoi or even Pohkseh say it is such a "tip-top" place, and laugh at us for being so modern and all but we have no sense of cleanliness. It's such a pity. I have friends who live in Moringar and Nongrim Hills and they say "The People of Laitumkhrah are so dirty, they live amongst rats and pests". (Literal rats and pests not the people).

I have no objection to hawkers being there, after all it's a livelihood for them, but why are they not respect-

Freedom starts with a Book

By Anisha D. Shullai

What is freedom? Many in this country would say it's the driving force behind the establishment of India; the bold spirit that motivated our forefathers like Gandhi and Nehru to take a stand against oppression and a unifying beacon that continues to draw foreigners to our exotic land. But "freedom", an elemental right, holds a multitude of meanings.

For a free person, freedom can mean one thing while for an incarcerated one it can mean something else. And for a writer, well, freedom isn't just about "the bold spirit," but it takes on a special meaning. It's about

the capacity to shape ideas, articulate thoughts, and to transform nebulous concepts into powerful narratives that create a web of human connections. It is also his right to voice out to the world a deep, intense, private view of the situation in which he finds in society. It's a thrilling journey from a blank page to a tapestry of words that narrates a compelling story.

But can you imagine a place where your reading and writing lists were governed by censorship or limited by the lack of access? Such a place would stifle creativity, curb intellectual growth, and suppress the free exchange of ideas, right? Sadly, such a place does exist and it's called "Prison." For most of us, this suffocating place isn't something we're exposed to, or know much about. But what we do know is that it's grossly inhumane; and life there can be harsh, traumatizing, and isolating for the people forced to endure it.

Over 127 years after it was established, the Shillong District Jail now looms over Meghalaya's capital city from which it takes its name. Separated from the outside world by a daunting concrete wall, today the 5.5-acre complex dominates the surrounding area. And as much as the jail — and its troubled history — shapes life in the city, it's also a place where it can be used to express feelings of joy, anger, sadness, remorse, or regret; one's ability to communicate with the outside world is immediately curtailed. Yes, this horrible place can be a living hell to many, but there's also something about it that changes

"One of the striking themes that fascinate admirers of Prison literature is how prison experience informs the works of certain authors. The stories of redemption, recidivism, or bravery in the face of utter despair are what intrigue many readers and draws them in. I guess stepping out of one's everyday reality and into confinement brings a quietness that allows for true reflection and insight — the pillars of good writing. But although select works in prison literature have been placed on a pedestal and are revered for their insight and alluring qualities, most incarcerated art doesn't make it outside the confines of a prison cell."

themes of high-level corruption in the state; but despite the novel's terrific plot, several publishing houses in the country had rejected its publication mainly because it was partly written while the author was still confined to a cell at the Shillong District Jail.

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on experience informs the works of certain authors. The stories of redemption, recidivism, or bravery in the face of utter despair are what intrigue many readers and draws them in. I guess stepping out of one's everyday reality and into confinement brings a quietness that allows for true reflection and insight — the pillars of good writing. But although select works in prison literature have been placed on a pedestal and are revered for their insight and alluring qualities, most incarcerated art doesn't make

it outside the confines of a prison cell.

So, why are prison rules in India restricting prisoners from expressing political views even when jail security isn't compromised at all? Unlike Romanian law which shaves 30 days off a convict's sentence for every book published while in prison, it

is limited, pressed by other security and rehabilitative priorities. This is why NGOs and societies like Kripa Foundation and Khasi Authors' Society should step up for support as such pen programs are critical in the advocacy for freedom of expression.

It's about time we champion the freedom to write, recognizing the power of the word to transform the world; and to ensure that prisoners across the state and the country have the freedom to create literature, to convey information and ideas, to express their views, and to access the views, ideas, and literatures of others. It's also time to leverage the transformative possibilities of writing to raise public consciousness about the societal implications of mass incarceration and support the development of justice-involved literary talent.

In the spirit of India's 77th Independence Day, let's ponder and explore the depth of what "freedom" truly means. This event is more than just a day off from work; it's a profound symbol of the liberty that empowers us as teachers, writers, journalists and sharers of diverse narratives. The celebration of liberty is an opportunity to reflect, grow, and appreciate the freedom we often take for granted. This freedom is also the backbone of our society, and it has a profound impact on various professions, especially those of us who thrive on the freedom to write. **Jai Hind!**

(The author is a research scholar based in Mysore. She is otherwise a permanent resident of Lunglei, Shillong.)

beautiful place but now it's becoming filthy and it reflects on the character of the people living and making their living from here.

I end this letter with the belief that hawkers should have a place for them to earn their livelihood but they should do so with responsibility and show respect to the place that provides them their livelihoods. We should also respect the hawkers but most importantly we need to know whether the hawker is actually a poor person that cannot afford to pay rent or is it a case of hawkers wanting to transact from a free space because they do not want to pay rent for a proper stall? No one should get away by citing poverty as an excuse to set up shop anywhere and everywhere.

Yours etc,
Shailini H. Lyngdoh
Shillong 11

Why the discrimination even in protests?

Editor,
A 14-year-old Dalit girl was allegedly taken away on a Sunday night from her house in Muzaffarpur district, Bihar. Her body was found in a semi-naked condition in a pond on Monday. She

was allegedly gang-raped and killed. On Wednesday night, Kolkata witnessed an inspiring nocturnal vigil by women who marched for the sake of justice for the victim of a heinous crime who was a postgraduate trainee doctor at the R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata.

I fully support the movement for justice for the trainee doctor in Kolkata, but I feel let down as there is no movement for justice against the criminals who committed no less a crime in Muzaffarpur in comparison with what happened in Kolkata. A victim is a victim, irrespective of her or his class, caste, religion, gender, and status. Whereas a criminal is a criminal, irrespective of those considerations and political colour.

The Muzaffarpur victim was Dalit, poor, and lived under a double engine government, but all that should not deter those who fight for justice from organising a mass movement against the criminals.

Yours etc,
Sujii De,
Kolkata

Publication of these works. And honestly speaking, the scandalous nature of publishing such works only leads to the fascination with and desire to read the literature.

Many lodged at different jails across India propose a "Prisoner Correspondence Network" be launched as they believe such a project would be an important tool for supporting the advocacy of incarcerated people, helping them "break the silence". But despite its importance — or perhaps because of its evident power to empower people made vulnerable by this system — government support for such projects

is limited, pressed by other security and rehabilitative priorities. This is why NGOs and societies like Kripa Foundation and Khasi Authors' Society should step up for support as such pen programs are critical in the advocacy for freedom of expression.

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Sujii De,
Kolkata

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

Much ado about nothing

By Corina Lyngdoh

In democratic politics, pressure groups also known as interest groups are organizations which attempt to influence the government. They represent the interests of certain sections of the society viz. students, farmers, labourers, business people, government employees, women etc. They are organised unions or associations of people having common interests. Their aim is to seek better conditions for their members or the groups they represent through organised efforts. They try to influence the legislature, executive and other decision makers to get decisions made in their favour. Group activities are usually more effective than individual activities. Hence, pressure groups play a vital role in a democracy in terms of influencing the government for expressing the common concern of a section of a society and promoting their interest.

Pressure groups play a crucial role in interest formation and interest aggregation. They play a mediatory role between the people and the government. According to Almond and Powell, converting demands into policy alternatives is a significant method of interest aggregation by identifying possible policy alternatives and presenting them before the government. They also explain the pros and cons of each policy alternative which, in turn, provides inputs and helps policy makers to select the best alternative for policy making and law making. In view of this, pressure groups are expected to make the political system respond to the aspirations of the people and provide the details of a particular policy issue of public importance to the ruling political elites.

Harold Lasswell, in his early work on Politics, uses the subtitle "who gets what, when and how?" In view of this understanding, the function of pressure groups in all democratic countries constitute an important dimension of the study of politics because the primary objective of any pressure group is to influence the government. The study of political science, Herman Finer viewed that it is perhaps now an axiom of political science that where political parties are weak in principles and organisation, the pressure will flourish; where pressure groups are strong, political parties will be feeble; and where political parties are strong, pressure will be curbed. In a parliamentary system of governance, pressure groups exert pressure mainly on the executive wing by the assumption that the legislature is under the control of the executive.

Pressure groups use various techniques to achieve their goals and strive to influence government policies through legal and legitimate methods such as correspondence, petitions, lobbying, publicity, public debates and maintaining contact with legislators.

However, one technique of pressure groups which very is often wrongly misused is propaganda. It involves influencing public opinion to indirectly influence the government by stirring up public sentiment and thus promoting a particular cause by using propaganda. In a society where people who parrot the agenda of the pressure groups, such people are said to be propagandists. To propagandise is to spread biased information that supports a particular political viewpoint. Propaganda is the dissemination of information - facts, arguments, rumours, half truths or even lies to control public opinion. It is often conveyed through mass media. They deliberately select facts and arguments and present distorted versions of issues in ways they think will have maximum effect. To maximise their point, they omit or distort pertinent facts or simply lie to divert the attention of the people they are trying to sway in their favour. They spread biased or misleading information to promote their point of view. "Propaganda isn't about just sharing information, it's more about swaying public opinion." Propaganda works by stealthily sliding into people's thoughts and emotions and targets feelings rather than logical thinking and understanding.

Propaganda works on,

"Making the lie big, making it simple, keep saying it and eventually people will believe it." Social media platforms have become the new battleground for propagandists. One major concern with people is that propaganda is completely tailored to their beliefs and eliminates opposing viewpoints and dissenting voices. We cannot deny the fact that we live in an echo chamber, an environment in which we encounter only beliefs or opinions that coincide with our own beliefs and alternative ideas are not considered. They amplify or reinforce their pre-existing beliefs by communication and repetition inside a closed system completely insulated from any kind of rebuttal.

According to recent studies, the echo chamber effect on social media occurs online when a harmonious group of people find their opinions constantly echoed back to them reinforcing their belief systems due to the declining exposure to the opinions of others. Individuals who participate in social media feel confident that their opinions will be readily accepted by others. YouTube users end up in partisan echo chambers where they receive "likes" and supportive comments posted by other users which are mostly improper, indecent and inappropriate. People receive a false sense of validation through social media question the benevolence of it. Rather than exclusively fostering an atmosphere of camaraderie and universal understanding, propagandists perpetuate power hierarchies. Since they have the agency to control a community's narrative through social media post, they have the agency to control the worth or deservedness of the community as well.

The recent altercation between the Meghalaya Public Service Commission (MPSC) with one pressure group is a reversion of the propagandising methods used by the group to influence public officials to adopt and implement policies to benefit their interests. The use of social media like YouTube to attract attention to wrongdoings on social media and interact with like-minded people unrelated to the cause is unpalatable. This group succeeded in disseminating the modus operandi in which being nepotist in the selection of candidates, alleging outrageous malpractices adopted in the conduct of screening tests and inconsistencies in the conduct of personal interviews etc. Such groups should first strive to get accurate information and conduct in-depth research before jumping to conclusions. Instead, they should know the principles adopted: the standard procedures followed during the entire process of screening tests and the modus operandi in which the viva voce is carried out before making any assumptions. Thirdly, they should not rely on misinformation provided by unreliable sources.

The imbroglio caused by the leaders of the Union was unbecoming, unkind and unpleasant. It was totally unbecoming and maintaining unbecome non-venturary accusations and using offensive language through sloganeering. All too often they discredited themselves by engaging in slander and character assassination, that is malicious and unjustified and with intent to harm the reputation of the Commission. Their intention to spoil the reputation of the Commission through criticism on social media shows that they are emotionally oriented with poorly defined goals.

To conclude it is important to note that the blame game does no one good. When we are made to believe that everything is someone else's fault, we will abdicate the larger good. What have our aspiring youth gained after the demands of the Union have been accepted by the Commission? What do they need to be stressed instead is that our youth need inspiration to work harder and try to outdo themselves not to outdo others. Propaganda isn't about just sharing information, it's more about swaying public opinion. Propaganda works by stealthily sliding into people's thoughts and emotions and targets feelings rather than logical thinking and understanding. Propaganda works on,

How parents can promote positive sibling relationships

Sibling relationships are some of the longest-lasting relationships we have in our lives.

Around 80 per cent of people worldwide have at least one sibling. Sibling relationships are unique from all other relationships because siblings often grow up together and share family history. Biological siblings even share genetics.

In childhood, children spend more time with their siblings than anyone else, including their parents. A longitudinal study found that the quality of sibling relationships in young adulthood was one of the strongest predictors of well-being at age 65.

Sibling relationships change as we grow. In early adulthood, maintaining the sibling relationship becomes a matter of choice, although most sibling relationships last a lifetime. In childhood, parents have important roles to play setting the stage for life-long positive sibling relationships.

As developmental and clinical psychologists, we recognise the profound impact siblings can have on development, especially having personally experienced the benefits, and sometimes the frustrations, within our own sibling relationships.

Sibling relationships and child development

Not only is the sibling relationship unique, but it also serves an important role in a child's development.

Children with siblings tend to develop better relationships with their peers, engage in more creative play and have higher empathy and a better understanding of others' thoughts and feelings. They often develop social skills much earlier than children without siblings, which helps them form friendships when they start school.

Some studies have shown that positive sibling relationships also serve as a protective factor during difficult times, like high levels of life stress and marital conflict between parents.

It is not surprising that siblings can have a large impact on an individual's development. For example, children may adjust their personalities to avoid conflict and competition with their sibling. Additionally, just knowing they have a sibling can positively affect a child.

Sibling conflicts, rivalry

When we are kids, sibling relationships



can be full of rivalry. In adolescence, sibling relationships tend to drift as we explore new relationships with peers and our own identity.

It is probably no surprise that a major topic in research on sibling relationships is conflict. Sibling conflict is quite common and, to some extent, can actually be good for children's development.

The sibling relationship offers a unique context for children to resolve conflict because, unlike friendships, the sibling relationship cannot just end after a quarrel.

Through navigating conflict with siblings, children can learn valuable skills such as understanding others' perspectives, developing empathy, improving listening

skills, setting boundaries and standing up for their own self interests.

However, there is a fine line between small disagreements and conflict being the main feature of the sibling relationship. It is normal for siblings to feel rivalry and competition, but when this becomes the defining feature of the relationship, it can create a negative environment. Specifically, children can become jealous and start to resent their sibling when they feel the need to compete for their parents' attention and approval.

How parents can navigate sibling conflict

Although most parents say they don't

play favourites among siblings, up to 85 per cent of children believe their parents had a favourite.

One of the biggest predictors of sibling conflict is differential treatment by parents - including perceived differences in parenting. This means that even if a parent believes they are treating all children equally, a child often feels they are being treated differently.

For example, if both children are running through the house on separate occasions and one child receives a time out while the other is not allowed to go to a friend's birthday party, the second child may perceive this as unfair, and naturally it creates tension in the sibling relationship. Parents should strive

to be as fair as possible in their parenting by ensuring consistent consequences for similar misbehaviours among siblings.

Another key factor is for parents to recognise the individual strengths of each child and avoid unhealthy competition between siblings. For example, if one child does well in math, and the other does well in science, recognise their individual abilities and accomplishments and avoid comparing one sibling's strength with the other's weakness.

Promoting positive sibling relationships

There are science-backed ways parents can promote positive sibling relationships.

1) **Encourage positive engagement:** Choose activities and interests that all siblings can enjoy together.

2) **Identify what's going well:** Recognise when siblings support, co-operate and help each other.

3) **Engage in shared experiences:** Highlight each sibling's unique strengths during activities that require teamwork.

4) **Regulate emotions:** Help children identify and process their emotions during difficult times.

5) **Facilitate social and emotional understanding:** Teach children about how to share their own feelings and understand and respect feelings of siblings.

6) **Manage undesirable behaviours:** Address negative behaviours like bossiness towards siblings.

7) **Help children learn to consider the actions of their siblings, without assuming these actions are directed at them:** It is important for children to understand that accidents happen and their siblings often do not have malicious intent toward them. For example, a parent might see a sibling accidentally knock over the toy tower.

8) **Manage conflict:** Parents can mediate conflict between children to help resolve situations fairly.

9) **Examine parental differential treatment:** Talk with children about instances when they feel they are being treated unfairly. Ask them to explain why they think something is "not fair" and discuss it together. By implementing these strategies, parents can help build strong, positive and supporting relationships between siblings, which can support their well-being throughout their lifetimes. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, August 18, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon semi square Saturn on your solar return chart and it promises to be a very fortunate year for you. Those involved in research or creative fields will do very well. You will be put in situations where you will have to take quick decisions but you will show maturity in handling with different problems of life. You will get an opportunity to show your creative skills at your place of work. And you will interact and spend a lot of time with people on one to one level. You will also coordinate with those people with whom you work together or share your thoughts. Those interested in going abroad for research or higher studies will also get success. You may get involved in an exciting romantic tie with a person known to you. Marriage looks a possibility.

This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) Your self confidence and outstanding personality may lead you towards achievement in matters related to your profession and finance. You will have an inclination for learning, higher education and gaining knowledge. Your professional requirements will be fulfilled and you will create an opening for enhancing your career. This is a phase when your charm and magnetic personality will prove irresistible to your partner. Your income will rise and financial dealings will prove to be beneficial at a later stage. Your communication skills will enhance your interpersonal relations. Both health and family life require greater attention so do not neglect these aspects.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) Your stars in this phase predict that your career problems will soon be sorted out. If you are thinking of taking a step to bring about a change in your career then this is a good time to do so. Your expenditure may take a rise. There is a good time to go on a journey. Do not make any promises as the same may get delayed. Your health may need a little care so keep a watch and do not neglect even problems that seem small. You will enjoy romantic moments with your beloved. Time spent with children will be joyful.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) The position of stars indicates mixed results. You will have to keep your wits in order to resolve career related problems. Professionally set your house in order on a priority basis. Your family and domestic problems will draw your attention and keep you involved so considerable energy and time may have to be spent there. You will plan to buy a property or to invest in real estate and funds may be arranged for the same. This is a time you need to look after your health and keep a close watch and take necessary steps and precautions.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Your financial issues will come into focus. There may be sudden unexpected gains and you may be on the lookout for new opportunities and profitable ventures. A professional or reputation matter will need your attention once you have addressed this issue, your work will be recognized and will be appreciated by your seniors. There is bound to be an enhancement in your image too. Entertainment and enjoyment are in focus as you rejoice with family as well as among loved ones. The unattached have much to look forward to as they are more communicative and expressive about their feelings.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You will find good relations among loved ones and family and your children will show their respect and affection for you. Romance and love matters are expected to favour you and you may reignite your old relationships now. At your work place this is a right time to choose a better job prospect. Your seniors will respect and praise your work and you will gain popularity. In your monetary dealings you will find ready money at your disposal as fast earnings come your way. Your health related problems will disturb you; so take care. Be careful of the company you keep.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) There are good chances of monetary gains and you may depend on the situation to create new things in the form of relations, profession or love. You may expect a gain in your professional relations and in personal relationships too. You find yourself to be more religious and spiritual

mindful. There may be an unexpected expenditure involved. You may go on a pilgrimage to fulfill your religious desires. On the domestic front, the family environment will be invigorating and joyful. You may also be filled with a desire to take up some social work and you will find solace in this activity.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) The planetary configuration indicates mixed results for you and you need to put in your best efforts in order to get things organized. You may think of a better alliance and match in your personal as well as professional matters. It is better not to go on a long trip right now and if it is a necessity then care for your belongings and health. At this time you are in a position to have access to money and you will have to manage some surplus funds. Sudden unexpected money will come but there are openings for outlets also so spend wisely.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) Your attention will be on your monetary funds and it will be better managed now. In order to enhance your image you may hone your interpersonal skills and establish important contacts. At this time you may have to spend more although your earnings will cover the situation. Your attention may also be focused on some spiritual gains. Your personal feelings may get hurt so avoid raking up past issues. Respect and affection will come to you from your family and you will enjoy a happy time among your children. Some good friends would come forward to extend their support.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) Your luck will favour you in monetary funds involving matters at your work place. Some unexpected help is forthcoming in matters of your progress in financial or professional gains. This is a time you may develop good social relations. Personal and family relations will also improve. An atmosphere of change is indicated in property dealings and you may have to make some innovations in your plans. Some old issues related to real estate may get resolved. Your health will improve as you bring in some long overdue changes in your lifestyle. Spend some quality time with children and benefit from their company.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) At this time you may enjoy a profitable dealing which will swing in your favour to give you monetary gains. You are in a position where you will make a little detour in your career so think wisely. Interaction with elders and their advice may further illuminate the path to success. There may be circumstances and developments which will bring about an overseas trip for you. Your partner may not support you in some matters so try to make the extra effort to strengthen your bond. Enhancing communications will help you tremendously in this regard. The health of someone in the family could cause some anxious moments.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You will be facing some unusual circumstances at your home or work place so try to maintain focus in all you do as well as an inner focus. Your thinking involves fear and contradictions in your actions and communications so keep your mind alert and not think in negative manner. You will soon get out of the situation and be back on track. Devote some time in meditation and yoga. Your professional and monetary matters will get resolved and you may consult friends for the benefits to be gained. Your spouse will extend support.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) Monetary and financial issues are expected to be your main objective at this time. You will have a suitable as well as a profitable venture at your disposal now and you will see that monetary gains are in hand. Your professional dealings will bear fruits and you will have chances of promotion also. Relations in the family will soar to new heights. Matters of romance and love are required to be wisely dealt with and the relationship will be filled with joy. You may decide to purchase some things related to home renovation. Your health requires to be looked after particularly while travelling.

Is it OK to lie to someone with dementia?

There was disagreement on social media recently after a story was published about an aged care provider creating "fake-away" burgers that mimicked those from a fast-food chain, to a resident living with dementia. The man had such strict food preferences he was refusing to eat anything at meals except a burger from the franchise. This dementia symptom risks malnutrition and social isolation.

But critics of the fake burger approach labelled it trickery and deception of a vulnerable person with cognitive impairment. Dementia is an illness that progressively robs us of memories. Although it has many forms, it is typical for short-term recall - the memory of something that happened in recent hours or days - to be lost first.

As the illness progresses, people may come to increasingly "live in the past", as distant recall gradually becomes the only memories accessible to the person. So a person in the middle or later stages of the disease may relate to the world as it once was, not how it is today. This can make ethical care very challenging.

Is it wrong to lie?

Ethical approaches classically hold that specific actions are moral certainties, regardless of the consequences. In line with this moral absolutism, it is always wrong to lie.

But this ethical approach would require an elderly woman with dementia who continually approaches care staff looking for their long-deceased spouse to be informed their husband has passed - the objective truth.

Distress is the likely outcome, possibly accompanied by behavioural disturbance that could endanger the person or others. The person's memory has regressed to a point earlier in their life, when their partner was still alive. To inform such a person of the death of

their spouse, however gently, is to traumatise them.

And with the memory of what they have just been told likely to quickly fade, and the questioning may resume soon after. If the truth is offered again, the cycle of re-traumatisation continues.

A different approach

Most laws are examples of absolutist ethics. One must obey the law at all times. Driving above the speed limit is likely to result in punishment regardless of whether one is in a hurry to pick their child up from kindergarten or not.

Pragmatic ethics rejects the notion certain acts are always morally right or wrong. Instead, acts are evaluated in terms of their "usefulness" and social benefit, humanity, compassion or intent.

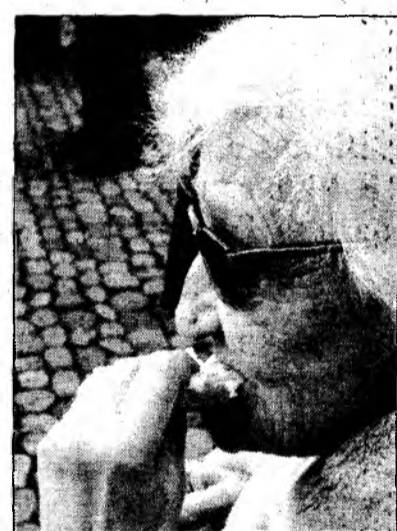
The Aged Care Act is a set of laws intended to guide the actions of aged care providers. It says, for example, psychotropic drugs (medications that affect mind and mood) should be the "last resort" in managing the behaviours and psychological symptoms of dementia.

Instead, "best practice" involves preventing behaviour before it occurs. If one can reasonably foresee a caregiver action is likely to result in behavioural disturbance, it flies in the face of best practice.

What to say when you can't avoid a lie?

What then, becomes the best response when approached by the lady looking for her husband? Gentle inquiries may help uncover an underlying emotional need, and point caregivers in the right direction to meet that need. Perhaps she is feeling lonely or anxious and has become focused on her husband's whereabouts? A skilled caregiver might tailor their response, connect with her, perhaps reminisce, and providing a sense of comfort in the process.

This approach aligns with Dementia Australia guidance that



carers or loved ones can use four prompts in such scenarios:

- acknowledge concern ("I can tell you'd like him to be here.")
- suggest an alternative ("He can't visit right now.")
- provide reassurance ("I'm here and lots of people care about you.")
- redirect focus ("Perhaps a walk outside or a cup of tea?")

These things may or may not work. So, in the face of repeated questions and escalating distress, a mistruth, such as "Don't worry, he'll be back soon," may be the most humane response in the circumstances.

Different realities

It is often said you can never win an argument with a person living with dementia. A lot of time, different realities are being discussed.

So, providing someone who has dementia with a "pretend" burger may well satisfy their preferences, bring joy, mitigate the risk of malnutrition, improve social engagement, and prevent a behavioural disturbance without the use of medication. This seems like the correct approach in ethical terms. On occasion, the end justifies the means. (*The Conversation*)

"Society is the union of men and not the men themselves."

—Montesquieu

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 9 SHILLONG, MONDAY, AUGUST 19, 2024

Yunus as arbiter

WITH a change of government in Bangladesh a fortnight ago, there's no clarity yet as to the character of the new dispensation. With social activist and Nobel laureate Mohammad Yunus having been installed as chief adviser to the interim government guided by the army, he has emerged as its face. Many view him as the head of the dispensation but the army is likely to be calling the shots there until elections are held and a popular government is installed. Yunus stated at the, 'Third Voice of Global South Summit,' hosted by India on Saturday that his government was "committed to a transition to inclusive and pluralistic democracy through free, fair and participatory elections." This promise, though, would be taken with a pinch of salt. The scenario in Bangladesh is evolving after the abrupt exit of Sheikh Hasina in a silent coup, in which the army chief gave her no more than a couple of hours to pack up and exit for good.

India has reasons to feel concerned not only because a friendly dispensation in Dhaka has been ejected from power, but also for the massive attacks on minority Hindus and their temples in its aftermath and for the way the new dispensation there chose to snap communications with Delhi. The gulf is so wide that it took a week's time for Yunus to turn to India and call Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the phone. He, however, promised Modi that the Indians in Bangladesh were taken care of and the attackers would be tracked down and punished. This was after the PM expressed his concern over the issue in his Independence Day speech. Yunus' promise might not necessarily be a guarantee to the safety of minorities in Bangladesh, given the volatile situation there.

The scenario in Bangladesh is evolving. The student protesters, whose leaders are part of the interim government, are planning to form a political party, fight polls and rule the nation. However, the mood of the people in Bangladesh is yet to be ascertained - as to whether they approve of the student uprising against Sheikh Hasina or not. She was disliked by segments of the population for multiple reasons but primarily because she had turned into a 'dictator,' jailing opponents and stifling free speech. Yet, a general impression has been that she remained the most popular leader. The students are yet to prove their popular support. The public mood can be gauged only through free and fair polls. The polls that Sheikh Hasina held earlier this year had been boycotted by the Opposition. Clearly, the main opposition BNP is weak. The Jamaat-e-Islami with a fundamentalist streak and alleged links to Pakistan too never had major public support. Chances are that fresh elections in Bangladesh would take time. The scenario would, in the interim, remain in a state of flux.

Mar Phalangki and the Monolith at Nartiang

By HH Mohrmen

Nartiang can be called the Monolith Capital of Meghalaya or the place of the dolmens and menhirs. The fact is that there is a large collection of monoliths in the area, and it is the place where the largest collection of monoliths in the state are found. Monolithic culture amongst the Khasi Jaintia people is unique because every monolith has stories to tell, and if we don't know the stories anymore, it is because we have lost them. Nartiang is not only the place where one can find the largest collection of monoliths in one place, but it is also famous for temples and we will discuss that in subsequent articles. While monoliths are found everywhere in the region, it is only in the Jaintia Hills that one can also find megaliths, and Nartiang has a few of these giant monoliths. Of the many monoliths found in the area, two stand out as the most prominent, not only because of their sizes, but because of the stories they tell.

The Monolithic culture
Monolithic culture is a tradition that was found to be practiced by people who live in the Neolithic age but it is popular in this region too. Despite it being a very ancient culture, the fact that this custom is still being practiced by the Khasi Pnar people today is, in itself, an enigma. The standing stones dotting the skyline of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills comprise mainly the Mawshynrang, Moopynteih (in Pnar), or standing stone or menhir, and Mawkynthei and Mooknor, or dolmen. The small stones on which the dolmen sits are called mawkhrum. While the standing stone symbolizes the male and the dolmen symbolizes the female, the mawkhrum symbolizes the children and the grandchildren (Dr. Fabian Lyngdoh Facebook post). There are different reasons why people erected monoliths in the Khasi Pnar culture. For a much more elaborate description of the monoliths and the megaliths in the region, one can refer to Mohrmen HH, Cultural History of Jaintia Hills in Stories, Stones, and Tradition.

Nartiang and Raliang: Shared stories and tradition
Nartiang and Raliang are two important villages in the Jaintia Hills. The two villages share at least one thing

in common, and that is the market day in both villages are observed on the same day, as per the traditional calendar of the Pnar. In both villages, the market happens on Mulong, a day before Musiang, the market day in Jowai, which is the seventh day in the eight-day week calendar of the Pnar people. There is a story behind why these two prominent villages observe market day on the same day, and this story is connected with one of the megalithic stones in Nartiang.

Apart from the menhirs and the dolmens in the Jaintia Hills, there are also the mawkjat, or footstones or stone slabs, which were used as bridges and are part of the megalithic culture prevailing in the area. There is one particular mawkjat at Nartiang located on the right side of the road from the village to the monolith park, which has a story connected with U Mar Phalangki.

Makjat that Mar Phalangki used as a Knap
U Mar Phalangki is a giant of a man from Nartiang, recognized by the king for his size and strength. Phalangki is a kur (clan) name that is popular in Nartiang, and Mar is a title, hence he must have had a name that we may have unfortunately lost. He earned the title "U Mar," meaning a giant or a strongman, and the king used him for various projects and during battles.

The story has it that U Mar Phalangki, after finishing his errands at Raliang, was about to return to his native village of Nartiang. As he was about to start his journey from Raliang village to Nartiang, it began to drizzle. It then started to rain heavily, and he had nothing to protect himself from the rain. He then saw an old lady sitting in the verandah of her hut and approached her to ask if she could lend him a "knap" or a "chaladiang"—traditional rain protection gear made of bamboo. "O fia, can you lend me a knap or a chaladiang to protect myself from the rain?" Looking at his size, the old lady said, "Sorry, I do not have a knap or a chaladiang for a man of your size. Why don't you just take that stone (pointing to the stone slab nearby) and protect yourself?" Mar Phalangki took the stone and

put it over his head to protect himself, but the stone was no ordinary stone. The large stone near the monolith park, which now serves as a bridge, is believed to be the stone that Mar Phalangki carried from Raliang to protect himself from the rain.

The stone and the traditional market
What connection does this story have with the market? Or rather, the question should be: why do the market days of these two traditional markets converge on the same day? The two villages are significant with regards to the culture, traditions, and religion of the people, and the markets in these areas are considered "yaw niam" or religious markets. These are markets connected with the traditional Niamtre, as offerings are still sacrificed at the altar in the market to pay obeisance to the market gods. The reason the two markets share the same day in the traditional calendar is that the stone Mar Phalangki carried from Raliang to protect himself from the rain is a "moon niam," or a stone connected with the rituals related to the market at Raliang.

The story of the tallest monolith in the park
The other story that connects a monolith in Nartiang with Mar Phalangki is located in the park itself. It is linked to the biggest and tallest monolith in Meghalaya, and because of its size, it can be called a megalith too. It is only in the park in Nartiang that one can see both monoliths and megaliths erected in one place.

The story of the tallest stone in the park is believed to have been erected by Mar Phalangki, and there is a Karbi connection to the story. The story goes that it was market day, and people were standing around a spot where the huge stone was to be erected. U Mar Phalangki was given the responsibility of raising the stone, but as he tried to do so, his efforts went futile as the stone fell to the ground. He tried twice over but each time, the stone refused to stand. The people were at a loss. Perhaps the stone did not stand because something offended the deities. They needed to do something. So, they conducted an egg divination, and the

message was that the gods needed to be propitiated with a human sacrifice. For the stone to stand tall, the deities required human blood. A golden lime container was purposely dropped into the hole dug for the base of the stone. A Karbi man, who had come to Nartiang market to do his chores, went to where he saw people gathered. When he saw the container in the pit, not suspecting any ill intentions, he went to pick it up. While he was inside the pit, U Mar immediately lifted the stone and placed it over the poor man's body. This act pleased the deities, and U Mar Phalangki was able to erect the stone, which has stood tall through the passage of time.

This is the story of the tallest and biggest monolith in Nartiang, which is about 8 meters in height, 2 meters in breadth, and 0.46 meters in thickness. It is believed to be the tallest and largest monolith in Meghalaya. There is another story connected with the monolith park at Nartiang, which says the monoliths were erected to celebrate the coronation of one of the Jaintia kings.

King's other assignment to Mar Phalangki
It appears that U Mar Phalangki was a very important person in the court of the Jaintia king. He was not only involved with the two monoliths, but he was also one of the Mars the king assigned to build the footpath from Nartiang to Jaintiapur. Legends have it that the footpath, which stretches for more than a hundred kilometers, was assigned to three Mars to complete: U Mar Phalangki, U Luh Laskor, and U Bailon Khyntiem. The first two were assigned to construct the stretch on the plateau, and U Bailon was given the remaining task to build the road on the southern slopes until it connected with Jaintiapur.

The remnants of the path, and more importantly the stone bridges that are part of the path, can still be seen today on the Indian side of the border. These testify to the grand project of the king to connect the two parts of the kingdom. However, it is not known if any remains of the path can be found on the Bangladesh side, though the monoliths at Jaintiapur provide evidence of the prevalence of monolithic culture in the area.

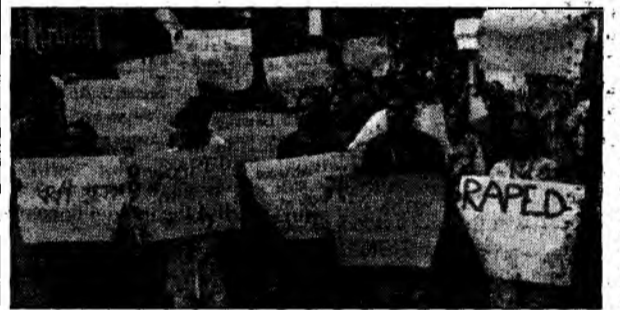
National uproar over rape and murder of lady doctor in Kolkata

By Salil Gewali

How long can one remain under the illusion that a state run by a "Sanyasini," who has renounced worldly desires, will not eventually succumb to corruption and depravity? This is the age of hypocrisy. Trusting someone at face value is sheer stupidity. The brutal rape and murder of a 32-year-old trainee doctor at RG Kar Medical College and Hospital on August 9 has undeniably stained the once-sacred and highly esteemed white sari of the West Bengal Chief Minister. The Chief Minister willfully remained unfazed for days, despite the nationwide uproar -- as if waiting for the storm to pass.

It's appalling why the leaders of Bengal cannot show even an iota of empathy for the grieving family of Moumita Debnath. While this horrific incident has shattered the lives of those closest to her, it has also sparked a wave of sympathy, anger, and despair among the public. This heinous crime, marked by unspeakable violence, indeed raises serious questions about the safety of women even within academic institutions and the accountability of, "those in power."

The details of the crime are truly horrifying. According to the post-mortem report, the victim, was not only raped but also subjected to a series of barbaric tortures beyond imagination. The autopsy reveals a shocking narrative



of "perverted sexuality" and "genital torture." This is not just a case of sexual violence; it is an act of perverse sadism. Could the concerned leaders provide an explanation for denying the parents access to the body for three hours? In the wake of this tragedy, countless doctors and concerned citizens across the country have taken to the streets in protest. They roared and thundered, demanding justice for the victim. From Kolkata to Guwahati, Hyderabad, New Delhi, Mumbai, Tripura, Shillong, the medical fraternity and the public have expressed their outrage. The anger is not just directed at the perpetrators of this heinous crime and the medical institution, but also at the authorities and leaders who have tried to blatantly trample ethical values in many ways. If one digs deeper, the response and non-chalance of the police and the ruling TMC government over the course of several days is utterly unpardonable.

Why did the police and even the hospital management attempt to dismiss this bone-chilling murder as merely a "suicide"? There appears to be a consistent attempt to "erase crucial evidence" of the tragedy by the authorities and the police, likely under directives from higher-ups. Instead of taking prompt action for justice, why did the Chief Minister and her government resort to the blame game in such a serious matter? The agony and distress of the victim's family, seemingly failed to "move" the Chief Minister until August 14. What is even more shocking is that when her party spokesperson, Shantanu Sen, spoke out about the rising immoral activities at RG Kar Medical College and Hospital, the TMC removed him from his position. Consequently, most top TMC leaders, including the outspoken Mahua Moitra, remained silent. Is it not bizarrely mysterious that on August 14, a mass vandalism spree erupted in the hospital premises, mindlessly destroying medical equipment

and assaulting the medical fraternity? Was this intended to destroy the crime scene and wipe out evidence? Who is behind this?

A close friend from Kolkata, Dr Debanjan Banerjee, the Dean of Media Science as well as a senior political analyst and writer, expressed his deep concern and anger: "The Principal of the Medical College, Dr. Sandip Ghosh, has been accused by both current students and alumni of being the mastermind behind extensive corruption within the hospital. The allegations are grave—ranging from involvement in drugs and sex rackets to harassment and other unethical practices. These accusations paint a disturbing picture of a leader who has betrayed the trust of the very institution he is supposed to uphold."

Incidentally, as public outrage continued to mount, the TMC government took a more sinister turn by threatening media persons reporting on the case with legal action. The police also began targeting individuals and protestors who shared clips and images of the incident and ongoing protests on social media. In a tragic twist, a courageous young lady doctor who consistently raised her voice against the crime found herself at the receiving end of this state-sponsored intimidation. On the evening of August 15,

she was hunted down by the police. The next morning, she again took to X again to recount her ordeal: "Around 7:30 pm, my mother received a frantic call from a neighbour in our hometown, saying that 3-4 'uniformed' police officers were searching for our home and relatives. Soon enough, the officers arrived, where they proceeded to intimidate my mother, brother, and sister-in-law, demanding that I delete all my posts. My mother cried inconsolably; my entire family was left devastated, forced to apologize under intense humiliation and duress."

This intimidation is just the tip of the iceberg. The real questions are how this vandalism came about; why the power of the government machinery was seized, and who all are involved in the horrendous rape case—because it all stinks to high heavens. Wasn't it Mamata Didi who heartlessly dismissed the rape by the son of her TMC leader in Nadia district as merely a "love affair," where the 14-year-old victim died the very next day, and her cremation was hastily arranged without the consent of her family? With the High Court now ordering a CBI investigation into Moumita Debnath's death, one can only wonder how many more skeletons are about to tumble out of the cupboard.

And here's a chilling thought, what if the CBI had not intervened in the case of the orgy in Sandeshkhali and similar incidents? The TMC leaders who sexually tortured many village women could one day have become the Home Minister or even the Minister for Women's Welfare in West Bengal—ironic, isn't it? It's time to seriously reflect on where West Bengal is headed and the fate of its innocent population. I wonder at those columnists who regularly write special articles in the news media, revelling in Didi's roars and successes, and hailing her as the future hope of the country!

Letters to the Editor

Umroi Airport Saga: A tale of neglect, incompetence & missed opportunities

The Shillong (Umroi) airport in Meghalaya stands as a stark reminder of how political intrigue, bureaucratic inertia, and a lack of foresight can stifle progress and leave communities under-served. For half a century, this airport has been held hostage by a tangled web of conflicting interests, leaving Meghalaya lagging behind its Northeastern counterparts in connectivity and development.

The story begins with a seemingly well-intentioned plan: expanding the airport to accommodate larger aircrafts and bringing Meghalaya closer to the national network to unlock its tourism potential. Yet, the process has been marred by questionable decisions, opaque dealings, and a blatant disregard for public good.

The acquisition of land in 2008-09, without a prior feasibility study, raises serious questions. Was there a deliberate attempt to bypass due diligence and secure land for speculative purposes? The government's justification for acquiring land before conducting a feasibility study is simply untenable, especially when the cost of removing obstacles is now estimated to be a staggering Rs 7,000-8,000

crore. This gross negligence has cost the public dearly, both financially and in terms of lost opportunities.

The recent pronouncements, stating that the airport is not feasible for larger aircraft, further deepens the mystery. Is this a sudden realisation, or has the government or any concerned authority been aware of these limitations all along? The timing of this revelation, after years of land acquisition and a considerable public investment, only adds to the suspicion of a hidden agenda.

The ongoing debate regarding the potential for a new Greenfield airport further complicates the situation. Is this a genuine exploration of alternatives, or a ploy to justify further land acquisition and potentially enrich those in power?

This saga is not simply about an airport; it is about the systemic corruption and inefficiency that plagues Meghalaya. The State Government has failed to prioritise the needs of its people and has instead allowed vested interests to dictate policy, leaving development in limbo.

The Hon'ble Meghalaya High Court's recent ruling on the feasibility of mid-size aircraft landing at Umroi airport is a welcome breath of fresh air for the state's development. The court's sound reasoning, based on the successful operation of

Paro International Airport in Bhutan, dismantles the long-standing excuses used to justify the airport's under-utilisation.

For years, the mountainous terrain surrounding Umroi has been cited as an obstacle to expansion. However, the court's observation that Paro, situated at a significantly higher altitude and with a far more limited optical surface, successfully operates international flights, is a powerful argument for Umroi's potential. This isn't just a matter of technical feasibility; it's about a mindset shift, a rejection of limiting beliefs that have held back Meghalaya's progress.

The court's suggestion for hopping flights from major cities is a visionary move that can unlock the state's tourism potential. Increased connectivity will not only boost tourism revenue but also create much-needed employment opportunities for the people of Meghalaya.

Hence, we urge the state government and the Airports Authority of India to seize this opportunity and implement the court's recommendations swiftly. The time for excuses is over. The people of Meghalaya deserve a functional, well-connected airport that facilitates growth and prosperity. It is time for the authority concerned to shed its cloak of secrecy, address the concerns raised, and prioritise the long-term interests of the state over short-term gains.

Let's make the Shillong (Umroi) Airport the gateway to a flourishing future for Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
Chanmiki Laloo
Shillong-02

Broken Trust: How MPSC's Examination Errors Shattered Fairness

We gained crucial information after the Khasi Students' Union demand to make the MCS preliminary marks public was met. The cut-off marks for different categories for the MCS Preliminary Examination as notified by the MPSC are as follows: UR = 112, KJ = 92, Garo = 84, and OST/SC = 86. After the marks for the MCS Preliminary Examination were made public, there were 17 Candidates that no longer secured the cut-off marks after the reassessment of Paper I. Among these, some candidates received marks of 78, 80, and 82.

Additionally, 23 Candidates secured below 92 marks after reassessment. Since their category is not yet known, we cannot assume they met the cut-off. The MPSC released an additional list of successful candidates after 7 months, stating that they applied the doctrine of equality following a reassessment due to errors in the answer key. However, they failed to omit or disqualify candidates who

no longer secured the cut-off marks after the reassessment. Now we understand why the MPSC was adamant about not releasing the marks.

It is now apparent that, since no disqualification was made from the first list, the MPSC intends to allow these candidates to write the Mains examination despite failing to reach the cut-off marks, which is illegal, treacherous, and unethical.

These are based on facts, not propaganda. Those who try to defend the MPSC tooth and nail, despite all its limitations and shortcomings, whether intentionally or not, show a lack of integrity. The first list is rendered invalid when candidates who failed to meet the required cut-off marks are still included. The result is irreparably tainted, unreliable and the overall examination process questionable.

Yours etc.,
K. Rynjah
Shillong

Case of organised crime at RG Kar Hospital

The murder of the intern doctor at RG Kar Hospital reminds me of the murder of Kong Iohbianghun Sakhkar, Assistant Manager, Orchid Hotel Polo, in June 2019. Her body was thrown in the forest at Umbir, near Umiam Lake. Kong Sakhkar was trying to expose corruption in the

MTDC and a flourishing sex racket involving higher ups in the organisation. We are unaware if justice has been delivered in the case of Kong Sakhkar. The incident at RG Kar is not simply a rape case or a case of women not being safe or of health workers not being safe. If we use the incident to highlight women's safety or health workers' plight, we have missed the awful truth. It was an organised crime, and an intentional and vengeful murder of a person, not because she was a woman or a health worker, but because it was a centre of organised crime. That's why it reminds me of the murder of Kong Iohbianghun Sakhkar, whose death seemed intentional, calculated and vengeful. We cannot protect women without understanding that crime syndicates exist in this country like satanic tentacles that involve well connected people in positions of power. This is why justice is denied many times. Awareness is the first step towards protecting women. It is high time normal people, including working women, are armed because no one can protect us from these organised criminals.

Yours etc.,
Amia Kharthomi,
Shillong

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

"In order to succeed, we must first believe that we can."

— Nikos Kazantzakis

The Shillong Times

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Instinct under pressure

POLITICAL reflexes are difficult to predict. In a patronage democracy where the MLA is actually the dispenser of freebies, being in the Opposition is starving the constituents. Joining the ruling party means a political appointment which assures the MLA of at least some crumbs of office so that some of the crumbs can filter down to the constituents. The Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) has been trying to educate the electorate not to expect money or freebies during elections but perhaps the Party must also talk to the electorate that the daily demands from the MLA are not sustainable and is the prime reason why Meghalaya is in the doldrums on every human development indicator. How on earth can an MLA address the personal needs of people 365 days a year except when he/she is travelling out of town and is gallivanting in the US or some other country on the plea of delivering wisdom to people whose format of democracy is completely alien to ours. There is no such thing as distributing freebies in the US. In fact, in the US there are individual supporters of the party and candidate that become fund raisers for their candidates. Can this be imagined in India? Only corporates and businesspersons will dish out huge amounts after extracting a promise that upon winning and forming the government the amount would be returned a hundredfold. This has been the modus-operandi adopted since 1972 when the state was formed and the modus operandi continues.

When political reflexes are in a crisis people indulge in political somersaults. The Congress Party in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills has been in the dog-house because it lacks charismatic leadership. A charismatic leader leads from the front and is always talking to the people via the media. In this day and age of social media and handles such as X (formerly Twitter) available, political leaders are always communicating to the world; to their party colleagues about their plans of action. Silence hardly works in politics. Look at the constant tweets of Congress leader Jairam Ramesh against the Prime Minister. "Those tweets are meant to bolster the energy of party workers and to tell them that the Congress shall overcome all odds one day and return to power. But in Meghalaya, barring Garo Hills where Saleng Sangma seems to be in control, in the Khasi-Jaintia and Ri Bhoi districts the Congress is in meltdown mode. While the Congress in other states seems to have recovered its losses and in a spirited fight with the BJP, in Meghalaya the opposite is happening. At this rate the Congress looks like it might lose its Leader of the Opposition status sooner than later.

Meghalaya tourism – A saga of delays, gaps and misses

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

Does Meghalaya tourism have potential? Is enough being done to realise the potential? The saga of delays, gaps and misses highlights that Meghalaya tourism has a long way to go with regards to deriving the best out of its tourism resources. Tourism has the potential to contribute a lot more to the state GDP if the problem areas are looked into. Mentioned below are some of such areas –

Delays –

The issue of Assam tourist vehicles ferrying the major share of tourists is not new. Concerns were first raised in the year 2015. That was the time when tourism really took-off in many new destinations. Tourism was no longer confined only to Shillong, Sohra and Mawlynnong; rather, many new attractions came up in Khasi-Jaintia Hills. This was also the time when resorts started coming-up thick and fast particularly in Ri-Bhoi District. Now, who ferries tourists to such resorts? Obviously, it is the Assam tourist vehicles. On July 26, 2024 HNYF stopped Assam tourist vehicles at Umtyngar from going onwards to Sohra and other destinations. Over the years many pressure groups have had a problem with Assam tourist vehicles plying to the attractions. Even sections of the public support such actions of the pressure groups.

It has been nine years since the problem started. In that time nothing has been done to address it. The delay is unwarranted and problems like this will continue to happen frequently unless a permanent solution is found. This is because Meghalaya tourism will continue to grow. This means that Assam tourist vehicles will also continue to grow. The only factor to be considered while looking at solutions is that 'protectionism in business does no good'. It is better to have an ecosystem of competition. Stopping Assam tourist vehicles is not the solution; rather, the scaling of skills and capacity (number of tourist vehicles) of the local transport entrepreneurs is.

What is the value proposition of Meghalaya tourism and how is it different from the competition of other destinations located near and far? This is the question that needs examination. Till the

time that is done Meghalaya tourism will lack a sense of direction and the policies and strategies formulated and implemented will not have a clear goal. The key here is branding and marketing. In the absence of proper branding there cannot be effective marketing. The result is that Meghalaya tourism will continue to be known as a leisure destination only. The word leisure in tourism parlance is 'generic'. It is time to look at 'specifics'. In business development this situation is known as 'a conceptualization problem'. It is the highest level problem which really needs think-tanks to come together and conceptualize a solution.

The meat and vegetables have to come from the villages so that the community can benefit economically. Today, the CBT destinations of Meghalaya source their raw materials from outside. This means reduced economic benefits for the community. This is one gap that needs to be mitigated. Here, the state government agricultural schemes have a major role to play.

For instance, take festival tourism. Meghalaya is slowly turning into a medium-to-high-end festival tourism destination. Now, how do festivals fit into the tourism landscape of Meghalaya? What about other verticals such as adventure, culture, cuisine, wildlife, etc? How do all these define the scope and shape of Meghalaya tourism? This is the branding question. Unless Meghalaya tourism appropriately brands itself as a proper destination it will not be able to position itself with a 'unique selling proposition' at the global stage. The absence of branding will result in a slow and gradual demise.

Gaps –

The state government has recognised tourism as one of the major engines for employment and growth. Efforts are being made with regards to training and development of the service providers across accommodations, transportation, food and beverages, guides, etc. It is a positive development; however, there are areas that the state government

requirements can be difficult to fulfil as the resources are privately/clan owned. This in itself poses a challenge to distribution of returns, etc. In most cases there is a trust deficit.

Even if the challenge is overcome, there is the question of management. CBT in its true sense requires that the raw materials used in providing services such as food and beverages, accommodation, etc are all sourced locally from the community and nearby areas. The meat and vegetables have to come from the villages so that the community can benefit economically. Today, the CBT destinations of Meghalaya source their raw materials from outside. This means reduced economic benefits for the community. This is one gap that needs to be mitigated. Here, the state government agricultural schemes have a major role to play.

Misses –

Meghalaya currently has a number of tourism associations. Some relate themselves to tourism development, some to tour operations, rural

development, hotels and accommodations, guiding, etc. While that is alright, it can also result in a limited view of tourism. Each association is looking at its own mandate only. Maybe there is a case of competition too amongst the associations. On the contrary, tourism works through cooperation and coordination. Tourism encompasses products, services and activities which are dependent and supplementary to one another. This makes the case for an 'umbrella tourism association' which would encompass all the associations of Meghalaya. For instance, take the autumn tourism calendar which was released recently. The festivals lined-up are not the domain of any specific association alone; rather, it requires the coordinated functioning of all the associations. Some will take care of tourism services, some will look at the events per se, and some will look at sight-seeing, etc. Having an umbrella association will also help the state government in dealing with the stakeholders through a single contact point. This is one element of 'ease of doing business'. Another area relates to tour operations. The complaint is that the majority of tourists who come to Meghalaya get their itineraries done from outside. The tourist does not take the services of the local tour operators. In recent years many local entrepreneurs have tried to do start-ups relating to travel operations. Quite a few have gained some success while many have failed. It would be good if the state government can think of a travel and tourism incubation centre to help the new start-ups. The majority of the start-ups today are all tech-based or tech-supported. This becomes difficult for the budding entrepreneurs in the absence of support and hand-holding. An incubation centre is a perfect setting for networking and entry into the tourism market. This will also augment tourism contribution to the state GDP from the current 5% (approx) per annum to higher levels.

The saga of issues are many. If not addressed immediately and appropriately, the future of Meghalaya tourism may not be that bright. (The writer teaches at NEHU; email – blyngdoh@gmail.com)

Sheikh Hasina had overstayed her welcome as Bangladesh Prime Minister Public outrage against her regime seems genuine, not fomented from outside

By Nantoo Banerjee

The United States of America or the People's Republic of China may have nothing much to do with the massive public demonstrations in Bangladesh that began last month over governmental job quotas forcing the fall of Sheikh Hasina as the country's longest serving prime minister and her government. Sheikh Hasina had dug her own grave firstly by rigging the last national election, which was totally boycotted by her party's prime opposition, right-wing Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its 19 other allies, demanding the polls be held under a caretaker government. In the past, Bangladesh had been run by caretaker governments before elections.

However, in 2011, the Awami League government abolished the caretaker system by pushing through the 15th constitutional amendment. Secondly, the introduction of a controversial quota system for government jobs favouring diehard Awami League supporters or dependents of the country's freedom movement. The quota proposal was scaled back by the country's apex court, after a massive nationwide protest by students for days, leading to deadly clashes between police and demonstrators killing scores of people. The country's Supreme Court ordered that 93 percent of jobs be allocated on merit. The unemployment rate for the young educated people in Bangladesh has risen sharply over the last five years.

In January, the Hasina-led left-of-centre Awami League had won a record fourth straight term in the national election. The party was nearly unopposed. The latest student-led public demonstrations and violence against the Hasina government, in which more than 300 people were killed, continued for nearly a month before she decided to quit and take temporary asylum in India. It is true that both the US and China were unhappy with Prime Minister Hasina. The US was unhappy because of her deep strategic involvement with China. The US Department of Defence, in a report, had expressed concern over China's growing influence in the region.

The US might or might not have approached Sheikh Hasina for a lease of the tiny 7.3-km-long mostly-flat St Martin's Island, situated close to the border between Bangladesh and Myanmar at an elevation of 3.6 metres above the mean sea level, which she allegedly refused to give for good reasons. It would be foolish on the part of the US to expect such a gesture from the Bangladesh government upsetting China. It would also be absolutely absurd to claim a US hand behind the massive public uprising against the former Hasina government involving millions of citizens of Bangladesh.

Ironically, India, which provided her with temporary political asylum, should as well be highly unhappy with her government's near total surrender to China over the years. China is the largest supplier of defence equipment to Bangladesh. Indirectly, it controls the Bangladesh defence department. The country's military bosses are in continuous dialogue with China. Dhaka is Beijing's second biggest defence customer, after Pakistan. Bangladesh has acquired sizable military hardware from China in recent years, including corvettes, naval guns, anti-ship missiles and surface-to-air missile systems. Last year, a China-built \$1.2-billion six-slot submarine base, named BNS Sheikh Hasina, was inaugurated at Pekua in Cox's Bazar. The Naval Base, about 200 miles south-east of Dhaka, was built to increase Bangladesh's naval capacity after the demarca-

tion of its maritime boundary with India and Myanmar. This submarine base in the Bay of Bengal is a major concern for India from its strategic standpoint. Hasina did not care. The Chinese built submarine base in India's backyard could disrupt the regional balance of power and complicate the tense geopolitical situation in the Bay of Bengal.

China's growing military presence in Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina has been a strategic concern for the US as much as for India. Sheikh Hasina's last foreign trip to China as the Bangladesh prime minister to meet her counterpart Li Qiang as well as President Xi Jinping was on July 10. The two countries signed 21 agreements and announced seven new projects. The visit also saw Beijing and Dhaka elevating their "strategic partnership" to a "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership," according to Bangladesh state-run news agency BSS. However, Sheikh Hasina had cut short her Beijing trip by a day, giving rise to the speculation that all did not go well with that visit and, probably, she did not get what she wanted from the Chinese authorities. Her government was already facing political turmoil under growing student unrest and public protests. Having given so much strategic inroads to China, could she have asked for some kind of help from the People's Republic of China to stem the internal political rot which the Chinese authorities might have turned down?

For China, which is practically in military and economic control of Bangladesh, it does not really matter which political dispensation is in power in Bangladesh today. At the end of last year, China's investment stock in Bangladesh increased substantially, and there were nearly 700 Chinese-funded companies in Bangladesh, creating more than 550,000 jobs, with bilateral ties continuing to tighten, according to the Chinese Embassy in Bangladesh. According to the United Nations COMTRADE database, China's exports to Bangladesh in 2023 were worth US\$22.95 billion as against its import worth \$1.03 billion, making the trade between the two countries highly lopsided.

China is also the biggest lender to Bangladesh. Lately, Bangladesh has been reeling under a debt trap. As of August 4, 2024, Bangladesh has received \$1.15 billion from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as part of a \$4.7 billion loan package. The loan was approved in January 2023 to help Bangladesh withstand a foreign reserves crisis and high inflation. Bangladesh's total external debt as of December 2023 has reached \$100.6 billion. Of this the share of public sector debt was 79.2% while that of the private sector was 20.8% as per data from the Economic Relations Division.

Going by the fast-expanding trade, economic and strategic relations between Bangladesh and China since Hasina returned to power in 2009, causing agony and tensions for India, the latter should have refrained from providing political asylum to Sheikh Hasina to maintain India's neutral stand on the internal political crisis in the neighbouring state. Back home, Hasina is facing murder charges. What will the government of India do, if Bangladesh demands, Sheikh Hasina's repatriation from India for trial? Bangladesh Home Affairs Adviser Brigadier General (retd.) Sakawat Hossain, speculated that 500 or more protesters and policemen were killed during the three weeks of violence. India has always misread poker-faced Hasina's strong internal resolve. India seems to be in a tricky situation. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Sad state of humanity: Gruesome truth of crimes against women

Editor,

Crimes against women are a deep and sad reality in our society. These incidents show to what extent our morality and sensitivities have fallen. A trainee doctor from Kolkata, who was dedicated to saving countless lives in the future, was brutally murdered. This incident is not just a crime, but a sad picture of the moral decline of our society.

Women are the pivot of society and have given life to society for centuries. Today deep question marks have been raised on our thinking towards them. What kind of society are we living in, where women are treated so brutally? The death of a doctor, who is committed to taking care of patients and giving them life every day, is a stigma on our society.

This incident forces us to think about the loss of morality and sensitivity in our society. Have we become so insensitive that we cannot even feel the pain of a human being? Such despicable treatment of women is not just a matter of one person or one incident, but it also exposes the state of our collective thinking and values.

The increasing figures of crimes against women are proof that there are serious flaws somewhere in our jus-

tice system. The law exists, but the lack of enforcement encourages criminals. In this case also, if the accused had been caught on time and given severe punishment, perhaps such incidents would not have happened. But delay in the process of justice only makes the criminals fearless.

It seems that our governments and millions of their workers have all become insensitive. No one has respect for justice, truth and humanity! It is the collective lack of empathy towards victims of rape which results in women having to wait a long time to get justice. During this time, their mental and physical struggle becomes even deeper. Everyone needs to look inward so that the culprits can be punished as soon as possible and the victims can get justice.

The need of the hour is to make strict laws to deal with crimes against women and implement them effectively. Strict laws do not only mean provision of stringent punishment, but also ensure that these laws are followed at every level. It is necessary to remove the weaknesses of the judicial process so that fear of law remains in the minds of criminals and they think before committing heinous crimes.

It is not only the responsibility of the government and police, but also the responsibility of the society to ensure the safety of women. We have to change our thinking and adopt a respectful attitude towards women. Change has to be brought in the society through educa-

tion and awareness.

Society must follow a set of values. Crimes cannot be stopped by laws alone; we also have to understand the importance of morality and values. To give the right direction to today's generation, there is a need for values and moral education. Parents, teachers, and leaders of society should ensure that children are taught right from wrong. Here the role of mothers to impart the right values to their sons is integral. The duty of a mother is not only to give birth to her son but also to make him a human being who deserves respect and dignity in the society. The crimes taking place in today's society highlight the lack of values in our society. Mothers have to teach their sons how important it is to respect women.

This painful incident has forced us to think about how unsafe women are in our society. We need to pay attention to this and create a society where women can feel safe and respected. We have to stand united against this barbarity and fight for justice.

Today we have to sensitise our society and reinforce moral values. We have to unite for the safety of our daughters, sisters and mothers. Every person in the society has to understand that women's safety is not only a matter of law, but it is the responsibility of every person.

Yours etc.,
Pushpa Bajaj,
President,
Shubham Charitable
Association, Shillong

Women's empowerment – fact or fiction?

Editor,

Women's empowerment is a term that resonates with hope, progress, and the promise of a better future for women in India. Over the years, significant strides have been made in promoting gender equality, encouraging female education, and increasing women's participation in the workforce. Laws such as the Domestic Violence Act and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act have been enacted to protect women and ensure their rights are upheld. However, these legal frameworks often stand in stark contrast to the harsh realities many women face daily.

The recent rape case at Kolkata's R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital has sent shockwaves across the city and the nation, highlighting the disturbing reality of sexual violence even within supposed safe spaces. A place meant for healing and care became the scene of a horrific crime, raising serious questions about the safety of women in public institutions. The incident has sparked outrage, with calls for swift justice and stronger measures to protect women, not just within hospital premises but across all sectors of society. As details of the case unfold, it underscores the urgent need for both systemic reforms and a societal shift in addressing gender-based violence

in India. The brutal gang rape and murder of Nirbhaya in 2012 shocked the nation and the world, leading to widespread protests and calls for change. Yet, more than a decade later, incidents of molestation, harassment, and violence against women continue to be reported with alarming frequency. The question arises: How empowered are women if their safety is compromised at every step?

While some argue that stricter laws and harsher punishments are needed to deter criminals, others point to the failure of existing systems to protect women effectively. It is not enough to simply enact laws; they must be implemented with the utmost seriousness. There must be no tolerance for those who commit such heinous crimes, and the legal system should deliver swift and severe justice. We must ensure there is never another Nirbhaya case in India.

Moreover, those who focus on the dress code of women rather than their protection should be silenced. The discourse should shift from questioning women's choices to ensuring their safety, dignity, and freedom. Empowerment cannot be achieved without addressing these fundamental issues head-on.

The role of the police and politics in rape cases in India is a complex and often controversial issue. On one hand, the police are tasked with ensuring justice for victims and maintaining law and order. However, their effectiveness is frequently

called into question due to delays in investigations, mishandling of evidence, and accusations of bias or corruption. In many cases, political influence exacerbates these issues, with powerful individuals or groups sometimes using their clout to shield perpetrators or suppress cases. This intersection of law enforcement and politics often hinders justice, leaving victims and their families fighting prolonged battles. The need for a transparent, accountable, and depoliticized approach to handling rape cases has never been more urgent in India.

Women's empowerment in India is a multifaceted struggle that goes beyond legislation. It demands a collective effort from all sectors of society to protect and uplift women, ensuring that empowerment is not just a promise but a lived reality. The horrific incidents at Kolkata's R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital and the enduring legacy of cases like Nirbhaya's underscore the need for more than just laws on paper. True empowerment cannot be realized until every woman feels safe in every corner of society, free from the fear of violence and harassment.

Yours etc,
Kalparaj Chakraborty,
Tura, West Garo Hills

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

"Success is never final, failure is never fatal.
It's courage that counts."

— John Wooden

The Shillong Times

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Murder most foul

HELL has broken loose in Kolkata after the 'rape and murder' of a 31-year-old trainee woman doctor in the seminar hall of the state-run RG Kar Medical College and Hospital in east Kolkata. The protests by medicos and the general public were justified even as these took on a political colour to target Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and press for her exit from power. Mixing politics with such issues at this critical juncture is condemnable. This, granted that the college principal and the city police commissioner sought to mislead the victim's family by initially branding this as a case of suicide. With so many injuries on the victim's body, such a conclusion was perhaps part of an attempt to cover up the case with ulterior motives. It is understandable that the high court has intervened and handed over the investigations to the CBI.

Passing a central law, even with its crude provisions following the Nirbhaya gangrape case in Delhi in 2012 and its still sharper amendment the next year in themselves meant little. Over 30,000 rape cases are reported annually though Kolkata had fewer cases and Delhi starkly continued to be the hotbed of rapes. Preventive steps are equally important but are not in place. IMA is now demanding CCTV coverage for all hospitals. This should have been in place long ago. There still are issues. For instance, whenever a crime takes place, the first explanation from the police would be that their own CCTV cameras in the area were defunct. In government institutions, cameras are mostly non-functional mainly because shady activities including bribe-taking take place there. While CCTV cameras functioned in the Kolkata hospital, the coverage was over a limited space. It showed the prime accused coming in and going out of the hospital. This alone is no proof. The urgent demolition of the fourth floor of the medical facility, where the seminar room was located is also a clear case of destroying evidence.

While gang-rape was suspected, autopsy reports did not seem to have established this. The sudden resignation of the medical college principal was as surprising as his swift reinstatement. Rumours about an organ racket leading to the murder also spread. It is natural that the BJP joined in the anti-government protests and sought the chief minister's resignation. Governor Ananda Bose drew derisive laughter even in this poignant scenario when he spoke up for women safety and sought to corner the chief minister. Political drum-beats apart, it is important to ensure women's safety through concerted actions on the ground. There was practically no security in evidence at the RG Kar Medical College, as the National Commission for Women has pointed out. In this context, the 25 per cent increase in security at all hospitals, as ordered by the Centre this week, is a welcome step. It is a welcome step that the Supreme Court has taken suo-motu cognisance of the case.

Letters to the Editor

MPSC needs a complete shake-up

Editor,
I wish to draw to your attention to the ongoing Meghalaya Civil Services exams and its debacle. "Meghalaya, the most corrupt state in the country" — Home Minister, Amit Shah said in a flashing headline in the Economic Times February 16, 2023 and The Shillong Times of the same date as well.

The contentious notification No.MPSC/Ex-C/50/2021-2022/145 dated July 23, 2024 had added successful candidates to the earlier notification No.MPSC/Ex-C/50/2021-2022/133. This notification has caused resentment and caused a lot of candidates to question the notification and its timing. This notification stated that representation from a candidate was received and that, 3 questions were wrong.

After the notification came out, student representatives, namely the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) came out to question the decision of the Public Service Commission, only to be met with a counter response that pointed to Article 21 (Right to Privacy). This decision is unacceptable as several central institutions themselves publish not only the merit list with marks but also the answer keys of the particular exam. Examinations of all state public service commissions are modeled after the UPSC so I shudder to think if this had happened at the level of the UPSC how grave the repercussions are

going to be.

The MPSC has a rule that they follow i.e., to not give out Answer Keys. So the candidates and the KSU had staged protests over the same. Thereafter the MPSC released a list of roll numbers with marks and also an answer key which included information on the three wrong questions on the basis of which notification No.MPSC/Ex-C/50/2021-2022/145 dated 23/07/2024 had added more successful candidates. The merit list received was also one which showed that some candidates got positive marks and some negative marks with reference to the three wrong questions, meaning that some students had either marked the three wrong questions correctly or incorrectly and therefore lost or gained marks accordingly. From this we can deduce that MPSC exams do not have negative marking. The explanation offered by the MPSC in this regard tends to obfuscate more than clarify.

Here's where it becomes interesting. Now the KSU and the candidates had to go through a lot to receive the merit list and the Answer Keys but as per the notification a representation was sent by a candidate and the OMR sheets were reassessed on the three wrong questions only.

The question now is - how did the candidate get information that the answers were wrong? Or better still How did the candidate know that the answer keys fed to the OMR correction machine (I would assume) were wrong since the MPSC does not give out Answer Keys? This is the voice of the

Setting up the Captain William Sangma State University in Meghalaya is indeed one of the major achievements of the Conrad Sangma led MDA government. It is heartening to know that the state government is taking initiatives to make the University functional. However, the continuing public debate in the state underscores the need for greater clarity and consensus regarding the objectives and scope of the proposed university. The initial remarks of the Education Minister regarding the affiliation of colleges have sparked different reactions. Some individuals in NEHU are alarmed by the prospects of the loss of revenue in case some UG colleges choose the state university for affiliation. Certain student organizations have also expressed fears over the affiliation. There are concerns about its lack of expertise to run all the departments. There is also a view that the state university could confine itself to technology departments. Such varied reactions are natural.

While admitting the need to address all such public concerns, doubts and fears, it is also essential for every to acknowledge the need for a viable and competent state university in Meghalaya. Notwithstanding the fact that NEHU has played an important role in the development of higher education in Meghalaya, it has become unwieldy over the years. Apart from several PG and UG programs on its campuses, NEHU has 80 colleges affiliated to it. Being the lone affiliating university in the state, NEHU has to take the responsibility of affiliating the colleges, approving the courses, working on the curriculum and syllabus for all UG programs, conducting the exams and announcing the results on time. Further, the hasty decision to push NEP 2020 and impose FYUP without creating the enabling infrastructure and academic environment in the state has posed multiple challenges. NEHU is going ahead with new PG programs, even though there are no adequate permanent faculty to run the courses. How its ambitious horizontal expansion has affected its vertical growth

candidates and the KSU and therefore we implore upon the elected members some of whom are MLAs and others in the ruling government to do justice to this case. We have heard their voices and paid heed to it before their elections. Now that they are elected, we expect them to reciprocate by paying heed to our voices too. This is our concerned voices - please hear us out and stand for us. Not just political parties, but also members of the society, learned members, teachers, parents. This is our future. We must take a stand. Why should only the students' representatives talk or stand for the State's well-being? One magistrate questioned the KSU leaders on the day of the protest as to who had given them the authority to act or to question the Meghalaya Public Service Commission? We should also feel the need to stand up to such challenges. Elected members are voted on the promise of creating more jobs and employment. Right now we feel like our jobs are being taken away. We are enraged at this injustice meted out to us.

I would also like to draw your attention to the fact that when a certain minister was a student leader himself, he brought out students from schools to bring down the then government which caused (Late) Shri E.K. Mawlong, the former Chief Minister to resign. Do you think we should also take to the streets to ask for the MPSC chairman's resignation because as of now we are trying to study day in day out and can no longer afford to take to the streets or to protest outside the MPSC office.

Shaping the State University in Meghalaya

By H. Srikanth

becomes clear from NEHU's declining national ranking.

The problem of inadequacy of teachers is more glaring in the UG colleges. Although they started the NEP courses, only a few colleges have appointed additional teachers for skill enhancement papers like Public Speaking. It is doubtful how many of them really have qualification and training for teaching such courses. For teaching regular papers, there are hardly any new appointments. The teachers, who were appointed earlier to teach eight core papers under the old system, are now expected to teach 15 core courses. The FYUP makes dissertation writing compulsory in the fourth year. As per the NEP norm, only those who have done Ph.D. are expected to guide the research. It is most likely that the colleges ignore the stipulation and entrust the responsibility of guiding the dissertation work to teachers who just have the PG degree.

Further, in the name of the new NEP curriculum, some papers which were taught in the PG program are now shifted to the UG program. Most college teachers are not familiar with many of the papers introduced as part of the FYUP. There are no prescribed textbooks as yet for some of the newly introduced papers. Further, conducting meaningful vocational courses for hundreds of students in the colleges will not be that easy. Barring a few city-based elite colleges, most colleges in urban and semi-urban areas may find it difficult to cope up with the additional academic and non-academic demands. In view of these problems, the college teachers and college managements are likely to face many difficulties in implementation of the FYUP. Further, in the absence of proper training and orientation for students at the Plus-Two level, both students and parents are worried about locals not getting admission once the CUET becomes compulsory for admission into the colleges within the state. It is but natural that some colleges which cannot cope up with the increasing

demands and the workload would look forward to a viable alternative.

Given the state of higher education in the state, the tasks of the state university would be two-fold - one to ease the problems of the UG colleges in the state, and the other, to charter into the terrains where NEHU has not yet entered or has failed to make its mark. Considering resource constraints, it is better that the state university avoids the duplication of academic programs and comes out with new UG and PG departments, which are truly relevant to the state. As NEHU's orientation is primarily academic and research, very few students from NEHU have been successful in cracking the central civil service exams. A four-year degree program is not at all needed for those who want to pursue their careers in civil services. Rather, the state university should lay emphasis from the beginning on training the students for civil service, banking and other competitive exams. It needs to equip the students with general knowledge, logical reasoning and quantitative aptitude. Burdening the students with too many papers and forcing everyone to undertake research at the UG level would leave little time for the students to prepare for the civil services and to take part in extra-curricular activities. Students and youth in the state are very creative. The state university may start PG and UG departments like Fine Arts, focusing on music, dance, painting, theatre, filmmaking, etc. Similarly, the state university could focus on sports and physical education. The university should also think of offering online certificate and diploma courses. As such, there are many possibilities of making the state university serve the needs and aspirations of the people of the state.

The state government should have a vision of its own to address the educational needs of the state. Education is a concurrent subject, and it is humiliating for the state to follow the central policies blindly. Not that everything in the NEP 2020 is bad. Taking relevant

inputs from the center's National Education Policy, the state government should come out with its own New Education Policy. In public interest, the state government should ensure that the state university remains secular, democratic, socially relevant, and financially affordable to the people of Meghalaya. Its priority should be to serve the interests of its people, not to appease the government at the center.

True, shaping the state university is beset with several challenges—political, financial, administrative and academic. Considering the ethnic and sub-regional fault-lines, the state government should balance the concerns and needs of the people of all the three hill areas. It is possible to surmount all the challenges if the state university is placed in the hands of visionary educational leaders who understand the state and also know how to think and act out of the box. Great care should be taken in the appointment of the Vice-Chancellor and other key officials who would head the administration and academic departments. The next task would be to identify and appoint competent and committed teachers. The first batch of teachers is crucial for shaping the university departments. There should not be any compromise in identifying and appointing qualified and committed persons as teachers. Nepotism, corruption, and external pressures in appointment of key officials and faculty would mar the progress of the state university. The state government, political parties and the civil society organizations should arrive at a broad consensus on the objectives and how the university should be run. Although the challenges are many, one need not be pessimistic. Many state universities in the country have performed better than some of the central universities. Meghalaya should take lessons from the experiences of successful state universities in the country. If there is political will, academic vision and social commitment, it is very much possible to give shape to a good state university, which supplements and also complements NEHU in strengthening higher education in the state.

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

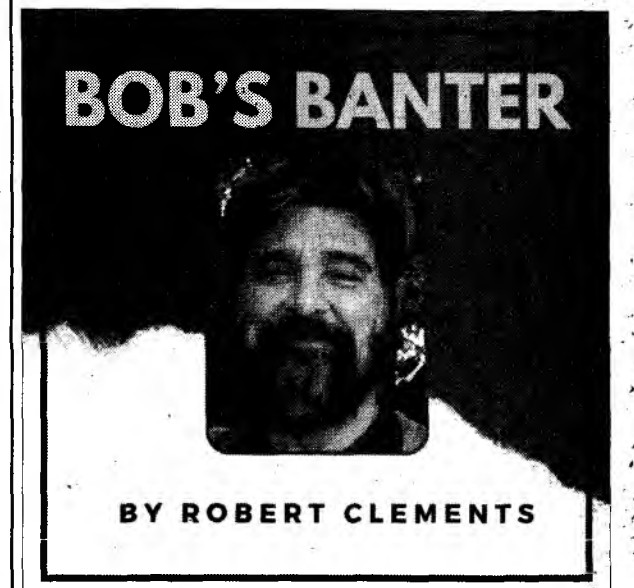
Trapdoor of Lust...! She walked just ahead of me in the park. I guessed she must have been around fifteen or sixteen years of age, and then she ran to a swing which was empty, sat on it happily and pushed herself to move upward, and in her eyes I could see the desire of wanting to enjoy what children much younger than her enjoyed.

She looked at me and smiled and as I saw the sheer delight in her eyes, as I saw momentum lifting her up, and the freedom she

as I sang with and listened to an orchestra once, with players from all over the world! As the orchestra, and singers and ballerinas sang and played and danced on stage, I heard my soul whispering, "These are windows to heaven!"

Indeed, they were. My soul lifts up in worship, when I see a beautiful painting. "How?" I ask myself, "Could there be a work so divine?" And the answer comes from above, "I opened a window!"

So, also a lovely garden,



was enjoying I smiled back at her!

As the swing swept up and then took an arc downwards I could see she was enjoying every moment and suddenly I realized she was a little child in an adult body. Soon she would have to give up such girly pleasures, soon it would not be the jhoola that would swing her up and down, but life itself, as the duties of being a wife or mother would make every day swing up and down with joys and sorrows!

And then my mind goes to Kolkata, to Uttar Pradesh, to the Air-India airhostess raped in London, all in the space of the last week; girls who found that lust and lechery were waiting just outside their safe spaces, to grab and fulfil sexual urges, when lecherous men with lusty hands, stretched out, groped, molested and killed.

I glanced back at the girl on the swing, how safe was she in India?

How safe are our women in the country?

Would someone look at her and say, "Why is she on a swing, that means she is a chalu woman!"

"That means she is available to us!"

"It means she wants to have fun, let us give her some fun!"

Yes, you rascals who touch and molest women because you think they want to have fun, they do want to have fun, but not the fun you think is fun: They want to enjoy life, go for a party with others they are comfortable with, dress up the way they feel like dressing, not for you, but for themselves.

And then I saw the men. They were standing round the girl on the swing. They were staring at her. They did not see a child; they saw a woman. They did not see her joy, they only felt their lust.

I saw her smile vanish. I saw her hastily stop the swing and before it completely came to rest, she got off and ran away.

I felt sad. One moment, the girl on the swing, had realized she was a little girl no more, but a mere body to be enjoyed by the men of our country!

The swing swung empty, showing the emptiness of a government which cannot keep its women safe!

I looked at the empty swing and my mind went to those who raise their hands in worship in a church, temple or masjid, I realize for me my soul lifts up in praise to my Maker and Creator at moments when I view or hear beauty in creativity! I saw so much of this ecstatic worship within me,

or a still lake, or a majestic mountain, all revealing beauty and grandeur, and giving us a glimpse through a window, of a life of eternity waiting for us, seeped in loveliness!

And then I open the papers, click the TV on, and hear the oft repeated ghastly word, "Rape!"

From the highest peak of beauty, I stare at the lowest cesspool of grime, filth and dirt!

As much as the fingers can wield a paint brush to produce a work of art, or write a book, as much as those hands can plant a wonderful garden or landscape a beautiful scene, so can those same hands, abuse, assault and attack, brutally, ruthlessly and violently! Same hands! "How?" I ask myself. And the answer is, what are we as a people opening: Windows to heaven, or a trapdoor to the darkness below?

When there is compassion, kindness and love flowing from us, not just to our near and dear ones, but even to those of another faith, nationality or colour, then you sit on a sill of a window to heaven!

But when national leaders spread hate, subtly bring about division, and turn a blind eye to injustice, then we know the trapdoor to darkness is being nudged open, inch by foot by mile.

I see frenzied reactions to the rape in Kolkata and hear loud suggestions, some bizarre, and feel like crying. "It is not the work of a few rapists, no, but each of us, who instead of taking the brush, waving the baton, or wielding a gardeners spade to create lofty beauty, have fallen prey to those openers of the trapdoor of darkness who are letting evil in!"

What is your job or mine? Start by making safe those young girls on swings, in your park or garden, as you see in them an innocent beauty that lifts our souls in worship, our hearts in compassion and love and our minds for justice! A window of heavenly music, a lovely painting, a beautiful book!

Quickly move away from the evil that sucks you below, from those who have allowed our nation to slide into this sludge, slime and squalor and lift yourselves from the trapdoor of lust to appreciate and keep safe your window of true beauty..!

(The Author conducts a Writers and Speakers Course for schools, colleges and corporates. For more details call him on 9892572883 or send a message to bobbanter@gmail.com)

What we want is to scrap notification No.MPSC/Ex-C/50/2021-2022/145 dated July 23, 2024 which had added more successful candidates. This notification has really dented our spirits as it reeks of nepotism. Nepotism is a dominant tendency in our state. I also implore upon the media to carry out investigative journalism and maybe just maybe we can push the state forward.

Yours etc.,
J Lyngdoh,
Via email

Will rape and murder victims ever get justice?

Editor,
Through the columns of your highly esteemed daily and widely circulated newspaper I would like to appeal to the citizen of this country to step forward and join together to deliver justice to the victim of the heinous rape and murder in RG Kar Medical College, Kolkata. She was a young medical professional who had recently completed her post graduate studies at that College. She was brutally raped and murdered in the seminar room in the same Hospital on August 9, 2024.

We are celebrating 78 years of Independence but despite this women's safety is in jeopardy. Rape is a major problem in India. The accused have usually gone free either because the victim did not file a complaint or because of poor evidence collection. As per the Na-

tional Crime Records Bureau statistics, every 16 minutes, a woman is raped somewhere in India. In 2022, there were 31,516 rape cases.

Other countries have brutal punishments for committing such crimes whereas India has none. The government wants investigation so that the case reaches a conclusion. We are hoping that this case proceeds real fast towards justice. How many more rapes do we have to see before society actually wakes up and does something to stop this evil?

Yours etc.,
Pinaki Nandy
Shillong

Powerless police led to heinous crimes in West Bengal

Editor,
Regarding the article by Salil Gewali titled "National Uproar Over Rape and Murder of Woman Doctor in Kolkata," (ST August 19, 2024), I commend the writer for his bold and honest piece. When we look at the scandals, scams, and corruption rampant in West Bengal during the TMC's rule, it feels like jungle raj. What's even more unfortunate is that many of these cases are either under-reported or completely ignored by the media, for reasons known to them. As the fourth pillar of a healthy democracy, the media should be unbiased in reporting the truth that affects all citizens and the nation as a whole.

It's been reported that the

family of the Kolkata rape victim was initially misled by hospital authorities into believing their daughter had died by suicide. The Assistant Superintendent of RG Kar Medical Hospital was the first to inform the family that their daughter had taken her own life. This clearly shows that they had no fear of the police. Also, do you think the police would ever cover up a rape case of this magnitude unless they had direct orders from political leaders? There is complete lawlessness in West Bengal.

I agree with Salil Gewali that, "TMC leaders who sexually tortured many village women could one day have become the Home Minister or even the Minister for Women's Welfare in West Bengal. It's time to seriously reflect on where West Bengal is headed and the fate of its innocent population." If we still think that our generation and women are safe in West Bengal under a powerless police department, then we all share the blame. If there hadn't been nationwide protests, the CBI would never have stepped in for intervention. So, my deep respect and best wishes go out to all the medical professionals and the public who stood up for justice for the victim. Now all should join together to fight for all daughters and sisters.

Yours etc.,
Vijay Sharma,
Shillong-2

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"Thoughts are the shadows of our feelings -
always darker, emptier and simpler."

— Friedrich Nietzsche

The Shillong Times

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Lateral entry, expertise

REFORMS in a democracy have their limitations and they often get stuck. This is more so when a weak government is at the helm. The decision to freeze recruitment of specialists to 45 senior-level posts in the bureaucracy is understandable. With the Opposition seizing the opportunity to paint the NDA government as anti-BC-SC-ST by alleging an "attempt to water down" the reservation policy, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was also hamstrung by the dissent from allies like the JDU and LJP. Clearly, the government is concerned over the impact the issue will have on the approaching polls in Maharashtra, Haryana and elsewhere. Indications are that the BJP would have difficulty winning these polls. Like the way the PM cut and ran from the agriculture reform bills in the backdrop of the assembly polls in UP and Punjab, he has abandoned a reform step this time too. Lateral entry into the bureaucracy is an appreciable idea. This will be equally appreciable in politics too, for the reason that there is a well-acknowledged scarcity of talent, expertise, wisdom in both these sectors. Those like Manmohan Singh who became RBI governor from his capacity as an economics professor and went on to serve the nation as the finance minister and later as prime minister is just one example of how talents drawn from external sources embellished the bureaucracy and government. The political class is wary of talent being superimposed on them. So is the bureaucracy. They must be having the last laugh now.

The disadvantaged segments of the population are justified in seeing red in the lateral entry policy. There's no provision for reservations in this recruitment as expertise in various fields is the "sole" criterion. Some aspects need highlighting. All fields of governmental engagement are oiled by extraneous influences, including considerations of party affiliations, caste, race, religion and class. The entire bureaucracy is dominated by a creamy layer from specific communities. Muslims are at a disadvantage. So are the BCs, SCs, STs, despite their existing reservations. Merit is the first casualty. A reason why we are near-zero in the Olympics. Likely, the government would overcome the present impasse with a provision for reservations to various communities. Even then, it is not necessary that the disadvantaged segments get in. UPSC could cite "lack of qualified persons/ specialists from these communities," as a reason to exclude them, as is already happening. Hence, reservations have not helped many communities to have proper representation in the establishment. In politics, SCs, STs can win only a limited number of seats given to them. BCs have no political reservations and hence are down in the dumps. It is in this context that community-based proportional representation is advocated by some entities. Merit as the sole criterion is the ideal scenario, though.

Khasi society trapped between modernity and tradition

By Patricia Mukhim

To say that Khasi society is a confused agglomeration of individuals is an understatement. Even as we speak there are Khasis who believe they are more original than others simply because they follow the religious tenets of yore and proudly claim that they have not been sullied by the scars of faiths coming in from the outside world. There are those who claim to be more indigenous than others. 'Others' here are those whose blood is an assorted mix of the 'dkhars' because their mothers looked beyond their own kind to procreate with. No matter how much you do, a non-pure-blooded Khasi will always be the underdog; not "Khasi paka" as the purists would call themselves. The question then is - Who is a Khasi paka? Are we sure that our great grand-parents and their ancestors actually descended straight from heaven through the mythical Diengie? Was it God (U Trai Nongbuh Nongthaw as the perfectionists would call him) who actually gave us the name 'Khasi' and told us that we are made up of seven human species? I am not sure that we have a categorical answer to this one.

In Khasi society personal rights are subservient to tradition which carries with it the burden of the clan and its definitive say in all matters personal and political. Now with the contentious Lineage Bill passed by the Khasi Hills District Council, the clan which was a web of relationships outside the politics that now seeks to determine the purity of Khasi blood, we have politics entering our kitchens and bedrooms. The personal rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitution don't matter to the District Councils. They often forget that the Sixth Schedule is but an offshoot of the Constitution and not a stand-alone document that can determine what our personal rights are. The Lineage Bill should actually be tested in a court of law where it will once and for all be decided as to which is more sacrosanct - tradition or the Constitution.

The Indian Constitution is embedded in a pluralistic character because it legitimizes the compromises essential for keeping hundreds of jostling identities abroad the ship called INDIA. We Khasis however live within the multiple institutions that

decide our choices namely the Clan, the Dorbar Shnong, the District Council and the State Government. All these institutions, but especially the first two, cast a shadow of uncertainty in the lives of many young women and men who want to carve out a future that is not circumscribed by the above institutions.

The reason for this article is my encounter with a bright young Khasi man at a tea shop. He was at first engaged with another person in a separate table and both were discussing something official. The young man had a laptop with him from which he was citing out some building plans. Having completed their meeting one of them left and the other decided to come to my table and introduce himself. He was in a bit of a quandary. He had studied and worked outside the country and had married a Malaysian woman. The couple have a son and the young man's predicament was that he wanted his son to carry his clan name. When I asked him why he wasn't willing to do a tang-jait, (a Khasi ritual where the wife and children of a Khasi man marrying a non-Khasi, non-tribal woman would be given a new clan name), he vehemently answered, "I don't want my son to have a clan different from mine." I was flummoxed. The young man wanted his wife and son to live here now but because they are both Malaysian citizens, the son and spouse were facing visa problems. One could see the consternation in the young man's face. Elsewhere in the country he would not have faced this problem.

While matriliney is indeed a rarity today and the Khasis are rightly proud of their lineage from the mother's clan line, would it be the end of the world if a man who marries a non-Khasi decides that he does not want the tang-jait ritual and seeks to bestow his clan name on his wife and children? Is it sufficient reason for the children of that man to lose their Schedule Tribe status merely because of the non-fulfilment of what is a ritual tied to the indigenous faith?

The other question that boggles the mind is also that among the Jaintia people there is no such thing as a "tang-jait." A Jaintia man

married to a non-tribal woman asked the Jaintia Hills District Council if he needed to give a new clan name to his wife and children. The JHADC said there is no such thing among the Jaintias. So what does he do? There are no easy answers. It made me equate this seemingly unsolvable problem to what Horst Rittel, design theorist and professor of design methodology at the Ulm School of Design, Germany calls the "Wicked Problems." Rittel defines wicked problems as problems with many interdependent factors making them seem impossible to solve. Because the factors are often incomplete, in flux, and difficult to define, solving wicked problems require a deep understanding of the stakeholders involved, and an innovative approach provided by design thinking. Complex issues such as healthcare and education are cited as examples of wicked problems. Rittel had probably not heard of the Khasi society which continues to define and redefine itself to ostensibly retain the purity of the race.

Rittel describes ten characteristics of wicked problems. They are (1) There is no definitive formula for a wicked problem. (2) Wicked problems have no stopping rule, as in there's no way to know your solution is final. (3) Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false; they can only be good-or-bad. (4) There is no immediate test of a solution to a wicked problem. (5) Every solution to a wicked problem is a "one-shot operation"; because there is no opportunity to learn by trial-and-error, every attempt counts significantly. (6) Wicked problems do not have a set number of potential solutions. (7) Every wicked problem is essentially unique. (8) Every wicked problem can be considered a symptom of another problem. (9) There is always more than one explanation for a wicked problem because the explanations vary greatly depending on the individual perspective. (10) Planners/designers have no right to be wrong and must be fully responsible for their actions.

In the case of the Khasis one wonders what really is the right way forward and how to extricate ourselves

from the daily existential dilemmas we find ourselves in as we struggle to prove our racial purity. Finally, all that is aimed at one and only one thing - that of being a tribal and a Schedule Tribe which grants special status to a Khasi (there is no mention of pure Khasi) and privileges him/her with reservation in education and jobs within Meghalaya.

Things have now changed so much that most Khasis live and work outside and men give their clan names to their spouses and children without blinking an eyelid and no one really considers that a 'wicked' problem as long as the man continues to live and work outside and lays no claim to the ST status for his wife and children. No one really keeps track of how many Khasi men have married non-Khasi women. As long as they live outside Meghalaya that Lineage Bill is not a wicked problem for them. But, we Khasis have really managed to complicate our lives and relationships.

So Khasis living here have a wicked problem at hand. And as Rittel points out categorically, wicked problems lack clarity in both their aims and solutions, and are subject to real-world constraints which hinder risk-free attempts to find a solution. As a society we need to gain much deeper insights into the nature of the problem and learn to reframe the problem entirely if we sincerely wish to have any chance at coming up with a valuable solution. Wicked problems are often social and cultural problems and what makes them worse is the way they are intertwined with one another.

If we try to address an element of one problem, we are likely to cause unexpected consequences in another. No wonder they're wicked! It's clear to see that standard problem-solving techniques just aren't going to cut it when we have a wicked problem on our hands.

Finally, what can help us address wicked problems is if we stop the othering; sit together and have the empathy needed to discuss these interminable obstacles we have created for ourselves because of our need to assert our 'pure' Khasi genes! There is no pure blood in this world and there is no pure Khasi. Period!

Uncertainty in Bangladesh: BNP, army differ on election timing

Official demand for extradition of Hasina depends on US nod

By Nitya Chakraborty

Over seventeen days have passed since the abdication of office of former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, following which she has taken political shelter in India. Since then conflicting trends are visible in the functioning of the interim government headed by Dr. Muhammad Yunus, as also in the activities of the political parties in the faction-ridden country. Three major trends are visible now.

First, the interim government, especially the students are not favouring immediate elections - within three months as demanded by the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami. The student leaders in the interim government have announced their decision to form a new political party and that process will take months, perhaps even more than six months. The army is also not in favour of immediate national elections. They want more time to stabilise. So is the view of Dr. Muhammad Yunus, the head of the interim government.

Second, as regards the operations of the political parties in the post-Hasina phase, the Awami League leaders are under attack. Most of them are hiding. Some of them tried contacting India for shelter through their sources, but did not get a favourable response. The Awami League organisation is in a mess. BNP and Jamaat are taking full advantage of the present anti-Awami League sentiment to cripple the AL organisations. All-out attacks made against the senior Awami League leaders are being engineered by the fundamentalists who are now seizing the opportunity, as the state police administration is still paralysed. The Hindu community organisations have to field their own volunteers and seek help from local communities to protect themselves. They cannot depend on the police for protection.

Third, the present situation is a free run for the US and Chinese diplomats. US ambassador to Bangladesh, Peter Haas and the Chinese ambassador Yao Wen are the most sought after by the politicians and the important people of Bangladesh. China has much more influence on the defence forces, economy and political parties in Bangladesh compared to the US. US diplomats were not allowed to get free access before the January elections, but things changed after February this year, with the US ambassador taking active interest in establishing good relations with the Hasina government.

The US has solid relations with the BNP, and even with a section of the Awami League which is of no use now. On the contrary, China has kept good relations with the BNP while maintaining excellent relations with the Hasina government, Awami League leaders as well as a good section of the students and media. All these have put China in a more advantageous position in Bangladesh now, as against the USA as both try to influence the course of events in the conflict-prone nation. Russia did a lot for Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League government in terms of giving economic assistance but with Hasina gone, Russia now has little leverage. BNP has always avoided Russia at the instance of the US. As regards India, South Block is rightly monitoring the developments in Bangladesh patiently and it will take some time for India to take forward steps to establish new relations and cultivate

the new rulers in Dhaka.

As regards Jamaat, this is the best of times. The party has started getting a big inflow of foreign funds from many foundations from different countries of the world. Hasina crippled the organisation financially by tightening the funds inflow. Similar is the position of BNP. The party gets funds from both the U.S. and China. BNP supreme Begum Khaleda Zia earlier gave instructions from the hospital bed after August 5. Now, she is free and back home after treatment. She will be more active now in directly contacting the interim government. She may not be liked by Md. Yunus but she has contacts in the army. She will cultivate that.

Bangladesh has always been a nation with corruption reigning at every level. The Awami League leaders were no exception. In the last five years, the corruption of the ruling party politicians increased. Also there is a menace of foreign funds which go to all sections of political parties, including the media. The post August 5 situation is no different. The only difference is that the Awami League leaders are in the no-go category. With their exception the funds have been flowing to every section including those who are trying to form a new political party. The situation is bizarre.

The immediate challenge for India is to deal with the demand for extradition of Sheikh Hasina, if it is officially made by the interim government of Bangladesh headed by Dr. Md. Yunus. So far, only BNP has made the demand and it has been mentioned in general terms by a member of the interim government. But if finally, the demand comes officially, then what will be the position of India? India and Bangladesh signed an extradition treaty in 2013 and it was amended in 2016 to simplify the process.

Hasina has been accused of a number of murder charges estimated at eighteen now, and the mood is such that if Hasina is extradited, harshest punishment will be given to her. This may include even hanging. The internal situation is such that the Awami League cannot expect any transparent legal process to be followed. There will be a mob and media trial of Hasina. Only international human rights lawyers can intervene effectively, but Hasina's record of 300 deaths in police firing in the last one month preceding August 5 puts hers as a fit case for International Crimes Tribunal. So the situation is very tricky.

India has the option of refusing Hasina's extradition on grounds that the accusations made against Hasina are not in good faith or in the interests of justice. But this is not just a bilateral issue, it involves the issues of humanitarian justice. India has to talk to the USA on this issue to see that the situation does not reach a point where the interim government will give an ultimatum to the Indian government to extradite Sheikh Hasina. Dr. Yunus will not take any steps on the extradition issue without consulting the US and China. India may have some problems in talking to China, but Prime Minister Narendra Modi must take up the issue with the US administration so that no ultimatum is sent by Bangladesh. The issue should be resolved on the basis of mutual discussions involving international assistance. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Expedite new appointments in Deficit Colleges

Editor,
I write in frustration at the extremely slow pace of approval of appointments to the position of lecturers and assistant professors in deficit colleges. I have been waiting for my appointment to be approved and it's already been a year, with no news. Those around me tell me to wait as it usually takes this long or even longer but can I ask why this long delay is being normalized? Should we all stay passive and let things carry on this way? If teachers are the ones preparing the leaders of tomorrow, should it not be a priority to ensure that the teachers also get what they deserve, and on time? Even teachers who put their heart and soul into teaching need monetary compensation to motivate them, because they are also part of the real world and need money to survive and meet their needs. I have been working for a year without receiving the remuneration promised for sanctioned posts. Further, may I ask why some colleges are secretive about the process and why there is no transparency in letting the concerned new recruits know about the status of the approval process?

I request the concerned authority in the Education Department to give ear to the plight of many teachers who are waiting for the approval.

I also request my present and future colleagues not to normalize such delays but stand up for their rights and raise their voices. Taking 1-2 years for approval is not normal.

Yours etc.,
(An agitated victim of the protracted approval process)
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Hassles of politics

Editor,
Apropos of the editorial "Instinct under pressure" (ST August 20 2024) political reflexes are challenging to predict due to several factors. Politics involves human behaviour, which is inherently complex and influenced by myriads of factors including emotions, personal experiences and social dynamics. Public opinion can shift rapidly due to new information, events or changes in societal values. Polls and surveys capture a snapshot in time, but they cannot always predict future changes? Media coverage and social media can significantly influence public perception and political opinions. The rapid spread of information and misinformation can lead to unpredictable shifts in public sentiments. Economic conditions, social issues and unexpected events can all impact political reflexes. These factors are often outside the control of politicians and can lead to sudden changes in voter behaviour. While polls are useful, they

have limitations. Sampling errors, non-response biases, and the difficulty of reaching a representative sample can all affect the accuracy of polls. These elements combine to make political reflexes difficult to predict with certainty.

It is a fact that being in the Opposition is starving the constituents. No matter how any party educates the electorate not to expect money or freebies, money is what money does. So, it is useless to enlighten those who will grab money when they get it. That is why the Khasis say "Lada phi don ruh pisa lada phim don ruh pisa". China keeps its army at home, where its people are, US politicians on both sides of the same electoral coin are supporting the genocidal Israeli regime as it massacres Palestinian children, in an attempt to advance US imperial interests in West Asia. Look at what the US has done to Syria, Libya and Iraq and now Bangladesh. The US government is not ultimately concerned about "legitimacy," because Americans have been denied a system of consultative democracy. The editor may be correct in stating that, "there is no such thing as distributing freebies in the US." But it is an open secret that the US government is instead focused on maximizing corporate profits, privatizing public institutions, and preparing for more war. The editor has rightly pointed out that, "The Congress Party in Khasi-Jaintia Hills has been in the dog-house because it lacks charismatic leader-

ship." And another thing is that there is no second rung leader in the Congress party. The old enjoy bulldozing the energy of the young and the charismatic ones.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Stones from glass houses

Editor,
Stephen Leacock's "Old Proverbs Made New" was in our Higher Secondary syllabus. Leacock says that someone should rewrite English proverbs since they are old now. They do not fit in our world anymore. In fact, many of the old proverbs, he argues, are opposite to the new world facts. He cites an English proverb that says, "People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones", implying the people who have faults should not criticise other people for having similar faults.

On this, he argues, "They are the very people who ought to throw stones and to keep on throwing them all the time. They ought to keep up such a fusillade of stones from their glass house that no one can get near it. Or if the proverb is taken to mean that people who have faults of their own ought not to talk of other people's faults, it is equally mistaken. They ought to talk of other people's faults all the time so as to keep attention away from their own."

Plenty of instances now demonstrate that Leacock's

advice is being followed verbatim by some. First, let us focus on the chronology of events in Uttarakhand. The Uttarakhand Police arrested independent journalist and Jago Uttarakhand editor Ashutosh Negi, based on a complaint lodged by a Pauri Garhwal resident on March 5, 2024. The journalist famously raised his voice for justice to Ankita Bhandari who was killed at a resort near Rishikesh, allegedly by the resort owner and two accomplices in September 2022. Her body was found in a canal after she went missing over a week. The main accused in this case is the son of a former BJP Minister in Uttarakhand.

Cut to August 2024. The mutilated body of a 33-year-old nurse at a private hospital was found in Rudrapur, Uttarakhand on August 8. She was allegedly strangled to death, and her head was smashed with a stone after being sexually assaulted. This heinous crime was committed on her when she was returning home from work. Five days later a teenage girl had been gang-raped inside a stationary private bus at the inter-state bus terminus in Dehradun, Uttarakhand, on August 13.

Two days later on August 15, while commenting on the rape and murder case at the R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata, Uttarakhand Assembly Speaker said, "It is very shameful that such a thing happened in a state which is known for its celebration of Navratri and Durga Puja." Given the

chronology of these events and the NCRB report that declared Kolkata as the safest city in India for the third consecutive year from 2020 to 2022, on the basis of the least number of cognisable offences per lakh population among metropolises, this is a case of, "the pot calling the kettle black."

Now, coming to what happened at the R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata, I fully support the movement for justice against the criminal or criminals who killed the trainee doctor. At the same time, I also want a movement against the criminals who committed heinous crimes in Uttarakhand and other parts of our country.

Gender violence, be it in Hathras, Kathua, Unnao, Uttarakhand, Manipur, Bihar, Kolkata or be it against Bilkis Bano or women wrestlers must be condemned by people in general and by the media in particular, irrespective of the political dispensation in power.

Never did I imagine that I would have to see rapists and murderers being honoured in public. But that had been done with the convicts in the Bilkis Bano case by a group of people.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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

"The discipline of desire is the background of character."

— John Locke

The Shillong Times

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Much ado about a University

THERE has been much bickering by Assam's Chief Minister. Himanta Biswa Sarma on the University of Science and Technology (USTM) located at Baridua in Ri Bhoi district, at the Assam-Meghalaya border. Sarma launched his first attack on USTM following the floods in Guwahati city that disrupted public movement. While residents of Guwahati attest to the fact that there have been building violations especially by builders of high-rise residential buildings and encroachments into drains and canals, Biswa Sarma is hell bent on blaming USTM's earth cutting activities for the waters from Meghalaya flooding nearby areas of Guwahati and Khanapara. In his usual Islamophobic twist he called the recent floods in Guwahati city, "flood jihad." Biswa Sarma accuses the USTM of earth cutting for building the PA Sangma medical college. The University administration contests this allegation stating that they had taken adequate environmental precautions and that the building plans and earth cutting etc were approved by the State Forest Department.

In normal circumstances if the Chief Minister of Assam were to escalate such environmental concerns to the Chief Minister of Meghalaya, the matter would have been taken to a different level and tackled more effectively if the allegations stand scrutiny, but because Biswa Sarma is a congenial Muslim baiter, no one is taking his allegations seriously. He has threatened to take the matter to the National Green Tribunal (NGT) even as USTM refuses to react. The Assam CM has always used the media to spread his no-holds barred attacks on Muslims. Two days earlier he had even questioned a journalist for asking certain questions and alluded to him being Muslim. This has angered the press fraternity in Assam which has condemned the incident.

The USTM is a top 200 university under the NIRF. It is run by a Foundation owned by Mahbub Hoque — a Bengali-Muslim from Assam — who is also the Chancellor of the institute. Earlier the Assam CM nit-picked at the construction of the University entrance accusing it of being non-secular. His latest tirade against USTM is that students passing out of that University would not get jobs in Assam unless they clear some special examination held by the Assam Government. This is a direct attack on the freedom of function of educational institutions which are mandated by the University Grants Commission (UGC). Can the State of Assam alone take such an arbitrary decision? Would this sort of capricious move stand judicial scrutiny? This indeed is a matter of great concern as it hits at the secular ethos of this country which has stood the test of time. In a fit of pique Biswa Sarma has also announced that his government would pass a new law to check the antecedents of every group that wants to establish universities in Assam. While this does happen as a matter of formality and any group or individual wanting to set up an institution in any state has to go through the formalities of providing their sources of incomes and sustainability models to the state government, anything exceeding that brief would point to ill-intent.

Constitutional validity of the MRSSA, 2016
A Policy Framework to Protect Against Infiltrators

By Kenneth Nongsiej

The breakdown of the rule of law in Bangladesh has caused serious concerns for India, particularly in its North Eastern regions. Meghalaya, which shares a 445-km border with Bangladesh, is anticipated to face critical challenges related to illegal infiltration. This issue is important because if security personnel cannot tackle it effectively, national security could have serious implications. However, there is legislation in place that, if implemented in letter and spirit, can check and balance and ensure that there is no threat to national security.

What is the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act, 2016?
The Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act (MRSSA), 2016, is a piece of legislation designed to address the challenges posed by illegal infiltration

Constitution guarantees the right to reside and settle in any part of India. However, this right is not absolute, as the State can impose reasonable restrictions in the interest of state security. By mandating the registration of tenants and monitoring their activities, the Act aims to strike a balance between individual freedoms and collective security. Without such regulations, criminal elements or illegal immigrants could potentially exploit the lack of oversight to rent houses in the state, posing a threat to public safety and the sovereignty and integrity of the country.

The necessity for amending the Principal Act is a matter of debate. The existing provisions of the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security

Act at the same time, the Court objected to the establishment of facilitation centres under sections 17 and 18 of the MRSSA, 2016.

Legal and Political Ramifications

The conflict between state and central legislation highlights the complex interplay between regional governance and national interests. The Constitution of India delineates specific areas where the central government has exclusive powers to legislate, and inter-state migration is one such area. By proposing amendments that encroach upon this domain, the state government risks creating legal ambiguities and potential conflicts with the central authorities. This has led to the Governor of Meghalaya withholding assent, which

administrative system, sufficient resources, and the collaboration of local authorities and law enforcement agencies are necessary.

In addition, it's vital for the public to be aware of and cooperate with such measures. Residents and landlords need to understand the importance of registering tenants and follow the rules. To maintain public trust and support for the law, transparency is crucial, as well as addressing concerns about privacy and discrimination.

In conclusion, the breakdown of the rule of law in Bangladesh poses significant challenges for India, especially in the Meghalaya and other parts of the North Eastern regions. The Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act, 2016, offers a viable solution to monitor and regulate tenant registration, thereby addressing security



and other security concerns. This Act mandates the registration of tenants in the state without restricting the entry of people from outside. The primary objective is to monitor individuals who occupy houses or rental units within the state. The Act mandates all individuals (regardless of religion, race, caste, or place of birth) occupying rented houses in Meghalaya to provide information to both the local police station and the traditional heads.

Constitutional Considerations and Reasonable Restrictions
The constitutional validity of the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act, 2016 (Principal Act) is debatable. It can be argued that the Act falls under the domain of reasonable restrictions aimed at ensuring the security and safety of residents. What does the Constitution say? Article 19(1)(e) of the

Act, 2016, are considered adequate for protecting the state from criminal elements or illegal immigrants. However, the introduction of the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security (Amendment) Bill, 2020 has raised concerns and controversies. The provisions introduced under the Amendment Bill fall under the Union List of the Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The power to legislate on inter-state migration lies with Parliament, not with the states, and this amendment is in conflict with the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873. Additionally, the Meghalaya High Court in the case of Iba-hunlang Nongkynrih v. State of Meghalaya has observed that the State of Meghalaya had legislative competency to enact the MRSSA, 2016 in the exercise of powers conferred under the various Constitutional provisions.

is now under scrutiny by the Union Government.

Moreover, the political ramifications of such conflicts can be significant. The central government, responsible for national security and border management, may view the state's actions as undermining coordinated efforts to address illegal infiltration and associated security concerns. This tension can lead to a broader debate about the balance of power between state and central governments.

The Importance of Effective Implementation
Apart from the legal and political aspects, the success of any law depends on how it is put into action. The Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act, 2016, has the potential to tackle the serious issues caused by illegal infiltration if it is fully and properly executed. To achieve this, a strong admin-

istrative system, sufficient resources, and the collaboration of local authorities and law enforcement agencies are necessary.

concerns and preventing the infiltration of criminal elements. However, the debate over amending the Principal Act highlights the complexities of regional governance and the need for effective implementation. The broader implications of this issue underscore the importance of a coordinated approach involving legal, administrative, and diplomatic measures. As India continues to navigate the challenges posed by illegal infiltration and security threats, the successful implementation of the Meghalaya Residents Safety and Security Act can serve as a model for other regions facing similar issues. Ultimately, ensuring the safety and security of residents while respecting constitutional rights and fostering regional cooperation is a delicate but essential balancing act.

India & Poland : Time for strategic partnership

By Dr Malgorzata Bonikowska

2024 marks the 70th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between Poland and India. The last few years have seen the growth of the importance of both countries in their regions and the strengthening of their positions in the world. However, when opening up to Asia, Poland has so far looked mainly to China, while India, for historical reasons, has identified Europe with the capitals of strategic partners such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

Today, on the wave of the Indian-EU new opening after Brexit, the pandemic and in the context of Sino-American rivalry, Warsaw and New Delhi have a chance to strengthen bilateral relations by establishing a strategic partnership. It was announced during the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Poland this week. The Head of Indian government comes here after long 45 years.

India is the fifth, and soon the third largest economy in the world, and Poland is sixth in the EU and 21st in the world. India is becoming a key player in the Indo-Pacific region, where there is a systemic rivalry between two superpowers: China and the USA. Poland is the West's hub for operations in Ukraine, the leading country on NATO's eastern flank, and one of the leaders in building a new architecture of European security against Russia. Seeing these changes, Warsaw and New Delhi decided to seek better political and economic ties.

India since independence and throughout the Cold War did not want to be entangled in either of the two geopolitical blocs at the time. The biggest enemy was Pakistan, supported by the Americans, which is why India was inclined to closer ties with the USSR. Since Western countries did not express their willingness to share their military technologies with India for years, New Delhi was forced to take advantage of the Russian offer and buy ships, fighters, helicopters, tanks, weapons and ammunition there. At the same time, due to the strongly felt threat from its Western neighbour, it conducted a nuclear program and has had nuclear weapons since the 1990s.

Despite its usual restraint, India is becoming more actively involved in the international arena, realising that increasing its global position also means increasing responsibility. In 2023, it chaired the G-20 group, using it ideally for political and promotional purposes. Traditional friendship with Moscow, as well as dependence on the arms sector, did not allow New Delhi to take a clear position on the issue of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. India began to use the situation to its advantage, among other things, by buying Russian oil and gas at lower prices and paying in rupees, which made it more difficult for the Russians to manoeuvre. The proximity to China and the existing border problems with China and Pakistan mean that New Delhi must uphold the stability of equipment supplies from Russia. At the same time, India has begun to increase the scale of its arms purchases in the West and build self-sufficiency in the defence sector. However, moving away from dependence on Russia will take at least ten years. Poland and India share several beautiful pages of history. During World War II, the Maharaja of Jamnagar gave shelter to several hundred Polish women and children trying to get to the West for several months on his estate in Gujarat. To this day, the "children of the Maharaja" are in touch with each other, and a street and a junior high school in Warsaw have been named after him. In 1944, Poles and Indians, arm in arm captured the hill and monastery of Monte Cassino, pushing the Germans out and opening the way for the Allies to reach Rome. Today, Polish universities educate thousands of students from India. Poles are increasingly eager to watch Bollywood films and listen to Indian pop music. Tourism and business are developing in both directions. Indian companies are investing in Poland, especially in IT, biotechnology, and electronic equipment and packaging sectors. In

2023, they employed about 10,000 Polish workers, and investments exceeded USD 3 billion. India is the second largest market for Polish FDI in Asia. According to data from National Bank of Poland, in 2021, their value in India amounted to almost PLN 380 million.

Trade and investment cooperation between Poland and India in the 21st century has several major "success stories". However, looking at both countries' political and economic aspirations, their achievements in development, and a shared understanding of the challenges and needs of the modern world, the potential for cooperation is often more significant than the previous scope of bilateral cooperation. While trade is currently below the potential of this South Asian giant, there are promising signs of growth.

In 2019, India was Poland's 28th largest trading partner, ranking 40th in exports (0.3%) and 25th in imports (0.8%). However, in 2021, bilateral trade reached USD 4.3 billion, marking a significant increase of 57% year-on-year. This positive trend continued, with exports from Poland to India reaching EUR 1.5 billion and imports EUR 3.868 billion a year later. India and Poland have undergone critical changes in their political and economic systems over the last 45 years. The key areas of bilateral cooperation should include research and development and electro-mobility to a much greater extent. It is also worth increasing business contacts, including at the start-up level. Joint development of hydrogen-related technologies, green technologies, solutions for the space sector, climate-friendly mining, and the agri-food sector would be promising. Contacts in security infrastructure and capabilities of defence and IT sectors are worth expanding.

Direct air connections between New Delhi, Mumbai, and Warsaw, launched in 2019 are facilitated by direct business, scientific, and tourist contacts. Polish aspirations to create a new aviation hub in the heart of Europe may work well with the potential of aviation infrastructure in India, where passenger traffic is growing by 15% year-on-year.

In Poland's thinking about strategic partnership, a new perspective on India as a rising global player, which is taken seriously by world powers — the US and China — is essential while simultaneously expecting greater responsibility for matters concerning the international order. Warsaw prepared a practical offer for India of comprehensive, mutually beneficial cooperation based on new assumptions. It includes supplies of military equipment, food, and products lacking in the Indian market. India puts high emphasis on business, education and academic cooperation, including offering 20 scholarships for Polish young people to study in India. The topic of security cannot be omitted from bilateral talks. Although historical and internal conditions prevent India from taking an openly critical stance towards Russia's actions in Ukraine, the government in Warsaw tries to convince the Indian Prime Minister to take a more decisive stance at the UN and in diplomacy. More so because the global consequences of the war are visible on many levels and are of great importance to India, such as the increase in the prices of energy resources, food shortages, and disruption of supply chains.

According to Poland, it is in India's interest to support the "democratic world" in the fight against neo-imperialism and the use of military force, which is contrary to the principles of international law and the Charter of the United Nations. This is important in the context of India's efforts to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which Poland supports. At the same time, the nearly three-year war in Ukraine favours strengthening Russia's relations with China. Obviously, it is not in India's interest, Russia may not be a problem for India, but China is. *INFRA*

(The writer is President, Centre for International Relations, Poland)

Letters to the Editor

Defection of Congress MLAs & moral collapse of Meghalaya's democracy

Editor,
I write this letter with a deep sense of anger and betrayal, reflecting the sentiments of countless voters in Meghalaya who have been let down by those they trusted the most. The recent defection of Congress MLAs Dr. Celestine Lyngdoh, Charles Marmgar, and Gabriel Wahlgang to the National People's Party (NPP) is nothing short of a disgraceful betrayal of the very people who elected them. It is a shameful act that reeks of political opportunism and moral decay, and it has left many of us questioning the integrity of our entire political system.

These MLAs, who were elected on the promise of standing up to the NPP's corruption and mismanagement, have now joined the very party they once condemned. This is not just a change of political allegiance; it is a betrayal of the voters who placed their trust in them. How can these politicians justify their actions to the people who believed in their words and supported them in the last election? How can they claim to represent our interests when they have so

blatantly sold out for power and money?

The anger and disillusionment felt by the people of Meghalaya are palpable. We voted for these leaders because they promised to be our voice, to fight for our rights, and to stand against the corruption that has plagued our state. Instead, they have shown that their loyalty can be bought, that their principles are for sale. This is not just about political strategy; it is a complete abandonment of the values that should guide public service.

The role of money in these defections cannot be ignored. It is widely believed that the NPP, much like its political master at the national level, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has used its financial power to orchestrate these defections. This is not just a political maneuver; it is the buying and selling of our democracy. Has the NPP's financial war chest, bolstered by the alleged corruption of the MDA 1 government, allowed it to undermine the very foundation of our electoral process? And who pays the price? We, the ordinary citizens of Meghalaya, who are left with leaders more interested in personal gain than in serving their communities.

What is happening in Meghalaya is not just a political crisis; it is a moral one. When our elected representatives can be so easily swayed by the promise of power or wealth, it destroys the very

fabric of our democracy. Voters are left wondering whether their votes even matter or if the entire system is rigged against them from the start.

This isn't just a problem for today; it's a problem for the future. What happens when the people lose faith in the democratic process? What happens when they no longer believe that their voices can make a difference? The answer is simple—our democracy crumbles, and in its place, we're left with a system where the rich and powerful call all the shots.

We, the people of Meghalaya, deserve a government that works for us, not against us. We deserve representatives who will stand by their principles, not sell them out for personal gains. And we deserve a democracy that's built on trust, integrity, and accountability.

It's time to take a stand. It's time to say enough is enough. The future of Meghalaya's democracy depends on it.

Yours etc.,
Khur Basan
Upper Shillong

Time to gear up healthcare system

Editor,
As we celebrate 50 years of statehood, the phrase, "Health is wealth" feels more like a distant dream for many

of us. Our healthcare system, divided among state-run civil hospitals, central government institutions, and private facilities, leaves much to be desired. It's time for us to come together and address these pressing issues.

State-Run Civil Hospitals:
A Call for Better Care
State-run civil hospitals are essential for our most vulnerable citizens, but they face serious challenges. Despite decades of existence, these hospitals often struggle with outdated facilities and substandard care. Reports of unapproachable and indifferent staff only add to the problem. Even when modern equipment is donated, it frequently remains unused because there aren't enough trained professionals to operate it. The free medicines provided by the government are often of poor quality, leading many patients to seek alternatives. The unhygienic conditions are a concern that needs immediate attention. It's a question worth asking: Would our leaders choose to receive treatment here? Likely not—they would prefer to travel to bigger cities for better care.

NEIGHHS: Room for Improvement
NEIGHHS, a central government institution, also faces its share of challenges. Many patients have expressed frustration with the level of care, noting issues with inexperienced doctors and inadequate facilities. The troubling incident of a young boy left unattended

in the emergency ward is a clear sign that improvements are needed. The practice of doctors taking Sundays off, while patients continue to need care, is another area that needs to be addressed.

Private Hospitals:
A Mixed Bag
Private hospitals often offer better facilities but come with their own set of issues. The behaviour of some staff members can be less than friendly, and the high costs of treatment can be overwhelming. Central government schemes intended to help with costs sometimes fall short, leaving patients with unexpected expenses. Additionally, the practice of recommending tests and medications from their own labs and pharmacies can feel exploitative.

Moving Forward Together
Despite these challenges, many doctors have shown incredible dedication, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there's a clear need for systemic improvements. The recent national news involving a serious crime highlights the urgent need for stronger protective measures and legal reforms.

To our government officials and decision-makers: It's time to focus on real, meaningful improvements in our healthcare system. Let's work together to make sure that every citizen receives the care they deserve. We hope you will join us in making

our healthcare system a place of hope and healing, not just a place of last resort.

Yours etc.,
A Sarki,
Shillong

Cease-work by doctors a punishment for patients

Editor,
I support the movement against the criminal or criminals who killed the trainee doctor in Kolkata, but I cannot support the cease-work by the doctors. The pictures of untreated patients in pain are unbearable. The Supreme Court nudged the striking doctors to resume work for the sake of the patients but to no avail. Cease-work continues. The doctors can continue their protests even after resuming work. The Supreme Court says that no coercive action shall be taken against the doctors as long as the protests are peaceful. Given that patients are made to suffer from violence within, the movement can no longer be termed as peaceful.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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Can Mpox virus spread through air like Covid-19?

Respiratory droplets might play a role in the spread of Mpox but not as efficiently as Covid-19 or even flu, said infectious disease experts on Wednesday.

Mpox is a viral zoonotic disease that occurs primarily in tropical rainforest areas of central and west Africa and is occasionally exported to other regions. The disease is currently seeing an outbreak in Africa with over 14,000 cases and 524 deaths have been reported, and the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared it a global health emergency.

It majorly causes fevers, headaches, and muscle aches, as well as painful boils on the skin. It spreads from person to person through close, skin-to-skin contact.

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), prolonged face-to-face interactions (such as talking or breathing) may increase the risk of transmission. The WHO also maintains that respiratory droplets (and possibly short-range aerosols) can result in Mpox transmission.

"This suggests that respiratory droplets might play a role in transmission. That being said, it's considered to play a lesser role in transmission dynamics as compared to direct intimate contact and sexual contact which are the primary modes of transmission," Dr. Dipu T S, Professor and Unit Chief, Infectious Diseases Department, Amrita Hospital, Kochi told IANS.

A recent study published by the University of New South Wales in Australia showed that the current outbreak caused by the Clade 1 strain has reported 70 per cent of cases and 88 per cent of deaths in children in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

"The predominance of children in the DRC epidemic suggests transmission may be respiratory. In fact, smallpox and Mpox are respiratory viruses, and Mpox has been identified in ambient air," the researchers noted.

The study showed that the variola virus (smallpox) was highly airborne, "with the potential to transmit over long distances".

Another study by a team of Spanish researchers in a 2023 study published in the journal *The Lancet Microbe* also showed that Mpox raised the risk of transmission indoors in poorly ventilated rooms.

Referring to the US CDC, Dr. Lancelot Mark Pinto, Consultant Pulmonologist and Epidemiologist, P. D. Hinduja Hospital & Medical Research Centre, said that the keywords are "prolonged" and "face-to-face".

"Unlike highly transmissible airborne viruses such as influenza and SARS-CoV-2, Mpox isn't likely to spread during casual short encounters," Pinto told IANS.

"Family transmission, sexual partner transmission, and caregiver transmission is much more

likely, and therefore such encounters would need added protection," he added.

The 2022-2023 global outbreak of Mpox was caused by a strain known as clade IIB. Since 2022, the WHO has reported 99,176 cases and 208 deaths due to monkeypox from 116 countries.

A total of 30 cases were detected in India, with the last case in March 2024.

Global scientists claim that if the more pathogenic Clade I Mpox becomes highly transmissible

Mpox in the US.

The Serum Institute of India (SII), the world's largest vaccine maker, has also announced plans to develop a vaccine for Mpox.

"Serum Institute of India is currently working on developing a vaccine for Mpox," said CEO Adar Poonawalla, in a statement, adding that the company will share "positive news within a year's time".

"To prevent the transmission of Mpox, the

Pakistan has already reported initial cases. The unanswered question is: Is India well equipped to handle one more possible pandemic?

"It is evident that Mpox is highly transmissible through close human contact, particularly during intimacy or through sexual fluids. This includes actions such as touching, hugging, kissing, or even sharing utensils or clothing of an infected person," Dr. Prashanti Sinha, Head- Emergency, PSRI Hospital told IANS.

He said that the virus can also spread through contact with contaminated materials like bedding, towels, or surfaces that have been exposed to the virus.

"We need to be highly alert in terms of coming close to an infected person or a potential carrier who has a history of travel particularly to any African nation," Dr. Sinha added.

On Wednesday, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced a global health emergency due to the rapid spread of malaria in 13 African nations, including the Congo, where there have been documented cases of 14,000 and 524 deaths.

"Mpox affects the functioning of the brain and a headache is just one manifestation of it. The virus can cause inflammation in brain tissues, leading to more serious conditions such as encephalitis. We need to be vigilant and monitor patients closely, particularly those who present with neurological symptoms, to ensure timely intervention," Dr. Praveen Gupta, Principal Director & Chief of Neurology, Fortis Hospital told IANS.

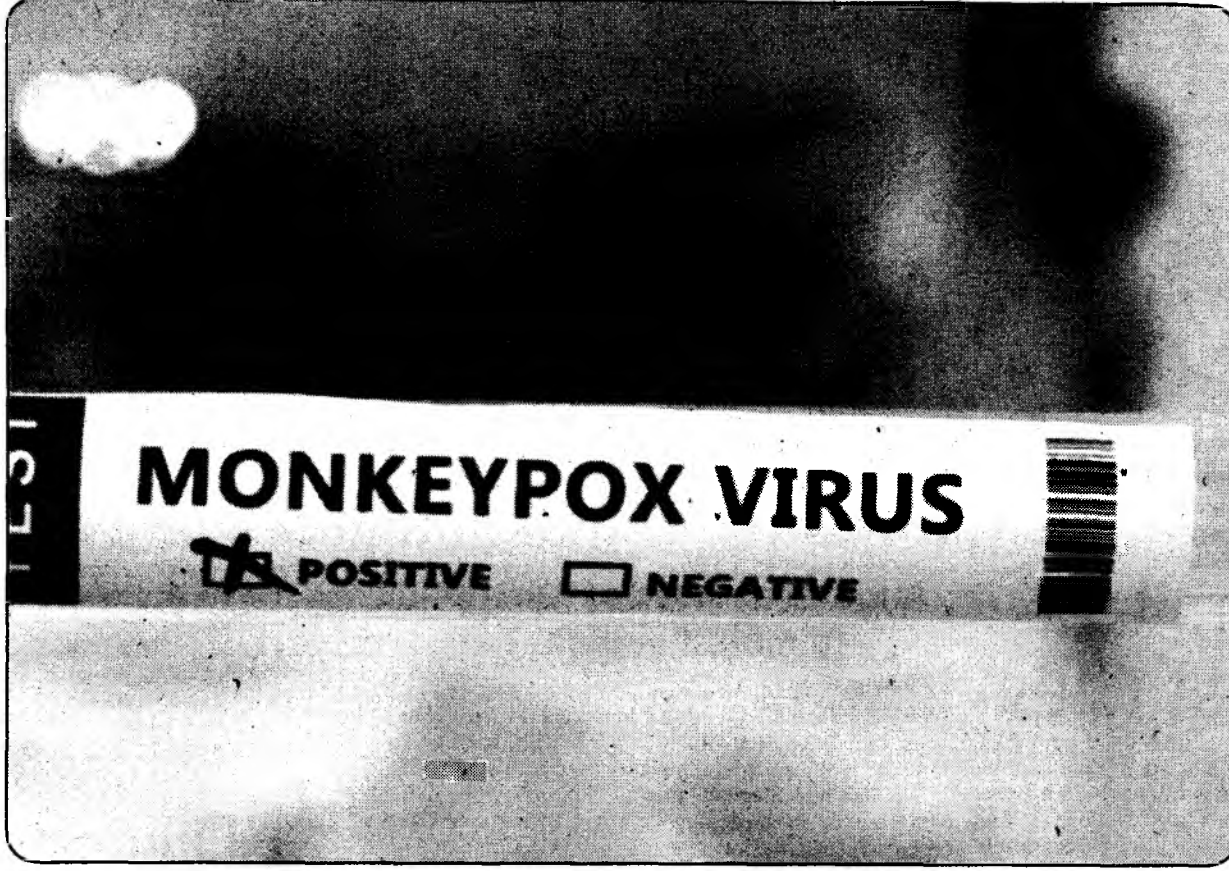
He added that the neurological impact of Mpox calls for the need for a multidisciplinary approach to managing the disease.

Experts suggest a multi-pronged approach to prevent Mpox spread in India, including public awareness campaigns, vaccination drives, and strengthening healthcare infrastructure.

Early detection and isolation of cases are crucial, and WHO recommends contact tracing and quarantine measures.

Public awareness campaigns and preparedness are essential to prevent Mpox from becoming a widespread epidemic. The COVID-19 pandemic lessons should serve as a wake-up call for India. Previously referred to as monkeypox, Mpox is an infectious disease brought on by the MPXV virus, which belongs to the Orthopoxvirus genus.

This virus belongs to two different genetic clades: Clade I and Clade II. The illness mainly spreads by direct contact with infected people, animals, or contaminated objects. Symptoms include severe rashes, fever, and enlarged lymph nodes. The virus was originally discovered in 1958 in Danish research monkeys and the first case of humans was documented in Congo in 1970. Following smallpox's elimination in 1980, Mpox started to emerge in Central, Eastern and Western Africa. (IANS)



between humans, it may pose a greater pandemic threat than Clade IIB.

However, Hans Kluge, WHO regional director for Europe, in a recent media briefing stated that Mpox, regardless of Clade IIB or Clade IB, is not the new Covid, as speculated. He said health authorities know how to control its spread.

Currently, there is no proven treatment against Mpox.

Bavarian Nordic's MVA-BN vaccine (Jynneos/Imvanex) -- approved in the US, Europe, and Canada -- is the leading Mpox vaccine worldwide.

In addition, KM Biologics' LC16 vaccine is available in Japan and Emergent BioSolutions' ACAM2000 is also under regulatory review for

general public should avoid close contact with infected individuals, and practise good hygiene by regularly washing hands and disinfecting surfaces," Dipu told IANS.

HOW INDIA CAN PROTECT ITSELF FROM MPOX

The deadly new strain of Mpox, often called monkeypox, first appeared in Central Africa and has since spread throughout the continent and beyond, posing a serious threat to public health worldwide.

The virus, which was previously limited to isolated areas, is now approaching India, as

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, August 25, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon sextile Saturn on your solar return chart. It is going to be an exciting year where a lot of opportunities will come your way. You will be having a lot of energy and passion to get the things right. And will have the killer instinct to hit the bull's eye. New opportunities will knock your door and you will grab them with both hands. Your ability to focus on matters of importance will bring praise from colleagues. You will also be given some big responsibility in your job. This will bring you name and fame. And you may receive some property in gift from relatives. You will also get involved in a long lasting romantic relation. Ultimately you may decide to get married. You will also plan to invest in movable and immovable assets. You will also be able to find some time for relaxation with family amidst hectic work schedule.

This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You will be keen to perform some outstanding work in your professional life and the stars are favorable for you to achieve your target. Your inner focus and dynamism will place you in the limelight. It is a time to be on your toes and use your wits for a good cause. Your personality will be remarkable and you will enjoy favours. Romance and love life will give you joy and happiness. Family relations will be amiable. Monetary gains too are expected. You may have some pressure or stress due to work so take care so that it does not affect your health.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) A lot of issues need to be looked into once again. So take stock of different aspects in your life. Also look at your plans in relation to what others around you are doing and see if you can combine forces. Cooperation instead of competition needs to be emphasized which is something that could pay dividends in the future. Take care about your health and avoid any conflict or unnecessary arguments. Keep expenditure under control lest it may disturb your budget. There may be a chance to go on a foreign trip. Hold on to your patience and stamina as you are going to need to draw on your inner strength and fortitude. Family will be supportive and your better half will help you gain insight into certain matters.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Your creativity will be par excellence and this is an excellent period when new ventures can be initiated. You communicate well and are able to put across your viewpoint effectively. Along with your creativity this is where you score over others and many of you may bag excellent offers. However it is also a time for you to exercise caution especially when you are on unfamiliar territory. There may be some thought to buy or construct a home. Take care of your health. This is another aspect that you have been neglecting of late and needs your attention. Concentrate on leading a healthy lifestyle especially to keep stress at bay. Personally this is a good period where personal relations thrive and grow positively.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Your potential is realized both by yourself and seniors as you manage professional matters with ease to get desired results. Your image will enhance and you are perceived as confident and courageous. It is a time that you may have to carefully watch your profit making ventures and investments. If you settle for the same you will earn some sudden profits. Financially it is good time and money matters continue to go well. With opportunities for travel - business or personal coming to you, make the most of it, as this travel will pay off. Entertainment and enjoyment is expected in family relations and domestic affairs.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Your search for a rewarding career may be fulfilled now as there is a positive change and communications, contacts and travel will prove to be extremely useful. New horizons are opening up as also the environment that offers new opportunities, connections and new dimensions and you get wonderful results. Go for some adventurous prospects and you will find a favourable deal waiting for you. An affair is something else to look forward to as you are full of charm and this love affair brings in joy and warmth.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) The stars predict some mixed results for you. Some unseen problems may disturb your personal and family relations so be wise and handle the situation prudently. At first you may find it difficult to tackle the problems but it may

be sorted out soon in some time. Special care needs to be paid to your health especially to keep stress and tension at bay as you could take on more than you can handle; pace yourself. A lot of travel is foreseen for you. Be ready for some unexpected financial gains. Your loved ones and children give you feeling of joy and happiness.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This phase will prove favourable for you in many spheres of your life as efforts will pay off and you shall find the solution of existing problems. You work on new ideas and you are likely to initiate a new project. You will encounter an event that encourages you to experience life in a free-flowing fashion; you may even get off your schedule and go with the flow. Your relationship with your spouse or partner is now on a much firmer footing as you discover some delightful yet hitherto hidden aspects of your partner. Minor health problems should not be brushed aside but rather be addressed at the earliest.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) This period may be helpful if you are looking for a good time to change your profession. Your courage and vitality will bring you opportunities to take bold decisions. By believing and making the effort, you're likely to get what you want. Work towards your goals instead of waiting for others to take care of you. Contacts, communications, short journeys enthuse you as you are full of charm, bright ideas and even innovations. Sudden gains are not ruled out. You feel much more stable and comfortable with your monetary situation. Take care of your health related problems especially as some old health related issues could resurface.

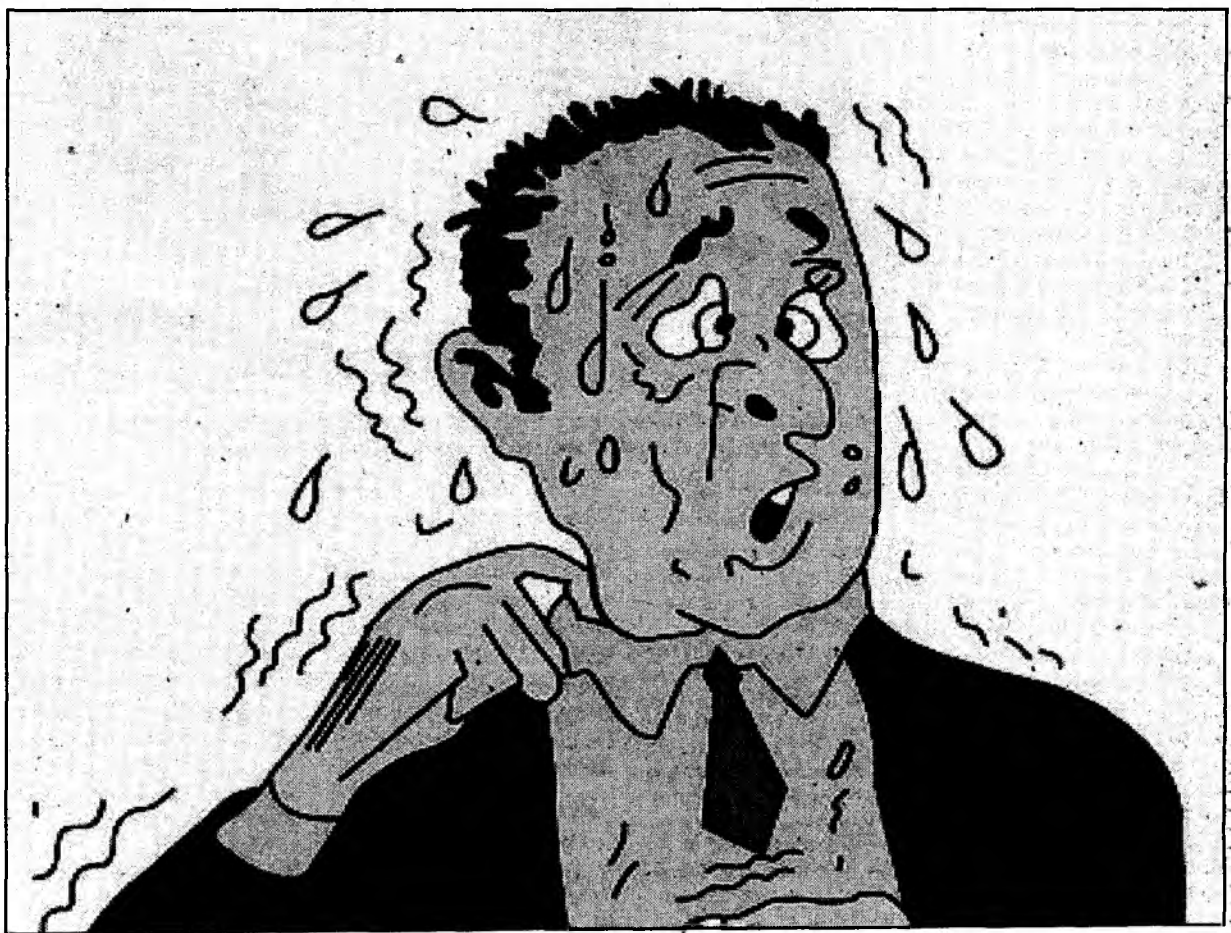
Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) It is a time when you may enjoy every good opportunity whether it is your health, love or professional life. Go ahead and put in your best efforts in whatever field you like and you will find yourself riding the wave of success. This will be an excellent period for money and business. Some of you will get an opportunity for overseas travel. Some of you can invest in property or conveyance. There will be much social activity including a celebration of which you will be a part. Some property or home purchase deal may be at your disposal and you may concentrate on making a long term investment. Health will remain good.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) The position of stars may give you some mixed results. This could be a trying phase for you as delays and obstacles will mar efforts. It would absolutely necessary at this point to steer clear of all controversies. You may find that you are powerfully romantically attracted towards a person whose company you find extremely stimulating. You are likely to be creatively inclined and you will be drawn to such activities. This will help you stand out in your professional group where you and your thought shine. Take care of yourself and learn to relax in between all these activities. This will rejuvenate you else you will end up feeling exhausted.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) Your monetary and financial problems will get sorted out soon in the near future. In matters related to your career you should be tactful and watch the situation carefully. There may be good response from overseas contacts and you will find favourable news or be able to close a deal. Keep an open mind and be receptive to new ideas and professional opportunities, which could lead to a new job while some of you will be in for perks, recognition and prestige. You are active both professionally and socially, a variety of social activities add to the busy schedule. Travel is also possible for some of you.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) On the professional front you start your new project with a bang and come in for praise and accolades. You are brimming with ideas and these are well received in your professional circles. New opportunities for increasing both status and income could come your way. Family life will be smooth and your spouse and children are supportive and shower their love on you. You enjoy time with friends and your social circle expands. There is definite re-bonding with friends. A short trip is on the anvil and will rejuvenate you. Concentrate on changing your lifestyle and adopting a healthier one to keep seasonal ailments at bay and elevate your spirits.

How humidity continues to be underestimated till date



Humidity, often neglected or underestimated, is a very serious problem yet it does not figure in climate change policies by governments, researchers argued.

Humidity, or the concentration of water in the air, is one such factor that is crucial in some regions of the world. Humidity has an impact on our body's capacity to release heat through sweat, which is the result of water evaporating off our skin.

This evaporative cooling is less effective and eventually unfeasible in high humidity settings. Qiang Guo from the varsity's Department of Global Health Policy said that HSI and its implications may differ based on environments.

Guo and his team used climate data from 739 cities across 43 countries to create eight HSIs. They found that the relation-

ship between daily temperature and humidity is the key factor affecting HSI performance. Humidity-incorporating HSIs have shown effectiveness in predicting heat-related mortality in regions like coastal areas in the US, Peru, South Korea, and Japan.

Wet bulb globe temperature could improve heat-health alert system accuracy. However, the study primarily focussed on developed locations, leaving out developing nations experiencing extreme heat stress.

This points to the prevalent bias, especially when the dichotomy between developing countries and developed nations comes up, even when the developing nations have a lot to contribute. (IANS)

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

—Mahatma Gandhi

The Shillong Times

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Change to change

A prerequisite to keeping the bureaucracy functional is to ensure attractive service rules and salaries commensurate to performance. Successful governments were not found lacking in this outreach to the employees. An additional reason is that the employees along with their families/dependents form a sizable vote bank. Both these factors weighed in when the Modi dispensation effected a partial U-turn in the central government's pension policy through introduction of a Unified Pension Scheme in place of the National Pension System that was in existence since January, 2004. A cabinet decision was taken after Prime Minister Narendra Modi held discussions with employee union leaders. UPS assures a guaranteed pension of 50 per cent of the last drawn salary, with some conditions built in the revised plan. The benefit goes to 23 lakh central government staff. If state governments follow suit, nearly one crore employees would benefit from this.

With the introduction of the NPS by replacing the Old Pension Scheme, the AB Vajpayee government had adequately responded to advice from economists that the employee pension scheme would be a growing burden on the exchequer. Curiously, the government spends more on pensions than on payment of salaries to the employees — these being some 19 per cent and 14 per cent respectively of the committed expenditure every year. The committed expenditures forms 37 per cent of the total revenue as per a CAG report some time ago. With the life-span of people increasing, this would turn out to be a bottomless pit. The Vajpayee government introduced NPS by putting in place a provision for contributory pensions, wherein every employee will have to pay 10 per cent from their salary and the government 14 per cent. The Modi government, through the UPS now, promises to raise the government contributions to 18.5 per cent while employees need pay only 10 per cent as was the case since 2004. This obviously involves an additional burden on the exchequer to the benefit of the employees. If the employees deserve this raise, this should not be made into an issue.

However, as Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge pointed out, a U-turnism has become the hallmark of the Modi establishment. It was a short while ago that the government cancelled the Lateral Entry system for government services. The Wakf bill has been sent to the JPC, instead of showing a resolve to pass it in Parliament. The three farm reform bills had met with a similar fate in Modi's last term. This time, the pressure is more on the PM after the NDA on its own failed to get a majority in Parliament. Every time more elections approach, more 'compromises' can be anticipated. This is the antithesis of a strong governance system.

Letters to the Editor

A wonderful story of hope through eco-restoration

Editor,
The news report, "From mining to conservation: Coal landscape don't green hue," (ST August 23, 2024) is such an inspirational piece. Normally news coming from Jaintia Hills are about criminal activities, pollution, illegal transportation of coal and what have you. This news is one bright spark and made my day. I plan to visit this place in Sutnga Elaka sometime soon to witness the greenery that has now replaced if only in a small way the black, coal-pocked landscape of Jaintia Hills. The gentleman responsible for this environment friendly initiative has rightly been recognised by the central government and also the State Government. Mr Self Denial Lyngdoh is a trendsetter in shifting from coal mining which has in the past caused several deaths due to mine collapse and flooding to a very sustainable form of livelihood — horticulture. Oranges are now an export product and the Khasi Mandarin grown by Lyngdoh is a prized fruit in the country and the world.

What is most heartening is that Lyngdoh has blazed a trail of shifting from an environmentally destructive activity which any mining activity is and has become an advocate of eco-restoration. If only more coal mine owners would follow his exam-

ple instead of expanding the scope for exploration of coal and seeing the rivers being afflicted by acid mine drainage. Lyngdoh has to wait to harvest the oranges for a few more years since he planted the trees in batches but when all those trees begin the yield fruit then that orchard will become a tourist destination for sure. That is what good business acumen is all about. Its not about getting rich quick but reaping a harvest of much effort and without harming mother nature. May Mr Lyngdoh continue to spread his message of hope to all other miners.

Yours etc.,
JR Kharkongor,
Via email

Advantages of lateral entry into central services

Editor,
The editorial "Lateral entry, expertise" (ST August 23, 2024) made interesting reading. One cannot disagree with the points raised in the editorial. The 'lateral entry' into certain posts in the Union government came into being in 2018 under the first Narendra Modi government. There are reports that the idea was mooted by the then Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, and recommended by the Second Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC) in 2005 under the chairmanship of former Union Law Minister and Congress leader M

The state has once again witnessed political commotion as three MLAs elected from one party defected and merged with another. The defection of elected representatives from one party to another is the root cause of political uncertainty, leading to under-development in the state. This practice is barred by law under the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution. Yet, people may ask: how is it possible for elected representatives to still leave their former party and join another?

Defection is Morally Wrong

To prevent elected representatives from defecting, Parliament adopted the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution. However, there is a provision in the law that allows defection if the aggrieved party can orchestrate a break of not less than one-third of the members of their party in the house. In this case, the defectors had the numbers to split their party's presence in the august house. But are they morally right to defect to another party and abandon the party from which they were elected? Is it ethically right for them to switch sides without going back to the voters? In this case, the voters have once again been deceived by the leaders they elected to serve them, who exploited loopholes in the anti-defection law. The spirit of the law is to prevent defection, ensuring that representatives elected from a party with its own ideology do not join a party with different principles. However, this intent is being manipulated by legislators under various pretexts.

Allegation of one-sided development

The leaders claimed that they decided to defect to the party in the treasury bench under the pretext of bringing development to their constituencies. But can voters in this age and time be easily deceived? The important question is whether it is true that representatives in the house are divided and treated differently by the government. From the statements made by the defectors, one gets the impression that there are at least two grades of MLAs in the house: those of the ruling dispensation and those of the opposition, who were treated differently by the MDA government. Constituencies represented by opposition MLAs were given the short end of the stick by the government; they did not receive the development they deserved, hence the need to jump to the other side where the grass is greener. If the allegations made by the turncoat Con-

gress members are true, then Conrad K. Sangma and the MDA government have no right to continue in power, as they have failed to uphold their oath and betrayed the people of the state.

One may also ask whether the Government of Meghalaya works only for the development of constituencies represented by members of the ruling parties or for the entire state. Can the government be selective and bring development only to the constituencies represented by members in the treasury bench? If what the defectors stated in unison—that they shifted allegiance to the ruling dispensation to bring development to their constituencies—is true, then Conrad K. Sangma and the MDA government should resign immediately because they have betrayed the Constitution and the oath they swore to serve the state without prejudice.

The Minimum Development Accomplished government

The MDA government has also failed to perform on certain very important fronts, which is evident in the substandard construction of roads. The portion of the Jowai-Shillong road from Jowai to Wahmynso was only repaired last winter, but sadly, the road is already in poor condition. Accidents have occurred, and people have lost their lives on this road as drivers try to avoid potholes. The Jowai bypass was also repaired last winter, but it did not last beyond one summer. The question that begs an answer is: what happened to the engineers who supervised the repair of these substandard roads? Why do roads constructed in Meghalaya not last beyond one summer or one rainy season?

In the same district, Ummulung PHC was upgraded to a CHC many decades ago, but it is still operating as a PHC. The staff strength remains the same, the building is the same, and nothing has changed except for its designation as a CHC instead of a PHC. If this can happen in the constituency of the Deputy Chief Minister, what do the defectors hope to achieve by joining the Minimum Development Accomplished (MDA) government?

The Promise of a C&RD Block

Reports in the press stated that certain MLAs who defected to the ruling side would be rewarded with a Community and Rural Development (C&RD) Block

in their constituency. But what happened to the already established C&RD Blocks? Take the case of East Jaintia Hills: it was earlier announced that a new C&RD Block was inaugurated at Wapung, but then it was announced that a new block was commissioned at Lumchong. The public needs to know which of these blocks is in operation. Or does East Jaintia have three blocks, including Saipung, which operates from Latoryke?

The NPP is a party of defectors, as all its leaders were earlier members of other parties particularly Congress. Even the party's founder, PA Sangma, was initially with the Congress, then formed the NCP, and eventually ended up with the NPP. Birds of the same feather flock together; it is no surprise that it attracts defectors from other parties to its fold. Another trend that should concern party leaders is the emergence of Conrad K. Sangma as the party supremo. The recent political developments have further solidified his hold on the party. As the saying goes, "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," is Conrad Sangma fast becoming all-powerful in the NPP? This is a very pertinent question.

Is Conrad sidelining James Sangma by pushing his wife's name, and not his brother's, to contest the upcoming by-election to the Gambegre Assembly Constituency? Initially, there were reports in the media that the two siblings who lost the election were also interested in contesting the upcoming election. Agatha was to be accommodated soon, as reported in the press, but Conrad instead nominated his wife, who has no experience in politics, and not his brother, to contest the election. One may also ask: Is all not well in the PA Sangma's NPP family? No doubt, the recent developments have also diminished the influence of the Dhar family in the party, but is Conrad Sangma becoming the supremo of the party, good for the future of the party?

Another point to note is that NPP leaders from Jaintia Hills are gradually withdrawing from active politics. W R Kharlukhi and Phidalia Toi were the doyens of the party, having been with it since the time P A Sangma was active in politics. They

The Emergence of a Supreme Leader in the NPP

were stalwarts and diehard party leaders who helped the party reach its current position. But why are they suddenly withdrawing from active politics?

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Congress under the leadership of Pala

The final question for the Congress in this entire imbroglio is: who is responsible for these double embarrassments for the party? In the recent past, the party experienced two splits—earlier under the leadership of Mukul Sangma and Charles Pynogrope, and now with the present defection. Why is this repeated defection happening? There must be something wrong within the party; otherwise, why would the party experience similar events in every term of the House? Who is responsible for the double defections the party has experienced?

It is time for Vincent H. Pala to look inwards rather than pointing fingers at others and blaming them for the fall of the Congress in the state. The Congress still has public support, but it seems the leaders at the MPCC level are to be blamed for the current faux-pas the party is facing. The Congress Party is optimistic and regaining momentum in other parts of the country. It would do well to look inwards and work to strengthen the party from the grassroots level.

Defection is because the MLAs failed to deliver

The Meghalaya State Legislative Assembly has been a playground for defection in the past as well. Many decades ago, governments in the state were toppled simply because MLAs defected from one party to another. It was only after the anti-defection law was enacted that defections in the assembly became less common. The Tenth Schedule of the Constitution is meant to prevent defections but under-performing MLAs still defect from one party to another.

In a democracy, there is always a ruling party and an opposition. Even today, there are members in the opposition have not defected to the ruling dispensation. The truth is that the defectors have not performed and have failed their constituencies and are using their defection to the ruling side as a smokescreen to deceive their voters.

Politicians should not be allowed to switch parties. If they wish to do so, they should resign from their membership in the House because they have not only betrayed the party they contested from, but also the voters who elected them based on the party ticket they contested from.

Additional, there are many shops, banks, temples, and offices along this path.

However, the footpath is frequently obstructed by shop owners unloading goods from lorries and numerous cabbies stopping to pick up passengers, especially during peak school hours. While traffic police regularly patrol the area and lock the wheels of unattended vehicles, they do not take action when drivers are present.

The absence of a safe pedestrian path and the reckless parking of vehicles create a perfect storm for disasters. This has already led to several accidents, some fatal. Many young children walk to school unaccompanied by their elders or parents, navigating through the chaos and risking being knocked down by vehicles from either direction.

We urge the authorities to (1) Construct a pedestrian footpath (2) Enforce strict parking rules.

(3) Increase surveillance. Let's work together to prevent accidents and ensure the safety of our children and citizens. Please take prompt action on this issue and ensure that citizens enjoy basic safety and the right to life guaranteed by the Constitution.

Your etc.,
Mohammad Sageer,
Via email

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

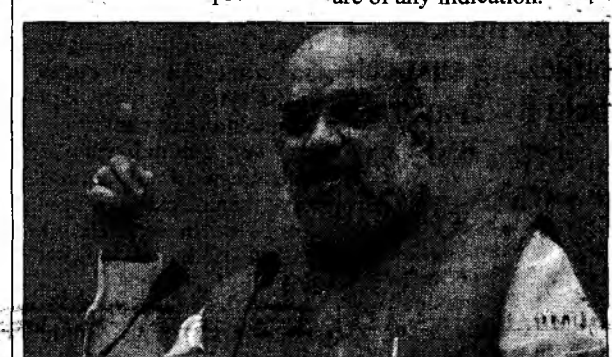
Amit Shah's attack on Congress may not help BJP in J&K and Harvna

INDIA Bloc's moves in Jammu and Kashmir upset Union Home Minister

By Dr. Gyan Pathak

India bloc's political moves in Jammu and Kashmir have utterly upset the Union Minister of Home and BJP leader Amit Shah, especially the seat sharing announcement between the National Conference and the Congress, which prompted him to sharply attack Congress on the politically sensitive issue of unity of India asking 10 questions to the party and its leader Rahul Gandhi. It amounts to sensationalization of the Jammu and Kashmir election by the very minister on whom rests the responsibility of maintaining law and order and peace in the region that is already disturbed.

Neither Congress, nor Rahul Gandhi has yet answered these sensitive questions. However, Rahul Gandhi, while in Jammu and Kashmir, had earlier alleged that BJP sees the entire nation through the "prism of Nagpur", a reference to the RSS and asked the party rank and file to gear up for the polls. He had also slammed the BJP for downgrading the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir into a UT, adding, "In the independent history of India, representation has always been given its due space and everyone get representation but here (J&K) we have an instance where representa-



tion was snatched away from the people." While attacking Congress and Rahul Gandhi, Amit Shah wanted to kill two birds with one stone but it is not likely to help the BJP either in the Union Territory or in Haryana scheduled to have the election by October 1, 2024.

Much to his frustration, pre-poll alliance among the Congress, National Conference, and CPI(M) has been announced. It is a significant development, since the recently concluded Lok Sabha election result shows that National Conference had gained lead in 36 assembly segments out of 90 assembly seats in the state, while the BJP gained lead in just 29.

The share of votes bagged by National Conference and Congress during the Lok Sabha election was 22.30 per cent and 19.38 per cent respectively. On the other hand, BJP's share of votes was only 24.36 per cent. The most disheartening factor for the BJP is abrogation of Article 370 and Article 35 A did not help the party to improve its political position in the state. Its share of votes came down by 23.13 per cent though the party was able to win two of the five Lok Sabha seats from the UT.

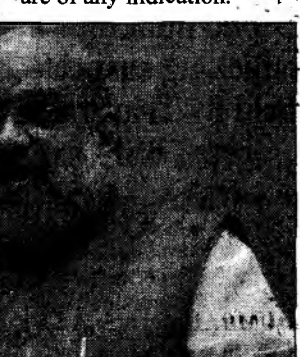
As for Haryana, the Lok Sabha election 2024 result shows that Congress had gained lead in 42 assembly segments out of 90 while snatching 5 of the BJP's Lok Sabha seats out of all 10 it had won in 2019. Congress has also increased its vote share by 15.16 per cent compared to the 2019 Lok Sabha election and bagged 43.67 per cent of votes. BJP on the other hand bagged 46.11 percent of votes with a loss of 11.91 per cent vote share. The political air on the ground is blowing in favour of the Congress.

No wonder, Amit Shah has chosen to attack the Congress to emotionally influence the voters away from the Congress. He has posed 10 questions to the Congress alleging that it "played with the unity and security of the country in its greed for power". He reminded the promises made by National Conference which included encouraging dialogue between Pakistan and India and strive to restore Article 370 and 35

and its statehood as prior to abrogation in 2019 and asked Congress and Rahul Gandhi the 10 questions, perhaps thinking that Congress will land in a political trouble in the election bound states while answering the questions.

The questions themselves indirectly inflict injury to the unity of the nation when Amit Shah alleges that formation of Congress-NC alliance risks the unity of the nation. His very first question is: Does Congress support the National Conference's promise of a separate flag for J&K again? The very question may agitate the common mind both within J&K and rest of India.

The second question is: Does Rahul Gandhi and the Congress support the National Conference's decision, to push J&K back into an era of unrest and terrorism by bringing back Article 370 and Article 35A? In the first place, it is just his imagination that the National Conference is trying to push J&K back into an era of unrest and terrorism, and secondly, he falsely asserts that era of unrest and terrorism has ended after abrogation of Article 370 and 35 A. Terror attacks and unrest continue, if recent spate of incidents are of any indication.



Another question: Does the Congress and Rahul Gandhi support nurturing terrorism and its ecosystem across the border (as a result) of the NC's decision to start trade (across the LOC) with Pakistan? Normalisation of relations between the two countries is of paramount importance, and thus such questions should have been avoided since it has the propensity to further deteriorate the relations.

Does Congress support bringing back the era of terrorism and shutdowns by reinstating into the government posts, family members of those involved in terrorism and stone-pelting? It is sad that a Home Minister thinks anyone guilty if one happens to be a member of the family whose other members are involved in a crime. Justice demands that no innocent should be prosecuted in place of others, even if their close relations are perpetrators of crime.

Further, no one can stomach Amit Shah's allegations that the Congress has an anti-reservation face, especially at a time when he is battling for protecting the reservation policy, that we have recently seen in lateral entry into higher posts in the Government of India. He asked Congress - Is the party with NC's promise ready to do injustice to Dalits, Gajars, Bakarwals, and Paharis by ending reservation?

That BJP leaders have an obsession with change of names on communal lines is well known. He asks - Does Congress want Shankaracharya Parvat (a temple on a hill overlooking Srinagar and dedicated to Lord Shiva) and Hari Takht-e-Suliman, to be Takht-e-Suliman, and Paharis Parvat as Koh-e-Maran?

The next three questions are related to administration of the UT and its economy, which he presumes that the INDIA bloc rule would give rise to corruption, discrimination between Jammu and the Kashmir Valley, and the divisive thinking of autonomy to Kashmir. He asks, does Congress and Rahul Gandhi support these? However the electorate this time does not seem ready to be diverted from their real issues of joblessness and cost of living crisis. (IPA Service)

UDP as opposition-in-chief

THE United Democratic Party (UDP) which is and has been a vital partner of the MDA Government in its first tenure (2018-23) and now in the MDA 02 is reportedly gearing itself up to raise important issues in the ongoing Assembly session. Normally it is the parties in the Opposition that prime themselves up to pillory the ruling party for its multifarious acts of omission and commission but the UDP this time has a definite grouse – and that is its being pushed into a position of insignificance in the ruling conglomerate. With 12 MLAs co-aligning with the NPP-led MDA-02 government, the UDP has only two ministers. After the NPP's strength has gone up to 31 in the 59 member Assembly with Gambegre soon going to elect its MLA, the UDP should feel the heat. This bye-election could go either way with NPP gearing up to fire on all cylinders and ensure that Mehtab Chandee, wife of Chief Minister Conrad Sangma is elected from Gambegre. As of now the UDP is dispensable. Elections in Meghalaya are like the weather – highly unpredictable. Considering that Saleng Sangma, former Congress MLA of Gambegre was elected to the Lok Sabha it would have been safe to presume that Gambegre would continue to be a Congress bastion. But elections are more about emotions, reason, greed, aspirations all melded into a neat package and which of the factors has more influence over a voter at a particular juncture is itself an electoral calculus.

What is clear insofar as the UDP is concerned is its waning popularity among voters – its candidate having been pushed to 4rd position in the recent Lok Sabha elections which show that the Party has lost even in those seats won by its party MLAs just a year ago in 2023. In the UDP President's constituency Mairang, the VPP MP scored 16,981 votes while the UDP candidate got just 8124 votes. This calls for introspection as far as the UDP is concerned with its President Metbah Lyngdoh forfeiting his Speakership and not getting a ministerial berth either. And now with VPP's rising popularity and its public agenda of ensuring clean governance a good chunk of voters are expected to shift loyalties by 2028. Of the 36 constituencies of the Shillong Lok Sabha seat the VPP candidate lost only in Nongpho, Jirang, East Shillong and South Shillong. The next elections may seem like a long way off so for now the VPP's goal is to win the KHADC elections and perhaps prove its point there first. With the NPP now in an absolute majority the UDP is dispensable.

In the present schemes of things where the Opposition in the Assembly is reduced to only 10 MLAs (Cong-1, VPP-4, TMC-5), the UDP is trying to fill the void there rather than be seen as a passive partner in the MDA-02 Government. This also is a clear sign to the Khasi-Jaintia legislators that they cannot aspire to govern Meghalaya if their party is restricted to the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and has no presence in the Garo Hills. The UDP is reduced to a cipher in Garo Hills and the VPP's influence is restricted to the Khasi-Jaintia hills. In these circumstances, political maturity and the accommodative spirit continues to elude the Khasi-Jaintia people. After 12 years of state-hood they haven't learnt the virtues of inclusivity and the spirit of accommodation.

Letters to the Editor

Public awareness on Anti-Defection law imperative

Editor,

The special article "The never-ending politics of defection in Meghalaya" by HH Mohrmen (ST August 26, 2024) made interesting reading. Recent cases in Indian politics like the one in Manipur and Madhya Pradesh in 2020, Maharashtra 2022 highlight the ongoing challenges with Anti-Defection Law. In the case of Manipur, the Supreme Court had to intervene, and the case highlighted the need for a more robust mechanism to handle defections. As for the case of three Congress MLAs in Meghalaya switching sides to the NPP recently, the Speaker has clarified that it is not a defection but a merger. These instances underscore the need for reforms in the Anti-Defection Law to prevent misuse and ensure political stability. Mohrmen's call that "politicians should not be allowed to switch parties," is laudable. One junior politician from Meghalaya (who is no more with us) narrated a story of two senior politicians (both of them who are no more with us) of Meghalaya who were arguing about the law. The senior politician who happened to

be the first Cabinet Minister of Meghalaya in 1972 told his junior, "You do not know the law?" The junior politician who happened to be a law maker himself replied back and said, "I know that the law is an ass." So, the argument between the two ended there. Going by the flaws and the loopholes of the Anti-Defection Law, enacted through the 52nd Amendment Act of 1985, which aims to prevent political defections and ensure stability in the government, the Act has several flaws and loopholes that can undermine its effectiveness. Here are some ways to address these issues:

1. The decision on disqualification due to defection is currently made by the Speaker or Chairman of the respective legislative body. To ensure impartiality, this power could be transferred to an independent tribunal or a judicial body.
2. The law should provide clearer definitions of what constitutes defection and establish unambiguous guidelines for its enforcement. This would reduce the scope for subjective interpretation and manipulation.
3. Introducing a mandatory time frame within which the presiding officer must decide on defection cases can prevent undue delays and ensure timely justice.
4. Extend the scope of the law which currently applies to elected mem-

In America, a young Hindu once came to see Swami Vivekananda. He said American doctors had told him that the virtue of chastity was unnatural. Swamiji asked him to return to India where his ancestors had practiced chastity for millennia. Swamiji then thundered at his American audience, saying such doctors had the morals of a tom cat. As Truth incarnate, Swamiji, I am sure, was not exaggerating. This chastity is a concrete motif that runs through the tapestry of Indian civilization. Despite her epidemic of rape and sexual violence, India remains, as Swamiji said, a monastic nation (the total converse of Hinduva). Moreover, the living fire of an unbroken lineage of mysticism characterizes the highest India – yielding, what Swamiji pointed to, as the highest trait of the Indian national character – a yearning for the Divine. To this day, I see this longing in Indians, which, even in its negative aspect (the credulity that makes us deify easily) – is enduring.

But a second troubling motif runs through the same India. When it comes to the practice of chastity, credible observers have pointed to a stark historical difference between Indian men and women. While men practice this sublime virtue, women do not. To the monastic eye, therefore, the Indian woman is a temptress – but also an object of temptation. Thus, the eminent historian and Indologist, A. L. Basham writes of the promiscuity of Indian women. Such verdicts are hard to accept in contemporary India, where women, girls, even female infants are raped and killed (by men) with impunity. But if true, this proves the abject failure of patriarchal ploys to coerce modesty and chastity in women. The power of eros cannot be policed. The Indian patriarchy (like others) – has failed – not just because of the enormous hypocrisy of forcibly veiling women, and policing their bodily desires, while oppressing them sexually and otherwise – but because eros, by nature, cannot be policed. When policed, it simply goes underground. True chastity comes through voluntary sublimation. It cannot and should not be coerced.

A third sordid motif pierces the very heart of the Indian civilization, shattering it. This is the motif of sadism – especially sexist forms that express themselves through hedonism and puritanism. If hedonism inspires the sadism of rape (especially gang-rape) – then puritanism

inspires gruesome violence against women, including the barbarism of sati. The problem therefore lies with patriarchal masculinity, which swings from extreme to extreme – exposing and desecrating the female body, when hedonistic, and concealing it forcibly, when puritanical. But let us not forget that this sadism is perpetrated not just by men, but also women, who can be willing participants in masculinist sadism against other women.

Like I said, I believe Swamiji. But I also believe his solemn assessment of the India of his day – as a corpse – both inside and out. Given the awful violence (domestic and sexual) against women, girls, even baby girls, in contemporary India – how do we reconcile these conflicting motifs? By dividing the Indian civilization into its sublime and sordid aspects. When Swamiji spoke in America, he was speaking of the highest India. But when he inveighed against caste-class-patriarchal violence, he was speaking of the lower India, which he said is a corpse.

This lower India, I believe, has, for centuries, cultivated a sordid sadism that expresses itself in myriad ways – from rapes and gang-rapes to domestic violence, violence against children and the elderly, dowry deaths, acid attacks, communal riots, extrajudicial bulldozer justice, etc. Indeed, the acrid stench of sati still haunts the Indian landscape, where, this sadism is as old as is the virtue of chastity. It has not erupted suddenly, with the advent of modernity. While women are the main victims of sexual and domestic violence, it is not as if men do not suffer. For the logic of sadism is such that whoever is vulnerable and disempowered suffers in the hands of those who are empowered.

I am not a historian – but all three motifs, I suspect, have ripened over the centuries, to reach their current forms. Granted, such gruesome acts as gang-rape and their frequency are relatively new. But it is not as if rape, incest, and sexual assault did not occur in the puritanical India of prior generations. They did – but not with the brazen shamelessness we see today. Moreover, rape was probably far more underreported in prior generations, when the stigma against victims was worse, and sexual sadism was more marital

Sexist Sadism in India

By Deepa Majumdar

and incestuous. To blame is the fate of modernity, which comes with a flight of the ascetic norms – especially the virtue of chastity. One cannot blame the west for everything. Modernity has come to us through western colonialism and neocolonialism. But the sexist sadism peculiar to Indian masculinity, is uniquely Indian. Not that it does not exist in the west. It does – but in a different way.

In September 2023, a young girl was raped by an autorickshaw driver. Bleeding, distraught, and incoherent, she walked around Ujjain city for two hours, rebuffed by one adult man who waved her off – before she was helped by a Hindu priest (now accused of sexually abusing a few minor boys in his ashram), who clothed her, called the police, and took her to hospital, where she underwent surgery. In the last few years, even infant girls have been raped and sexually assaulted, some dying from their injuries. The recent horrific rape, sexual sadism, and murder of a promising 31-year old medical trainee at R. G. Kar hospital in Kolkata, on Aug 9th, has unleashed nation-wide waves of righteous protest by medical personnel and others. Before this, a nurse in Uttarakhand was raped and killed, her face mutilated, beyond recognition. After this, on August 12th, a teen-aged girl in Muzaffarpur was gang-raped and murdered. On August 12-13th, another teen-aged girl was gang-raped in Dehradun, by a bus driver and his four associates.

On June 25th a young woman was publicly flogged (Taliban style) in West Garo Hills – condemned by a kangaroo court for an alleged extra-marital affair. At least four men rained blows on her, pulling her hair, ignoring her pleas to stop. Many bystanders, including women, watched this spectacle of violence – without protesting or intervening. If such violence is justified in the name of preserving traditions, it is high time indigenous communities abandoned bad traditions in favor of modernity and social justice. Besides, why are women always the ones punished? After all, it takes two to have an affair. Finally, what kind of a male thrashes a young woman in public? We women expect good manners, respect, and nonviolence from men.

All these incidents exemplify the sexist sadism embedded in the masculine

psyche of India. They make it hard for us to believe in the law of karma. Women have long argued that nobody deserves rape. Regardless of how we dress, no woman invites rape. Besides, the act of rape, while sexual, is not just lust, but the sadistic desire to control, conquer, and subjugate, as these words of Mukesh Singh (one of Nirbhaya's rapists) suggest – "A girl is far more responsible for rape than a boy... When being raped, she shouldn't fight back. She should just be silent and allow the rape." Some people argue that rape is not sexual at all – but violence. I am not sure lust and violence can be disentangled. For, hatred is a faithful shadow of lust. At best, rape and sexual sadism (a category of sexist sadism) are a combination of lust and violence. After all, what kind of a monster feels the urge to rape a baby girl?

Yet, humanity has progressed – slightly. Not that long ago women rape survivors were abandoned and shunned by their families for bringing shame and dishonor. When they showed classic signs of sexual trauma – symptoms that mimic promiscuity without being promiscuous – some have been flogged for being unchaste. This is no longer the case. Today we protest loud and clear. But protest alone is inadequate.

Almost twelve years have gone by since the horrific Nirbhaya rape case. Despite the nation-wide outpouring of outrage back then, nothing substantial has changed. What is the solution? Besides letting the law take its proper course, what else can be done? Feminist misogyny, that condemns all Indian men, does not help. This same civilization has angelic men, who worship the Divine in women. In between these extremes (the rapist and the monk), there are many decent Indian men – husbands, fathers, and brothers with excellent family values. Yet, the rapists are not just a few bad apples. They manifest systemic sexism.

The solution lies in proper parenting that no longer spoils boys, but raises them to respect girls and women. It lies in renewed and reinforced sexual ethics. It lies in monitoring social media outlets for children, and in teaching youth (especially young men) – the basics of chastity and self-control, through sublimation of lust and violence. It lies in teaching girls and women the basics of self-defense.

Our healthcare institutions need more women at the helm

By Sanjana Brahmawar Mohan

How can a woman doctor be raped, brutalised and murdered in a busy hospital in a metro city? We have gone terribly wrong somewhere. We need to search for the answers and do something urgently, before another heartbreaking story is created.

I go back to my own residency 30 years ago in a busy pediatrics hospital in Jaipur. The duty rooms were next to the wards and were common for women and men. The doors did not have a latch. While a guard was present, he would often nap at night. We were lucky nothing happened to us but many other women were not so fortunate. Can we ever forget Aruna Shanbaug? The case that traumatised the medical world for four long decades after the 25-year-old nurse from King Edward Memorial hospital, Bombay was sexually assaulted and choked with a dog chain in 1973. Suffering brain damage, paralysis, cervical cord injury, she remained in a vegetative state for 41 years.

But from those days in the 70s when the nurse was brutally assaulted to now, nothing much has changed in most hospitals. And certainly not in the pediatrics hospital in Jaipur referred to earlier. Despite this hospital having grown in size substantially, the duty rooms have not changed. There are also not enough toilets for women doctors, who travel to the hostel, even for changing their sanitary napkins.

There are several situations and cases. For instance, that of a colleague in another city. She was "sad and depressed" for a long time before being confronted by her father who wanted

present in the hospitals, now they spend less time here and a lot more in their own practices. Where then is the time or mind space to think of the safety of women residents, the condition of their duty rooms and toilets?

Women colleagues also talk about their repeated requests regarding hospital conditions to the administration, including duty rooms, canteens, places where they can sit and have their meals. They anyway spend so much of their time in the hospital. All of these seem to fall on deaf ears. Who are these administrators? We share the situation in Rajasthan, which may not be different across many States: 90% of the district health officials and hospital administrators are men. This includes the Reproductive and Child Health officers, who as the name indicates are responsible for the health of women and children.

There are some bright spots. Colleagues who have studied at premier institutions like the PGI in Chandigarh speak of separate duty rooms for women and men, labour rooms guarded by guards at several entrances, and a well-functioning canteen. Such examples though are very few and far between.

If we move from cities to towns and villages, and from hospitals to CHCs and PHCs, the absence of women doctors is striking – for 8 male doctors, you will see 2 women. Concerns for their safety seem to influence their choices of where to work and this is something we need to know better. For our nurses and ANMs, harassment is not uncommon: in a study conducted 20 years ago, several nurses



to know the problem. It turned out that her professor and his friend, both senior doctors, were forcing her to meet them in private, and also making sexually explicit remarks. It took threats from her father for their unwelcome attention to stop. A young colleague who completed her residency in

spoke about harassment at the hands of community members, and also reported a gruesome case of rape and murder. Even now, the women in the workforce do not know about POSH or any complaints committee. Neither is this information displayed in any public health facility.

Through running primary healthcare clinics and a government PHC, we have seen these threats first hand: women nurses receiving calls from drunken men, who are sometimes senior panchayat members. At times these men visit the clinics at night for trivial conditions and cases of sexual harassment have come to the fore and been promptly acted upon. But it needs to be acknowledged that not all incidents see the light of day. A tolerance for such acts, fears regarding confidentiality, keep many of these under wraps – a situation that can become explosive anytime.

A message from the Kolkata case is to rebuild our healthcare workplaces with the intent of making them safe and gender inclusive. In addition to enhancing security, building more duty rooms and toilets, women must be brought to the decision-making table, life must be infused in our internal committees and the POSH Act. Till then, our work is only half done.

(The writer is a doctor and co-founder of Basic Healthcare Services, a Rajasthan-based non-profit that runs primary healthcare centres. Views are personal) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

bers of Parliament and State Legislatures so as to include members of local bodies and councils in order further strengthen political stability at all levels.

5. The provisions related to splits and mergers of political parties can be exploited to circumvent the law. Revising these provisions to close loopholes and ensure they are not misused is essential.

6. Increasing public awareness about the Anti-Defection Law and ensuring transparency in its implementation can help in holding elected representatives accountable.

7. Period review and amendments to the law, based on evolving political dynamics and experiences, can help in keeping it relevant and effective.

By implementing these measures, the Anti-Defection Law can be made more robust and effective in curbing political defections and ensuring stable governance.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Shillong

Govt is to blame for train accidents, not loco pilots

Editor,
Assume the role of a detective to find out whodunnit. The enquiry report of

the June 17 train accident between the Kanchenjunga Express and a goods train has come out in the open. Ten people were killed when the goods train rammed into the rear of the stationary Kanchenjunga Express near the Rangapani station on the outskirts of Siliguri. The loco-pilot of the goods train and two other railway employees had also lost their lives in the accident.

Janak Kumar Garg, Chief Commissioner of railway safety, prepared a 29-page enquiry report which was submitted to the Railway Board on July 12. He blamed "lapses at multiple levels in managing train operations under automatic signal failures" for the June 17 Kanchenjunga Express accident. He also highlighted the need for installing an anti-collision device, Kavach, to prevent such accidents.

After the accident, the railway authorities put the entire blame on the loco pilot of the goods train who died in the accident. Now, they owe an apology to the family members of the departed loco pilot. Also, they owe an apology to the public for rushing to conclusions.

On this, a trade union leader rightly said, "From the day of the accident, we have been saying blaming the loco pilot cannot be fair. The report of the CCRC proved that we were right. The railways should now focus on increasing the required in-

frastructure, including the installation of Kavach."

A series of major train accidents happened in our country. The following are the clues to find out whodunnit.

Train Collision Avoidance System, which was later renamed as Kavach, is an automatic train protection system that helps prevent collisions if two trains are on the same tracks. Had it been in place, it would have saved the collisions between Kanchenjunga Express and the goods train. Senior railway officials said that a field trial was started for Kavach in 2016. But it has been installed only in less than 1,500 km of tracks out of the total 70,000 km covered by the Indian Railways across the country. That means this life saving device has so far been placed in only a little over 2 percent of railway tracks in eight years after its field trials!

Now, what is the reason? According to railway officials, the reason is high cost and technical challenges. What a joke! The cost is a factor when it comes to enhancing safety and saving human lives. But cost is not a factor for a glamorous bullet train project!

When we have speedier alternatives in air transport, there is no reason why Indian Railways must compete with airways. Railways cannot make their bullet ride a cheaper option than

air travel. The government needs to make existing train journeys more punctual and safer instead of sweeping train safety under the carpet of Bullet and Vande Bharat trains. It is a pity that Kavach is yet to be installed in nearly 98 per cent of railway tracks.

An RTI reply says that of 1,27,644 sanctioned posts of loco pilots and assistant loco pilots, 18,766 – nearly 15 per cent – were vacant as of March 13 this year.

It is a dangerous practice to make train drivers do extra shifts. It is equally dangerous if there is a lack of manpower in the field of track inspections and maintenance.

Two things surprisingly coexist – a rise in unemployment and a fall in railway recruitment. All these factors put the life of a train passenger at stake. Finally, here is a bonus clue to find out whodunnit. In spite of being at the dismal 134th rank in the global human development index, India plans to land a man on the moon by 2040.

Yes, the failure to get our priorities right is the culprit.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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"Praise undeserved, is satire in disguise."

— Alexander Pope

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Diplomacy in Ukraine

DIPLOMACY is an art. It is a way of being nice in one's dealings with others and yet managing to get what one wants. Diplomacy helps in thrashing out vexed issues with a smile. India's relations with Russia after the start of the Ukraine war are a case in point. While seemingly adopting a neutral stand, feelings strengthened that the Modi government chose to side with a war-monger. The deal India fixed with Russia to buy its fuel in the context of the sanctions that Moscow faced from the West, helped India get oil at cheap rates while it helped Russia withstand the western economic pressure.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Ukraine came a while after his visit to Moscow. The claim that India can mediate and help end the long-run war Russia started with Ukraine is unfounded. Yet, it is important for India to have a line with both Ukraine and Russia. An inference could be that India is neither a friend nor a foe, but is only aiming to promote its own interests. Therein lies the rub. Modi stated in Kiev that he came to Ukraine with a "message of peace" from the 1.4 billion Indians, and stressed that "India is not neutral in this war, but is on the side of Peace." It cut no ice with President Volodymyr Zelensky, who noted that Russia bombed a children's hospital at the precise time when Modi was hugging Vladimir Putin in Moscow. Zelensky's take was that this also amounted to a Russian insult to India. Zelensky's grim face all through his meetings with Modi displayed his struggle within. Also, in the context of the oil deal, it may not be easy to sell the proposition of India being on the side of peace, as it was Russia that started this war.

When it comes to foreign policy, the fact is that India never had a firm foreign policy. While Jawaharlal Nehru stood in the forefront of the now-defunct Non-Aligned Movement, it was clear to all that NAM's alignment was with the Soviet Union set against the US during the Cold War phase. The US hence looked at India with suspicion, if not contempt. It was from the 1990s that under Narasimha Rao, India started strengthening its ties with the US. By then, the Soviet Union had disintegrated and the Cold War era ended. China's Xi Jinping described India as a "beauty" seeking to "woo one and all." We are neither here, nor there. Since the US found India undependable during the Nehru era, it patronised Pakistan and fed it with sophisticated weapons to "defend itself" against India. Even today, despite terrorism being a fly in the ointment, the US keeps supplying modern weapons to Pakistan.

Unified Pension Scheme: The Return of Guaranteed Pensions

By Prof Rajkumar Giridhari Singh

Today, in this contemporary world, peace of mind is immensely determined by reliable financial support. Life can get complicated when your income dries out and you still have liabilities and monthly bills. More importantly post-superannuation it may worsen when you are not in your prime to earn sufficient earnings for your living. A pension created by an employer for the benefit of an employee is commonly referred to as an employer pension. It is an arrangement to provide people with an income during retirement when they are no longer earning a steady income from employment. It helps the employees to make themselves financially stable after their retirement. A recipient of a retirement pension is known as a pensioner or retiree. The quality of pension systems varies widely around the world, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution, as each system has developed from distinct economic, social, cultural, and political contexts.

In India, the pension system has evolved significantly over the years. The British initiated the pension system in India following the Indian struggle for independence in 1857. The Indian Pension Act of 1871 was enacted to address issues with the existing pension system, followed by the Royal Commission on Civil Establishment in 1881. According to the 1881 Act, government employees needed at least 10 years of service to qualify for a pension at age 58, providing them with 50% of their last salary on a monthly basis. The Old Pension Scheme (OPS) of 1924 introduced additional benefits, including Dearness Allowance (DA) twice a year. After India's independence in 1947, government employees received benefits such as 50% of basic pay, a non-practicing allowance, stagnation increments, and a death gratuity. In 1998, the pension age was increased to 60 years. OPS, which offered a lifetime income after retirement without salary deductions for pension payments, provided guaranteed pension payments indexed to inflation and pay commissions for retired government employees and their spouses. However, OPS faced criticism for being unsustainable due to the increasing pension liabilities and the significant burden on Central and State governments without a supporting corpus. Consequently, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government discontinued OPS in 2004 and introduced the New Pension Scheme (NPS). Launched on January 1, 2004, the NPS is a voluntary, contributory pension plan managed by the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development

Authority (PFRDA). In May 2009, the scheme was expanded to include all citizens, including self-employed and informal sector workers. Under the NPS, individuals can contribute monthly until the age of 60 and receive a pension upon retirement. The minimum contribution is Rs. 500, with the option to increase the amount. Government employees contribute 10% of their basic salary plus Dearness Allowance (DA), while the government contributes 14% of the basic salary plus DA each month.

The NPS is a market-linked annuity scheme allowing individuals to make regular investments during their working years and receive an annuity upon retirement. Contributions are pooled into a pension fund that is invested in a diversified portfolio, including corporate equities, government bills, bonds, and debentures. Professional fund managers, regulated by the PFRDA, such as SBI, LIC, and UTI, oversee these investments. At retirement, individuals can withdraw up to 60% of their NPS corpus tax-free and invest the remaining 40% with any of the ten professional fund managers to receive monthly pension annuities. According to the NPS 2009 guidelines, account holders can also withdraw up to 25% of their contributions before retirement. The final pension amount depends on the total corpus accumulated by the time the scheme matures.

The significant shift from OPS to NPS has sparked considerable concern, particularly among government employees who began their service after December 2003. While NPS is considered economically sustainable, OPS is viewed as more favourable for employees. Many employees, supported by their unions, are calling for the reinstatement of OPS and its benefits for those who joined after December 2003. NPS is a contributory scheme with no guarantee of a minimum pension, whereas OPS is a non-contributory scheme with defined and guaranteed benefits. Additionally, under NPS, there is no provision for a family pension after the death of the retiree. In contrast, OPS provides a family pension to the spouse, unmarried daughters, divorced daughters, widowed daughters, and physically or mentally challenged children of the deceased pensioner.

The recent approval of the Unified Pension Scheme (UPS) by the Union Cabinet on August 24, 2024, and its subsequent announcement by the Government of India

marks a significant development in the evolution of India's pension system. Effective from April 1, 2025, the UPS aims to provide guaranteed pensions for government employees. Key features of the UPS include:

- 1. Guaranteed Pension:** Employees who complete a minimum of 25 years of service will receive a pension equal to 50% of their last drawn salary (average basic pay over the last 12 months before retirement). For those with less than 25 years of service, the pension amount will be proportionately reduced, down to a minimum of 10 years of service.
- 2. Assured Minimum Pension:** Employees who retire after at least 10 years of service will receive a minimum pension of Rs. 10,000 per month.
- 3. Family Pension:** In the event of a retiree's death, their immediate family will be eligible to receive 60% of the retiree's last drawn pension.
- 4. Inflation Indexation:** The pensions mentioned above will be subject to dearness relief, calculated based on the All India Consumer Price Index for Industrial Workers, similar to the adjustments for serving employees.
- 5. Lump-Sum Payment at Retirement:** In addition to gratuity, retirees will receive a lump-sum payment calculated as 1/10th of their monthly emolument (pay plus dearness allowance) for every six months of service completed at the time of retirement.

According to a government report, the new Unified Pension Scheme (UPS) will benefit the 2.3 million central government employees. This initiative is expected to lead to an additional expenditure of Rs. 6,250 crore in the next fiscal once it is implemented. As part of the scheme's provisions, the government plans to increase its contribution to the pension fund from the current 14% of basic pay (under the NPS) to 18.3%. However, the contribution rate for existing employees, set at 10%, will remain unchanged.

The introduction of the UPS follows the recommendations of a committee chaired by Cabinet Secretary, TV Somathath, who was Finance Secretary in 2023. The government established this four-member committee in April 2023 to review the pension system for government employees. The announcement of the UPS marks a significant step towards ensuring financial security for government employees after retirement.

Another important aspect of this announcement is that

it will extend benefits to past retirees who were under the National Pension System (NPS). These retirees will receive arrears with interest calculated at Public Provident Fund (PPF) rates for the period since their retirement. With the UPS, government employees opting for the new scheme will receive a guaranteed pension, in contrast to the NPS. The UPS will apply to all those who retired under the NPS from 2004 onwards.

Further details about the UPS, including how it will address existing employees under the NPS who have withdrawn 25% of their contributions (as permitted by NPS 2009), are still pending. It remains to be seen whether the tax-free lump sum of 60% of the corpus amount, available under the NPS, will also be offered to employees who choose the UPS.

Ahead of the Union Budget 2024-2025, the Confederation of Central Government Employees and Workers submitted a proposal to the Centre outlining seven key demands, including the restoration of the Old Pension Scheme (OPS). The joint forum advocating for the reinstatement of OPS (NJCA) has urged the finance ministry to replace the contributory National Pension System (NPS) with the non-contributory, guaranteed OPS for government employees and autonomous bodies. The introduction of the Unified Pension Scheme (UPS) reflects the concerns voiced by government employees.

Political analysts might view the UPS as a strategic response to address the dissatisfaction among government employees—a significant political constituency—potentially aimed at countering opposition challenges in upcoming state assembly elections. Nevertheless, the UPS represents a constructive and empathetic approach to meeting the genuine needs of government employees. It is seen as a positive step towards integrating the best aspects of both OPS and NPS.

Everyone desires a relaxed and carefree retirement. The UPS have now addressed the grievances of the employees specifically the stability of income and security to family. In response to the call for OPS, the government has introduced UPS, a new avatar of blend of NPS and OPS, it remains to be seen whether UPS will prove to be an optimum alternative to OPS if not better to OPS. We hope this new announcement brings happiness to many families!

(The writer is currently Head, Department of Commerce, North Eastern Hill University and can be reached at rajg@nehu.ac.in)

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Forgive, Forget and Forward March... What kind of a title is this, you ask.

Bear with me as I recount an old fable all of you know, but I have a reason to repeat the same:

Once upon a time, there was a man who had many sons. The sons, on the other hand, were always fighting with each other. As the man became older and weaker, he became worried that his sons would ruin themselves if they continued to fight. He begged them to live joyfully and peacefully together, but no one listened to him and continued to act in the same manner.

One day, the old man called all of his sons together and handed them a bundle of sticks which were tied together. "I want every one of you to take this bundle of sticks and break it," he said. The sons tried to break the bundle one by one with all their strength, but they were

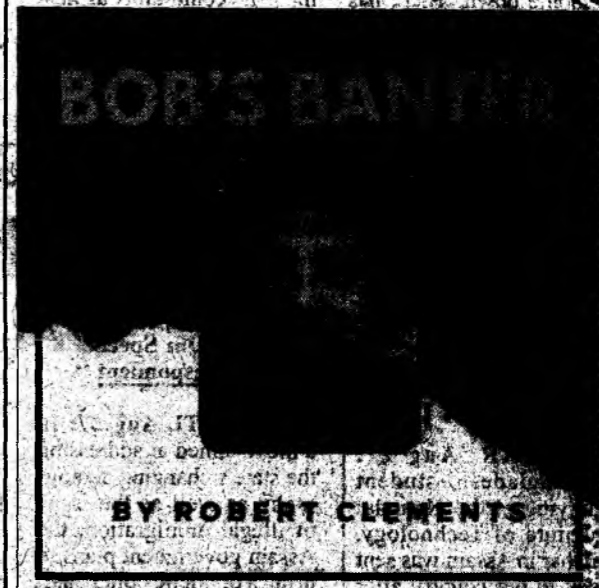
his father, sharing the same platform!

If politicians can forgive so fast, why can't they implement this on a national level?

And yes, for the same reason: Power!

Imagine how powerful we would be if we could forgive each other for previous communal transgressions! Imagine how powerful we would be if we could forgive our neighbouring countries for past wars, beginning with stopping the stopping and staring tamasha that happens every day at the Amritsar border, and instead a shaking of hands or simple namaste?

Europe had a thousand years and more of war. If you read about it, when a little country fought against each other, and millions died, and in case you have got a history book ask your grandparents about World War III. Germany conquered most



unsuccessful. "Please accept my apologies, father!" "No matter how hard we try, we can't break this bundle!" said all of his boys.

The old father then opened the rope that bound the sticks together. He then handed a stick to each of his sons. "Now, my sons, try to break it!" he exclaimed.

The single stick broke easily.

"What does this mean father?" the boys questioned.

"No one will be able to break you if you stay together, just like these sticks," the old man continued. "Many individuals in this world will take advantage of you when you are single. If you stay together, you can face any challenges."

They all learned a lesson and realised the importance of one another.

As we remember this meaningful fable, my thoughts go to our own country, which is today needing someone like this old father to tell us that it is time we came together, so that we could become stronger.

Today, we are a country of 'single sticks' and maybe the newspapers don't talk about it, but television, but every day the law and order situation is getting worse and it's time for us to move from being such solitary sticks to becoming a 'bundle', strong and united.

I look around and hardly find anyone who will be able to lead our nation in doing this and find a fitting solution to this frightening situation, both in our country or throughout the world, so till we do find that someone, let us start with a thought:

What about having a 'Forgiveness Day'?

What's that, you ask, what'd you mean by such? Well, since this government seems to be blessing us with days to remember atrocities and injuries, what about a day to forgive and forget each other for the same? Not just you and me, but religious communities and nations forgiving each other for previous fights, wars and acts of bloodshed.

You think it's impossible? Just look at our politicians; how quickly they forget past hurts and join ranks for the sake of power! You have a political leader dragged to jail, maybe spending time inside, and in the next elections, he's joined forces with

than twenty countries! Millions died and millions more came home maimed, mutilated and scarred for life.

But what did they do with their scars?

They healed their wounds by coming together in 19 years and forming the mighty and formidable European Union, which today can even stand up to the mighty United States of America!

That Union bears testimony to the logical act of forgetting and forgiving. Their economies have risen, their military might has become a force to reckon with, and their human rights thinking has moved from revenge to humanitarianism and compassion.

Here, in our country, allow wily politicians to rub salt on our partition wounds, scrape off bandages and make gaping bloodied creases out of injuries that should have healed by now.

Are we fools not to see what is being done to us?

Even a dastardly rape in a hospital is being used to bring a government down. We need to realise what's happening, that every single incident, whether it's a rape or the lifting of a medal by a wrestler at the Olympics is cleverly used, to make us believe that either the government or opposition is at fault.

Let's stop listening to all this and remember the fable that we just read, and remember that only a coming together can bring more power for us. Yes, a coming together of religious communities in India, and a coming together of nations around us. We can keep fooling ourselves with false statistics of economic growth but poverty is rampant in the last elections have shown that the poor are voicing their dissent.

Let us put an end to the stocking of 'remembrance' fires, and move towards a period of progress. The politicians are doing it and succeeding, the EU has done it, and we as a people, need to do likewise: Forgive, Forget and Forward March...

The Author conducts Writers and Speakers Courses for schools, colleges and corporates. For more details call him on 9892572883 or send a message to bobsbanter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Defectors' pathetic defence!

Editor, The latest defections of the three Congress MLAs of Meghalaya to the ruling dispensation has in no uncertain terms bowled over large sections of people. Paradoxically, to add a layer to this bafflement is the fact that these representatives in the preceding years, as Congress members, had vehemently been going hammer and tongs against the corrupt nature of the NPP led government. But, lo and behold, now they are floating on the very same boat and relishing the same morsels, being part of those at the helm of power. Incidentally, while reading public comments on social media, I could palpably grasp the widespread condemnations against the defector trio!

Reportedly, the raison d'etre advanced by the turncoats in question for fleeing to NPP was that their remaining on the Opposition side has unerringly undermined their status as MLAs, given the fact that virtually they couldn't fulfil anything worth their salt for bringing any development to their respective constituencies and ushering in any social welfare scheme on which they are accountable for as MLAs. Be that as it may, such science of reasoning is fraught with

lame excuses and the public will take the same with a pinch of salt!

Perhaps these lost sheep must be reminded of a stark instance by citing the example of one of their former counterparts, who has since expired, namely, Thrangkoh Rangad, who consistently represented the erstwhile Laban constituency. This upstanding member was also a representative who was sitting in the Opposition side and was very active in the Assembly debates. Notwithstanding the fact that he belonged to a saffron party, for which I have no love lost for but nonetheless I had an intrinsic respect for him. As an Opposition member, he never defected to the then ruling party. And despite being in the Opposition camp, he could sincerely bring about praiseworthy developments to his constituency. Rangad indeed epitomized rare integrity in the field of politics. Additionally, he was never consumed with a desire for any ministerial post but the latter dogged him relentlessly until, without changing his party he had occupied a key cabinet portfolio in the then government as Home Minister. No wonder then, MLAs need not invariably be part and parcel of the ruling party but representatives possessing moral fibre even from the Opposition can do yeoman's service to their respective constituencies!

All things considered,

from the public notions I happened to garner is that as the next State elections to the Meghalaya Assembly are hardly around forty months hence, these three fallen angels are obviously aware that their return, to the august house in 2028 is markedly uncertain, so they want to may hay while the sun shines!

Yours etc,
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Shillong-2

Neither Smart City nor Smart Roads!

Editor, The installation of LED Screens doesn't define a city to be a smart one. If this is what defines a smart city then, so many cities in India would have that tag. Why is there a need for such screens? The common people fail to stomach this. Even in homes, televisions are rarely watched as people have no time, everyone is cooped up with their own mobile phones. Let's not even begin with making the best use of those LED Screens across the city, they are just white elephants. Making a city a smart one is when it has good roads, good drainage system, good transportation and you name it all. The list will go on, and none of those are seen in Shillong, not even one.

The internal roads of

Shillong deserve attention, whether it is Nongrah, Lapalang, Jaiaw, Lower Mawpreim, Lumkshaid, parts of Mawlai, the roads are all in dilapidated condition. One will have to rethink if these roads actually fall under the Shillong conglomeration. Smart cities don't have these roads, and even if they do, they are immediately repaired for smooth plying of vehicles and commuters.

Certain government officers have encouraged citizens to walk; there are many who wish to do so as that comes with health benefits. How can they expect us to walk when pavements are reserved for the hawkers, and when the road infrastructure is crumbling. The puddles caused by inadequate drainage and damaged surfaces create hazards that result in office-goers being splashed by passing vehicles. Who do you blame here? The vehicle? The pedestrian? The road?

Complaints have been raised to the concerned department but they either turn their deaf ears and blind eyes to such complaints or simply state inexcusable reasons blaming the inclement weather. The fact that road construction is not practical in the monsoon season is acceptable but at least some repair works can be done temporarily to avoid any unforeseen accidents.

So when school students are late for school, don't blame them or their parents,

blame the traffic. Similarly, blame the poor condition of the roads for the late punch in of many working professionals.

Concerned officials should exercise their power and put in their best efforts and although the citizens are fuming and yet are silent about it, they still have hope for further improvement with regards to better infrastructure across the state. Good roads don't require to be repaired annually. Engineers and contractors should work diligently in ensuring that the foundations are free from corruption and deliver us the best roads.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Serial heinous crimes against women

Editor, A series of heinous crimes against women happened in Uttarakhnad, West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, and Maharashtra in this month of August. On August 8, the mutilated body of a nurse at a private hospital was found in Rudrapur, Uttarakhnad. She was allegedly strangled to death, and her head was smashed with a stone after being sexually assaulted when she was returning home from work.

On August 9, the body of a trainee doctor was found

at the seminar hall of the R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata. She had allegedly been raped and murdered.

On August 12, the body of a 14-year-old Dalit girl was found in a semi-naked condition in a pond in Malzaffarpur district, Bihar. She was allegedly gang-raped and killed.

On August 13, a teenage girl had allegedly been gang-raped inside a stationary private bus at the inter-state bus terminus in Dehradun, Uttarakhnad.

On August 22, the body of a 10-year-old girl was found in a field in Kolhapur, Maharashtra. She had allegedly been raped and murdered.

Again on August 22, a minor girl had allegedly been gang-raped in Assam's Dhing.

On August 24, two minor girls were allegedly sexually assaulted in Badliapur, Maharashtra.

Amid the rising atrocities against women all over the country, we need to protest against each of these heinous crimes. It would be wrong to single out only the Kolkata rape and murder case for protest because all other incidents happened under a double engine government.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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

"Patience, persistence and perspiration make an unbeatable combination for success."

—Napoleon Hill

The Shillong Times

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Dangers of populism

IN Meghalaya there is not a single MLA who is an advocate of the environment. The state has been experiencing unprecedented rainfall this year and this is likely to exacerbate if we are to go by what climate scientists predict. Yet no MLA will call out illegal coal mining that carries on in the jungles of Jaintia Hills, West Khasi Hills and Garo Hills despite the ban by the National Green Tribunal. Trucks carrying limestone and boulders to Bangladesh by the thousands every day are making a killing. Hence the Truck Owners Association are pulling all the stops to impress upon the MLAs that without the limestone and boulders they would go out of business and therefore quarry and mine owners should be allowed to keep on cutting down forests and continue to dig and mine to their hearts content.

Those who advocate for mining and quarrying constitute a small number of influential elite who also contribute to political party coffers. It is well established that there are a few 'high level' coal mine owners who are also the biggest funders for the NPP, the UDP and the BJP. It is therefore not surprising that the South Shillong MLA, Sanbor Shullai has become a strong advocate for mining and quarrying and has used the Assembly as a platform for airing his views on behalf of those who stand to gain from quarrying and mining. Use of words like small miners/small quarries are misleading. Once quarrying starts there is no stopping it. And with the State Pollution Control Board reduced to a silent and mute spectator to environmental destruction, Meghalaya is soon set to become water deficient even as catchments and springs dry up due to rampant deforestation and quarrying.

It's an irony that while Lafarge Cements have had to pay a heavy price for eco-restoration and to invest in economic and development activities of the areas surrounding the Nongtrai mines as a price for limestone mining there, the same yardstick is not applied for other miners on the plea that they are local indigenous persons. Can such double standards be accepted when the impact on the environment through mining is the same no matter who the miners are? Use of the word 'minor minerals' to define limestone is already very misleading, considering that hundreds of hectares of hills have been brought down along Shella-Nongtrai and the Jaintia Hills. Across Meghalaya there are 1700 quarries operating illegally. In the State Forest Department, the Officer in Charge, Territorial Division is responsible for granting 'no objection certificates' for quarrying and mining. And if there are 1700 illegal mines then the person heading the Territorial Wing of the Department should be answerable. Incidentally the VPP is also an enthusiast for restarting mining activities. Is this the reason why the VPP won over nearly all of Jaintia Hills in the recent Lok Sabha elections? Meghalaya's tragedy is that there are no serious environmental activists that can take the matter to court and let it be adjudicated by those who understand that the environment is life itself. Killing the environment by mercenaries on a get rich quick mission will lead to human disaster, diseases and deprive us of water and clean air. Is this the Meghalaya we want?

Yogi Adityanath steadily replacing Modi as Hindutva icon to Kangana Ranaut episode exposes the confidence crisis in top BJP leadership

By Sushil Kutty

The Bharatiya Janata Party's Mandi MP Kangana Ranaut is facing greater heat in the Himachal Pradesh Assembly after the BJP pushed her under the bus for talking out of turn on the farmers' agitation which rankles as one of the most abject U-turns of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his second prime ministerial term. The BJP doesn't want to be reminded of Modi losing face.

Whatever will then happen to 'Modi Hai toh Mum-

campaign, Modi kept talking of "abki baar 400 paar". The 400+ failure must be a drag on Modi's train of thoughts.

Result: Anything and everything causes Prime Minister Narendra Modi to panic and the Bharatiya Janata Party goes into a tailspin. So much so, there is no need for the Opposition to bring in a motion of no-confidence. It is just a matter of time before

Does the BJP not cotton to strong women, ones with a voice of their own? It must be the RSS! Nupur Sharma went under the skin of Prime Minister Modi and she was reduced to the status of a political untouchable for upsetting Modi's 'Gulf', albeit with a factual yet reckless statement. Now, its Ranaut because she is a threat to Modi's international image

category.

The Yogi's "batenge toh katenge" rhetoric has taken him past Modi in the "Who is more Hindutva?" column. Modi made his first U-turn when he indulged in his own brand of Muslim-appealment after coming to power in 2014 with a string of promises to his core vote-bank of Hindus. Today, 10 years later, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has become the Hindutva challenger to Modi. The battle is between



kin Hai'? Kangana Ranaut must have meant well for the Modi regime but Modi has changed since June 4, especially after Congress MP Rahul Gandhi became LoP. Modi became Prime Minister for a third time with the BJP getting 240 Lok Sabha seats, compared to the INDI-Alliance's scorecard of 234, and yet both the BJP and PM Modi have been behaving like total losers even as Rahul Gandhi with 99 seats lords it over the Lok Sabha.

Is there a crisis of no-confidence in the saffron party? Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who achieved the Nehruvian-Gandhian record of three straight terms as Prime Minister, has been behaving like a rookie first-time MP assigned to the back-most of the back-benches. Mind you, Modi has just begun a third term and he has to complete the term to stand alongside Nehru and Indira Gandhi.

So, is Modi psychologically-compromised and severely short in confidence? The colossal failure of not getting "abki baar 400 paar" must be hurting Modi more than what he is letting out. Signs of the swagger are still there, but LoP Rahul Gandhi says there is a stoop to Modi's shoulders! Throughout the 2024 Lok Sabha elections

the Bharatiya Janata Party MPs staged a walkout from the Lok Sabha and not make a return till after the next Lok Sabha elections.

Also, Narendra Modi in his third term as Prime Minister is heading a U-turn coalition. The number of U-turns the Modi-led NDA government has staged in the short time since the government was formed is a scorecard that speaks of a sorry story. Anything out of kilt and the Modi government panics like a squirrel at the sight of a sloth! Even something as ordinary and routine as an actor-turned-Member of Parliament telling "the miserable truth" gives the BJP and PM Modi the heebies-jeebies.

The farmers' agitation over the three "black laws" which have created a "Bangladesh-like situation" was what Kangana Ranaut said and the BJP couldn't digest the thought first voiced by Congress leaders and farmer leader Rakesh Tikait. The BJP's "powerful" party Chief Jagat Prakash Nadda hauled up Ranaut and gave her Nupur Sharma's halo, saying Ranaut should have kept her yap shut. Nupur was a party spokesperson and the BJP threw her out the bus window for saying something which has been said millions of time.

of a "pacifist and a Gandhian". The reality is, Modi is always running away from women with rare exceptions, like Smriti Irani and Nirmala Sitharaman.

Mandi MP Kangana Ranaut is Sadhvi Pragya and Nupur Sharma rolled into one. Why was Kangana even chosen for an MP seat in the first place? PM Modi, who craves the label of a 'good guy', has been making lots of bad decisions destined for the U-turn. The latest was the U-turn on lateral entry into the UPSC. There were other U-turns including the one on the Broadcast Bill and the Wakf Board Act Amendment Bill 2024 and these aren't destined to be the last.

The real story is, the BJP is hemorrhaging supporters, voters who are pissed off with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's perceived pusillanimity, and his timorous U-turns on issues which take forward the Hindutva agenda. Modi's agenda is international recognition for himself. The "Bangladesh situation" is not his concern for the time-being. Modi never was the 'Hindu Hriday Samrat' and he is now being compared to Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath with the Yogi overtaking Modi in the "strongman said it straight"

Modi's preference for Pasmanda Muslims versus the Yogi's stark Hindutva line.

To be honest, Yogi Adityanath has left Narendra Modi behind in the popularity stakes in the Hindi-heartland. And BJP Chief Ministers are toeing the Yogi line. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath is challenging Rahul Gandhi and Akhilesh Yadav as well with the Hindutva plank against the duo's PDA and Caste Census planks. Prime Minister Narendra Modi took a U-turn and ditched his core Hindu vote-bank. Modi was given two majorities to make good the BJP's election promises but he squandered both majorities and chose to stray and lose himself in the Muslim ghetto!

Has the Prime Minister learned his lesson? No, 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' hasn't slipped out of Modi's mind. Modi spoke of "mangalsutra" and of "Muslim reservation" only when he saw defeat in the Lok Sabha elections staring him in the face. It was only then that he remembered his core vote-bank of Hindus. By the way, the Himachal Pradesh Assembly, consisting of both Congress and BJP MLAs, has adopted a resolution to take Kangana Ranaut to task for her anti-farmer comments. (IPA Service)

US Fed's message signals ushering of a lower policy rate regime RBI's dilemma mounts as inflation scenario causes concern

By Anjan Roy

The US Federal Reserve chairman, Jerome Powell, has given a clear message from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, that the American central bank is all set to enter a rate reversal cycle. The Federal Reserve at long last would usher in a regime of lower policy rates.

This was picked up immediately by the financial markets and the US stock markets have risen once again, after a slide in recent days. One can expect that once the Federal Reserve initiates its policy reversal, the financial markets would further start adjusting.

When the US Fed speaks up, the world's other central bankers have to listen. This is because the markets would enter a new phase of dynamism. No doubt that the Reserve Bank of India would raise its antenna and look for the changes in the Indian markets.

One can expect that in sync with the global markets, the Indian stocks would also rise as happens when the broad spectrum interest rates are lowered. The stocks markets should show further upsurge in the coming days. Along with that, the bonds markets would also seek fresh levels. One can also expect money to flow from the overseas markets to advantage of the surge.

Against this background, how should the Reserve Bank reset its broader policy measures? Obviously, the guiding factors should be the overall

drop is reversed in the short run, then the RBI should not budge from its anti-inflationary stance. If otherwise, and the prices seek lower levels then there is room for the RBI to reset its policy rates. As of now, it is difficult to really look through the haze and predict how the prices should trend in the coming months.

Two considerations are important in any such assessment. First, the historical trends. It has been generally seen, the food prices, particularly, those of the principal two cereals and fruits and vegetables, tend to rise in the summer months through the monsoon periods. These then drop in the post-harvest season from October onwards. Going by experience, maybe, we are over the price hump and the trends in the coming months should become more and more comfortable, barring unforeseen bumps. The other favourable factor is that the monsoon is progressing well and the prognostication is that it should remain at the normal levels this year.

Hence, the fears of a bad monsoon and a possible hit to food production could be cast aside this season. The price situation, particularly, food inflation could remain stable for now.

Finance ministry sums it up thus: "With moderate core inflation and positive progress in monsoon, the headline inflation outlook is positive. Assuming a normal

"The factors that should weigh in for the RBI are the inflation trends and the potential for a pick up in price trends. The prices have shown sober trends in the last few months. In the latest monthly economic report released by the union finance ministry, this week showed a fairly comfortable picture."

price stability in India as well as the growth potential and performance of the Indian economy.

In its last monetary policy committee review meetings between August 6 and 8, the PC decided to hold its policy parameters unchanged. The policy rate was left untouched, though two of the committee members strongly argued against the decision, according to the latest release of the proceedings of the committee.

The factors that should weigh in for the RBI are the inflation trends and the potential for a pick up in price trends. The prices have shown sober trends in the last few months. In the latest monthly economic report released by the union finance ministry, this week showed a fairly comfortable picture.

Overall, retail inflation slowed to 4.6% in the first four months of the current financial year April to July 2024, against 5.3% in the same period last year. More specifically, month-to-month July showed a sharp deceleration in prices.

"Retail inflation based on Consumer Price Index-Combined (CPI-C) eased from 5.1 per cent in June 2024 to 3.5 per cent in July 2024, the lowest since September 2019." The finance ministry ascribed this to a significant fall in food inflation.

Food inflation "declined to 5.4 per cent in July 2024 from 9.4 per cent in June 2024. The substantial fall witnessed in food inflation was helped majorly by a decline in vegetable inflation from 29.3 per cent in June 2024 to 6.8 per cent in July 2024." However, this runs counter to the anecdote price levels in markets around the country, particularly the prices of vegetables.

Now the question is whether this price moderation is transitory or a poster to a longer trend. If this sudden monthly

monsoon, CPI inflation for FY25 is projected at 4.5 per cent by the RBI, with Q2 inflation at 4.4 per cent."

On the other hand, the finance ministry's monthly report takes note of the adverse consumer expectations in the midst of the otherwise favourable economic data.

The finance ministry notes that amidst "favourable developments, consumer confidence in the current economic situation, employment, price level, and income has declined, as reflected in the Current Situation Index of the RBI's Consumer Confidence Survey. Households' optimism about economic conditions for the year ahead has declined from the previous survey round."

Further, "lower optimism on the general economic situation, employment and prices led to a moderation in the future expectations index of the Consumer Confidence Survey."

Typically, economic models give a major importance to the consumer's inflation expectation as a guiding indicator for future inflation. Once inflationary expectations get anchored, then the future course of prices are influenced by this.

Look at the apparent contradiction. The consumers and the basic economic units are pessimistic about the future, though gauging the present situation it is not bad. How come this contrarian evaluation? Maybe, the people do not have enough confidence in the governance structures. It is a lack of confidence in those who are in the drivers' seat. But, then, consider the Reserve Bank's problem in its formulation of policy. It is facing a "riddle". Introduce an accommodative policy stance and you stoke the inflationary fire, but if you don't you miss an opportunity to let growth go in its full steam. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Why is society failing to address rape?

Editor,
The horrific incident of rape that happened to the young doctor in Kolkata is not only unfortunate but frightening. We've seen these uprisings during the Nirbhaya case when the entire nation stood up in protest. The culprits may have been awarded punishments with ironically the juvenile getting less to nothing when he was more violent in his act, and that violence could have been the cause of Nirbhaya's death. For no fault of hers, Nirbhaya was made to leave this earth when she had not even lived half of her life. The loss is felt by her parents and near and dear ones. It's an irreplaceable loss.

What we need to ponder upon is that no amount of protest and even stricter laws can stop the human monsters from committing these heinous crimes. Instead of reducing in frequency, rapes are now rampant. On August 9, the horrendous rape, torture and gruesome cold blooded murder of the lady doctor shook the entire nation leaving Kolkata burning with fury. What we must not forget is that such acts had happened in the past too in many other states where attempts are made to hide the cases especially when the rape victims are Dalits or of a lower caste. If the law takes too long to deliver justice such incidents

will be repeated.

The point is that the law should come to the rescue of women and girls and take an exemplary stand once and for all and make our country a safe haven for women. Since time immemorial girls and women were subjected to subjugation, suppression, discrimination. Today along with all of these are added violation, torture and murder. Today, in the 21st century girls and women are even more terrifyingly suppressed to the point of losing both their honour and lives. Every time a woman is violated we need to search our conscience and ask ourselves if we feel no fear and remorse to trample on another being? As a woman I feel a sense of fear and desperation for women who could be attacked any time of the day or night. Have we become so bestial that we are no longer willing to differentiate between right and wrong and being human with the ability to think and reason? Besides everything else what is more degrading is the fact that the loss is entirely that of the victim and the family members. Isn't it painful that as a society, we can no longer live in peace and harmony but are steeped in immorality and inhumanity? Unless the law steps in and treats rape as a crime that needs swift justice we will continue to hear the same stories repeat themselves even while women and girls are reduced to a state of utter helplessness.

Society has to discuss these issues and find out the

reasons for such bestiality. Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

Dangers of instant justice

Editor,
More often than not, instantaneous justice, be it in the form of an encounter or bulldozer, is used to shield the real culprits or other powerful culprits. This is the most dangerous aspect of instant justice, apart from its ethical downsides. It strikes on the legal guarantee of the rule of law. The rule of law is like a barbed wire fence. It protects us from the rule of the jungle which is based on the survival of the fittest. The custodial death of one of the convicts of a gang-rape case in Assam's Dhing area has raised suspicions in our minds. As a matter of fact, any custodial death always raises a question as to whether it has deliberately been orchestrated to protect more powerful culprits.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Enough of political violence

Editor,
Atrocities against any woman anywhere is unacceptable and condemnable. But such unfortunate cases in West Bengal are viewed in a different light because of the complicity of the administration, police and ruling political party in shielding the

criminals. Sandeshkhali and R.G. Kar incidents are two recent classic examples of Government-criminal-TMC nexus which are amongst umpteen numbers of past incidents in West Bengal where the ruling party be it Left (Communist) or TMC went overboard to protect the criminals. Such a dark legacy prevailing only in West Bengal for many decades now needs to be stopped and the civil society need to take a call to come out from such political slavery.

Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee,
Shillong-1

Shillong: From city aspirations to town challenges

Editor,
Shillong, once celebrated as the "Scotland of the East", is increasingly overshadowed by significant urban challenges that threaten to undermine its potential. Despite its role as the capital of Meghalaya, the city's burgeoning issues highlight a growing disconnect between its aspirations and realities.

Congested streets and insufficient infrastructure: The area stretching from Garikhana to Motphran, encompassing Police Bazar and Nongthymmai, vividly illustrates the frustrations of both residents and visitors. The lack of well-maintained footpaths—often encroached upon by vendors—creates perilous conditions for pe-

destrians. Additionally, the overwhelming presence of parked vehicles, particularly in Stand Jeep, near Paltan Bazar exacerbates traffic flow issues. The congestion, most evident at the iconic Motphran, disrupts movement and highlights the dire need for better traffic management and parking facilities.

Motphran, a pivotal area in Shillong, is plagued by persistent traffic jams. The shortage of adequate parking and the absence of a designated taxi stand aggravate the problem, with vehicles frequently idling for passengers. This congestion extends from Police Bazar to Motphran, illustrating a broader issue impacting smooth vehicular movement throughout the city.

Noise pollution and neglected areas: Police Bazar suffers from severe noise pollution. Vehicles passing through this busy commercial zone create considerable trouble for pedestrians, with constant honking adding to the disturbance. The absence of effective traffic management and noise regulation enforcement further degrades the quality of life for residents and workers in the area.

Additionally, Police Bazar, often compared to MG Marg in Sikkim, is in a sorry state. Littering is rampant, and the overall appearance of the area is marred by waste and neglect. The contrast between the intended vibrancy of Police Bazar and its current dilapidated condition is stark and concerning.

A call for action: The palpable frustration among residents regarding the perceived inaction of local legislators and officials is evident. The frequent absence of elected representatives and administrative officers from the streets underscores a troubling disconnect between policymakers and the daily realities of Shillong's inhabitants. Many believe that effective solutions require more than office-bound decisions; they necessitate on-ground surveys and proactive engagement from those in power.

Shillong's challenge lies in reconciling its administrative significance with the practical needs of urban infrastructure. While it remains a crucial city in Meghalaya, persistent issues like traffic congestion, inadequate facilities, and environmental concerns cast doubt on its readiness to be recognized as a modern metropolis.

To truly realize its potential, Shillong must undertake urgent and comprehensive reforms. Improvements in infrastructure, more effective traffic management, and a responsive approach to governance are essential steps towards transforming Shillong from a quaint town into a vibrant, modern cityscape.

Yours etc.,
A Sarki
Shillong

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Oasis in the desert

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi and his government at the Centre were passing through a phase of complacency; and a sense of hopelessness was creeping in across various spectrums. The Cabinet approval to the setting up of 12 new industrial cities across about 10 states, with a promise to offer 10 lakh jobs, is a good step forward. Its success depends on the government's commitment to the cause of industrial growth and job creation — two areas that Modi did not give due attention to in his 10 long years. The bureaucracy that oversees such initiatives has a knack to scuttle projects through red tape, corruption and creating a host of other hurdles. This is the reason why India, with its huge human resource potential of skilled, educated and normal manpower, keeps depending on China for much of its domestic and industry-related requirements. Lack of effective leadership has been the nation's main hurdle in its ambition to emerge as an economic super power.

Obviously, the 2024 Parliament poll results drilled some sense into the Prime Minister's head. As the leader of the nation, he was found wanting in his responses to the problems in multiple fields. Erecting highways, building ports or airports etc., form only a small part of a government's responsibilities. Some 30 other vital departments have too little to boast about in terms of performance in Modi's two terms. The railways are a case in point. Despite the big talk that Modi made when he started in 2014, very little has materialised other than the boasts about "increasing" the track lengths. The Vande Bharat is no great shakes in terms of its speed and much else. It is an improvement on an ageing system left behind by the British Raj. Cases in Indian courts drag for decades. Delayed justice is denial of justice. Ordinary people cannot run with cases for 20 and more years. These were times for reforms. In the Agriculture sector, no major improvements came about despite the large manpower at hand. There too, Modi took three steps back on reforms. Making use of India's huge manpower potential of 1.40 billion through industrial and agricultural hyper activity, leading to matching growth in exports, is the principal way for India to grow big. Modi dragged on these fronts too.

In fact, rather than limiting things to 10 states, each state should have been granted a new industrial city facility. The entire North-East is not in the picture. This region is craving for development. Modi's new associate Chandrababu Naidu has been granted two industrial cities. Bihar too got one. Kerala that has labour problems and scarcity of manpower has been granted one city. Yet, finally, this is a time of hope for a better India under Modi equivalent to an oasis in a desert.

Are we wrong in using our brains to think?

By Patricia Mukhim

This article is a result of an incident at the Shillong Raj Bhavan on August 16 last. The occasion was an award ceremony named the RITI Academy awards instituted in memory of Crystal Gayle Kharnaor, daughter of noted artist and Khasi intellectual, Raphael Warjri. The five awards were given to persons who have made a mark in (a) the performing arts (b) media (c) academic excellence (d) as a vocal artist (e) visual artistry. After the awards were distributed Newly appointed Governor of Meghalaya, Mr Chandrashekar H Vijayashankar who dispensed with the written script pointed to a significant matter — which is the lukewarm response from the audience while the awardees were receiving their awards. The Governor said that each of the awardees had worked hard in their respective fields and deserved the award given to them hence the audience should rejoice in the achievements of these awardees and their loud resounding claps would encourage them to scale newer heights. The Governor verbalised what many of us feel at different award functions or performances. The claps are almost inaudible — as if the audience is in two minds about whether to put their hands together for those who are felicitated or not to, almost as if clapping is not for adults.

In the west, it's a different scenario. At any event you are called to speak, when what you say resonates with people they will cheer and clap in the middle of your speech and spur you on. One can feel a surge of emotions in the room. Why is it that we Khasis are so emotionless as a people? Why are our emotions misplaced and directed only at certain issues and entities? The bulk of our anger is targeted at politicians; at the government, especially the ministers. We don't get too angry about other things because we have not even analysed the origin of our anger. I believe we are very emotionally unintelligent people, who never express our happiness outwardly as if that would make us look foolish. Even our anger is misdirected which is why issues are not addressed. I am glad that Governor Vijayashankar has pointed to this fatal flaw in our mental and emotional make-up.

To understand the role of emotions vis a vis reason I

read up a couple of books from neuroscientists and psychiatrists. Dr Lisa Feldman Barrett's books "Seven and a half lessons about the brain," and "How Emotions are Made" speak about our tendency to place too much importance on the brain when emotions actually guide our reason and therefore our decision making. The problem with us individually and as a society is that we are not educated to handle our emotions using the brain because we have believed for the longest time that emotion is a primitive human response that's likely to lead us astray. We have learnt from listening to adults around us that reason is cool, rational and sophisticated and therefore believe that all the engineers and scientists are where they are because of their ability to separate reason from emotion. Just how wrong we are in putting reason and emotion in separate cubicles in our minds has been proven by neuro-scientists and psychologists in this century. These findings are in fact intellectual breakthroughs of the century.

Very often, the Khasi society's response to any problem is instant and often violent and then there's a long hiatus before the matter is resurrected. Elders call this the aluminium pot effect. They say aluminium pots heat up quickly and cool down equally quickly. But is that because emotions have failed to guide our sense of reasoning, because we have separated the two for too long when they are actually embedded in one another? In the book, "How emotions are made," Prof Barrett says we may think that in everyday life the things we see and hear, influence what we feel but it's the other way around. What we feel alters our sight and hearing.

Barrett says that decision makers need emotions to take risks and venture towards creating policies for the poor. What they don't see and feel does not hurt them or push them to do better. This is exactly the problem with our elected representatives today. They don't see the poverty and health concerns of people in their constituencies because they are obsessed with their own upward mobility and that of their family members. They engage in meetings

the entire day using their "brains" with no place for the emotions to guide their decision-making. That's the reason why governance is failing. It has become a dry, mechanical, rational activity that looks at how much money there is to spend and how much is saved for attending to personal needs of the constituents. In both cases the emotions have been shut down so questions as to why people need to approach an MLA for paying for health care or for paying school fees and for buying school uniforms at the beginning of the year are never asked by the MLA or by the government of the day. Hence there is no attempt to address the gaps in health care and provide education that does not pinch the purses of the poor too much. If the government health system was working well, why would anyone need to go to the MLA and seek his help for healthcare? The emotional brain should tell the minister/MLA that there is a need to repair this broken system.

The fact that we tend to look at engineers, scientists and financial wizards as emotionally detached, calculating, always cautiously evidence like walking computers is in itself so wrong. We assume they are non-emotional people and therefore are doing well in life. Look at our examination system, particularly the questions for competitive exams. Most tests are standardized so there is only one-dimensional thinking allowed. There is no place for creative thinking which involves emotions. And we conveniently label those who don't pass the standardised tests as too emotional and incapable of reason. Modern neuro-science says emotions put us in the right state of mind so that we can effectively think about the situation we are in. In his book "Emotional," neuro-scientist Ralph Adolph says, "An emotion is a functional state of the mind that puts your brain in a particular mode of operation that adjusts our goals, directs our attention and modifies the weight we assign to various factors as when doing mental calculation. In other words, emotions slant the mind in one direction or another depending on circumstances. When

we see injustice the emotion of indignation comes to the fore and helps us develop empathy such that we want to address that injustice. The emotion of euphoria pushes our minds towards risk-taking while happiness makes us more creative and flexible in our thinking and disgust pushes us to reject immoral behaviour. Adolph adds that fear helps to amplify our senses and focus attention on issues. Anxiety makes us pessimistic and we are less likely to take chances. Sadness improves memory and helps us make more accurate judgments; it enables us to communicate better and to pay attention to fairness.

In another book, Permission to Feel, Yale scholar Marc Brackett guides us through the process of verbalising our emotions using the RULER method. Here R stands for Recognising the emotion; U - to Understand the emotion, L to Label; E to Express it and R to Regulate the emotion so that it does not get destructive and result in violence. Brackett further states that we need to be emotional athletes to be able to make great decisions in our lives and enhance our reasoning capacity. We humans need to be ardent enough to feel and astute enough to understand our feelings. Life is more complicated than a series of calculus problems and to negotiate these complexes we need to use our emotions intelligently because they guide this navigation system.

Neuro-scientists all agree that while IQ scores may correlate to cognitive abilities, control over and knowledge of one's emotion state is what is most important for professional and personal success.

Dr Lisa Barrett correctly states after years of study that the "Brain" is not for thinking. She says the brain's most important job is to run the systems of our bodies to keep us alive and well. Even when our brain produces conscious thoughts and feelings they are more to manage the needs of our bodies than we realise. At the end of the day therefore, we are only as smart as our emotions. Sadly we live in a society that's besotted with raw brain power but is not educated on how to manage emotions for greater productivity.

Modi now clueless. losing his earlier strong moorings Good show by INDIA bloc in assembly polls will seal fate of Modi 3.0 Govt

By Nitya Chakraborty

Former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson once said that a week is too long a time in politics. This was in the context of post-war turmoil in British politics. As regards India, it seems that the post 2024 Lok Sabha election scenario is changing fast and the most affected has been Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is on his third consecutive term comparable only to the country's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

It is less than three months since the third NDA government led by the BJP leader Narendra Modi took oath on June 9 this year. The BJP's Lok Sabha tally came down to 240 as against 303 in the 2019 elections. PM Modi is dependent on the support of

both hailing from the PM's home state, Gujarat. These people, mostly Marwaris and belonging to the traditional business houses, are feeling sidelined. They are also big donors to the BJP, but they do not get commensurate benefits, they feel. Many of them are in a mood to contribute more to the Congress and other opposition parties as they muster courage on account of the BJP being on the decline.

Only this month, an unusual government notification was issued in a hurry which is not common, according to industry circles. Adani Group set up a power plant in Jharkhand for selling 100 per cent of the production to Bangladesh. After the August 5 abdication of



his two major NDA partners, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and Janata Dal (United) [JDU], who had been part of the opposition earlier, and who do not share the Hindutva agenda of the BJP.

In the last eighty two days since the formation of the Modi 3.0 government, few things have happened which signal the continuing diminishing stature of the Prime Minister, which was considered invincible till the 2024 Lok Sabha results came out on June 4. First, the latest Mood of the Nation survey made by a leading magazine shows that the popularity rating of Modi has drastically fallen to 49 percent as against more than 70 percent in earlier surveys. While Modi's rating has fallen, Rahul Gandhi's rating has reached 34 percent, a big jump from earlier less than 20 percent.

Second is that in the extended family of Sangh Parivar, Modi's importance has gone down. Modi will remain the PM, but he has to operate within some guidelines of the RSS. He will not be allowed to be the sole arbiter of government policies without consulting top leadership of the RSS. The consultative machinery between the Modi government and RSS has been made functional. Further, for the first time, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has been allowed by the RSS leadership to have full sway in selecting candidates in the coming by-polls to the ten constituencies, by overruling Modi-Shah combo. It is becoming apparent that Yogi is steadily replacing Narendra Modi as the Hindutva mascot for the hardcore Hindutva base.

Third, at the government level, the rollback of some of the major announcements of the administration, signal the inconsistency of the leadership, which was not perceived earlier. Modi never cares for democratic practices; he is basically an authoritarian. He opts for discussions and exchange of views with others, only when he is compelled by political circumstances. That is why, the third-time PM is feeling uncomfortable as he is not sure always about the final position of the two major NDA partners. PM is vulnerable to his allies and it's a situation he dislikes the most. Fourth, presently a big churning is going on in the corporate world. It started three years ago during Modi's second term, but this has got wider dimension after the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The non-Gujarati section of industrialists are angry at the way the government policies are attuned to suit the business interests of the top two industrialists,

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina from the government in Dhaka and taking shelter in India, there were reports that the new rulers might review the Adani power agreement. There was no official move and even now, the interim government has not moved on this.

But the Modi government took no chances. On August 18 itself, a government notification was issued allowing Adani Group the right to sell power from the Jharkhand plant to the domestic market. This was an attempt by the Modi government to ensure the profits of the Adani Group keep flowing from that controversial power plant. Industry insiders say that every such project has some risks and the big industrialists like Adanis have the capacity to take care of those. Then why this unusual step to go out of the way to maintain the profits of a leading company? Many such Indian companies face similar risks, but rarely does the Modi government intervene to save them; then why this favourable treatment to a particular company?

This issue is taking the form of an upsurge among the aggrieved big business class, which has felt ignored during Modi's ten-year rule. Moreover, even as the MSME sector has been the main contributor to the employment and exports of the country, it's the big houses that go scot-free by defaulting on bank loan payments, while the small and medium entrepreneurs are punished by the banks for defaults in much smaller payments due to financial crunch. The public sector banks under the present NDA regime have a pro-big corporate bias. Expectedly, the MSME entrepreneurs are very angry at the Narendra Modi government.

It is under these circumstances that the assembly elections are going to be held in Jammu & Kashmir and Haryana by October 1, to be followed by-polls in Jharkhand and Maharashtra by the year-end, and Delhi and Bihar in 2025. The indications are not favourable for BJP, even though Modi, Amit Shah and the RSS leadership are doing their best to perform better in the assembly polls. They also know, if INDIA bloc can defeat the BJP in the coming assembly elections, then that would effectively seal the fate of the Modi 3.0 government. The political impact will be such that the NDA might finally break apart and the country might even have to go for midterm elections in 2026. INDIA bloc has to do its utmost to perform well in the assembly polls to facilitate that process of change. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Increasing rape cases and demand for justice

Editor,

It seems that the Kolkata Hospital rape and murder case has taken an ugly turn. Protests and outrage continue to escalate, with the police force using all resources at their command to stem these protests. From the medical fraternity and film stars to academicians, students, scholars, lawyers, and political leaders, people from all walks of life have voiced their condemnation, particularly against the inaction of the police department. It is unthinkable that the police have allegedly cooperated in "destroying or tampering" with the evidence. There is a big WHY here.

Yes, the public is not just angry—they're fed up with the West Bengal Government and its peculiar tendencies in handling this despicable crime. The blame has been squarely placed on the police and administrative machinery, accused of turning a blind eye to the "unethical activities" brewing at RG Kar Medical College for years. Hospital staff and interns have also come forward to expose the deep-rooted corruption within the institution. Many have described the principal, Sudip Ghose, as corrupt to the core, with direct ties to the TMC. Allegations further suggest that he was allegedly involved in the grotesque trade of selling body parts from deceased pa-

tients to third parties. What's even more appalling is that a group of high-profile lawyers in the Supreme Court, led by former Minister Kapil Sibal, is allegedly determined to exonerate the Bengal government. Their shameless "giggling" at the plight of the victim and her grieving family, while seemingly shifting the blame onto those demanding justice, is utterly disgraceful and inhuman. It only goes to show how low some will stoop for money and power.

Isn't it a heinous crime to attempt to shield the culprits or remain silent? And yet, the lips of most INDI alliance leaders remain sealed. Is their integrity not questionable? If their own daughters or sisters were the victims, would they still remain silent?

The public demand for justice is growing stronger. People are now insistent that those responsible for this crime must face the harshest punishment, with many calling for a "public hanging". A senior doctor from Kolkata, a father of two daughters, put it bluntly: "Every authority involved should be held accountable for turning the West Bengal police force into nothing more than a lifeless log against the crimes."

Many who have spoken out for justice and women's safety, and dared to criticize the administrative machinery's inaction, have been served with legal notices. They include a few TMC members and journalists. If that's not the murder of democracy, then what is? Isn't it unconstitutional and downright immoral to si-

lence citizens who speak out against crime and the unethical activities of government institutions? In a shocking display of anger, Bengal's Chief Minister thundered two days ago: "If Bengal burns, Assam, the North-East, Odisha, and Delhi will also burn." How can a public leader use such inflammatory language that offends the sentiments of the masses and risks the integrity of the nation? Winning an election should never be a free pass to dictate the country on whims and impulses! It's time we consider amending the Constitution to ensure that leaders are held accountable not just for their actions but for their words as well.

Incidentally, consider the horrific case in Garo Hills, where a stepfather raped his two stepdaughters, and the mother didn't even bother to report it to the police. This Wednesday in Bareilly, a 13-year-old girl was gang raped who self-immolated the next day. The media is rife with increasing rape cases, which only send chills down our spines.

Given the rise in sadistic rapes and murders like these, it's high time we enacted strong laws that immediately disqualify leaders and severely punish anyone who dares to seize the power of the police and enforcement agencies when heinous crimes are committed. Without the fear of strong law enforcement, criminality will only tear apart the very fabric of society, leading to social decay. And let's not forget, we really don't need another episode where leaders and citizens are proudly

garlanding rapists, as we so shockingly witnessed in the Bilkis Bano case. Kudos to the media for pressuring the court and government to send the perpetrators back to prison.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

Patients at receiving end

Editor,

On the rape and murder case of the trainee doctor at the R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata, the Supreme Court, while passing directions to the CBI and the State of West Bengal, only appealed to the striking doctors to resume work. But it cut no ice. On August 22, the apex court again nudged the striking doctors to resume work for the sake of the patients. But the strike continues.

We all know that hospital beds are much less in India in comparison to the number of patients. But when it comes to beds in government hospitals, the only place where poor people can get treatment, the ratio is more unfavourable for patients. A health department official in West Bengal has said that senior doctors are working overtime but that is far from enough to meet the shortage resulting from the cease-work of junior doctors who are the backbone of patient care at medical colleges.

As there were not sufficient doctors, patients were being denied treatment at the medical college and

hospitals in Kolkata. Even planned surgeries had to be cancelled. I fail to understand why innocent patients are made to suffer to the extreme. The pictures of untreated patients in pain have raised many questions. Why should they bear the brunt of the strike? What is their fault?

Reports of the agonies of patients and their family members are pouring in. An eight-year-old girl from Minakha in North 24 Parganas was scheduled to undergo surgery for removal of a brain tumour on August 12. The surgery was cancelled. Sitting on the pavement of the National Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata, her mother told a reporter, "We had arranged blood for the surgery. My daughter's condition is worsening by the day but the doctors are not giving any fresh date for the operation." Now, who will be responsible if something untoward happens to her due to this prolonged delay?

Sudip Chandra Barman, a blood cancer patient and his wife Shyamoli Barman came from Cooch Behar district to Kolkata for treatment. But he was kept waiting on a stretcher outside the emergency ward of NRS Medical College and Hospital.

His wife said, "My husband was admitted to a private hospital on Friday. Since we could not afford the treatment there, we brought him here. We were hoping that we could get him admitted to NRS, but the staff here said that was not possible. They told us to consult a doctor in the OPD on Monday.

But since the strike is on, I am not sure whether my husband will be admitted on Monday."

It is a shame that they had to return to Cooch Behar on Sunday as Shyamoli Barman said that she had no clue how to continue her husband's treatment. Are the poor patients simply pawns in the tussle?

The Bengal government's health secretary said that the absence of junior doctors was affecting especially specialised treatments such as cancer care, neurological, and cardiological care in the government medical colleges. The magnitude of the sufferings of poor patients could be understood if we judge this along with the fact that in the government healthcare sector, only medical colleges offer such treatments.

The doctors can continue their protests even after resuming work. The Supreme Court says that no coercive action shall be taken against the doctors as long as the protests are peaceful. Given that patients are made to suffer from violence within, the cease-work by the junior doctors can no longer be termed as peaceful.

How can there be peace when the patients are forced to die a violent death by denying them adequate treatment and care?

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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"There is nothing impossible to him who will try."

— Alexander the Great

The Shillong Times

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Distressing road conditions

WHAT would it take for the Government of Meghalaya to rise up to the crises posed by abysmally poor road conditions. The Jowai bypass was in a decrepit shape since 2021 and after loud public protests it was repaired to coincide with the 2023 elections. Hardly six months later the road is in the same pathetic mess. Heavily loaded trucks take a big risk by plying on those roads and so do smaller vehicles that ply alongside these pass heavy vehicles. But the Jowai bypass is just one example. There is the Khliehshnong - Sonapur to Shillong road which can no longer be called a road. It has long lost the character of a road. And now the Shillong-Dawki road looks like it might take a decade to complete, looking at the pace at which it is being constructed. Meanwhile as the NHIDCL is on the job to construct this highway, the condition of the old road from Myllem onwards up to Dawki has put passengers and drivers at a huge risk. At Myllem in particular the road has become so bad that trucks topple over with regular frequency. Yet no one complains. MLAs take up the issue of poor road conditions only during the Assembly sessions and forget about them after the session is over. None of the 60 MLAs actually care about the deteriorating road conditions.

A road in Nongmynsong that leads on to Polo Grounds- Mawlai etc., which is hardly a kilometer in length, has taken nearly a year to complete. There is no time-limit for any project in this state and no one bothers to do an RTI to find out the reasons for the inordinate delays in completing any road project. It is a fact that Meghalaya is a state where anyone who can't find a job in the government sector automatically becomes a government contractor. Such contractors with no experience or expertise in road making but with expertise of taking and giving cuts from the amount allocated for the roads to the PWD minister and engineers, the MLA, and other flunkies of the ruling party in the state are given contract works far exceeding their capacity to deliver. The MLAs through whose constituencies the roads pass through are blackmailed to give the road construction and/or repair work to such contractors or they will turn against the MLA in the next elections.

With this sort of handicap in allocation of contract works and with some high level ministers themselves owning construction companies, Meghalaya is seeing a huge downgrade in terms of road quality since 2018. The NHIDCL faces problems in constructing Shillong-Dawki road because every village headman insists that the alignment be changed for flimsy reasons. Hence an alignment that has been certified by geologists and other experts is abandoned under pressure from extraneous groups. It is time for the Meghalaya High Court to step in and stop these arbitrary demands which in turn endanger the lives of commuters on such roads. It is evident that governance in Meghalaya is a huge failure for roads are the measure of a state's progress and development in the right direction. All other claims are vacuous.

Letters to the Editor

Punctuality and development

Editor,

If we want to achieve development, we must all work together in sync. Unfortunately, many government departments are not functioning well. Most of the staff in various state government departments are either absent or the departments are poorly managed. Even the heads of departments are rarely present. How can we expect the other staff to be available when there is no one to monitor them? Many employees are seen loitering around Police Bazaar, and some are occupied with personal errands such as dropping off and picking up their children.

During my recent visit to the MBOSE office at 10:45 a.m., I found very few staff present—mainly just a few cleaners. I returned again at 1:30 p.m., only to discover that the office had closed for lunch. The break lasted until 2:30 p.m., and by the time the staff returned to

work, it was nearly 2:45 p.m. During this time, students, parents, and other people were left waiting outside for service to resume. Among them was a special needs child, waiting patiently for assistance. What surprised me even more was that when the staff finally returned, many of them were playing music on YouTube, gaming on their phones, browsing social media, or standing outside smoking. This lack of professionalism is evident even to a layperson like me. How can anyone ignore such behaviour?

Sadly, this isn't an isolated incident. This kind of behaviour is observed in many government departments. The staff are rarely seen serving the public; instead, they appear to be preoccupied with personal matters. On the contrary, if you visit any central government office, you will find the staff reporting for work by 9:00 a.m. and working until 5:30 p.m., with a lunch break that lasts no longer than 30 minutes. There is always someone available to assist visitors.

At MBOSE, it can take

Unilateral sanctions imposed by West are nothing but criminal acts Zelensky wants India to follow NATO and participate in war crime

By Prabhat Patnaik

During Narendra Modi's visit to Ukraine (why he visited Ukraine at all at the present time remains a mystery), Zelensky asked India not to purchase fuel from Russia in violation of western sanctions, that is, to fall in line with the "unilateral" western sanctions. Let us for a moment forget the identity of the person making this suggestion, the fact that he rules Ukraine with the help of the followers of Stepan Bandera, the notorious Nazi collaborator during the second world war; let us also forget the present context there: a war brought on by NATO's insistence on extending itself eastwards right up to the Russian border in violation of the promise made by Bush to Gorbachev at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, a war moreover that could easily have been prevented if the Minsk agreements, arrived at through negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, had not been repudiated by the latter on Anglo-US "advice". Let us also forget about India's own "self-interest" in breaking the sanctions by purchasing Russian oil. Let us talk only of the ethics of "unilateral" sanctions.

Unilateral sanctions are those imposed only by some countries, namely the western imperialist countries, against those that violate their diktat; they have to be distinguished from sanctions that have the approval of the United Nations, that is, the support of the committee of nations in general, and not just of the imperialist countries. A large number of countries in the world from Cuba to Iran to Venezuela to Syria to Libya, which have earned the displeasure of imperialism by standing up to it have become victims of such unilateral sanctions and Russia is the latest to join their ranks; falling in line with such sanctions amounts therefore to endorsing the aggressive manoeuvres of imperialism.

A hallmark of such sanctions is that they hurt the people; indeed they are meant to hurt the people, their efficacy judged by the extent to which they succeed in hurting the people. They are therefore analogous in their effect to civilian bombing, which is also meant to hurt ordinary people and constitutes an act of collective punishment. But an act of collective punishment inflicted on the people at large in retaliation for actions that they did not commit, amounts to a war crime according to Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. It follows that unilateral sanctions by imperialism are nothing short of a war

crime. And Zelensky's suggestion to Modi amounts to making India complicit in a war crime. The fact that sanctions do not seem to have hurt the Russian people much is entirely beside the point; what matters is the intent behind them. They are analogous to civilian bombing and amount to a war crime.

Imperialist justification for the imposition of sanctions is that the government of a sanctioned country has done something wrong; but this justification cannot stand scrutiny. If the action of the government of a sanctioned country has the support of its people, then

in terms of the casualties they inflict. While precise estimates are extremely difficult to come by for obvious reasons, to say that they take an even heavier toll is no hyperbole. The denial of food and basic medicines to the mass of the people is the obvious reason for such casualties; and almost every sanctioned country in the past has experienced food and medicine shortages with devastating impact. And fourthly, precisely for this reason, sanctions take a far heavier toll among old people, children, and expectant mothers, persons who are in greater need of medicines and who by general consent

are supposed to be spared, as much as possible, the horrors of war.

There is an additional reason why people suffer, even when the targeted country can arrange for a certain amount of supplies of food and medicine from some other countries, which happen to be intrepid enough not to be intimidated into acquiescing in sanctions. This additional reason is that all targeted countries suffer from extremely high rates of inflation which put these basic requirements of life, even when available, beyond the reach of most people. Such an acceleration in inflation occurs for two obvious reasons.

First, even when the country can manage to get supplies of some basic commodities from friendly countries, there is usually still some residual shortage, which causes acute inflation. Second, the inevitable impact of sanctions is to cause a depreciation of the exchange rate of the targeted country, which occurs for a number of reasons: its exports get drastically reduced; the inflow of remittances and of financial investments into the country that would normally have occurred, dry up; and the country's foreign exchange reserves which are held partly at least in banks of the sanctioning countries are deliberately placed beyond its reach.

With the depreciation of the exchange rate, even when supplies of basic goods are somehow arranged, their domestic prices shoot up because of the fixity of their international prices, making it impossible for people to access them. Sanctions in short hurt the targeted country even when that country can get the help of some friendly countries willing to break the sanctions against it.

It follows that sanctions are not only an implicit form of warfare, but a form that is even more dangerous than open military conflict, a fact hidden by its apparent benignity.

Casualties occur in hospitals among people independently suffering from all kinds of ailments because of the lack of essential medicines, or at home because of the paucity of food that makes people vulnerable to diseases; this makes people's suffering seem not only less horrendous than the effects of civilian bombing, but also unrelated to the sanctions in any direct causal manner. But this is clearly deceptive.

These considerations may not be applicable in the Russian case, but that is only because Russia possesses a developed and diversified economy inherited from the days of the Soviet Union. In fact Russia happens to be the first case of a developed country against which imperialist sanctions are being imposed; not surprisingly it can withstand such sanctions better than the typical third world country that is usually targeted. Besides, the very multiplicity of countries against which sanctions are now being imposed, reduces the effectiveness of sanctions.

But the fact that sanctions are less effective because of their wider reach these days, or the fact that they are less effective against Russia than against others, does not reduce by one iota the criminality of unilateral sanctions. Such sanctions are a deadly weapon in the hands of imperialism against the people of the third world, and should be proscribed by the United Nations. True, such a ban will have little operational significance unless endorsed by the Security Council; and endorsement will not be forthcoming because the imperialist countries have a decisive voice at the Security Council. But a UN resolution opposing unilateral sanctions will have a great ethical weight.

Zelensky's suggestion to Modi therefore amounts not only to converting India into a combatant in the economic warfare against Russia, but also to making India complicit in the perpetration of a war crime. (IPA Service)

Without considering which political party is in power in the state. Unlike Kolkata, other incidents happened under various "double engine" governments. But that should not stop anyone from speaking against them.

The rally in support of the gang-rape and murder accused as happened in Kathua and honouring of gang-rape and murder convicts in public as had been done with the convicts of Bilkis Bano case are simply more than enough for our imagination.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

So VIPs can't deal with bad roads!

Editor,
For those of us who take the road to Last Stop and Oxford Hill, the stretch from Rhino point to Last Stop isn't a smooth ride. However, just before the start of the Assembly session we have been blessed with a smooth road at least from the Rhino Point up to the Harisaba

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Round the states

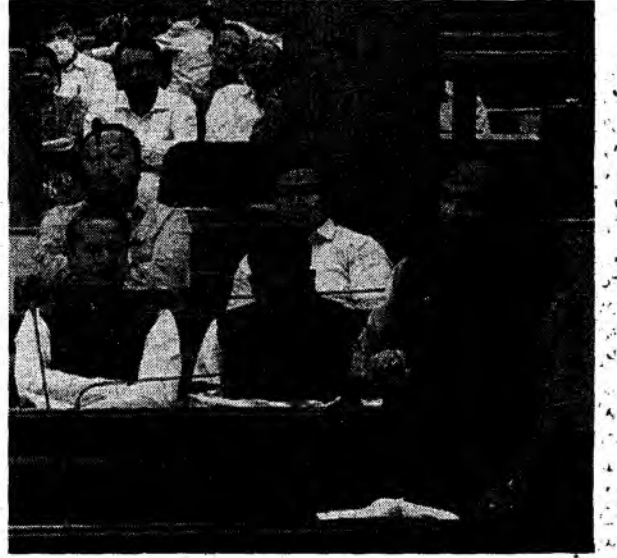
By Insaf

'Anti-Muslim' Rhetoric Assam CM going overboard?

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's anti-Muslim rhetoric is jarring. In the ongoing Assembly session, he claimed crime rate hasn't increased if population growth is considered and, "Why will people from Lower Assam go to Upper Assam? So that Miya Muslims can take over Assam? We won't let it happen." This during adjournment motions by Opposition regarding law and order situation following rape of a 14-year-old girl in Nagoan. The Assembly passed Assam Repealing Bill, 2024, abolishing The Assam Moslem Marriages and Divorces Registration Act, 1935, and Assam Repealing Ordinance 2024. His explanation: "Our aim is not only to abolish child marriages...also to get away with the Kazi system", whereby clerics register Muslim marriages and bring registration under government system. 'Discriminatory against Muslims and brought to polarise voters in election year,' says the Opposition. And United Opposition Forum, Assam (UOFA) has submitted a memorandum to President Murmu demanding Sarma's dismissal, as he has failed to maintain law and order and

it was unveiled by Prime Minister Modi on December 4 and Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi says it was constructed in a tearing hurry to garner votes before Lok Sabha polls. It has demanded Shinde's resignation, while the latter urges 'opposition has other issues to do politics on but Shivaji Maharaj, a revered figure in Maharashtra, should be kept out of it'. However, the Opposition chooses to use the opportunity to the hilt and announced it shall take out a protest march in Mumbai on Sunday. A first test-run for the bigger battle ahead?

UP Social Media Policy
Uttar Pradesh government's new digital media policy has raised many an eyebrow. For it gives a distinct impression that chief Minister Yogi Adityanath now requires good publicity/promotion but shall yield the stick if publicity goes against him. The policy says the government will pay up to Rs 8 lakh per month to influencers and holders of these accounts after empanelling them on different social media platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram and YouTube depending on followers and subscribers. This claims the department shall also help create jobs. On the other, the policy warns government will take legal



of inciting division among communities. He must be reined in as the office he holds can't be biased. He must uphold his constitutional duty. Will Rashtrapati Bhavan step in? Or is it asking for the moon?

J&K Assembly Polls
Come September and Jammu and Kashmir shall get reignited with political flurry with Assembly elections in the Union Territory after a decade. Importantly, Congress and National Conference have managed to finalise a seat-sharing deal for the 90 seats, with the latter contesting 51 seats and Congress 32 after hectic parleys and back-to-back meetings. Another two seats have been left to accommodate allies, CPM and Panthers Party. The alliance partners will have a common minimum programme with broad message being: 'People of Kashmir have been cheated by BJP. Here, the state became UT and it was done by BJP. While we believe in progress of people, unity and employment, BJP agenda is to divide the people.' Uncanny as it may sound, but the BJP has had to go into damage control following its supporters and workers divided over distribution of tickets. There are protests outside its office and some supporters are creating ruckus at BJP rallies. The top brass is trying to quell the simmering anger saying the party is 'set to create history' in these polls and there must be a show of strength and commitment for this 'ensuing victory'. While the results would be most anxiously awaited the BJP would do well to remember the saying: If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride!

Mamata On Back Foot?

Will agitating junior doctors be able to tame the Bengal tigress? Doubtful, but their 'cease work' protest since past 21 days against the rape and murder of a young medic may have West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee being put on the backfoot. This, as Thursday saw her post on X: 'Let me most emphatically clarify I haven't uttered a single word against the (medical etc.) students or their movement. I totally support their movement. Their movement is genuine. I never threatened them, as some people are accusing me of doing. This allegation is completely false.' She also wrote: 'I have spoken against BJP because, with support of GoI, they are threatening democracy in our state and trying to create anarchy... Opposition BJP reacted with: 'Don't mince your words. There's no malicious disinformation campaign against you. You have threatened the agitating medical students & junior doctors...' Amid all this, Didi has called for a two-day special session of the Assembly on Monday to table and pass a Bill which would provide for 'capital punishment to convicted rapists.' Will it help overcome the ongoing social and political turmoil in the state, is a million-dollar question. ---INFA

Maha Statue Collapse Politics

The collapse of 37-foot Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj statue at Malvan in coastal Konkan and its timing couldn't be more unfortunate for Ekant Shinde's Mahayuti government in Maharashtra. The Opposition has got more ammunition, months before the State goes to Assembly polls. Not only has the government set up two committees, one technical committee to probe reasons behind the collapse and another to look into the reconstruction aspect and build a "grand statue befitting the stature" of the warrior king. The statue collapsed just 8 months after