

"It's our roots that really give us our identity."

— Rosalia

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Individual versus Community Rights

IN Meghalaya rampant quarrying threatens to dry up water bodies and catchments. Quarrying and deforestation happens on so-called "private" land or Ri Kynti. The question is whether one individual enjoys untrammelled rights to carry out activities that are detrimental to the entire community in the long run. The Government of Meghalaya came up with the Meghalaya Water Bodies (Preservation and Conservation) Guidelines in July 2023. This document is intended to show the Meghalaya High Court that something is being done in the interest of conservation of water bodies and catchments. The problem with this document is that it is only a guideline which residents flout with impunity because enforcement is weak. These paper tigers carry little or no weight.

Rampant quarrying continues unabated, hence it would be judicious for the High Court to employ the North East Space Application Centre (NESAC) to give an overview of the areas under quarrying and the water bodies, lakes and reservoirs that they have impacted or are likely to impact. Had the above Government notification been implemented in letter and spirit the custodians of the rivers and villages – the District Councils and Dorbar Shnong would also have been answerable to the High Court. Another burning question is - which is the authority or authorities that grant permission for quarrying? There are many parallel authorities so whose writ runs? Is it the Forest Department or the Directorate of Mining and Geology or the State Pollution Control Board or the District Councils? Considering that climate change is upon us, should there not be a single authority to deal with issues that have long term environmental impacts?

The government notification says, "No person shall undertake the following activities in any of the water-bodies: a. Dump or throw solid waste or garbage in the water-bodies; b. Discharge untreated sewage, industrial effluents or any other pollutants into the water-bodies, directly or indirectly; c. Obstruct or interfere with the activities of the Competent Authority or other designated agencies tasked with the preservation and protection of the water-bodies. 4. Subject to any other laws which are for the time being in force in Meghalaya, no person after coming into force of these Guidelines shall without the permission of the Competent Authority: a. Carry out any mining or excavation activities in the water-bodies; b. Exploit the water bodies for commercial fishing or aquaculture activities that may disrupt the natural ecosystem; c. Undertake any activities including the filling up of water-bodies which may cause damage or reduce the size of the water-bodies; d. Construct or erect any structure in the water-bodies. 5. Any person aggrieved by the order of the Competent Authority under Guideline 4 may submit representation before the State Government within thirty days from the date of such order, whose decision thereon shall be final. 6. Without permission of the Competent Authority, no person shall be entitled to take up any project or scheme of tourism or water-based recreation for better management, preservation and conservation of the water bodies." The situation on the ground till date remains unchanged.

Khasi Folk : One Ethnic & Historical Identity

By Kittor H Blah

The debate over Khasi and Jaintia identity has been made to bear upon all of us yet again with some intellectuals and public persons voicing their discontent over the non-representation of the Pnar dialect in the recently released State anthem. While representation of Pnar dialect is one issue, this issue has allowed more incendiary elements to use the issue to again question whether Pnars and other Khasis have one identity. One poster was forwarded to me on WhatsApp which even says, "I Yntoh Ki, Ki Yntoh I." And this is the fear of those on the other side of the debate – that the concerted efforts by many intellectuals to emphasise the differences between the Pnars and other Khasis will lead to a misconception about the very identity of the Khasi folk. This article aims to show that the Khasi Tribe is one ethnic identity, including the Pnars. And therefore, it is an unnecessary exercise to continue to accentuate our differences, when we have the opportunity to unite under a shared history.

On what grounds shall we establish the identity of the Khasi folk? The chief bases would be ethnicity and history. But of course, ethnicity is inseparable from history, especially in our context, as we shall see. In truth, all of the arguments and counter arguments put forth by various writers on both sides of this issue are based on the same principle, i.e. an appeal to history. The differences amidst the clamor are simply due to the fact that each writer appeals to his selected facet of history. Some writers have appealed to British or colonial historians. Other writers have appealed to our own historical traditions. Still we have others who have appealed to the history of the Jaintia kingdom, on the basis of the Jaintia Buranjis.

The article which appeared on January 29, 2024 stated that Jaintia is not just an idea. Indeed, it has a lot to teach us about the history of the Jaintia kingdom and how the name Jaintia is derived from that kingdom. But on that note, Khasi identity itself is not just an idea, because when we speak of Khasi identity, we are in fact speaking of ethnic identity, as we shall see. And our ethnic identity is inseparable from our common, yet diverse, history. So, both ethnicity and history are inseparable as the grounds of Khasi identity whether that history is sourced from the British, the plains or from our own traditions.

Some have appealed to one facet of history, namely, the administrative demarcations of the British, to distinguish between the Pnars and the Khasis. They would appeal to the presence of Jaintia Hills and Khasi Hills, or the presence of Khasi autonomous district and Jaintia au-

tonomous district, as the evidence that we have different identities. But apart from the administrative demarcations of the British, we were in fact divided into various traditional provinces or himas and elaks. Shall we then further divide our Khasi tribe according to these provinces and elaks? So, an appeal to just one facet of history cannot be sufficient ground to base our identity on. If, as one writer has claimed, that Kiang Nangbah fought for the Jaintia kingdom, not for the idea of a Khasi country, then on the same note, did not Tirot Sing fight the British for the interest of Hima Nongkhlaw? So, then is Tirot Sing to be remembered as a Khasi freedom fighter or shall he be restricted to one facet of our shared history, namely the history of Hima Nongkhlaw?

I could also put forth the question, as to why Kiang Nangbah should be viewed as a freedom fighter of the Jaintia kingdom when the British had annexed the Kingdom in the year 1835 and the King had settled for a pension of Rs. 500 and spent his retirement in the plains of Sylhet. Secondly, the Jaintia uprising from 1860 onwards,

the historical claims of each writer, but to counter the very principle of all these writers – that is, to select a specific facet of our diverse history, and base the identity of a whole group or sub group on that one facet of history, and furthermore, to use that to undermine our collective Khasi identity.

The name Jaintia itself may be proper, when referring to the Jaintia kingdom, but it is an exonym when used to refer to the ethnic identity of the Pnars. As the British annexed Jaintia, they associated the term Jaintia with the inhabitants of the Jaintia kingdom. The imposition of the misnomer Jaintia on the ethnic identity of the Pnar people has become so entrenched in the minds and the culture of the people, that it is now seen as part of their ethnic identity. This could have presented an opportunity to the British administration to pursue a policy of divide and rule, the consequences of which we still see to this day.

Now, when we speak of chieftainship or Himas, it is not dissimilar to speaking of a State, because when we speak of a State or chieftainship we are speaking about

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led by Kiang Nangbah, was a rebellion of the common Pnar people against the house tax and income tax imposed by the British, who used the traditional institutions themselves, through the Dolo, to impose taxes and bring economic exploitation. Therefore, it is important to observe both the role of external forces as well as the proxy role of internal factors in such a civil unrest. Similarly, in the present scenario, it is pertinent to ask who the external factors are who will benefit if the differences between Pnars and other Khasis are accentuated, and whether this difference is something that is being imposed on the common people, and is actually alien to our identity as Khasis.

So, how can the history of one kingdom, that was ruled by Brahmin rulers, and that practiced a Hindu form of religion, be imposed on the identity of all Pnars, from different elaks, who practiced a different form of religion? But I am not writing this article to delve into

territory and its administration, and not ethnic identity. So whether we source our history from the British, the plains, or our own traditions, it is not intellectually honest to impose the history of one Administration, or Hima, or State, on the identity of the people, because as stated above, Khasi identity is grounded on both ethnicity and a diverse history.

One fact that testifies to this is our clan system that speaks of clan bonds or jingiateh kur. This bond transcends the geography of administrative demarcations, elaks, himas, or states. This bond transcends even sub Khasi groups of Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi or War. And this bond is not based on religion, political affiliation, place of birth or territory, but on blood relation and a shared historical bond between the clans. This fact itself shows that there is one Khasi tribe. As the tradition goes, we call ourselves "Ka Ri tip kur tip kha." So, the question is, can one find a Kur or a Kha from amongst the other tribes

in the Northeast, or from amongst the other tribes in the state, or from amongst the plains people or dkharis, in case of cohabitation between a Khasi and a person from these other people groups?

But this idea of Kur and Kha is inseparable from our identity as Pnar, or Khyntiam, or Bhoi, or War, or Lyngngam. And the clan bonds are still upheld today by orthodox Khasis. So, the question is, what is the 'Ri' in the tradition "Ka Ri tip kur tip kha." It is the Khasi tribe. It is one tribe. It is a shared ethnic and historical identity that precedes and transcends any one facet of history, whether British, traditional or from the plains. This identity transcends the geography of diverse himas and elaks. Another transcendent factor in our identity is our tradition, specifically our creation myth, which is centred on Lum Sohpetbneng, which is located not in the Jaintia Hills districts, or Khasi Hills districts, but in Ri Bhoi district. Therefore, colonial history or the history of the Jaintia kingdom cannot be imposed on the identity of all Pnars, while disregarding the different elaks that existed in what is called Jaintia hills and that preceded the colonial administration or the Jaintia kingdom. May I be bold enough even to suggest that "Jaintia is geography, but Pnar is identity."

In view of the above, while we should all be proud of each of our own facet of history, yet we cannot also disregard our shared history. That the Sohra dialect has become a uniform and standard tongue is a part of our shared history. The different churches that span these hills and elaks, all have the same Scriptures, which is in the Sohra dialect. The schools, colleges, and various departments in the universities use the same Khasi language. The Ri Khasi anthem, rendered in the melody of the Welsh anthem, is in the Sohra dialect. There is no reason to disregard this common Khasi language, and the unity which it brings in our literature, religion, administration, and communication, just for the sake of one facet of history.

In conclusion, I would respectfully state that to disregard our ethnic identity as one Khasi tribe, Ka Ri tip kur tip kha, and to disregard our traditional historical identity based on a shared creation story, and to disregard the common Khasi language that has become a cohesive and unifying force, just for the sake of one facet of this diverse shared history, is nothing but a case of special pleading, that is not necessary, and that will do more harm than good. Our intellectuals must be more responsible, and I appeal to them to be wary of damages that may arise if we are too eager to accentuate our differences.

Temple consecration Shankaracharyas' significant dissent

By Jagdish Rattanani

The inauguration of the Ram temple on Jan. 22 has seen unprecedented euphoric reactions in large parts of India on the one hand and internal dissonance on the other hand with stiff opposition from the high priests, the Shankaracharyas, citing age-old scriptures and violations of Hindu traditions. The celebrations brought us a sea of saffron flags, particularly in the North, highlighting a political mobilisation that the BJP and many others are assured will bring unprecedented dividends for the party in the 2024 national elections. The opposition to the temple inauguration, first on scripture technicalities, then on invitation niceties and later on larger issues of overall propriety and political capture, brought out differences that point to an internal breakdown of a shared understanding and trust within the broader pro-mandir group. Not everybody is willing to stomach the command-and-control operation that the temple movement has been turned into by BJP strategists, and certainly not the Shankaracharyas, who have put up a significant dissent. The BJP appears to be saying to its constituents: We gave you the temple. We know the way. Follow us and ask no questions. Many from the army of political bhaktas seem to agree. But those now uncomfortable seem to say: We fought for it. And this is not what we bargained for.

Questions on the date of the inauguration, the centrality of a Prime Minister leading the consecration ceremony, the unceremonious treatment of the Shankaracharyas and their subsequent refusal to attend the event, the display of wealth and showbiz in the invitations to select pro-BJP business magnates and assorted notables, the focus on material grandioseness, the overwhelming use of security forces that became inevitable when the inauguration was all about politics, have raised new questions even for those thought to be with the BJP on the temple issue. This is not the first time that fellow travellers have felt left out or seen the BJP as the enemy within, a force that swells at the cost of everything else the wider group might hold dear. If you have doubts, ask Uddhav Thackeray and his Shiv Sena in Maharashtra!

In the Jan. 22 display of bhakti mingled with political mobilisation, the Shankaracharyas dissent represents an important voice that stands in contrast to the political narrative sought to be pushed by the BJP and its associates. The dissenting voice has been clear, unambiguous and dispassionate, unlike the frenzied discourse built around exaggerated claims dressed in superlative adjectives for a futuristic Ayodhya-dham. The Shankaracharyas arguments though not in these words point to the political capture of the temple movement by the BJP, the weaponisation of the movement for narrow political gain and their immediate cause of fire – a date of inauguration that the Shankaracharyas hold has nothing to do with an auspicious moorat and everything to do with the coming elections. They have pointed out with force and conviction that the temple cannot be inaugurated now when the construction itself is not yet complete.

In sum, the statements that have been coming from them, notably the Shankaracharya of Jyotish Peeth, Swami Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati, and the Shankaracharya of Puri Peeth, Swami Nischalananda Saraswati, have torn the entire edifice on which the BJP appears to be preparing its election campaign.

As matters stand today, these positions have a strong grounding in religion, tradition and morality but not necessarily a political edge that the BJP may worry about. They may not dent the votes that the BJP expects to encash in return for the temple. But they mark a significant point of departure, bringing the

force of scriptures and their understanding as embodied in the institution of the Shankaracharyas, to challenge those using the same scriptures and traditions for political rewards.

It is noteworthy that a clear and indeed a vociferous point of view against the developments in Ayodhya has come from religious leaders rather than the political opposition, which has struggled to frame its line of argument in a clear manner. This unexpected turn of events points to the complex nature of the current discourse, and self-defeating narratives in the past that have brought us simplistic understandings and flavours marked out as "hard" or "soft" versions of communalism, or at the other extreme, the demand for a water-tight dividing line between religion and politics.

Each of these versions is exploitative in its own way and unappreciative of the values and principles that, for example, Mahatma Gandhi brought to his discourse on politics unhesitatingly mixed with religion. Gandhi openly saw Rama as his Lord and saviour and brought him into a political discourse that was inclusive. As he said: "Rama... has brightened my darkest hour. A Christian may find the same solace from the repetition of the name of Jesus, and a Muslim from the name of Allah. All these things have the same implications and they produce identical results under identical circumstances. Only the repetition must not be a lip expression, but part of your very being."

Interestingly, it is the Shankaracharya Swami Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati who recently referred to Gandhi in a glowing light, explaining to his audience Gandhi's sacrifice, his work for the nation, how the nation has lost its path now, and how and why Gandhi gets the title of a Mahatma. The Shankaracharyas are of course religious, overtly and completely by the very definition of their roles, and position. Their statements on the form and substance of the temple inauguration bring a refreshing dissent in the face of political forces that have done everything to wipe out dissent. Politics and religion mix up here but in ways that serve the nation well, even though historically the Shankaracharyas views have not always been progressive and not always welcoming of Gandhi's reforms and his fight on issues of temple-entry for all castes and classes.

The typical response of the BJP to the Shankaracharyas dissent on the Ayodhya temple consecration has been to go on the attack; Union Minister Narayan Rane, who is from Maharashtra, asked what the Shankaracharyas have done for Hinduism while the UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath made the point that no one can be bigger than Lord Ram. But soon enough, these attacks have stopped and the BJP leadership appears to have realised that overtly targeting the Jagadgurus will be counterproductive.

Meanwhile, it may be business as usual as Ayodhya is sought to be brought on the global tourist map and well-connected builders buy up land to put it for sale at exorbitant mark ups to investors looking to park funds. One offer being pushed reads: "Launching Ayodhya's First seven-star mixed-use development, by the sacred Sarayu River with an integrated five-star hotel. Located 15 mins from Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Temple & 30 mins from Shri Ram International Airport." An area of 1250 sq. ft. is on offer for Rs. 1.70 crore onwards. Bookings are open. Amitabh Bachchan is said to have booked his plot. "Development" is coming to Ayodhya!

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Letters to the Editor

Hynniew Trep term is specific to the Khasi people

Editor,
These days I have been reading in this esteemed newspaper the debate/discussion on the term "Hynniew Trep." I would like to say that the writers should not interpret the term Hynniew Trep as the entire human race because it hurts the believers of Khasi Religion (Niam Khasi) who believe that the Hynniew Trep are their ancestors and they themselves are the descendants of the Hynniew Trep. So, the believers of the Khasi Religion used to call themselves "U Hynniew Trep/Ki Hynniew Trep/Ki Khun U Hynniew Trep/Ki Khun Ki Hynniew Trep." In modern times we identify ourselves as "Khasi" as it is a convenient term to the world. I would like to request that nobody should

hurt the religious beliefs and traditional beliefs of the Niam Khasi believers whether we believe in myths or realities.

Yours etc.,
Wallambi Rani,
(A Niam Khasi Believer),
Upper Shillong

Let our votes count

Editor,
In approximately two and a half months we will be heading for the general elections to the Lok Sabha. Almost all the news headlines on television, newspapers etc are about the upcoming election. Different parties with different ideologies have started campaigning in different states. Political parties are trying to zero in on the most influential person and popular personalities and handing them the tickets for the seats. During the campaign each party prepares a manifesto to tell voters what their party stands and what

it aims to do in the next five years. This is nothing new in a democratic country like India. This pattern is repeated every five years.

The first question is, who will win the majority of seats this year and who will be in power? Only time will decide the results. It is too early and not wise for me to predict the results. So instead of looking at the whole country it is better if we concentrate on our own State of Meghalaya. Fortunately or unfortunately, we have only two seats in the Lok Sabha. So, who will win these two seats? Again, let's wait for time to decide the result.

My point here for us the voters is whether we are really concerned about the results? Because, no matter how much the campaigners try to convince us to vote for their political party, the power is still left with each one of us voters to decide which political party and which candidate to vote for. The right to vote freely rests with each one of us but this

right has been downgraded during the elections. Money is the determining factor during the election. In some cases one vote is cheaper than a plate of chicken biryani in the restaurant. And since we are bound by clan and community relationship even though we know that the candidate is good for nothing we still vote because he is related to us. In terms of religion too, even if we know that the person is not performing his religious practices or has poor moral conduct we still vote for him/her because he/she belongs to our creed/religion. And we care the least about the educational background of the candidate!

Even, if we know that these are the main reasons for the lack of developments in our State why do we still fall into the trap of this vicious cycle? Why do we produce politicians who are incapable of delivering? This time around can those two persons elected from Tura and Shillong be the beacons

of lights for our state and society because as a State we are really far behind in the development indices when compared to other states. We are nowhere near in terms of development when compared with our neighbouring state of Assam, despite having enough human and natural resources.

The lack of self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-identity make us afraid to choose the correct leader as our representative. Many of us still don't realize that our one vote can make a difference to the State and society. Let's remind ourselves that by the power of one vote in 1800 in the US, Thomas Jefferson was elected President in the House of Representatives after a tie in the Electoral College.

Of course, it happens that sometimes we are cheated by the leaders we have voted for due to their blind obedience or blind loyalty towards their party. At other times they work only for themselves and for their own political

and individual benefits. In this case we are not to be blamed but, we have to be vigilant not to vote such persons this time.

In conclusion let me quote some wise sayings, "Bad officials are elected by good citizens who don't vote." – George Nathan. "Someone struggled for your right to vote. Use it!" – Susan B. Anthony.

"If you don't vote, you lose the right to complain" – George Carlin. "The ballot is stronger than the bullet." – Abraham Lincoln. And finally, one by Peggy Noonan, "Our political leaders will know our priorities only if we tell them, again and again, and if those priorities begin to show up in the polls."

Yours etc.,
Riwanki Suchiang,
Via email

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"It is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view."

— George Eliot

The Shillong Times

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Lack-Lustre budget

PRIMA facie, the interim budget presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has failed to enthuse the nation. The nearly hour-long speech in Parliament was devoted principally to trumpet the Modi government's achievements, to which was superimposed some plans for the future as in the case of railways, infrastructural development and the like. Sitharaman cannot be blamed though. This government has no more than three months of existence, and would be in the lame duck mode after the end of this Budget session. Elections are at the doorstep and even the most-optimistic party cannot be sure as to who would win. Admittedly, the election system here is functioning on proper lines. The win for the opposition in states is proof of the strength of the electronic voting system.

Those who expected a fresh relief in terms of a raise in income tax levels were disappointed. The present levels would continue while corporate taxes have been brought down from 30 to 22 per cent. This reduction would be a boost to the investment climate. Significantly, direct tax collections have more than doubled in the past 10 years, while GST, or the 'one nation, one tax' system that unified the markets, has been a huge draw. Market reforms set in motion during the Manmohan Singh era and carried forward to their successful conclusion have also paid rich dividends in terms of revenue for the national exchequer as also state coffers. Sitharaman has asserted that the earnings thereof have been "wisely" used – meaning not squandered or looted. Admittedly, corruption at the level of ministers of the Union Cabinet is now unheard of even as the ruling dispensation is organising huge funds from National Highways and other contracts possibly for running the party's election machinery. Three railway economic corridors are promised to boost logistics efficiency while the promise is also to roll out 40,000 modern bogies in the coming years on the lines of Vande Bharat. A boost to the tourism sector is envisaged, with an offer of interest-free loans to states for development of this sector.

The budget speech has made a special mention of the population bulge. The reference to the formation of a high-power panel to submit a report on ways to check this drift could also be linked to the plans to introduce the Uniform Civil Code, a pet agenda of the RSS-BJP parivar. This is certainly a national cause as unbridled growth in population would hurt social well-being and the national economy. More so as the government is "feeding" the nation's poor. But this could also be interpreted as an attempt to target the Muslims. The government must take all segments of the population into confidence in such endeavours.

Letters to the Editor

Include Pnar lyrics in State Anthem

Editor,
I reiterate my stand that Pnar/Jaintia is one of the primary tribes (and not a sub tribe as many would like to club us) of Meghalaya. This fact is known to all but they choose to deny it for reasons best known to them. This includes the Government too. The State Government is buying time and waiting for the issue to die out by doing nothing but I urge upon the Pnar community to fight till the end.

We are simply asking for inclusion of a line or two in our state's anthem being the main tribe of the state. We are not asking for the moon or anything which is so big or impossible. Yet for this aspiration of the Jaintias, there arose scholars, historians and what not to describe the origin and history of the Jaintias almost daily in the esteemed newspaper of Shillong. Some of the writers had taken so much time and may have done rigorous research just to score their points. Some write-ups were

so long making one's head ache so as to allow all the intricacies of the history to stay with us while reading. Why does one have to spend so much time and energy on writing a comprehensive history for the sake of non-inclusion of my language in the anthem? It's uncalled for and if such writings are published some other time for the knowledge of students in particular and the general public, then one would have showered praises and accolades for their work.

Another aspect which I would like to stress here is that our Government is at fault by omitting the Pnar language in spite of knowing that the Pnars form a major tribe of the State. It did this deliberately and thereby opened up a Pandora's box for everything filthy to come out.

I cannot help wondering if our Jaintia leaders at the time of attaining statehood might have overlooked this matter or may have been so kind hearted that they did not insist on an equal/separate percentage of reservation quota for the people of Jaintia Hills at that time. Had our leaders been wiser and smarter, then perhaps this

Khasi language is one and it should grow stronger

By Mankular Lamin Gashnga

ous about this and to create a fertile environment for the language.

The sum of the parts is greater than the parts: The Khasi language as a whole is a continuum of many

tribute to help strengthen the standard written Khasi language.

This had already been done by some great writings in the Khasi language. One example is the incorpora-

"Khasi language has a lot of market value today. Today's youth are using the language in different forums and are trying to learn new ways of using the language. With the internet and social media, we should capitalise on these tools to help boost the relevance of the language. To achieve that, there are some things that need to be done by each one of us to contribute in whichever way we can, whether one is a student, a teacher, an officer, a politician, or anyone."

dialects which are variations of the whole. Everybody knows that the written Khasi language is in the form of the Sohra dialect because

tion into standard usage of the Pnar word 'kurim' for a spouse; I find it very classy and elegant instead of 'lok.' Also in literature the use



the founders found it to be a more convenient dialect because it is more polished (because it is a khun khatduh, as Bhogtoram Mawroh so beautifully put it) both due to its diction as well as in its consistency. It worked and it is a success story that no one can deny. We should

of the Waar-Amwai words such as 'khuri' in the line 'ka khuri jong nga ka shlei', (my cup overfloweth) instead of 'pela'; or when Soso Tham used the word 'shuri' in 'dang lah kaba sohkhliang u ryadang ha ka juwar ban ia kaba pynsmie' ia u ha 'ka shuri,' (better that my throat

"Religious institutions also play a very big and important role in shaping the minds of the people. Leaders of all NGOs are also responsible for the unification and uniformity of the Khasi language. We cannot leave it as it is. Our leaders have to be serious about this and to create a fertile environment for the language."

capitalise on this success of the missionaries and polish the language more by contributing to it vocabularies from other dialects like the Pnar, the Waar, the Maram and from whichever Khasi regional group that can con-

is scarred by the plough rather than tickle it with a knife. Such incorporations had added so much class to the Khasi language.

I had also heard some Pnar refer to wrestling as iaslait instead of ialympat

which is interesting. I had even heard from Nangbah village one word which they used for video or movie, but which slipped my mind now. Also, I find the playful use of the term 'koh 'siang' with the term 'koh' derived from the Maram dialect, for a fox, to be adding quite a lively characteristic to the Khasi language. Therefore, from Maram, from Bhoi, from the four corners of our society we can incorporate words that will enrich our beautiful Khasi language. [On my part, I had tried to list down some Waar words to contribute. These are 'hor' for curd instead of malai; or hor for die/dice; iah rkew for divorce; ludong for commode/sink and others.] I don't have to elaborate because I feel the readers have grasped the larger inclusion of words in the Khasi language. This cannot be achieved within a limited timeframe; sometimes not even in one generation, but we all should work

towards

it. Later on we can also think about incorporating one or two more letters into the present Khasi alphabets in order to update its relevance in many spellings

of words and names. Over time, the Khasi language that we know today will grow to become a monster of a language that will have an equal strength as many other major languages of the world. However, as I said, it takes time and it takes the right leaders.

Time to discard false pride and arrogance: Now is the time to unite and not to break the language into pieces. It is senseless to argue which room is the best room in the house when the whole house is on fire. We all remember the story of the oak tree that had been cut down for firewood by a woodcutter. When the woodcutter was breaking it down into pieces, he saw the tree weeping. Concerned, he asked why it was weeping. The tree replied, "That you had cut me down for firewood, I do not mind, for you are my enemy, but that you are using my own children as a wedge to tear me to pieces, is something I cannot bear to see." This is what we have become, children that tear into pieces their own mother, if we are to let this language conundrum to continue.

Motphran to Them Bijoy road in shambles

Editor,
The road leading from Motphran to Them Bijoy was dug out for laying of water pipes over a year ago. It is disappointing to note that after the laying of pipes, the entire stretch of this road has been lying unrepaired and unpaved since then. It is a matter of shame that the concerned department has totally neglected to repair and re-tar this road.

It seems that nobody cares about this notable road, which leads to the most important market of Meghalaya, ie Lewduh.

I request the concerned officials to get this road repaired on an urgent basis.

Yours etc.,
Sarad Bawri,
Shillong

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How did Shillong get its Name?

Dr Omarlin Kyndiah

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

A section of the Austric people called T'sin-taing or

from Kremlamet decided to settle at Saphohlynrum, while the majority remained at Kupli valley under the leadership of U Long Chyllong's nephew, U Synriang. He is the son of Long Chyllong's sister, Ka Lisan Chyllong. U Long's other siblings are U Sifi Chyllong and Ka Rah Chyllong. As they settled at Saphohlynrum, gradually they domesticated the land and started agriculture.

Worshipping mountain and river gods was one of the most important forms of nature worship. Around each god sprang up myths, legends, sacrificial rites, and procedures. Analysis of mountain god worship leads

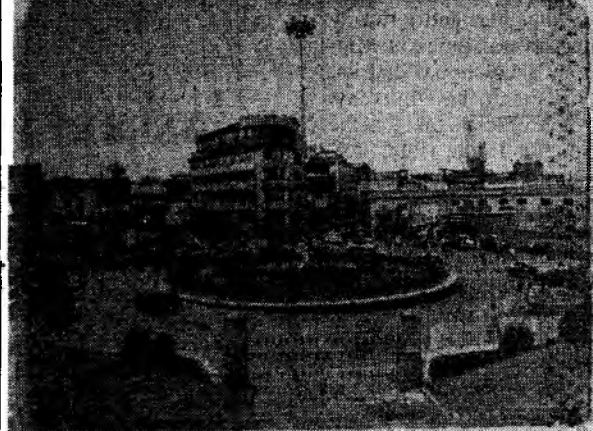
"A section of the Austric people called T'sin-taing or T'sin-tein migrated from China. They were later known as Zyntein or Synteng and now as Jaintia."

The view point that the Jaintias derived their present name from the goddess Jayantesvari or from the puranic Tantric literature or from their subject people in the plains is still debatable."

T'sin-tein migrated from China. They were later known as Zyntein or Synteng and now as Jaintia. The view point that the Jaintias derived their present name from the goddess Jayantesvari or from the puranic Tantric literature or from their subject people in the plains is still debatable. The Jaintia came to the north-east and settled at Kamrup now known as Guwahati. Due to the threat of raids and conquest by the Brahman of the

to a fuller understanding of Hyniewtrep mythology. According to tradition, U Long Chyllong built a sacred place of worship at the peak of Lum Chyllong (Shillong peak). Hence, the peak began to be deified and U Long Chyllong was made a King (Syiem Chyllong) who was regarded and revered as a god.

Meanwhile, the issue of ownership of the place of worship emerged between the Jaintias and the people



Indo-Aryan, the Jaintia migrated to the east and settled at the bank of the Kolong river. Subsequently, they moved south to establish an agricultural civilization on the fertile valley of the Kupli River which they called Kremlamet and situated in the present-day North Cachar Hills.

French scholar Przyluski mentioned an interesting find-

of Myllem. Oral tradition has it that both the parties decided to resolve the matter by prayer and libation to the deity. The Myllem people cleverly faked the ceremonial rites. The Jaintias who are the early settlers of Saphohlynrum eventually decided to return to their original native land at Kupli valley. On their way back, different clans and clan-

"On their way back, different clans and clan-clusters joined together and formed villages or Chnong in the present-day Jaintia Hills. Some migrated to the present Laitlyngkot and further down south to Mawphanrang, Sohra, Mawphu, Thied-dieng, and Jadien."

ing that the Austric tribes used to migrate in batches under a leader. Like other Austrics, the Jaintias according to oral traditions and folklore was led by their great leader U Lakriah. The myth of U Lakriah and the descendant of U Niaw Wasa (the Seven huts) through Ka Tangnoob Tangiri (the golden ladder) is connected with the origin myth of U Niaw Wasa or Hyniewtrep. Myths usually came about during a time when history, science, philosophy, and technology were not very precise.

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

The place they called Saphohlynrum, has a large variety of wild fruits and vegetables. The area is known for its rich soil and abundant access to water, a favourable spot for settlement. A section of the Jaintias who migrated

clusters joined together and formed villages or Chnong in the present-day Jaintia Hills. Some migrated to the present Laitlyngkot and further down south to Mawphanrang, Sohra, Mawphu, Thied-dieng, and Jadien. This migration led to the redistribution of the Jaintia population across the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the Jaintia plains.

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

These are stories handed down from the remote past by word of mouth from one generation to the next, reflecting the people's traditions, feelings, beliefs, and judgments. It is one of the numerous versions of the narrative of Shillong peak. There is an agreement these days, not only among the folklorists but social scientists as well, in accepting the historical potential of folklores. It is recognised as a social phenomenon being the expression of the shared experience of the people at a stage when they could not write their own history.

Shameless MDA government

Editor,
It is discouraging to observe that the MDA admin-

istration, led by the NPP, appears to be in deep debt, as is evident by numerous projects and plans. The main dam's durability is in jeopardy because the government borrowed 18 crores to restore it, according to reports. It is even more astonishing that this government still has not released the deposit funds to the appropriate departments, despite multiple agencies having done so. And let's not even mention the eight to ten percent of contractors whose bills have gone unpaid for months after they were released.

In addition, the city's defenseless contractors bore the financial burden of numerous state-sponsored events attended by very important persons. Despite the fact that contractors have been up at night worrying about the G20 summit for nearly a year, credible sources say that the single window system has still not approved their estimates. The Union Home Minister, Prime Minister, and President of the Country are among other dignitaries who had visited the State and will be visiting in the months to come.

As before, we observed the city's nocturnal facelift

decorations and bamboo barricades in addition to the pothole sealing. The Contractors, however, will be the ones to pay the price for the complacency of the administration. This government has no business refusing to pay such urgent bills. They must have found a way to reroute the funds from the deposits to cover other expenses. These occurrences prove that the MDA administration is financially strapped.

It appears that this administration spends a lot of money on celebrations like the Cherry Blossom Festival and the Meghalaya Games, among others, without giving a hoot about the contractors who feel deeply wronged. Please tell me where is the justice that the people of this state demand Mr Conrad K. Sangma? Spending money that should be going toward the deposit works seems like a waste.

Is this the kind of leadership that promises to turn Meghalaya's economy into one worth ten billion dollars? Will the government pay immediate attention to this undue delay of payment?

Yours etc.,
Bilcarson Rymbai
Shillong-3

"Where there is unity there is always victory."

— Publilius Syrus

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No: 172 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2024

Opposition unity imperative

LEADER of the Opposition in the Meghalaya Assembly, Ronnie V Lyngdoh's statement that he would approach the Opposition Party MLAs to collectively raise critical issues during the 8-day budget session of the House scheduled for February 16-27, 2024, is a welcome move. MLAs need to be reminded that they represent their constituents and not just their political parties and therefore it is important to rise above political differences and collectively make a case for better budget allocation on more substantial issues such as health, education, agriculture, horticulture among others. MLAs need to be more active and be connected to what's happening in the far flung areas of their constituencies. Not many debates have been witnessed in the Meghalaya assembly on issues related to the environment. The environment which includes forests, rivers, water bodies, reservoirs et al are left orphaned. There is none to take up their case because they can't speak for themselves. Meanwhile massive deforestation and unregulated quarrying continues in every part of the state with none of the state institutions aware of such goings-on and their attendant consequences.

In present times people who have visited the state after a gap of ten years have noticed the environmental devastation caused by quarrying which is equivalent to gouging out the rocks and boulders and selling them to Bangladesh. Any attempt to put a halt to this assault on the environment is met with the counterpoint that selling environmental products is a livelihood for many. But for how long can the environment sustain this?

There are several issues that the Opposition could coalesce on and take the Government to task for that is its prime role. For too long assembly sessions in Meghalaya have been constituency specific with few concerned about the state and its economic and developmental trajectory. Not much is discussed in the Assembly about job creation. Some of the government-created institutions under fancy names have been touting that they promote entrepreneurship. The very word "entrepreneur" needs to be broken down for the common person to understand and grasp as to what is required of him/her to join the bandwagon of "entrepreneurs. How many of the so-called entrepreneurs that have been launched with government assistance are able to access bank finance to scale up their businesses?

Meghalaya features very poorly in primary education. The medical colleges envisaged over ten years ago are yet to be up and functioning. The state invariably ends up with bidders that have no record of completing any project successfully. This state always picks the worst private partner in every public-private-partnership (PPP) project. It's time for the Opposition to put in quality time to study and research issues and ask questions that will make the Government sit up and act. Merely standing up and speaking without adequate facts and figures will not do. MLAs should spend part of their funds to employ research assistants to prepare questions and supplementaries. The Meghalaya Government has spent a substantial sum of money to send MLAs for training at the Indian School of Business, Mohali. It is high time these MLAs prove their worth.

Letters to the Editor

Identity, Language & Political Manipulation

Editor,
It is high time to unravel the 'Divide and Rule Strategy' in the Jaitbryniew before things go out of control. In recent editorial discussions, the contentious issue of Pnar/Jaintia identity and language has ignited debates, with various writers presenting diverse arguments. However, a discerning eye reveals an underlying attempt to sow division within the Jaitbryniew (community), seemingly orchestrated for political gains. This manipulation aims to portray the political landscape in the Khasi Hills as exclusive to the Khasi people, thereby undermining the representation of the Jaintia Hills.

The looming threat posed by a political party challenging the incumbent government has fuelled fears of losing power in the future elections. The exploitation of language and identity issues becomes evident as a tool for political gain, with individuals instrumentalizing these aspects to foster the perception that the political party from the Khasi Hills

prioritizes the interests of the Khasi people over those of the Jaintia Hills residents.

While the fear of political change prevails, it is crucial to recognize the disconnect between pre-election promises and post-election actions. Those in power, once empowered, often prioritize self-preservation and the perpetuation of their government rather than upholding the unity and development of the Jaitbryniew. This shift raises questions about the sincerity of leaders in safeguarding the collective interests of the community.

Addressing the call for a State anthem, it's pertinent to question its necessity when a National Anthem already exists, fostering a sense of brotherhood among the diverse populace. The real concerns of the people revolve around fundamental issues such as improved infrastructure, employment opportunities, affordable essential items, and other development projects. Introducing a state anthem at this juncture appears to be a diversionary tactic, steering the discourse away from substantive issues. In this context, the assertion is made that India requires only one anthem, the Jana-gana-mana, uniting the nation under a single emblem of shared identity.

This article is dedicated to the Rohingya people – victims of an ongoing genocide. Jan 27, 2024 was Holocaust Remembrance Day. Indeed, the horrors of the Shoah should never be forgotten. This does not mean there were no other genocides in the twentieth-century. If anything, this blood-stained century was – despite its remarkable scientific, technological, and economic progress – peppered with genocides. Moreover, genocides have continued into the twenty-first century.

Tragically, the list is long – from Myanmar's ongoing genocide against the Rohingya, and the Islamic State's genocide against the Yazidis – to Darfur, DRC, Rwanda, Bosnia, Bangladesh, etc. – all the way to the Shoah itself. Nor is it the case that the Shoah was the first genocide the world has ever seen. But it was unique, as is every genocide. In the end, what matter are not just the numbers killed, or the scale of cruelties, but the unfathomable, identity-based hatred itself. If the Shoah was unique in the chilling efficiency and brutality of its extermination techniques, then its victims were exemplary in their courage. The helplessness of the European Jews and others (the Sinti-Roma peoples, Slavs, homosexuals, etc.), their forced meekness, unimaginable courage, and unbearable agony – with children torn apart from parents sent to gas chambers – all this should haunt the world, so we strengthen our resolve to expunge genocides forever from human history. The Shoah should make us ever vigilant against mass hatred – especially identity-based xenophobia.

The Shoah should inspire Christians world-wide to expunge theological forms of antisemitism that have plagued western Christian thinking since the days of early Christianity. Christian antisemitism is a theologically defended prejudice that has led to concrete acts of antisemitism (pogroms, etc.). Only a historian would know if these acts led to the Shoah. Especially reprehensible is this central belief known as the Jewish decide – that people of the Jewish faith are, to this day, collectively responsible for the death of Jesus. While some Christian denominations (like the Catholic church) have repudiated this belief, not all have.

The Shoah has lessons also for Meghalaya and Assam. Kristallnacht (1938) should be a warning to all who wage pogroms against

Dkhars, destroying their homes, businesses, and places of worship – killing them with random cruelty. The Shoah should remind the Assamese to never ever repeat the horrors of the 1983 Nellie massacre against helpless Bengalis. It should remind Assamese leaders to avoid hate-laden epithets (like "Miya") against Bengali Muslims.

Finally, the Shoah should make us utterly vigilant before the dangers of Hindu fascism against religious minorities (especially Muslims and Christians), and the politically downtrodden (especially Dalits). If the European Jew, who had no choice but to walk meekly into Hitler's gas chambers, has made Israel what it is today – a state willing to go to any length to protect itself – then Hindu extremists might try and use the same argument to justify their fascism – saying it is in self-defense. They might justify themselves saying that centuries of invasions and oppression have converted the mild, into the militant Hindu,

Hindu practitioners should protest Hindutva's distortions of their great religion. The Shoah should inspire an uproar of protest against Hindu extremists, like Pooja Shakun Pandey (a senior member of the Hindu Mahasabha), who said (in Dec 2021), "If 100 of us become soldiers and are prepared to kill 2 million (Muslims), then we will win... protect India, and make it a Hindu nation." The Shoah should make us shudder at the 2015 words of Sadhvi Deva Thakur (at that time, a senior member of the same group) to reporters – that Christians and Muslims should undergo forced sterilization, in order to control their population growth.

Human genocide and the-riocide, or the mass killing of animals, are related. Often, victims of genocide are first dehumanized – by being compared to animals – before they are killed en masse. Indeed, Israeli leaders have called Palestinians human and inhuman animals. In the state of nature, animals can be very cruel to each other. But they never kill with the

"The helplessness of the European Jews and others (the Sinti-Roma peoples, Slavs, homosexuals, etc.), their forced meekness, unimaginable courage, and unbearable agony – with children torn apart from parents sent to gas chambers – all this should haunt the world, so we strengthen our resolve to expunge genocides forever from human history."

who does not hesitate to engage in ruthless violence. This includes India's extrajudicial murders in foreign nations and violent domestic acts in defense of a Hindu utopia. While it is true that India needs strong defense – because it is flanked by two formidable neighbors (China and Pakistan) – should Hindutva draw inspiration from Zionism, and RAW from Israel's Mossad? According to the American Prospect (Jan 18, 2015), "India's embrace of Israel... attests to how Israel has become a model for repressive governments and far-right movements worldwide, including in Italy, Hungary, Brazil, the Philippines and the United States."

Instead, the Shoah should inspire in us a wake-up call that strengthens our resolve against Hindu fascism. Groups like Bajrang Dal and others should destroy complacency in moderate practicing Hindus. More than non-Hindus, moderate

intelligent zeal unique to humans. Thus, Aristotle was right when he said that man when separated from law and justice, is the worst of all animals – but the best, when perfected.

In the context of the current tragedy unfolding in Gaza – the indomitable courage of the Jewish people during the Shoah, and thereafter, should inspire us to make careful distinctions between antisemitism and anti-Zionism, on the one hand – and between the Jewish people and the state of Israel, on the other. It should also inspire us to distinguish between Islamophobia and legitimate critiques of extremist Islamist organizations, like Hamas, ISIS, etc.

The world should be horrified that the state of Israel, in its Zionist zeal, appears to have learnt no lessons from the Shoah. Otherwise, it could not engage in a hi-tech war that is killing unarmed Palestinian women and chil-

dren with impunity. Given their gung-ho warmongering against the Palestinian people, Zionist state actors in Israel appear to have forgotten the horrors of the Shoah. Conversely, Hamas' dastardly cruelty in its Oct 7th, 2023, surprise attack on Israeli communities and military bases – although on a far smaller scale, and in that sense, not quite comparable with the Shoah – should be a stark reminder that antisemitism still kills. Tragically, some elderly Israelis have had to face both the Shoah and Hamas' attack.

Article II of the Genocide Convention defines genocide as a "crime committed with the intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, in whole or in part." Given this definition, technically, Israel's current actions in Gaza may not qualify as a genocide. However, this should not, in any way whatsoever, lessen Netanyahu's culpability and hypocrisy, or that of his warmongering supporters. The fact that he has cited the Old Testament to justify his war is a testament to his hypocrisy. The fact that they are willing to perpetrate violence on unarmed "alien others," notwithstanding memories of helpless unarmed Jewish Europeans killed during the Holocaust – the fact that collective memories of the Shoah have not deterred them from engaging in collective sadism against unarmed people – all this testifies to their hypocrisy. That Israel's Gaza war may not qualify technically as a genocide, should have no repercussions for the immediacy of the Gazan crisis. In no way whatsoever does it lessen the sufferings of the Palestinian people (in Gaza and the West Bank). At the same time, Palestinian suffering (now and in the past) can never justify the cruelty of Hamas, or of holocaust deniers and antisemites in the Arab world.

Does Israel's current hi-tech war count as self-defense? Was the 1948 Palestinian Nakba an echo of the 1941-1945 Shoah? Is Netanyahu an equivalent of Hitler? Ordinary people will always ask such questions. But they do not have the expertise to answer them. Only historians can attempt to address such questions. The rest of us should use Holocaust Day to purge ourselves of all identity based hatred, so we can begin the journey towards virtuous cosmopolitanism – a state of harmony that synthesizes myriad differences.

so far? What contributions have we, as conscientious citizens of the state made towards our state? How much noise are we making about the lack of proper health care, education, unemployment, pathetic road conditions, poor connectivity, corruption, nepotism, crime, substance abuse, etc., that inflict our society? Pertinent issues that need to be addressed and fought for are often left untouched. Perpetrators of crimes are often allowed to go scot free with little to no conviction. The worry and anxiety of every parent are multiple, starting from finding a good school, college, university, job while also facing myriad challenges in our day to day lives as to what young minds might fall prey to. Mind you these are detrimental to the physical and mental wellbeing of young minds. Starting 2024, let's hope that we channelise our thoughts and actions towards grave and serious matters that will benefit each one of us, the citizens of the state.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

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Will Arvind Keirival be the next on the pattern of Hemant Soren?

Delhi CM may not be given further chance as per ED script

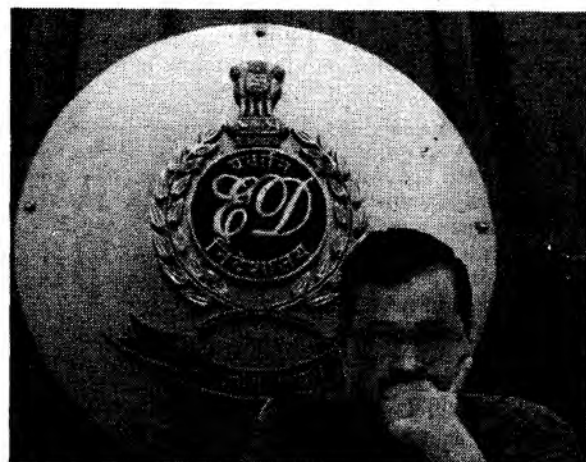
By Sushil Kutty

After Hemant Soren, will it be the turn of Arvind Keirival? Both of them are Chief Ministers who became targets of the Enforcement Directorate. The Jharkhand Chief Minister got arrested and had to resign. Hemant Soren says he will fight to win; fighting words, but the writing is on the wall. Problem is, the Modi government is whittling opposition Chief Ministers one after another and leaving them in Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra's wake.

Problem is also that in

procure a third term for Prime Minister Narendra Modi who is no different from Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping when it comes to tenures though Modi never tires of singing praise of the powers of electoral democracy.

After engineering the defection of JD-U to the NDA and "stealing" Nitish Kumar from right under the nose of the Bihar Mahagathabandhan, and scalping Hemant Soren, the Modi government is now all set to cripple the Aam Aadmi Party. Delhi Chief



Soren's instance, the cases against him smell bad and Hemant is in all sorts of trouble. Hemant Soren's arrest and abdication is a setback to the INDI-Alliance. That Soren couldn't run any further is a warning to Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal of what's in store for him? And with general elections round the corner, time is a problem for INDI-Alliance leaders in ED's crosshairs.

Minister Arvind Kejriwal faces imminent arrest and AAP is hard-put to find a replacement as and when Kejriwal throws in the towel. Fact is, Kejriwal cannot keep kicking the tin can ahead endlessly, he will have to surrender self-respect and reconcile to life in prison, just like Hemant Soren, who couldn't outrun a 10th ED summons.

The defiant Kejriwal has so far skipped four summons. A fifth one and he has

The defiant Kejriwal has so far skipped four summons. A fifth one and he has rejected that, too. The sad fact about ED summons is, none of Kejriwal's INDI-Alliance partners can help the Delhi Chief Minister escape the ED summons. They can only criticize and condemn, make a hue and cry in the media. Kejriwal can help himself, though, by joining the BJP, thereby avoiding jail. If politicians dread anything, it's jail. But for how long will Arvind Kejriwal rule Delhi from a Tihar cell?

Also, with INDI-Alliance running short of leaders, one after another, the burden of carrying the hopes and aspirations of the Opposition is falling on the much-tested shoulders of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi. RJD leaders Lalu Prasad Yadav and Tejashwi Yadav also have the ED after them. The INDI-Alliance is facing a leadership crunch and by the time elections are overhead, only Rahul Gandhi and Mallikarjun Kharge might be there to represent the "28-party" INDIA Block.

Unfortunately, Rahul Gandhi's record of winning elections isn't something to write home about though after the Congress victories in Karnataka and Telangana, which came on the heels of Rahul's south-north Bharat Jodo Yatra, there was jubilation in the Congress camp that Rahul Gandhi was finally delivering to his potential. The Gandhi scion is now on the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra and it isn't as smooth going as the 'Bharat Jodo Yatra'.

For various reasons, east to west is a bumpy road compared to the level progress of the south-north Bharat Jodo Yatra. The Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra has had to contend with disruptive adversaries including taking friendly fire from an INDI-Alliance partner. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is difficult to please. As it turned out, Banerjee was no less hostile than the BJP's Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

The story so far for the INDI-Alliance is of losing Chief Ministers and of Chief Ministers falling to BJP traps, starting with Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar who is now in the BJP-led NDA and has been recruited to help

rejected that, too. The sad fact about ED summons is, none of Kejriwal's INDI-Alliance partners can help the Delhi Chief Minister escape the ED summons. They can only criticize and condemn, make a hue and cry in the media. Kejriwal can help himself, though, by joining the BJP, thereby avoiding jail. If politicians dread anything, it's jail. But for how long will Arvind Kejriwal rule Delhi from a Tihar cell? It is more than likely, ultimately, he'll have to find his own "Champi".

Fact is, Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra will be wading through hostile BJP held terrain for the next few weeks. Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh included. Even Maharashtra. The Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra will not hit Delhi and Arvind Kejriwal and Bhagwant Mann happen to be the only INDI-Alliance Chief Ministers left to welcome Rahul's 'Nyay' yatra. It is almost like, the BJP/Modi regime has been whittling Opposition Chief Ministers, one by one, from the given route of the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra.

The ED's fifth summons to Arvind Kejriwal may be the last he skips. Like Hemant Soren's experience suggested, after a point even running from the ED does not help. If the agency wants, it will even hound. Soren could only run so far, and no further. AAP's "legal team" is mulling options. But with every passing day, there may not be many options left. Kejriwal was scheduled to address a protest rally outside the BJP headquarters in Delhi on February 2. Sounds like Kejriwal is tired of skipping summons. He wants to claim martyrdom. The question is, where will that leave the INDI-Alliance? (IPA Service)

Much ado about a State Anthem

Editor,
The state anthem released in the 52nd year of our statehood has created a lot of debate. Perhaps never in the past has the news daily in the state been bombarded with so many scholarly and researched write-ups as those we are reading these days.

Expanding on these perspectives, it becomes evident that the divide and rule strategy is a calculated move to distract the community from pressing socio-economic issues. A deeper analysis is required to unravel the intricacies of this political game, examining the historical context, socio-cultural dynamics, and the vested interests at play.

Examining the historical aspect reveals instances where similar divisive strategies were employed to perpetuate political dominance. Understanding these patterns can shed light on the recurrent use of identity and language as instruments of manipulation. It is essential to delve into the socio-cultural fabric to comprehend the significance attached to language and identity within the Jaitbryniew, exploring how these factors contribute to a shared sense of belonging or create fissures that can be exploited for political ends.

Moreover, a thorough exploration of the economic landscape is imperative to comprehend the genuine concerns of the Jaitbryniew. Unemployment, insufficient infrastructure, and escalating prices of essential commodities are issues that demand urgent attention. Investigating the impact of

Yours etc.,
David L,
Via email

There are benefits to sharing bed with pets – as long as you’re scrupulously clean

When heading off for a night’s slumber, does your pet follow? Perhaps the cat curls up at the end of your bed. Maybe the dog dives under the duvet or pops their head on your pillow. Alternatively, your pet might have their own devoted sleeping space.

But if you do share your bed with Fluffy or Fido, what does science suggest is best practice?

Pets increasingly have new roles and expectations in society.

Dogs, cats and a multitude of other companion animal species have become family members, a role far removed from their original purposes as protectors, hunting partners, pest-exterminators and in some cases, food sources.

Owners now spend much more time in close contact with their pets, which confers many benefits.

Positive associations with pets are linked with improved health, social contact, physical activity, and decreased perceptions of loneliness.

While people typically share living spaces with their pets, sharing beds is a much more intimate proposition. Nevertheless, research shows that of the estimated 90 million European households who own a least one pet, 45% of dogs and 60% of cats are allowed on the bed – and 18% of dogs and 30% of cats sleep with their owner inside the covers.

While it might be enjoyable and relaxing to share resting time with your pet, it could come with risks to pet and human health, not to mention impacts on sleep hygiene and human relationships too.

Disturbed Sleep

One challenge of sharing your bed with your pet could be disturbed sleep. The movement of sleeping partners (two or four-legged) may lead to reduced sleep efficiency, although a bed large enough to accommodate all can mitigate this.

Encouraging your pet to sleep elsewhere, but within the bedroom could also be beneficial if sleep disturbance is affecting your wellbeing. Our pets also need quality sleep, so their own sleeping space might be good for them too.

But shared sleeping areas can have positives. Many owners like to sleep with their pets, who can offer companionship, security and even warmth.

More than 80% of dogs examined in studies preferred to be close to people at night, suggesting a mutual benefit.

Different species of pets also appear to spend time resting together, so if you have a multi-pet household, all might enjoy shared sleeping.



Bed bugs

Pets sometimes bring unwanted guests into our homes such as fleas, ticks, mites and lice. These ectoparasites might hop from our pets to us and either cause transient or more prolonged irritation. In extreme cases, they can transmit other, potentially serious diseases such as plague or “cat scratch disease”, an infection caused by bacteria in cat saliva.

Pets often also harbour internal parasites such as the roundworm *Toxocara canis* – a parasite that affects both cats and dogs – some of which can be passed to humans, resulting in illness. Microscopic eggs that can cause infection can be carried on the fur of our pets and close contact increases the potential of spread between pets and people.

The potential for other disease-causing organisms including bacteria, viruses and fungi to spread between our pets and us is also of concern, especially antibiotic-resistant bacteria such as MRSA. Indeed, we can even share infections with our pets – including COVID-19 – so it’s not all one-sided.

Allergies and injuries

Sharing intimate contact with pets does raise the potential for increasing allergic responses or injury risk. Minor, unintentional injuries such as scratches can occur. Contact with dust and dander from pet hair can be prolonged when in close proximity. This material can also accumulate in the environment, potentially increasing the risk of allergic reactions.

Some pets may develop behavioural concerns such as separation-related

behaviours as a result of sharing intimate spaces and prolonged contact with their human. Conversely, some owners choose to allow their pet access to sleeping areas to reduce problem behaviours such as door scratching or nighttime vocalising. Fair, consistent training and expectations between a pet and their owner can go a long way to mitigate any such concerns, no matter where a pet sleeps.

Keeping it clean

If you do share your bed with your pet, good hygiene and regular cleaning is a must. Advice suggests that at least weekly washing of bed sheets is good practice. If you share your bed with pets, washing bedclothes every three to four days is suggested.

The fur and feet of our pets can be contaminated with dirt and pathogens too. This leads to potential contamination “hotspots” in sleeping areas. Bacteria from faeces was isolated from the paws of 86% of dogs in one study. Cleaning pet paws after being outdoors is a good strategy to reduce contamination risk.

Regular grooming and bathing (when appropriate) is important for pet health monitoring and wellbeing. It can also support a positive human-pet bond and reduce the potential for spreading potential infection.

The use of anti-parasitic treatments under veterinary advice can also minimise the carriage and spread of internal and external parasites to caregivers and other pets.

It’s bedtime

Whether you choose to share your bed with your pet depends on a number of factors, including lifestyle, health and even the relationship with your pet.

Balancing the potential downsides of sharing a bed with your pet, with possible benefits is important to assess whether it is a good choice for you or not. Indeed, sleep disruption due to bed-sharing with pets is not as detrimental to sleep quality as often thought.

With good hygiene and management, the choice to share your sleep with your pet might just give you both a great night’s sleep. (*The Conversation*)



‘Star - Gazing’

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, FEBRUARY 4, 2024

‘Birthday Forecast’

Moon sextile Mercury on your solar return chart denotes a good year. Improving your skills will be a focus in this year, and some of you will do so formally, benefiting greatly from it. There is a growing need to buckle down with your education or to learn more specific skills rather than broad topics now. This is an excellent period for skills development no matter what your age, and you’ll want to prepare for the cycle that begins at the tail end of this year. The Stars urge you to discipline yourself in your professional life and reminds you of the importance of structure, responsibility, and reputation. A career peak of sorts is on its way.

‘This week for you’

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You are individualistic brilliant and daring in professional aspects as new projects get under way. This is an exceptionally exciting time as professional and business opportunities are offered to you during this time. You could be impatient in love and relationships as you are overflowing with energy this week. Relationships take on a lighthearted aspect as children play an important role. You are more stimulated by all that is unconventional during this cycle, and your ideas are original and progressive now.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You win debates, competitions and sports with your dynamic energy and power. Emotional attachments and relationships are rewarded with reciprocity. Some interesting people are drawn to you and invite you to work with them. This is a good time to attend to matters that require attention since you are received well by others. Think about the attachments you have—to things, people, and routines—and consider which ones are dragging you down. This is a time when competitive energies and the ego are on a bit of a break.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You would be able to face truths, deal with emotional choices or difficult situations. Your position of power and authority is maintained despite many changes all around. You can draw correct conclusions from previous knowledge of people you meet again personally when making important decisions. Business projects and associations are opening up and widening your horizons so you need to think expansively from now onwards. A new cycle begins with the old order finishing as inner and outer changes are on the cards. Health problems are resolved and your energy is restored.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Personal relations are packed with emotions and feelings and you enjoy the company of loved ones. Practical details are to be dealt with clarity and efficiency. You may be involved in meetings with business associates, as financial and business dealings would bring good results and gains. You can count on your professional and personal partners, as they stand by you. You will work in a free and unrestricted space. Physical energy and good health allow you to tackle busy schedules.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Your actions and emotions are balanced as you bring more accuracy in your work area. You connect with new people and discuss important business matters. Your professional skills wisdom and craft is appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Personal relations are satisfying and you have plenty of goodwill and friendships around you. Your partner is especially supportive. You could be attracted to new people and ideas as you are open and receptive. But you must conserve your financial resources for priorities that have to be met at the end of the week.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) The unpredictable is likely to happen and that too when you least expect it. Surprises are in store for you in professional and personal matters. It would be best to be open and receptive in personal relations and family situations. A flexible approach in the work area is recommended. New

people may come into your life and influence your decisions and direction. Don’t be thrown by new developments. Balance in all areas and field of activities is recommended this week. You could be depleted of resources and forces if you don’t manage them properly. Meditation and spiritual pursuits can be rewarding and worth pursuing.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This week opens up a world of romance and love in personal relations. You are gracious with family and children. You are likely to be involved in creative pastimes. You would express yourself in a gracious and exalted manner and influence people in authority this week. You may handle more than one project at the same time with expertise and success. Commercial transactions and business deals could be conducted effectively this week. Money matters take priority, as some unexpected expenditures have to be met. End of the week brings fresh energy, love and romance in important relationships.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) The planetary configuration brings mixed results for you. A partner’s resources could have a significant impact on your home life. Finding joy in developing intimacy is featured, and this is a time where you develop and enhance your love on a deeper level. Work could be moving towards more research and development. The work you do could be supported by your spouse or other people’s money in general, such as work in finance. You achieve success as you are brilliant and there is good fortune attending professional, personal and material aspects.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You are bold, courageous and frank while dealing with controversial, professional and family matters. You are likely to meet well known authoritative people and share ideas and spend a fruitful time in their association. A stimulating project should be taken as a challenge that would further and promote your business prospects. Good planning and management lead to progressive and productive ventures. You may take a short break before starting on a new project to renew your energy. You are able to achieve a lot at home and at work with youthful energy.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) Your social life is expansive and a variety of people connect with you. You are stronger and wiser after having gone through trouble and difficulty. It would be wise to face difficult people and situations rather than escape as there would be victory and success in professional ventures. Don’t take the one you love for granted but show your love and appreciation. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting as business opportunities are extended to you. Meditation is needed for gaining deeper insight into personal relations and complex situations.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You have the ability to stand alone and have strong positive energy. You are independent, creative, original, ambitious, determined and self-assured. Adopting a realistic, practical and disciplined approach towards life would bring harmony at home. You would have good support from family members. While you work on one project another suddenly gains more importance and demands more attention. A financial windfall is possible as some backlog is handed to you after a period of time. Sports and physical activities keep you fit and energetic.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You are fortunate as things turn out well in difficult situations at work and home during this period. Your financial situation looks promising if you manage it well personally rather than trust upon others. Personal relationships are warm and comfortable as you spend beautiful moments with your loved one. A relaxed and light attitude would help to overcome negative thoughts. Examining the past in order to improve the future is certainly worthwhile, as long as you don’t expend all your energy. Creative opportunities should not be ignored as it is likely to bring substantial professional material gain.

10 reasons why e-cigarettes and vaping devices can trigger serious health issues



Vaping continues to pose irreversible dangers for society with new-age gateway products using innovative marketing techniques to lure children and youngsters. In today’s age of information overload and misinformation, it is extremely vital for citizens to have access to credible and accurate information to ensure they do not fall prey to activities promoted by vested interests.

Mothers against Vaping, a united front of concerned mothers combatting the escalating vaping crisis among our youth, has highlighted 10 major health risks associated with vaping as it seeks to raise awareness about vaping and various health hazards ranging from excessive usage of nicotine to severe lung injury in children.

The first risk it has highlighted is that new-age tobacco devices, unlike typical cigarettes, can result in excessive nicotine intake and these devices enable more prolonged usage sessions.

Secondly, there is a prevalent misconception that the vapours emitted from new-age tobacco devices are harmless, but in reality, these emissions consist of a range of harmful substances, including nicotine, diacetyl, which are linked to severe lung injury. The aerosol produced by e-cigarettes contains particulate matter smaller than 2.5 microns (PM2.5), notorious for its detrimental impact on respiratory health. The 2019 e-cigarette or vaping product use-associated lung injury (EVALI) outbreak in the United States serves as a stark reminder that led to the hospitalisation of numerous Americans, predominantly teenagers and young adults, resulting in enduring lung damage and pulmonary dysfunction for many survivors.

Thirdly, the dangers of New-Age Gateway Devices go beyond just respiratory health issues. E-cigarettes, in particular, harm blood vessels, increasing the risk of heart disease. They are also linked to negative effects on the immune system and reproductive organs.

Fourthly, these devices contribute to environmental issues and consequently harm humans. The components of New-Age Tobacco Devices, including a cartridge, an atomizer, and a battery, contain materials such as metals and ceramics. Improper disposal of these components contributes to e-waste, posing environmental hazards.

For example, e-cigarette batteries can lead to environmental pollution with heavy metals, seeping into the soil and contaminating groundwater, rivers and lakes. This contamination not only harms the environment but also poses risks to human health, with children being more vulnerable than adults.

The fifth health hazard pertains to mental well-being. Peer-reviewed studies have revealed troubling connections between vaping, nicotine and the exacerbation of symptoms related to depression and anxiety. The findings suggest higher chances for individuals to be diagnosed with depression due to their vaping habits.

Sixth, the chemicals in these products pose a significant risk to oral health, leading to issues like gum disease, tooth decay and oral infections. A study by NYU College of Dentistry in February 2022 found that e-cigarettes alter the microbiome, contributing to gum diseases. The microbiome, a diverse community of bacteria and microorganisms in the gum, can be adversely affected by e-cigarette use, intensifying or causing oral health problems.

Seventh, using these New-Age Tobacco Products during pregnancy poses serious risks to fetal health, significantly increasing the chances of adverse outcomes such as preterm birth, low birth weight, and developmental complications in new-borns.

Eighth, health hazard is that alternative tobacco products could act as a gateway to more severe addictions like cocaine and heroin. Early exposure and addiction to nicotine through these alternatives might pave the way for individuals, especially young users, to experiment with stronger addictive substances, significantly impacting their overall health and well-being.

Ninth, nicotine exposure from new-age devices during crucial adolescent brain development can have lasting effects on cognition, attention and impulse control. This not only disrupts learning environments but also hampers the cognitive development of students engaging in this harmful behaviour.

Last but not the least, a crucial health hazard posed by these new-age gateway devices is their susceptibility to malfunctions or explosions, leading to severe risks such as burns, facial trauma and tragically even fatalities for users. E-cigarette batteries can explode without warning through a process called “thermal runaway,” occurring when the battery overheats, leading to dangerous increases in internal temperature resulting in fire and explosion. Conditions like overcharge, puncture, external heat and short circuits can trigger thermal runaway.

Manufacturers of these devices target children and youth to create lifelong customers. Alarmingly, children aged 13–15 are using e-cigarettes more than adults in all WHO regions. To address this issue, it is essential to actively disseminate accurate information about the genuine risks associated with these products, dispelling any misleading perceptions and ensuring the protection of our children and youth. (*LANSLife*)

"Time is the father of truth, its mother is our mind."

—Giordano Bruno

The Shillong Times

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Advani as Bharat Ratna

LAL Krishna Advani, in the sunset of his life, must feel relieved that he has not been forgotten. It was out of the blue that Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a Bharat Ratna for the 96-year-old leader. While admitting that Advani is a controversial figure, his good qualities deserve adulation. When most politicians of today are after power and pelf, Advani is made of a different mettle. His commitment to the cause -- of turning the BJP into a powerhouse from being a party with just two MPs in 1984 -- was unique.

While Atal Behari Vajpayee was the face of the BJP, its growth into a strong political establishment was engineered at the organizational level by Advani. His Rath Yatra changed the course of national politics. It culminated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. The massive riots that killed over 2000 people, followed by the Gujarat riots that killed another 2000, were dark moments in the nation's history. Advani cannot escape the blame. There's blood on his hands. In vertically dividing the Indian society on communal lines, Advani played the lead role in association with various arms of the Sangh Parivar. While it was Advani's commitment to the cause that energized him, the RSS changed its tactics and eventually denied him the top political badge -- the PM's post. It first rubbished him over his praise of Mohammad Ali Jinnah during the veteran's Pakistan trip. Alongside, Advani's protégé Narendra Modi was projected as the future PM. From then on, the two fell apart. One of the first acts of Modi as PM in 2014 was to relegate Advani, MM Joshi etc to insignificant advisory roles. He did so via the formation of a Margdarshak Mandal for leaders who crossed the age of 75. Very little was heard of Advani after this. He was resigned to fate, maintained a dignified silence and avoided the limelight.

Advani led a simple life. Even while he functioned as deputy prime minister, Advani used his rickety old vehicle for his personal use on Delhi's roads. He was unassuming and gelled well with the rank and file. He steered clear of corruption though some of his family members in later years made wealth via real estate deals. No one could raise an accusing finger against Advani in this respect. As home minister, he was outstanding and had shades of Iron Man Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Advani watched the 10 years of the NDA-BJP-Modi rule from the sidelines. Silence was golden for all those in the Margdarshak Mandal. They were aware the party and the nation were caught in a Modi aura. All things considered, LD Advani deserves a Bharat Ratna.

The King is dead; long live the king

By H H Mohrmen

They say history is dry and boring, but there has not been a more exciting time for local history than this. The excitement, the interest, and the penchant to learn the history of the Jaintia kingdom are rather unprecedented.

Why the King is dead; long live the king?

It is the phrase used to announce the death of the monarch and the installation of the new king, but in this context, it connotes a new meaning. Not many of my articles have sparked the same interest as the article that was published on Monday last. The debate that followed after I had shared my last week's article on my Facebook page continued for days together. From a layman in the street to an activist, a former bureaucrat, and scholars, they all took part in the debate. This compelled me to do a deep dive on the subject and try to answer the questions that friends raised and clear some of the doubts that still exist in the minds of the people. Therefore, in this context, the phrase has a different connotation, and though the Jaintia monarch has ceased to exist since 1835 when it was annexed by the British, the interest in knowing about the kingdom has only begun. Though the kingdom has ceased to exist for 200 years, yet the Jaintia kings continue to live in the minds and hearts of the people.

Don't blame the good old Brits

One of the arguments suggested on my timeline was that the term 'Jaintia' was introduced and promoted by the British by employing their famous "divide and rule policy" to divide the tribe. It was alleged that the name was suggested to create a schism in the tribe where none existed before. The British officers may have made many mistakes and created a lot of mess during the heydays of the British Raj, but blaming them for naming the region Jaintia is too far-fetched. I think, at least on this issue, we should spare the good old Brits and stop blaming them for the mess that is of our own making. The reason is that although many may not have been aware of it, or even the locals may not realize the fact that the profound relationship between the people and the kingdom runs deep in the psyche, the stories, the structures, and the traditions of the people.

The kingdom, the pride of the people

The two articles help rekindle the pride that people have in their kingdom. In

fact, my interest in the kingdom started from the stories I learned when I was a kid, and it grew when I saw for the first time the coin of Jaintia kings at the Museum in Kolkata. Now there is a book on the coinage of Jayantiapur by N.G Rhodes and S.K Bose. For many, the fact that unlike other tribal chiefs, the Jaintia king is not a mere tribal chieftain and one of the few kingdoms which issues coins is an eye-opener. They have also constructed paths and structures to showcase their greatness. Since ancient times, the Jaintia kingdom is known as the female kingdom and, till the last king, like any matrilineal institution, the kingship in the kingdom also passed from uncle to the nephew, not from the father to the son.

It's in the name?

The naysayers have asked, why the name Jaintia and not Sutnga? If (as one theory suggested) the Sutnga kings

followed the Tantric form of Hinduism. When we also converted to Christianity we adopted Christian or Biblical names, likewise the Jaintia kings used Sanskrit or Hindi names.

What would we miss if there's no kingdom?

'Ka luti syiem' or the Royal path remnant of which can be seen till date would not have been there if it is not for the kings. Oral narratives have it that the king commissioned two of their Mars, u Mar Bailon Khyndiem and u Mar Luh Laskor, to construct the path from Nartiang to Jayantiapur. But the study suggested that the path goes much beyond Nartiang. It was Dr B. Pakem who pointed out that unlike in the other himas where one can find monoliths dotted across the skyline, in Jaintia hills, people also have megalith structures, and the four stone bridges on this path are testimony to fact. There would

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be no path, and there would be no stories about the Mars if there was no Jaintia king, and people continue to share these stories.

There would be no monolith in Nartiang if there is no kingdom because the monoliths at Nartiang were erected in commemoration of the installation of one of the Jaintia kings. The carving and the sculpture at Syndai, which include an image of Ganesha, would not have been there if it was not for the Jaintia kings. The 'thaw sum syiem' or the Rupasor Bathing ghat at Syndai, and the beautiful elephant sculptures around the pool and the limless baby elephant image at the um Pubon would not have been sculpted if there was no kingdom. There are other sculptures and carvings on stones in and around Jaintia hills and they all have a connection with the Jayantia kingdom.

There would be no stories about u Mar Bir Nongpoh, u Mar Phalangki, u Tep Kyndait, u Ran Nangti, u Sajar Nangli, and the Thadlaskin Lake if there was no Jaintia

kingdom. The stories of these important personalities continue to be narrated to this day. Not many know that there are five temples in Jaintia which have a history connected with the kingdom, one in Syndai, and another at Borkhat, the other one on the no-man's-land near Muktapur, the Shiv temple, and the Jayanti Devi temple at Nartiang. Only the last two temples are still being used, and the rest are abandoned, yet the history of all these temples goes back to the time of the Jaintia kingdom. The story of 'ka thmi thad khair' a battle between the Nongtaland and the Padu also has a connection with the kingdom.

The residents of Saitsama who are of Zo-Kuki descent also have a dance which they say is connected with the tribe paying homage to the king. The 'chonha' of the War Jaintia people, which is a lamentation, also has a competition which has to do with narrating the story of the Jaintia kingdom. The 'Longhai' which is a wedding tradition practiced by the War Jaintia people in the jhum cultivation also has mention about the king in some of the chants.

The king still lives

The king is not dead; he still lives in the traditions and the religious rituals that people have been practicing since time immemorial. I did not have the opportunity to study the people and the traditional religion of the Pnar who live in Jayantiapur, but the religion and the tradition of the people who live in Nartiang are the living examples of the religion as practiced in the past. Nartiang is the remnant of the tradition and the ancient religion practiced by the people during the reign of the king. Religion as practiced by the Nartiang is the synthesis of tribal religion and Hinduism, and the main festival at the Shakti peeth is the Durga puja.

Till today, during every Durga Puja, the Daloi of Nartiang has to offer two goats at the altar, one goat in his name 'ka blang Daloi' and another on behalf of the king known as 'ka blang syiem'. So, effectively, though the king has ceased to exist for a long time, yet he still lives in the traditions as a goat is still being offered in his name every year.

Jaintia is not a myth or a story, but a powerful and flourishing country that could issue coins. Perhaps the Jaintia kings are the only tribal kings in the area which could do so. Suffice to say that its history needs to be put on record and shared far and wide.

Fight Cancer, Fight It Any Day

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

This year the World Cancer Day falls on Sunday, February 4, and perhaps there was no public or official function to observe this day but I am certain that people are fervently praying in their homes, Temples, Mosques and Churches for their fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, friends and neighbours who are struggling to be healed from this dreadful disease. I join them, not only today, rather daily in their battles and pray along with them that the Almighty grants them and all of us the courage and strength to fight another day and grants us the grace to use our pain to reach out to others, to help and support. We also pray that God touches us with healing hands and comforts us with hope. Let us find solace in the embracing love of the Almighty. The fight against Cancer warrants us to lend our hands and walk alongside those battling against it.

In the State of Meghalaya with the low income and poor economy, Cancer results not just in untimely deaths of patients, but also cost people's earnings and livelihoods so dearly. It is disheartening to learn that Meghalaya tops in Cancer prevalence with East Khasi Hills District as the second highest Cancer incidence rate in the country.

With the advancement in medical sciences, hundreds of Cancer patients had sur-

where do they turn to for quality health care? Is the universal health insurance scheme in the State, like the MHIS, enough? A disease like Cancer does not just torment the patients, but the entire family. Therefore, the priority and primary duty of the State is to provide a holistic and universal support system. But in the context of the deteriorating health care system in the State a campaign for universal, affordable and quality health care is imperative.

No doubt, the State does have specialized doctors, trained and committed medical professionals who can serve and whose services we desperately need. But questions remain as to what is the quality of machines/health infrastructures, availability of medicines, human resources and care which are the prerequisites for Cancer treatments?

After more than fifty years of Statehood a special audit can also be conducted as to how much the Government had spent for Cancer treatments etc., of its esteemed regular employees outside the State? Perhaps such an audit will give us an idea of the cost being incurred from the State exchequer which will in turn guide and make the Government to improve health care facilities in the State and result in cutting down the costs and help people to have access to treatment within the State. Should not the same medical reimbursements be awarded to all the employees, including the contractual workers

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vived the pain, trauma and deaths which it entails. In the words of a Cancer survivor who said, "I want people to know that it is possible not just to survive, but to thrive and live a wonderful life again." These words will certainly give hope to hundreds of patients and their families, but they may sound meaningless to someone who couldn't afford the cost nor has access to quality treatment.

In the neo-liberal era, health care is costlier than ever and it is slowly being converted into a privilege, rather than a right. Cancer treatment is costly and long driven and Marianna Mazucato, the author of Value of Everything rued that, "today the price of Cancer treatments and medicine is extremely high and has touched the sky". This forced patients and families into bankruptcy, and they had to sell off properties and exhaust their lifetime savings to meet exorbitant medical expenses.

It is also a fact that in Meghalaya, many Cancer patients take recourse to traditional treatments or "dawai Khasi" and the State abounds in traditional medical practitioners, especially in rural areas. The people are also content with these indigenous or folk healers for healing and survival. On the other hand, a good number of Cancer patients from the State availed treatment in the best hospitals in the Country and the State Government reimburses the medical bills for its regular employees. Besides, there are an equal number of Cancer patients who undergo treatment in Civil and other privately owned hospitals in Shillong. Therefore, citizens of Meghalaya can easily draw a comparison between Cancer treatments which are available within and outside the State.

Unlike workers in formal and government sectors in the State, unorganized/daily wage and contractual workers with low wages and other low-income groups, who do not have health insurances,

of the State Government? How far has the State been able to provide the necessary support system to Cancer patients and families who are outside the gate?

In today's world, Cancers are treatable, and patients can recover and resume their lives, provided they have access to quality health care and support systems. Patients need financial, physical and psychological support. A better health care system also includes a strong socio-economic support system, and this is the essence of tribal society of Meghalaya where care and support for the sick, old age etc., is considered a sacramental duty. However, in the process of urbanization and materialism this element in tribal society is being eroded and this has adversely impacted the overall wellbeing and happiness of the people.

In the fight against Cancer, we need to rediscover the lost socio-economic support system for the sick and destitute found in close knit tribal society. More importantly is to enhance the universal health insurance scheme to not less than ₹ 30 lacs and the scheme should cover every ailment and expand the benefits under the scheme to provide free and quality health care and cancer treatments to BPL families. The State of Meghalaya is also known to be religious and spiritual. There are a number of religious groups who care for the state/society and therefore it is high time for them to engage in giving palliative care and support (not only with prayers) to improve the quality of life of Cancer patients.

Let me conclude with the words of Bishop Shelby Spong, Anglican Bishop of Newark, USA who said, "to pray for the will of God to come is to make a commitment to be actively and passionately involved in the affairs of life, including a commitment to share our life, our humanity and our bread with everyone..."

Letters to the Editor

The language debate

Editor,
Paul Sidwell, a noted Australian linguist and an expert on Austroasiatic languages who currently serves as the President of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society (SEALS) wrote in his book, "The Khasian Languages," Classification, Reconstruction & Comparative Lexicon & I quote, "The branching relations indicated here suggest that Khasi began as a marginal Pnar dialect which subsequently expanded and restructured under special social conditions, especially the British colonization and Christian proselytization in recent centuries."

A lot has been said and written about the exclusion of the Pnar dialect in the State anthem which was released a few days ago with many voicing their disquiet and disappointment and some opining that such an act is a deliberate attempt to sideline and undermine the Pnar's collective identity. But deconstructing the above statement by Paul Sidwell, the Sohra dialect (Khasi language) is a marginal pnar dialect which gained promi-

nence on account of the efforts of the British colonial rulers to make the Sohra dialect the lingua franca of the larger Khasi community. From a linguistic point of view, it puts to rest the argument for inclusion of the Pnar dialect since according to Paul Sidwell, the Khasi language is actually a marginal Pnar dialect; inclusion of the standard Pnar dialect in the state anthem would be akin to Double counting in National Income Accounting; double counting in National Income Accounting is treated as an error and inclusion of the standard Pnar dialect in the State Anthem would also be an error.

Putting aside the academic viewpoint, even from the layman's point of view it is undeniable that the Khasi language (Sohra dialect) and the standard Pnar dialect have common roots. Many a time, I've played Pnar songs and asked my non Khasi friends who have some familiarity of the Khasi language to identify the language of the song and naturally they would always say it is a Khasi song. As many have also pointed earlier, there are many other dialects spoken in different parts of Khasi and Jaintia Hills and dialects like that of the Lyngngam and the War

Jaintia dialect have no mutual intelligibility with either the Standard Khasi or Standard Pnar dialect. The beauty of our country is its diversity. No other country is as diverse as India but at the end of the day unity should take precedence over other things and the only unifying factor that will bring people closer together be it at the country or state level is a common language.

Yours etc.,
Gary Marbanangi,
Via email

Double standards of the US

Editor,
After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, several sporting bodies banned teams and players from Russia and Belarus from taking part in international sporting events. When they are allowed to participate, they have to play as neutral athletes without the names and flags of their respective countries. That is how Daniil Medvedev of Russia and Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus played in the Australian Open tennis tournament which was held at Melbourne Park from

14 to 28 January this year.

It is one of the necessary measures to get the message across that a country should not invade another country whatever may be the excuse. Russia's argument that Ukraine's drift towards the United States of America could become a threat to Russia's territorial integrity does not hold water because after all Ukraine is a separate country and it should have the freedom to choose its allies.

But the ethical stand of the United States of America and its allies in the matter of their policy regarding Ukraine vanishes into thin air when it comes to their policy regarding sovereignty of Palestine. Why are they not taking similar actions against Israel now? Like Ukraine, Palestine should be treated as a sovereign country as per the partisan plan of Great Britain's Palestine in 1947.

It appears that these countries follow ethics only in their internal affairs but keep it away from their foreign policy. Otherwise, how can they support Israel? Israel has been ignoring the two-state solution as per the 1993 Oslo Accord for decades and now it has engaged in genocidal violence in response to the October 7, Hamas attack. The United Nations secre-

tary-general António Guterres rightly said that the Hamas attack did not take place in a vacuum. It had its origins in Israel's hegemony over Palestine decade after decade.

UNICEF has described the Gaza Strip as the most dangerous place in the world to be a child in. According to the Gaza Health Ministry, children make up roughly half of Gaza's population and thousands of them have been killed since the start of the war. According to the World Health Organisation, the condition in the enclave is horrible. It is limping with scarcity of water and poor sanitation. Many children are malnourished and sick. Only 15 out of Gaza's 36 hospitals are partially functional.

Now the situation in Palestine has come to such a pass that the International Court of Justice has asked Israel to take steps to prevent genocidal acts in the Gaza Strip by its armed forces. According to the World Food Programme, there is a risk of pockets of famine in the Palestine enclave as Israeli authorities have been systematically denying WFP access to northern Gaza to deliver aid. The Ministry of Health in the Gaza Strip said that over 26,000 Palestinians including many

children and women had been killed leaving more than 64,000 wounded in Gaza. It has been reported that Nasser Hospital and El Amal City Hospital in Khan Younis are under "extreme danger" from Israeli bombardment.

The ICJ's ruling and the findings of various agencies of the United Nations Organisation have laid bare the double standard in the foreign policy of the United States of America and its allies. These countries should boycott Israel until the latter complies with the two-state solution as per the Oslo Accords.

Israel construction companies have asked to send one lakh Indian workers to replace Palestinians whose work permits had been cancelled since the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7. It is highly unfortunate that the Uttar Pradesh government has started a week-long drive to recruit construction workers for sending them to Israel. India should not comply with the demands of the Israeli construction companies.

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

"Things done well and with a care,
exempt themselves from fear."

— William Shakespeare

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SHILLONG, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2024

Cancer care an imperative

CANCER is a silent killer that is not much discussed except on designated days when the World Health Organisation instructs the national government to create awareness on this insidious malaise which is among the top five causes of death in Meghalaya. A report released in 2022 titled 'Monitoring Survey of Cancer Risk Factors and Health System Response in Meghalaya' found that tobacco consumption in the state begins at 19.2 years. But some surveys have also found that boys in particular start smoking by age 14 and below. The survey report also highlighted the usage of betel products, observed to be the cause of oral submucous fibrosis, a pre-cancerous condition that can progress to oral cancer. Currently, the consumption of non-tobacco betel products among respondents is 72.7%, of which areca nut consumption is the highest. The survey also found that many people in the state start taking alcohol at 21 years and 10% of the respondents said they have been into heavy episodic drinking. More than 60% of the respondents said they consumed preserved or salt-cured and fermented products. The problem with many, especially those living below poverty line is that they are disinclined to go for regular check-ups. The survey found that health-seeking behaviour was very low and about 29.2% of the respondents never had their BP measured in life and only 16.4% of the respondents were aware of Cancer screening for the three common cancers - oral, breast and cervical.

The above survey was done in collaboration with the Indian Council of Medical Research-National Centre for Disease Informatics and Research (ICMR-NCDIR), Bengaluru. ICMR-NCDIR Director Prashant Mathur had urged for improving cancer screening and bringing cancer care centres closer to the people. He also emphasised the need to declare cancer as a notifiable disease in Meghalaya to understand its actual burden and for better collaboration between the government and the PBCR. Dr Caleb Harris, oncologist at NEIGRIHMS has been at the forefront in the campaign to create more awareness about the causes of Cancer particularly esophageal cancers in Meghalaya which is largely due to betel-nut and alcohol consumption and smoking. It must be noted with concern that women are most susceptible to breast, cervical Cancer and endometrial Cancers, yet many women don't turn up for regular screening. Most come at a late stage when treatment is both difficult and expensive. Early detection could mean a difference between life and death yet people seem to put that off and live in denial.

It is also a fact that in Khasi society Cancer is not openly discussed. It's a taboo and is called "bam-pong" in Khasi. This word means an illness that eats into the vitals of a person. When people come for treatment too late everyone suffers. The doctor's prescriptions become heavy; the expenses are heavy too and the infrastructure in Meghalaya is not yet capable of addressing the large number of Cancer patients. Its time to demystify Cancer in Meghalaya. Oncologists, activists and educational institutions should join hands in this fight against Cancer.

What's the most important topic for debate in Khasi society?

By Dr. Caleb Harris

World Cancer Day,
February 4th, 2024

The editor of this daily, through her article (Importance of debate in Khasi society, ST dt.26.01.24) rued that rather than waste our energy arguing on the languages in the state anthem, we ought to look at the real issues confronting Khasi society. Some of the issues, according to her, are growing poverty, increasing school drop-outs and rising drug-dependency in the states. While I totally agree with her point of view, I feel that she has missed one of the most important issues plaguing the Khasi society - high cancer rates.

I wish to substantiate my claim with the fact that while poverty, illiteracy and drug-dependency are important issues which need to be addressed, none of these are directly responsible for the death of our people. As per data from the National Cancer Registry Program (NCRP) Report released in 2020, East Khasi Hills has the second highest number of cancer patients in India, with 228 males per lakh population being afflicted by cancer. To give another perspective, one in four men below the age of 74 in East Khasi Hills is likely to develop cancer. This results in the death of 95 men per lakh of population, as compared to 22 deaths per lakh of men in Delhi. It is important to note that the proportion of patients who die due to cancer in Meghalaya is almost thrice that in Delhi.

One of the reasons attributable to the higher death seen in the cancer patients of Meghalaya (as compared to other regions) is the type of cancers prevalent here. Meghalaya tops the country in the rates of esophageal (food pipe) cancer, with ten times the national average of this particular cancer. Esophageal cancer is deadly, with hardly one-fifth of the patients living to see the fifth anniversary of the cancer diagnosis, despite the best treatment possible.

The treatment for esophageal cancer is multidisciplinary, meaning that the patient may need a combination of surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy for achieving best chances for cure. While it is heartening that we can offer such treatment for our patients here, we are at times overwhelmed with

the number of patients who seek such treatment. Besides, most of the patients come at a late stage. It is important to understand the symptoms of this cancer. Difficulty or pain in swallowing, especially in a person who uses kwai (betel nut), tobacco or alcohol, is a symptom which should not be overlooked. If a patient with esophageal cancer comes at this stage, in some cases only surgery may suffice. However, as commonly happens, patients tend to ignore this and end up being able to take only soft food, followed by a stage when it is impossible to take anything but liquids. At this stage, patients will invariably need multi-disciplinary treatment.

After a battery of tests, patients are subject to around five weeks of radiation therapy along with chemotherapy (injections) after which they are taken up for surgery. During surgery, the entire esophagus (food pipe) is removed and the stomach is fashioned into a tube which replaces the esophagus. While this was traditionally performed through a big incision on the chest (thoracotomy), we are able to do this through thoracoscopic (key-hole) surgery at NEIGRIHMS, resulting in much lesser pain and early recovery. The patient must modify his lifestyle, by having small, frequent meals in order to live a healthy life. But the lurking danger of a disease recurrence remains.

Sadly, many patients come at a stage when they are unable to even swallow their saliva, carrying a spittoon around and many others with a communication between the food pipe and the wind pipe, resulting in constant cough. At this stage, surgery is usually not possible, and the patient may be administered only chemotherapy to

keep the disease at bay. We can insert a metal tube (stent) to open the blocked segment but even this may be temporary in many patients as the disease may grow into the stent. Its evident that if patients present early, the treatment may be simpler, with the patient's chances of 'cure' being higher.

One must remember that all these treatments are intensive, affecting the patient nutritionally, emotionally and financially. While some patients are motivated, many tend to get depressed and a few even stop the treatment, not wanting to undergo the stress associated with treatment. The financial stress is felt by not just the patient but the entire family. At NEIGRIHMS, thanks to being a government institution and the insurance schemes available, we do not turn away any patients due to lack of finances, but there is the burden of loss of livelihood for the patient and caregivers, apart from the expenditure on travel, food, accommodation, etc. If the patient is the breadwinner of the family, one can imagine the impact on the economy of the family, and with so many families being affected, the economy of the state is affected too.

It is easy to gauge that if a patient is detected early, lesser treatment may be required and hence the cost of treatment would be low, with better outcomes. Wouldn't it be better if we diagnose the cancer before the onset of symptoms? This approach is called screening, which has been established for cancers of the breast, oral cavity, uterine cervix and lung. It is important to note that screening has been found to be effective in 'high risk population' - those with higher risk than the rest of the population. While higher

age is a risk factor for some of these cancers, many others are at risk due to use of tobacco.

Screening is a good strategy to reduce the ill effects of cancer treatment and increase the chances of long-term survival, but the smarter move would be to reduce the risk of cancers by refraining from use of tobacco, kwai (betel nut) and alcohol. According to the NCRP report, 70% of cancers in Meghalaya are associated with the use of tobacco, meaning that if tobacco is not used, we may have only one-third of the cancer patients we currently see.

World cancer day, observed on February 4th annually, is an initiative of the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC). The theme for the past three years has been 'Closing the gap in cancer care'. The last year of this campaign is all about bringing attention to a higher level—literally. We need to raise our voices to engage our leaders. Now that we have knowledge and a united community by our side, we are ready to shake the very foundations of injustice—to become lifelong advocates fully equipped to push for lasting change. Together, we will make sure our leaders know that we demand a commitment to prioritising cancer, to creating innovative strategies designed to confront inequity and to investing our resources to achieve a just and cancer-free world.

We need more voices debating on what needs to be done to reduce the burden of cancer in Meghalaya, and that cancer care services are available to all citizens of the state. It needs to start with an effort to prevent cancer by ensuring awareness regarding tobacco, betel nut and alcohol, in addition to strict enforcement of anti-tobacco laws. This is probably the most important topic to be discussed by society. The pressure groups need to take this up too, as this is an important effort in saving the jaidbnyriew.

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Writing our history

By Ubahunlang Dkhar Tmar

Prologue:

The present discussion and exposition of opinions on the issue related to the Pnar dialect vis a vis the State Anthem has generated various opinions which have stirred the hornet's nest about our origin, ethnicity and identity. In a sane civil society, we must try our best to provide a logical-rational argument free of emotions, and look at it from a constructive point of view. This article does not wish to state who is right and who is wrong but it attempts to deviate a bit from the point of contention on dialect/language, since this issue is also connected with the past. Hence this article will try to provide a few perspectives or a food for thought to further a gentlemanly debate or research on our past history. In this article I will address only a few points and conjectures that I feel are relevant.

After browsing and reading the articles and letters to editors, apart from social media discussions and allegations, some light has been shed on the blurry past and shows that we are part and parcel of the same tribe/ethnicity/community. In the context of the present issue, no one can deny the 'fact' that all of us at one point of time in the past are the products and offshoots of one source/centre of origin but due to the geographical, ecological, historical, political, administrative factors, circumstances and events we have come to calously consider ourselves as different (ethnicity/culture). If we consider how societies and cultures evolve through time and space, we will realise that the trends and patterns of the circumstances of history of any human group/race/ethnic is not linear; history is packed with the interplay of many factors. There are gaps in history (including pre-history and proto-history) waiting to be filled, examined and exposed to rigorous academic debates and discussion, but this deficiency does not give us licence or legitimacy to exploit history to propagate one's agenda, ethnic and political ideology. This is what we see in this country; how history has been misused to propagate certain agenda that destroys and affects lives, destabilising the very social and cultural fabric of the republic. We have to be cautious that political opportunism should not be given space while we try to understand, unravel and construct our past.

The crux of disagreement and discontent: As a State we are now cvassing, proposing and lobbying for the Khasi language to be recognised and included in the 8th schedule of our Constitution and here we are disagreeing with the State Anthem which I felt it is not the right moment to bring up this issue. Putting this 'present debate on dialect/language aside, we have to ask ourselves, since when did this misunderstanding or discontent begin, for we know that this conflict of understanding didn't just crop up overnight; it has been the undercurrent that has been waiting to surface. At this moment we can only hypothesise and prematurely identify the conditions that allow this to evolve and percolate into our socio-political psyche. We have to correct and alleviate the misunderstanding, conceptions and perceptions.

We know that the historical past of every nation or race comprises both positive and negative events and circumstances. We also have the tendency to uncritically and blindly glorify our past history and this has crept into our normal conversation and interactions; engaging in half-baked, ill-informed narratives, cherry picking parts of our history that fits a certain agenda or objective. This only promotes jingoistic feelings of nationalism and false ideas and understanding of nationhood/statehood, because history appeals to the emotions rather than the intellect. The past is not an absolute monolithic entity that can be read and displayed easily, it is a quagmire also filled with cul de sacs (blind alleys) that are yet to unfold and connect.

Further, whatever documented folk and ethno-history (including our local/state geography) we have, were not given equal importance as other subjects and topics in our school/college curriculum, which is crucial if

we want to nurture a 'sense of belonging' as conscientious and erudite citizens. We must encourage our students to objectively appreciate the past. With the exception of the few scholarly works from this State, Assam etc, we also have books, booklet, stories of our past folk history in our vernacular languages that are yet to be examined and scrutinised by social-cultural theorists, linguistics, ethnographers, experts in historiography. Most of these narratives are based on 'folk/collective memories' which are prone to errors, mis-interpretation, mis-judgement, because apart from the philosophical underpinnings, writing history requires astute knowledge, understanding and appreciation of various methods of historical investigations.

An unbiased appreciation of the past:

Utilising and understanding history as a 'body of information' to help us with our present predicament (ethnicity, border issues, economy etc) that will guide us in building the foundations of our future is crucial. From an academic and scholarly point of view it is healthy to look at history from a constructive critical lens. We must never fall into the trap of "confirmation bias" (gathering only evidence that fit our beliefs, objective, narrative, hypothesis). This will distort history (facts, truth, reality). "Not every narrative of the past is valid history. Readings of the past have to be based on proven, reliable evidence and the causal connection they make have to be logical and to draw on rational argument. Misrepresenting the views of professional historians is another way of drawing the attention of the media to oneself" (Romila Thapar's Dr D C Deshmukh Memorial Lecture, India International Centre, New Delhi, 14th Jan 2023). Considering every correlation as causation or causal connection or relation is another misconception or fallacy.

Writing history is not only the obligation of scholars and historians, but it is also our collective responsibility. When occasions to relive and re-enact our past occur, we must make sure to try and propagate and communicate the right history without any bias. An awareness of history is important for any nation, community or race to be able to stay intact and bind itself as a unit.

Inquiring into our conditions:

I am referring here not only to the present debate but to the entire aspects of our history (pre, proto-history, history, palaeo-geography etc) culture, economy etc which requires scholarly investigations and analysis. Writing history is also an ongoing affair as new evidence emerges that debunks earlier evidence and the adoption of new methods of inquiry and analysis disrupt the established paradigm. From an anthropological perspective there is the 'insiders' and 'outsider' point of views; we also need to look at our past history and culture from the prism of our indigenous knowledge/thought/philosophy.

With the exception of the universities (where research topics are decided by scholars and their guides) and the Anthropological Survey of India (North East Regional Centre), we have seen steps being taken in 2023 by the KHADC which has initiated the task by providing funding to those who will engage in reviewing, researching, documentation on the various aspects of our culture, society etc., which will further bring light, knowledge, understanding and even critical questions and findings. The department of Arts and Culture Government of Meghalaya too have been taking initiatives to preserve, document, promote culture in its own capacity. There is also a State Tribal Research Institute at Mawlai Nongkwar but we don't know what its predicament and state of affairs is. From a holistic and integrative perspective, the production of historical knowledge (including culture) and information requires the cohesive engagement of scholars, key-grassroots informants with local/folk knowledge, local/grassroot authors, government, research institutes, colleges and universities.

Letters to the Editor

Misleading the public

Editor,
The hullabaloo on the Governor's address is perfectly justified. Meghalaya does need a Governor who can communicate in the official language of this State which is indeed English. When we have a Governor who can communicate in English, then official matters are better understood. The MLAs of the VPP are absolutely right in demanding that the Governor's address be delivered in English or his address be translated into English for all MLAs.

At the same time I believe it's time to educate certain politicians here in Meghalaya on the difference between the terms 'official' and 'national.' Hindi nor English are national languages. Both these languages are official languages of India. It's shocking that 'people who ought to know better,' speak incorrectly thereby misleading people.

A 'leader', leads while a 'misleader misleads'.

Yours etc.,
Tyrone Patrick D'Brass
Tura

One nation, one election not feasible

Editor,
A few days ago, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee sent her reply to a high-level committee, formed by the Centre and headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind on the Centre's "one nation, one election," proposal. After that she asked in a news con-

ference, "If, at the Centre, nobody gets a clear majority for stability, what happens then? If the Centre collapses, will all the state governments fall as well?"

Her apprehension is absolutely correct. No one can guarantee in a parliamentary democracy that all elected houses be it some of the Vidhan Sabhas or the Lok Sabha will not go to the polls before completing five years of their full term. As a matter of fact, no elected house in a parliamentary democracy can have a fixed expiry date. So, there is hardly any possibility that five years after a one-nation-one-election, Lok Sabha and all Vidhan Sabha elections will again automatically come into a synchronised joint event. Moreover, it would cause premature deaths of some elected state assemblies in order to club them under the umbrella of one election. Interestingly, the only argument in favour of the idea behind one-nation-one-election is that it would be cost-effective. However, it would actually become more costly as it requires to cut short the life-span of some of the state legislative assemblies and/or the parliament.

Congress president, Mallikarjun Kharge in his reply to the Committee said, "Such forms of simultaneous elections that are being floated by the government go against the guarantees of federalism contained in the Constitution." Indeed this unilateral top-down proposal totally disregards the federal and basic structure of the Indian Constitution. Such a one-size-fits-all approach is incompatible with the principles of our diverse, federal, parliamentary democracy.

Some other one-one formula be it opposition-mukt, one-nation-one-party or one-nation-one-leader is a trademark of a totalitarian regime with the odour of majoritarianism. Opposition parties are banned in a dictatorship. If any effort is made to the contrary, it is suppressed with force and persons concerned are penalised.

India's three language policy and recognition of 22 languages as official languages discarded the divisive idea of "one-nation-one-language." This helped India to solidify her unity. Whereas Pakistan had broken down into two countries as it was trying to tread the path of one-nation-one-language.

India also adopted secularism cancelling regressive one-nation-one-religion majoritarianism. We need to banish such one-one formula to safeguard our unity in diversity and to protect our parliamentary democracy, secularism and federalism as enshrined in the Constitution of India.

Sometimes a tree has been pruned in a bad way turning it into a sorry state of one-tree-one-branch. Such a tree loses its balance and more often than not falls flat causing grave accidents in the process. A democratic country is like a tree. The tree would give us fruits of fundamental rights and welfare if it gets water in the form of debate and dialogue. Moreover, it produces fruits only when all of its major branches - legislature, executive and judiciary and other branches - financial, banking, investigative, educational institutions get the air of transparency and unhindered sunlight of freedom. Democracy cannot

survive if its institutions are undermined.

But the most essential of all is the constitution soil. If some toxic elements get mixed with the soil then the democracy-tree will die a slow death. One day all of its leaves will dry up. Then only the skeleton of the tree will remain. Soon the tree will turn into a dry naked question mark in front of our moist eyes.

As citizens and custodians of this great democracy, we must remain vigilant and protect the delicate balance that sustains our democratic canopy.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

New Year celebrations and contemplation

Editor,
Time is in ceaseless progression. With the change in seasons due to the revolution of the earth around the sun, the first day of the year has become the most precious to all of us. As the clock strikes midnight on every January 1st, a flurry of excitement sweeps across the globe, marking the arrival of a new year. This momentous occasion, often celebrated with unrestrained revelry and joy, should also invite deeper philosophical contemplation. It is particularly because we leave this planet, living behind everything we amass in our lifetimes. Further, the New Year also symbolizes an enigmatic blend of temporality and eternity, a dance of fleeting moments progressing against the backdrop of timelessness.

Undoubtedly, New Year is a time of joy, a collective sigh of relief at the closing of a year and a hopeful gaze towards a fresh start. But beneath this fun and celebrations, there certainly lies a profound opportunity for introspection and an inner longing to dive deeper into other aspects of our existence and the world around us.

A month has already passed since the year 2024 began. Are we not reminded of the "quick passage" of time here? It feels like just the other day when the world welcomed the dawn of the new millennium (2000) in unprecedented jubilation and fervour. But almost two and a half decades have slipped by. NATURE has already put its signature right on our heads, with grey hair and a waning of youthful vigour. Of course, if the New Year could magically make us younger by one year, perhaps we could certainly leap and frolic like children, happily wishing everyone a Happy New Year and dancing, letting our hair down.

However, amidst the celebratory atmosphere, it's essential to question whether we have evolved into beings of greater compassion, forgiveness, and tolerance, or if we have succumbed to the lower facets of human nature. The increasing instances of conflict, corruption, and virtual moral decline have already littered the landscape of modern times.

Yes, in our mad rush to embrace materialism, we often blissfully overlook the core of human values and the beauty of humanity, as TS Eliot eloquently conveyed in

his masterpiece, *The Waste-land*, long ago. Sadly, these days, our knowledge is limited to Google information without contemplation.

Let's just ponder over the vast expanse of the cosmos - the solar system, and beyond, the Milky Way. The Milky Way itself is spread out over about 100,000 light-years. Is it not just a small spot in the limitless cosmic ocean? No exaggeration, we cannot fully understand the intricate beauty of a single gazania, the flower that blooms in a pot on our veranda each morning. Should we not marvel at such awe-inspiring natural phenomena that are responsible for the New Year rather than lose ourselves in superficial entertainment and the boom-boom of environment-polluting firecrackers?

Hence, it is crucial that we practice shifting our focus towards higher goals --- spiritual growth, mental well-being, and a harmonious "co-existence" with our environment --- particularly now when the siren of climate change has already set off. As we step into a New Year, let's take a moment to pause, to look within, and to reconnect with our deeper values and aspirations. Let our hearts leap up with gratitude for the wonder of DIVINE CREATION, rather than falling for those that quicken our journey towards the grave!

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwalli,
Shillong

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

"History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce."
— Karl Marx

The Shillong Times

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Cleaning the Augean stables

A praiseworthy step from the Narendra Modi-led government is introduction of the Public Examinations (prevention of unfair means) Bill in Parliament. As the saying goes, better late than never. The Bill aims to check malpractices in the public examination system, which often demoralises the educated youths. The aim of the new law, it stated, is to bring "greater transparency, fairness and credibility to the examination system." Any indulgence or tampering with the examination system for monetary or wrongful gain will be punishable with a maximum jail term of 10 years and a fine up to Rs one crore. The context needs some elaboration.

Cancellation of exams for teacher recruitment in Rajasthan, a question paper leak scam in Telangana, irregularities relating to Common Eligibility Test for Group-D posts in Haryana and the recruitment exam for clerks in Gujarat, the question paper leak for constable recruitment in Bihar were among the major instances of recently reported malpractices. No examination system in this country can be certified to be free of malpractices, but the Modi-dispensation closed its eyes on such matters thus far. The present bill promises, among other steps, to secure computerized examination systems from tampering and punishment to government officials too. Systems go for a toss as vested interests tighten their grip over these and make hay. All systems here are facing odds due to unbridled acts of tampering at the behest of the political class or by the bureaucracy itself. Good Governance is often a casualty in democracies as those who form governments have no clear perspective about the way a nation should be run or ruled. India, though, is fortunate to have had some visionary leaders at the apex of its governance. It also had the good fortune, of late, to have stable governments -- after Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister introduced the anti-defection law; and the electorate generally gave clear mandates. However, such attempts to strengthen the rusted systems have not been a strong point with the Modi dispensation.

One of the first acts of Narendra Modi as PM was to end the interview system for lower level central government jobs, thereby giving direct appointments to those who pass the competitive exams. He rarely acted with a reformative zeal later. GST was a UPA baby. The judicial system is facing serious strains due to pendency of cases, in crores, and perceptions about corruption in its ranks. President Droupadi Murmu had noted the poor performance of Indian universities as they failed to show up in the lists of world's top 100 universities. It's time to clean up the Augean stables. Reforms are the way forward, but a prerequisite is an enlightened leadership. The present Bill might be passed into law, but the question is whether the law alone can change things for the better.

Letters to the Editor

Cash award for a multi-dialect Hynniewtrep song

Editor,
Amidst the controversy surrounding the state anthem and the presence of certain forces for many years now, from outside and from within who find it easier and to their advantage to divide and weaken rather than build and unite our miniscule populated Hynniewtrep people who are surrounded by communities with bigger populations, the MAITSHAPHRANG have decided to hold a multi-dialect song contest that must include the different dialects of the Hynniewtrep community which should be meaningful and inspire unity among the people. The objective of this contest is to showcase the different dialects of our people and the relevance of the Sohra dialect now known as the Khasi language, enriched from all the other dialects and other languages as well. This language unifies us and helps us communicate with one another without which it would be very difficult for the Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lyngngam to communicate and understand one another. The winning song shall be selected by a panel of judges.

The selected winner will be awarded a cash prize of Rs. 50,000 by the MAITSHAPHRANG which will be enhanced by supporting sponsors. There will be no participation fee and the

last date for submission of entries will be on or before March 31, 2024.

To further strengthen the bond among the Hynniewtrep community, the MAITSHAPHRANG would like to offer a suggestion that the different districts in the present Khasi and Jaintia hills should be named after their respective District headquarters as for example, Shillong district, Jowai district, Nongpoh district, Mairang district and maybe future Amlarem/ Dawki district.

As Kong Patricia Mukhim has stressed on the importance of debate and debating intellectually in our society, I'm confident that the present debate will lead to a positive conclusion and together as a united Hynniewtrep people we'll address more immediate and important issues like preventing further degradation of our environment and restoring the state's lost glory; the need to economically empower all the children of a family to address growing unemployment in the state and to strengthen the State's economy and to address the increasing number of abandoned women with children in our state which is the root cause of some very sensitive social problems facing us today.

Dr Melari Nongrum, Associate Professor at the Indian Institute of Public Health, while delivering her keynote address on the one day seminar on 'Socio-Economic Status of Single Mothers' in June 22, 2023 organised by the Meghalaya State Commission for Women pointed out that "the number

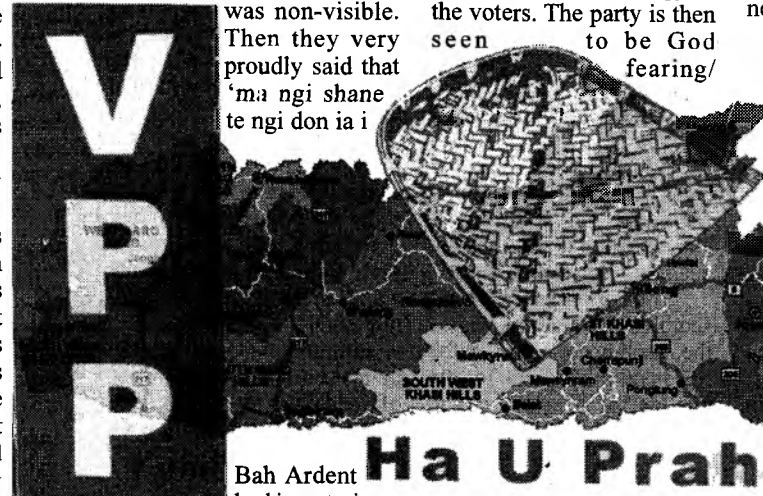
Is VPP changing Meghalaya's political discourse?

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

People and politics

Few days before the Meghalaya MLA election in 2023, two ladies selling seasonal fruits at Laitlum tourism spot asked this writer about the constituency to which he belongs. On saying Nongthymmai they inquired about the presence of VPP. It was difficult to give them a clear answer as at that point of time VPP at Nongthymmai constituency was non-visible. Then they very proudly said that 'ma ngi shane te ngi don ia i

a will/desire and a guidance of God. On careful analysis of Meghalaya's political discourses of the past, never has God been as prominent as currently. Politics is about using a trump card. It is impossible to say if VPP is explicitly bringing God into its political strategies to woo the voters. What is clear is that when God and politics are combined regularly and at all junctures/issues it implicitly works on the psychology of the voters. The party is then seen to be God fearing/



loving and in a state where the majority of voters are Christians it will impact upon voter decision-making. Maybe VPP is bringing God and politics as an honest intention, but on the ground it is creating positive vibes. The outcome of this development is that the other political parties are also starting to use God more frequently in their messages and arguments. The manner in which VPP is acting and how others are just reacting is indeed a very interesting picture.

ADC elections

The KHADC and JHADC elections are going to be delayed to at least till after the MP election. To many observers they have seen this coming since December, 2023. It is wrong to think that delimitation of the two ADCs is the only reason for the delay. VPP is without doubt one of the most popular parties today if not the most popular. The recent political developments show that if the ADC elections are held as per schedule, VPP will be winning many seats. This will further add to the popularity of its MP election candidate Ricky A J Syng-

God and politics

While bringing God into politics is nothing new, its intensity and frequency has increased manifold ever since VPP came into the picture. All objectives, goals and courses of action are presented and fed into the voters as

of single mothers is on the higher side among the Jaintia community which is around 16.33 per cent, while the Khasi and Garo communities stand at 12.01 and 13.96 per cent respectively" (ST June 24, 2023).

So even while we are all proud of our peoples' history, as inheritors of this rich legacy it is upon our shoulders now to preserve what is still relevant today, introspect and enrich further the land and its people for the benefit of our future generations failing which history has also shown us how many great civilisations in the past have vanished forever.

Yours etc.,
Michael N. Syiem
Convenor, Maitshaphrang,
Via email

Mark Zuckerberg's digital mess exposed in US Senate

Editor,
"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity..." - these words of Charles Dickens ring true now more than ever before. While digital technology has taken this civilization to new heights, it has virtually spelled disaster for countless people across the world. Various digital platforms that were initially designed to "connect" people have

become hotbeds of the "exploitation" of innocence. The recent outcry in the US Senate against social media giants, including Evan Spiegel, Zi Chew, Yaccarino brought forth a shocking truth - the tales of aggrieved parents whose children have become victims of sinister forces lurking in the shadows of mushrooming digital platforms.

The Senate Judiciary Committee has done a great job by exposing the grim reality faced by families and alerting each concerned citizen to be more vigilant. It revealed the dark underbelly of the digital world, where the vulnerable easily fall prey to various kinds of sexual exploitation, drugs and deceit.

Surrounded by hard-headed senators, Mark Zuckerberg found himself being humiliated as parents roared about the harm and pain inflicted on their children. The senators targeted their verbal arrows at the heads of META, TikTok, X, Discord, and Snapchat. They fervently expressed how innumerable young children are being trapped by the devious allure of "advertisements" running with impunity on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, X, round the clock.

Following the heavy rant and criticism against Mark Zuckerberg, he apologized to all the parents by saying: "No one should have to go through the things that your families have suffered." But will this apology bring back their children. Will this regret make peace with the society where youths have died of suicide or are

heavily indoctrinated by the evil forces active on those platforms?

Senator Lindsey Olin Graham from South Carolina accused the CEOs of having, "blood on your hands," emphasizing the dangerous consequences of social media. TikTok's Shou Zi Chew also nodded in affirmation by saying, "as a father of three young children myself, I know that the issues that we're discussing today are horrific and the nightmare of every parent."

A distressed mother of Houston, Robyn Cory, says, "If Instagram didn't exist, this wouldn't have happened to my daughter." Her daughter, Kristen, aged 15, was trafficked into sexual exploitation. It was reported by The Guardian that five months after Kristen was found on the street and returned home, she again disappeared. She has not been found since then. Kristen had told her mother: "They're coming to kill you all if I don't go - I have to go back." Hope the concerned leaders take note of these developments with all seriousness. What lies in store for the new generation that gulps anything that comes on their Cell phones!

Just by clicking a couple of such sexually explicit reels or videos on Facebook or Instagram or TikTok, they will be flooded with similar pop-up notifications or obscene clippings/images that are freely uploaded by gangs of agencies, even countless individuals, to earn a number of "likes" and shares. Then they will gradually be chased by a swarm of outrageous forces that employ various

methods to hit directly at their adrenaline, numbing the nerves of their wit and wisdom. As concerned parents, do we still prefer to keep mum?

Of course, it is indeed greed for money that has blinded social media CEOs. They cannot distinguish between what is good and bad for society. The Guardian recently reported that over 100,000 children using Facebook and Instagram face "daily" sexual harassment and cyber-bullying, including exposure to endless sexually explicit content.

Are we sacrificing our children's innocence at the altar of voyeurism with "likes and shares"? The dark confinements or addictions created by these devious agencies, platforms and tools leave an indelible imprint on younger people's minds, completely corrupting their thought process and behaviour. Believe it, countless terror groups have also been using these platforms as springboards to brutally attack the entire civilization.

Is it not time to wake up? Is it not time to break the silence? Albert Einstein had rightly cautioned: "The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watch them without doing anything."

Yours etc.,
Sali Gewali,
Shillong

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

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

The Emperor's New Clothes..!

For the last few months I've been curious about the many inaugurations by the Prime Minister of the Vande Bharat trains, and so I decided yesterday I'd travel in one of them from Goa to Mumbai.

The train came in late from Mumbai, and so the cleaners made us wait on the platform. Two of them cleaned the dusty windows outside, but only the window glasses of the Executive Class. When I finally sat on my seat, I found that the food tray was permanently on my lap. I told the TC that I would be happy if it could go back to its place and he agreed and told me the maintenance people would fix it in a few minutes. Well, in the eight hours I sat in the train, the food tray seemed quite comfortable on my lap.

The train swayed and shuddered from side to side, and I'm sure at the end of the journey many shippers from Goa going to join their ships in Mumbai, must have thanked their stars for the intense practice sessions they received even before they went out to sea. And as I tried to doze off with a tray that loved the comfort of my legs and a seat that refused to go back, storyteller that I am, I thought of an emperor of long ago, who loved new clothes and decided to stitch himself another set of new ones.

It was said, he spent most

smiled most graciously and looked closely at the empty looms. No way would he say that he could not see anything because then the world would think that he was unfit for his job.

He presented the weavers with the emblem of an order of knighthood.

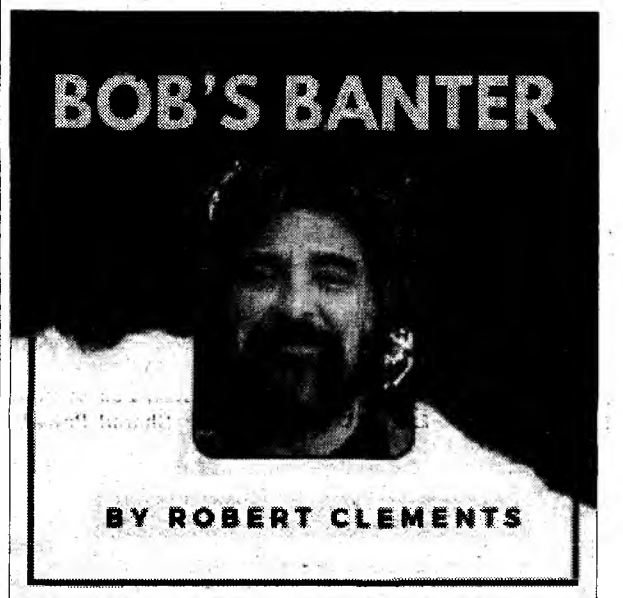
On the day of the procession, when the emperor would walk in a parade in his new clothes, the emperor was undressed for a fitting, and the thieves pretended to array him in his new suit. The Emperor turned round and from side to side before the looking glass.

"How splendid his Majesty looks in his new clothes, and how well they fit!" everyone cried out, afraid to tell him the truth, that he was near unclothed. "What a design! What colours! These are indeed royal robes!"

"I am quite ready," said the Emperor finally. He appeared to be examining his handsome suit.

The lords of the bedchamber, who were to carry his Majesty's train, felt about on the ground as if they were lifting up the ends of the mantle. Then they pretended to be carrying something for they would by no means want to appear foolish or not fit for their jobs.

The Emperor walked under his high canopy in the midst of the procession, through the streets of his capital. All



of his kingdom's money on clothes. One day, he decided to stitch clothes that had never been stitched before and employed two weavers who said they could produce cloth from a formula they had read in ancient books. The clothes made from this wonderful cloth he was told would be invisible to everyone who was unfit for the job he held, or who did not believe in the beliefs of the emperor.

the people standing by, and those at the windows, cried out, "Oh! How beautiful are our Emperor's new clothes! What a magnificent train there is to the mantle; and how gracefully the scarf hangs!" No one would admit these much-admired clothes could not be seen because, in doing so, he would have been saying he was either a simpleton or unfit for his job.

Suddenly a little boy cried

The Emperor was upset, for he knew that the people were right. However, he thought the procession must go on now! "I will behead anyone who says I have no clothes on!" he shouted and continued walking on and on and on, and the people were too afraid to tell him that he had nothing on.

"They think like me," chuckled the emperor, and he gave large sums of money to both the weavers in order that they might begin their work at once. So, the two pretend weavers set up two looms. They worked very busily, though in reality they did nothing at all. They asked for the finest silk and the purest gold thread. They put both into their own knapsacks, then they pretended to work at the empty looms until late at night. Finally, the Emperor himself wished to see the costly material while it was still in the loom. He took many officers of the court. As soon as the weavers saw the Emperor approach, they went on working faster than ever although they still did not pass even one thread through the looms. "Is not the work absolutely magnificent?" said the two weavers. "If your Majesty will only be pleased to look at it! What a splendid design! What glorious colours!" and pointed to the empty frames.

"Oh! The cloth is charming," the emperor said aloud wondering inside why he couldn't see anything. "I approve of it completely." He

out, "But the Emperor has nothing at all on!" What the child had said was whispered from one to another. "But he has nothing at all on!" cried out all the people at last. The Emperor was upset, for he knew that the people were right. However, he thought the procession must go on now! "I will behead anyone who says I have no clothes on!" he shouted and continued walking on and on and on, and the people were too afraid to tell him that he had nothing on.

I sat in the Vande Bharat train with the tray on my lap, some dhal which the food man had spilled on me when the train had lurched, and with a seat unable to go back. The dusty windows didn't allow me to see where I had reached.

The TC smiled at me, "It's an excellent train, what progress we have made!"

"I smiled and said fearfully and dutifully, "What beautiful clothes the emperor is wearing..."

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

*"Work hard, stay positive, and get up early.
It's the best part of the day."*

—George Allen, Sr.

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVI No. 177 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2024

STEMS: Sustainable Public Transport

STEMS which stands for Sustainable Transport and Efficient Mobility Society was incorporated by the Government of Meghalaya in 2022, to revolutionize the way people commute by leveraging modern transport solutions that are safe, sustainable, efficient, and cost-effective. The objective of the STEMS is to develop and implement transport solutions that can enhance mobility, reduce congestion, and benefit the environment by reducing emissions. Traffic jams in Shillong city today are an urban nightmare and cause undue delay for commuters and office goers. The peak traffic congestions occur during school dropping and pick-up hours which means 8-10 am and 2-4 pm. Another reason for traffic congestion is also because thus far there has been no efficient public transport system linking different localities to the main thoroughfare. Hence office-goers mainly commute in their private vehicles. Add to that the thousands of other commuters going for their respective duties in their private vehicles or local taxis and we have clogged roads where a distance of 10 kms takes 3 hours to commute instead of 15 minutes, driving @40 km per hour which is a reasonable speed within city limits. Pollution from vehicular emission has also reached unsustainable levels.

It is in view of all the above concerns that the Government initiated the STEMS public transport system for the benefit of school students, to significantly reduce congestion during school dropping and pick-up hours. However, any system requires a mindset change which is a huge challenge. The STEMS buses have several safety features such as CCTV cameras inside the bus, safe and customised bus fleet, trained staff, assured seat, real time tracking and those ferrying students to make sure that each student is verified. This shared commuter bus project aims to gradually transform the current mobility landscape of Shillong and shift the mindset of people from using private cars to an efficient and sustainable public transport system with enhanced comfort, safety and timely services. This is a much-needed initiative for a hill station that has very little scope to expand the existing road width. In fact, if office-goers start patronising the STEMS bus services there will be a visible reduction in traffic congestion.

While a number of parents have registered their children to commute to and from school on the STEMS buses, there are other parents that claim that their children may not be safe on these buses. Students who use these bus services have shared publicly that they are happy, safe and secure. Much depends on the heads of institutions too, to encourage parents to sign up for the STEMS services. This will also significantly reduce the growing class differences in a society that started off as being egalitarian and which believed in shared values.

Letters to the Editor

Govt's decision on hawker relocation: Step in the right direction

Editor,
As a frequent contributor to The Shillong Times and a resident of Laitumkhrah, I commend the Government, and our MLA, Ampareen Lyngdoh, for their pragmatic approach to the issue of hawkers' relocation in Shillong. I am confident that her leadership will continue to make a positive impact on the lives of the residents.

In light of the concerns raised by residents, the decision to reconsider the plan to shift hawkers to Lady Veronica Lane reflects a deep understanding of community needs and a commitment to finding equitable solutions. The recent protests by residents of Lady Veronica Lane against the proposed relocation underscore the importance of engaging with communities and considering their perspectives in decision-making processes. It is heartening to see the government taking heed of these concerns and exploring alternative options to address the issue of hawker congestion

tion in the area. One such alternative, as proposed, could be to relocate the hawkers to a parking lot near Stoneyland, opposite Eldorado Guest House, Dhanketi. This alternative location not only provides ample space for the hawkers to conduct their businesses but also ensures minimal disruption to residents and institutions in the vicinity.

By carefully considering the needs and concerns of all stakeholders, the government demonstrates a commitment to inclusive governance and community well-being. The government's willingness to reassess the hawker relocation plan and explore alternative solutions is a testament to their responsiveness and commitment to serving the interests of the community. By fostering dialogue and collaboration, we can work together to address the challenges facing our city and build a more inclusive and vibrant Shillong for all its residents. As we continue to address the challenges facing our region, let us recognize and appreciate the leadership of the MLA, whose commitment to the people of East Shillong is reflected in every decision she makes.

Throughout the past week (Jan. 21-26) and later The Shillong Times had carried interesting debates on the above topic almost on a daily basis and the debate might continue while the protest would escalate in various forms until the controversy is removed. We from Jaintia Hills thank you most gratefully for the spirit of journalism and the good sense of democratic principles. The credit goes to the Jaintia Students' Union which had thrown the gauntlet (S.T. Jan.21, 2024) to the State Government and the MLAs & an MP from Jaintia Hills. Following this, the MP responded the next day while it took two days for the MLAs to wake up.

Briefly in history, the year 1964 is to be remembered for all times to come as in this year the people of Jaintia Hills including old men and women, were one day dancing and singing in the streets with great joy and happiness as they were granted a separate autonomous district Council although devoid of Block-I & Block-II. The late Rev. JIM Nichols-Roy had done his very best to unite the two cousins and get the old districts of Khasi and Jaintia Hills renamed, temporarily though, as the United Khasi-Jaintia district in the Sixth Schedule in 1950. But he (Father of the 6TH Schedule) failed to protect Jaintia Hills from which a large chunk of area well-known as Blocks-I & II, were sliced away forcibly by the then Congress government of Assam.

Khasi Hills was then silent and quiet; anyway a separate district council came as a boon for the Jaintias as though their kingdom was revived as desired by Kiang Nangbah. The then Assam government might have told the cabinet minister Nichols-Roy that what it had done by transferring more than 500 sq. miles from the Jaintias' homeland was according to the 6th Schedule (while ignoring the ratification by the Constituent Assembly), and it feels like Nichols-Roy was being beaten with his own stick.

Then came 1971 when the three district councils (Khasi, Garo, Jaintia) were working very hard and enthusiastically hand-in-hand to get a new Hill State without any suspicion that one would betray the other. A group of Jaintia youths expected that Blocks - I & II would then be re-transferred back to Jaintia Hills. Alas! the youth were mocked by the APHLC leaders who would not agree to wait till the issue would be solved; the reason being ob-

vious - hunger for positions! The youths then shouted that Jaintia Hills should opt out of the new state. The APHLC interim government then decided to pound on their leader who was then teaching in the Dibrugarh University by sending a posse of policemen to arrest him. The police team could not accomplish their engagement as they were denied entry into the university campus; a compromise was however arrived at subsequently. It is hoped that one day this untold story would be unearthed by historical researchers. This writer was an eyewitness to all these historical events in Jaintia Hills.

The Jaintia youths again thought that there would be no more betrayal. But 2005 came and the State Language Act was passed by ignoring the Jaintia language. The then MLA of Jowai who was a cabinet minister, confided to this writer that the brute majority would not listen to him but he assured that he would wait and take some necessary action later; he could do nothing however till he passed away. It may be recalled that "The Jaintia Language & Literary Association" was formed in 1975 under the leadership of Prof. B. Pakem and others, with the aim and object of preserving and promoting the Jaintia language as desired by the Jaintias.

According to media report (e.g. ST, Jan.23/2024, front page) it appears the Jaintia MLAs had re-acted very late although the cabinet minister A.L.Hek had given a warning; they did decide to have a meeting on Tuesday, January 23, to pass a resolution. Surprisingly indeed, the cabinet minister Kyrmey Shylla was reported to have revealed in the same news item "that he was not a party to creating and approving the State Anthem". If the seven MLAs of Jaintia Hills are sincere to their word we will soon see the amendment to the Meghalaya Language Act 2005.

It is amusing to read some of the articles in this connection, some of which make an attempt to write on the history of the Jaintias based mostly on conjectures and distortion. Some write that the name Jaintia was derived from Jayanti Devi the Jaintia queen behind whom a mythology was manufactured to resemble the story of a Woh Randi and Ka Li Dakha. Should we believe this mythology or the historical fact that the name Jaintia was derived from the name

of the first State JAINTIA formed by the Monkhmer or Austric-speaking race in Kopyi (Kupli) valley where they settled after fleeing Kamrupa before 500 A.D.? We should know the reasons why they fled Kamrupa and the subsequent historical events that followed instead of dabbling in Jaintia history.

Heirtami Paswet in his letter (ST, Jan. 25, 2024) while referring to one of these articles, terms the arguments 'senseless', nay, simply bombastic! Paswet makes one gentle comment without elaborating: "If the term Khasi was actually used by our ancestors, we would not object but sadly there is no evidence that they did in the hundreds of oral traditions that they left for us." I would say with all the information at my command, that the term Khasi was never found in history. Dr. Homiwell Lyngdoh (Nonglait) in his book KANIAM KHASI (1937), in a 21-page 'Jinglamphrang', tries his best to link the Khasi people with 'Khasa', a tribe or race that settled in the Himalayan foothills from the present Uttarakhand to Nepal but ends up with no conclusion. The Khasas have subsequently turned up to be a branch of the Aryans according to W. Crooke's 'Races of Northern India' (1973). Hamlet Bareh (1967) in his The History & Culture of the Khasi People & Namita C. Shadap-Sen (1981), in the very first lengthy footnote of her book 'The Origin and Early History of Khasi-Synteng People' also try hard to explain the derivation of the word 'Khasi' by borrowing some information from a British writer and both conclude with a fanciful meaning of the word.

Those who make an attempt to write the history of these people may rest assured that the term 'Khasi' has been derived from 'Khasia' as supported by eminent historians like David R. Syiemlieh. The Khasis became obvious only in the first part of the 19th century. When William Carey and his missionaries wanted to give a title to the Bible translated by them in Bengali script as The Khasia Bible, there was objection from the then few converts as the term Khasia was derogatory to them being unaware that the term Khasi is more derogatory in Sylheti and Assamese languages; its meaning in Perso-Arabic is far more derogatory. These meanings need not be given here for the sake of modesty. Hence the Bible was entitled

touches my heart and my emotions.

Another aspect is that if we go by the popular song Khyrniam u Pnar, U Bhoi u War then why are all these dialects not incorporated in the anthem? We do not need the English language in our anthem at all. Had the MDA-2 Government done so, this debate would not have happened. But as usual our Government is not a far sighted one in almost all the decisions it has taken.

My fervent plea to all the Khasi Jaintia people based on the growing population is that now is the right time to revise the age-old reservation policy so as to have equal representation which will benefit our youths today and for the future as well. Do we have any takers here and I am asking especially the student bodies, the seng bhalang for their response.

Yours etc.,
Helen Dkhar,
Via email

New energy in KHADC

Editor,
As a regular reader of your newspaper I feel gratified to see the new Chief Executive

Member, Pyniaid Sing Syiem take quick action on illegally run stone quarries in Laikroh that have the potential to damage the environment beyond redemption and to dry up the water bodies in the state. In the past such quick action was missing from the district councils which in effect are tasked to conserve those forests that are out of the purview of the State Forest Department. The district councils were created to conserve the culture and tradition of the tribes of Meghalaya and that includes the natural environment which in Khasi is called 'Ka Mei Mariang' (Mother Nature). Is it part of tribal culture to kill the environment first by cutting down all the trees and then to start taking out all the rocks and boulders and expose the earth to the cruel elements? Culture does not mean only ornaments and clothes and dances. Without this earth sustaining us we will all die. It seems we did not learn any lessons from last year's flash floods in Mawsynram and other places where houses were washed away by the flood waters. Because of the greed of a few people all of us stand to suffer.

I wish to laud the CEM, KHADC Pyniaid Syiem for

'Khashee New Testament' 1831 according to Bareh (1997). It must be remembered that the Jaintias who spilled over from Jaintia Hills into Shella and Cherrapunjee region were called Khasia by the Sylhetis. One great historian Sir Edward Gait, in his "History of Assam" has stated that there is no record or tradition suggesting that the Khasis and Syntengs owed allegiance to the same prince. A Jaintia scholar was fond of saying "we are same but not identical."

The name 'Jaintia' given to the Monkhmer-speaking people is of 15 centuries old while 'Khasi' is hardly two centuries old, yet some dare to write "Khasi includes Pnar/Jaintia" which should have been the other way round. Again many people refuse to believe that the word 'Pnar' is a geographical term and not the name of the people, and deliberately equate it with the term 'Jaintia' to confuse the general readers. The sobriquet 'Pnar' cannot be equated with the real name 'Jaintia'. This is another reason that leads to some controversy! By using the term 'Pnar' we neglect the War Jaintias and the Bhoi Jaintias like the Myrris and the Yunthong. One can also read Gulio Gosta, a renowned Anthropologist who lived with the Khasis for a long time and wrote a beautiful article on 'The Origin of the People' published in Ka Syngkhong Jingtip in three Parts (1958, '59 and '60) and before he concludes the second Part he writes "On the other hand... what should we think of the people of Jaintia Hills, which was the parent of the present Khasis." Gosta is historically right, but the Khasis would not accept it; they would rather stick to the two-century old name than change into the 1500 years old name of their parents!

We would like to see someone write on the various stages of migration of the Jaintias to populate Khasi Hills - the greatest exodus being the one led by Sajar Nangli in the 16th century but the first one led by U Shyllong is believed to have taken place between the 11th & 12th centuries.

The above is but a brief account of the history of the Jaintias taken from a larger canvas. Their language deserves pride of place and must be preserved and promoted as strongly recommended by many linguists, "linguists", anthropologists, historians, et al. The Jaintia Hills has many prospective sportsmen and women whose love and passion for their own language must not be disrespected. We must shun any kind of imposition and homogeneity.

rising to the occasion and doing his duty as assigned by the 6th Schedule of the Constitution.

Yours etc.,
Kitboklang Khongsit,
Via email

Whither justice?

Editor,
Umar Khalid's bail plea has been postponed for the eighth consecutive time. Umar Khalid has become the face of the legal maxim, justice delayed is justice denied. He already spent over three years in custody after being arrested in connection with the 2020 Delhi riots in September 2020 under the UAPA. The question that naturally comes to mind is: while he has been languishing in custody year after year, what are the actions that have been taken against those who instigated the crowds with the "Goli maro" battle cry?

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

Kota suicide points to a scarcity that still plagues us

By Ajit Ranade

A suicide note in Kota shook up the nation. A young girl says sorry to her parents, for letting them down. She died of not a broken heart, but of a broken spirit. The inhuman competition, and the burden of expectations was just too much for a teenager of tender age. It does us no good to blame the parents, for all they wanted was a better future for their child. They might have mortgaged their family wealth, although that just increases the burden on the child. It does not help to blame the regimented system of Kota coaching centres, which has already snuffed out twenty-five young lives, just last year.

Kota has already switched to suicide watch mode, alarmed by an increase in suicides and attempted suicides. Hostels fitted with spring loaded fans to prevent death by self-hanging, or high-rise buildings with anti-suicide steel nets and special police cells for suicide counselling, have all been in place for some time now. Yet enrolment in Kota has doubled in the last three years. More than 200,000 aspirants clock up to 18 grueling hours of study, seven days a week. Such is the power of the lure of the lottery that are these entrance exams called JEE and NEET. Let us not forget, it is a lottery whose odds are terribly stacked against the applicants.

The Union government has proposed guidelines to regulate the coaching centres which form an industry on their own. There are an estimated 30,000 coaching

learning organisation created to improve the quality of education in India, is an excellent source to gauge the depth of the real problem. Their report says that parents pay upward of one lakh rupees even for coaching at the level of class nine. This points to an utter lack of quality of education received from regular schools. It also points to the huge gap between available seats in engineering and medicine which are considered to be of good quality, and the number of applicants. In 2024 around 12,31,874 students have registered for JEE Mains and the total number of seats across 23 IIT's are 16232. That is a success ratio of 1.3 percent, among the most difficult in the entire world. And who is to say that those ten thousand students after the last rank admitted, are not as good? This story is repeated in NEET, the all India entrance exam for medical seats too. Even for the all India civil services, the applicants to seats ratio is extremely adverse. And many students appear several times, especially for civil services. This is an utter waste of the prime years of their lives.

This is a deeply structural problem, and points to a very big weakness of our education system. The 1991 economic reforms were transformational because it took the nation from one of scarcity, to one of choice and abundance. The dismantling of the licence permit raj, and the free entry of anyone into the manufacturing sec-

"Kota has already switched to suicide watch mode, alarmed by an increase in suicides and attempted suicides. Hostels fitted with spring loaded fans to prevent death by self-hanging, or high-rise buildings with anti-suicide steel nets and special police cells for suicide counselling, have all been in place for some time now."

institutes and they also have their own national federation and industry body. In a place like Kota which is India's most famous coaching cluster, there is a local thriving economy of paying guest accommodation, food delivery service, dummy schools and colleges, transport and other services. It is estimated that the annual turnover of all coaching centres exceeds the annual budgets of all IIT and AIIMS taken together! So, the new regulations will affect this industry adversely. The new proposed rules prohibit the institutes from registering any student who is less than sixteen years old. It also mandates that fees should be reasonable (which means price control), and that coaching centres look after the physical and mental health of their students.

Most members of the Coaching Federation of India are upset because their catchment starts in class five or six. Many parents plan for engineering, medicine careers for their kids, or even for civil services much in advance of class eleven or twelve. So, this catchment will no longer be available to the coaching institutes. The other problem is that enforcement of the rules will be difficult given the spread of coaching classes across the country. This is not to deny that some sort of regulation is certainly needed. Whether that is best served by self-regulation of the industry or by the government appointed regulator is the question. Some of the large players in this industry have received substantial investments from private equity or venture funds. It is in their interest to bring some order in the behaviour of all players, and hence self-regulation does have a chance.

But the larger point may be lost in this discussion about regulating a wild industry or in the tragic stories of suicides by young students. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) by Pratham, the innovative

tor, meant that there was competition for quality and lower price. Across products such as automobiles, white goods, household items, and even food products we got used to expecting and getting world class quality products. This extended to services such as telecom, retail, banking, finance and stock markets. But the field of educational services remains shackled by regulation, licensing and rigid legacy practices. Of course, education is constitutionally in the States' list, but higher education is influenced by Central government policies too. Much reform has been attempted to unshackle the sector. But the proliferation of what is called the "coaching culture" by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, and the thriving economy of the coaching industry points to the widening gap between demand and aspirations on one hand, and supply of good educational institutions on the other.

India's richer parents now send their kids abroad, not only for post graduate studies, but increasingly even for bachelors' degrees after class twelve. The steep prices for medical and business degrees is an added factor to choosing an affordable alternative in America, Europe or Australia. India's annual "import" of education, i.e. dollars spent on foreign education is upward of 30 billion dollars, half of our entire defence budget! Just like Bisleri and the bottled water industry prospered, the booming coaching industry is a manifestation of the scarcity of quality supply that still plagues India's education sector. This supply has to increase vastly both from public and private sources. That is the highest priority to enhance India's human capital, if we want sustained increase in all round wellbeing.

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

“Every act of creation is first
an act of destruction.”

— Pablo Picasso

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 178 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2024

Centre as ‘villain’

ISSUES of Centre-State relations are again in sharp focus. Karnataka’s chief minister Siddaramaiah rallied forces in the national capital to taunt the Modi government, accusing it of indulgence in economic oppression of his state. The Centre is charged with discrimination in tax allocation to states, a view shared also by other non-BJP chief ministers. The Left too held a protest at Jantar Mantar, accusing the Centre of “diluting the principles of federalism.” Like Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu is also accusing the Centre of denying the states their due share of tax collections. Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman claimed in a statement in parliament that the government has been strictly following the Fifteenth Finance Commission’s recommendations on tax sharing with states and has even extended more help to states. Kerala’s Pinarayi Vijayan, as is his wont, presses his case by parading the entire state cabinet at Jantar Mantar, either in the hope of browbeating the Modi establishment or more likely to derive some publicity mileage in the national media.

It must be said to the credit of the Modi government in its two terms that there was less chatter about Centre-State relations or violations of rules and principles thereof by the Union Government. Modi as Prime Minister avoided confrontations with his political rivals. This was unlike Indira Gandhi, another strong-willed politician who had a special knack to keep her detractors on their toes. Modi as PM perhaps lacked her sense of confidence, or he was made wiser by his previous experience at the head of a state’s government and understood the intricacies and complexities involved in the Centre-State relations. Nirmala Sitharaman, on her part, is less of a politician and functions more on professional lines — a testament to the somewhat comfortable state of the national economy under her tutelage.

A tendency on the part of politicians is the more they get, the more they want, be it power or pelf. While the argument is that the present central government is not discriminating against non-BJP governments, this requires closer scrutiny. However, from whatever issues these state governments raised so far, they lacked a solid ground to put the Modi government on the dock. Notably, the Supreme Court too did not see merit in such a complaint advanced before it by the Kerala government. Notably, it is also unacceptable for states to grant more powers to the Centre under the federal system even when a situation — as in the case of terrorism or financial frauds — warranted so. Rather, states like West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh invoked constitutional provisions in the past to deny CBI an entry into their states to probe financial irregularities of the ruling cliques. The Centre, or Modi, simply recoiled.

The Environment: Many custodians; none accountable

By Patricia Mukhim

Climate change is real and frightening as it can result in catastrophic and unpredictable weather conditions. What’s tragic is that people have such short memories and have already forgotten how homes and humans were carried away in the flash floods in May and June 2022 in West Khasi Hills, South West Khasi Hills and Garo Hills. Much of this devastation is triggered by unregulated stone quarrying which first involves deforestation and then gouging out the earth to pull out the rocks and boulders as if there is no tomorrow. And most of those boulders are transported to Bangladesh via Dawki. Just looking at the long line of trucks parked at Pongtung village waiting their turn to drive to the border will inform that this quarrying business is not only unsustainable but it will also lead to water crises in the short run. While the Government of India is trying to implement the Jal Jeevan Mission with the promise that piped water will come into every home even in the distant hamlets this promise may end up with only gas coming through the pipes instead of water, if we don’t get our act together.

As citizens we all have a PhD in blaming the Government for everything that has gone wrong and that is likely to go wrong in the near future and in the long term. Now Meghalaya has an atypical land holding system. The people of this state started off by saying that they are a tribal community. By their very definition tribals have a shared heritage, culture and shared value systems of which the prime one is, “common property resource.” Forests, rivers, land etc., were supposed to be community-owned. But by some strange arrangement master-minded by the British during their rule over these hills, the concept of private property seeped in. This is because the British needed land for their cantonments and institutions and had to harangue with clans, syiems and dorbars for such land. They deemed it easier to negotiate with individuals and that was what perhaps brought in the idea of ‘Ri Kynti’ or privately owned land. It was the beginning of the commodification of land. Since then there has been no turning back.

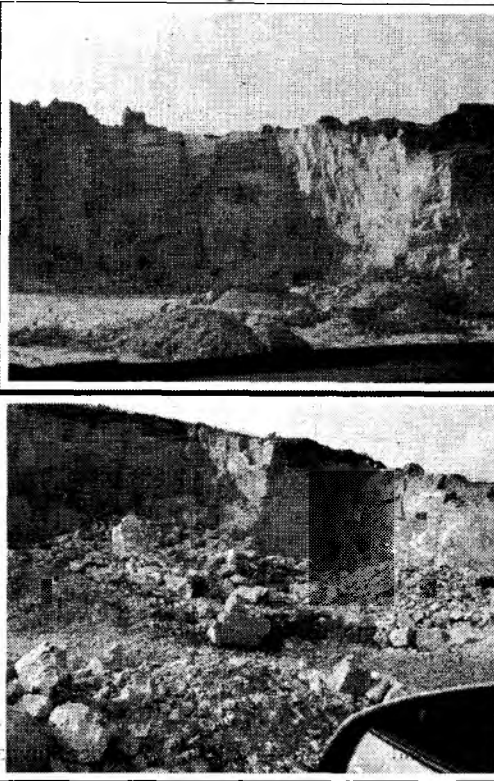
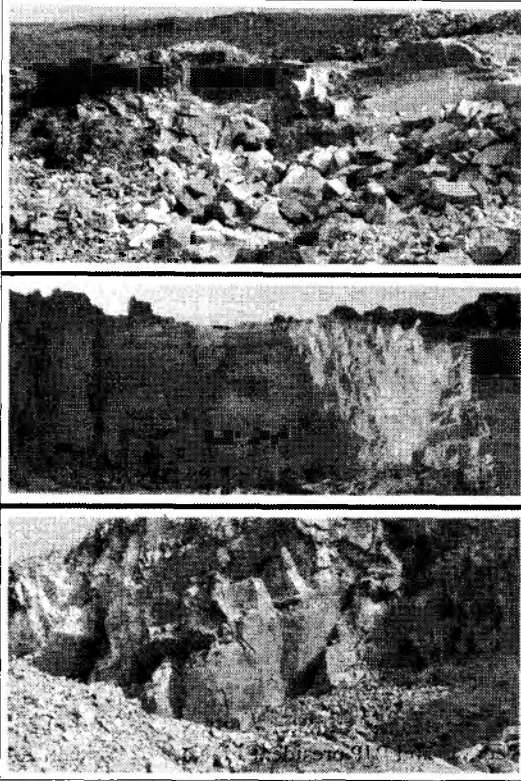
In the past week this newspaper carried reports of massive stone quarrying along the Laitkroh-Laitkynsew range which in turn

threatens to dry up the reservoirs in Wahnlangleng and other rivers/reservoirs downstream which feed the Greater Shillong Water Supply System on which the residents of Shillong depend. But quarrying is not the only evil happening. Flanking the Wahnlangleng river on the other side opposite the stone quarry is a huge bald hill after all the trees were mercilessly slaughtered very recently. On questioning the residents of the area one is told that the hill is owned by an individual and that person has decided to sell the logs. After all, in Meghalaya if a person owns a forest we can say goodbye to that forest. The question therefore is what are all the institutions doing if people have the right to do anything they want? And how many institutions do we have at the moment

with quarrying without any permission? Who is granting the no-object certificates to quarry owners? Which of the above authorities is granting export licenses for boulders to Bangladesh? Until what point will it be a case of ‘enough is enough?’ Have all the above authorities/institutions sat together to thrash out these issues of environmental depredation? There are some individuals who can only think of the immediate and not beyond their own generation. For them there is no tomorrow. In a world where we live on borrowed time can a few individuals be allowed to monetise this very earth that they claim to own? While it is true that humans need a home to live in and land is required to build a home. But can one individual monetise several hectares of land and

started. But does anyone care? We are told that the Dorbar Shnong granted the quarrying permission. Does the Dorbar Shnong have the right to grant quarrying leases? We really need clarity on this because it is this very ambiguity that is killing Meghalaya’s ecosystem by degrees.

In the Mawlynre area the so-called Meghalaya Community Led Landscape Management Project (MCLLMP) was implemented with a bang and with World Bank funding. If people visit the area today they will witness miles and miles of relentless quarrying and the trees that were supposedly planted are invisible or have disappeared. This happens because anything that is a project has short term interest both for the implementers and the community. Once the project period is over the community



that are supposed to conserve the environment (forests, rivers, and this very earth). Let me name them one by one.

1. Water Resources Department 2. Forest, Environment and Climate Change Department 3. State Pollution Control Board 4. Soil and Water Conservation Department 5. The State Environmental Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA) 6. Public Health Engineering Department (which of course is engaged in providing water to households and perhaps has very little say in pushing the water conservation agenda) 7. Autonomous District Councils 8. Syiems & their Dorbars 9. Dorbar Raid 10. Dorbar Shnong 11. The MLA 12 The MDC.

So we have 12 very powerful custodians but they are either blind or deaf to what’s happening around them! With a dozen or more institutions supposed to be overseeing our environmental concerns in Meghalaya, how come individuals get away

gouge out everything inside the earth to export to another country? The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has come down heavily on rat hole mining (a) because it is dangerous for the miners (b) because it is environmentally unsustainable. How come the NGT does not see the potential dangers to Meghalaya’s ecology from unregulated limestone mining and quarrying?

One has to only travel some 20 kms from Shillong city in any direction to see the massive destruction of the environment. First the trees are cut and then quarrying begins. No one cares if that area where the quarry happens is also a catchment feeding a river downstream. Take the case of the massive quarry in Mawlynad which is owned by the construction company co-owned by the Deputy Chief Minister in the MDA Government. The River Umken is now just a trickle of what it used to be before the quarrying

has no interest in pursuing the exercise. In the first place the community does not see a livelihood beyond quarrying and mining. In fact, the most prolific livelihoods in Meghalaya are all extractive.

There used to be so much brouhaha about jhum agriculture because it supposedly brought down forests when people moved to a new virgin area after every five years or so. Now we have largely settled agriculture but the forests are still being slaughtered. Clearly we the indigenous people of Meghalaya have lost our tribal values and we have become as avaricious as any other community on this earth. All we wear is a fake exterior and loud claims to an empty indigeneity. The intrinsic nature of our tribal roots has all but vanished. That’s why perhaps we rely so much on costumes, dances and songs! Some sincere soul-searching is called for.

Preserving Meghalaya’s aquatic treasures: A vital imperative

By Banlam Jingshai Marbaniang

Meghalaya is bestowed with abundant water resources encompassing lakes, rivers, creeks, and streams, boasts a diverse population of flora and fauna. The allure of these water bodies has transformed the region into a major tourist destination, drawing visitors to experience the enchanting waterfalls, meandering streams, serene lakes, and majestic rivers and the presence of local fauna, predominantly fishes, adds an extra layer of delight for the tourists to witness. As a matter of fact, the entire North-eastern region stands out as a biodiversity hotspot, harbouring a plethora of fish species, largely unexplored. Recent discoveries, such as the world’s largest cave fish locally known as dakra pnar krem or khasaw krem (Neolissochilus pnar), snakehead or locally called dothli (Channa aristonei), and Meghalaya dano known as shalynnai/ byrthich (Danio meghalayensis), underscore the rich and uncharted piscine diversity within the state. This has piqued the interest of aquarists, environmentalists, scientists, and researchers globally, prompting investments in studying Meghalaya’s biodiversity.

It is imperative for all concerned to prioritize the conservation of these invaluable resources to maintain a harmonious ecological balance. Addressing the balance of the aquatic ecosystem, each aquatic species, whether flora or fauna, plays a pivotal role in maintaining a healthy and sustainable environment. A symbiotic relationship prevails among aquatic flora, fishes, insects, and micro-organisms. The absence of one can impact the existence of the others. For instance, the mutualistic relationship between green algae and aquatic fungi forming lichen which plays a highly significant role in the environment demonstrates the delicate balance within ecosystems. The presence of grass carp in a pond ecosystem, controlling the overgrowth of aquatic weeds, prevents negative repercussions on other living organisms.

Despite the intricate interdependencies in aquatic ecosystems, various malpractices have inflicted harm on them. Activities such as poisoning water bodies, depleting sanctuaries, and polluting water sources have been rampant for decades. Notable incidents include the latest and infamous Williamnagar fish sanctuary poisoning and theft (December 2023), Khri river poisoning (May 2023), Umiam river poisoning (March 2023), and pollution of Umshyri and Umkrah rivers due to waste discharge and industrial effluents, coal and limestone mines’ effluents and leachate polluting the Lukhra river are a few incidents. Regrettably, even government departments have been implicated in contributing to ecosystem degradation. The discharge of bleached untreated water by the PHE Department, Mawphlang through the Greater-Shillong-Water-Supply-Scheme into the Wahlyngkien river over the years has led to the extirpation of local fish fauna and rendered the river water non-potable.

Considering these challenges, it is incumbent upon the public to recognize and sensibly address the situation by actively participating in the conservation and protection of natural water bodies. The looming threat of water body destruction necessitates a collective effort to safeguard the future for generations to come. Let us act responsibly and prevent the impending hazard from compromising the delicate balance of our ecosystem, ensuring a thriving environment for all life forms.

Therefore, conserving and protecting aquatic life is critical for maintaining ecological balance and ensuring the sustainability of water ecosystem. To achieve this feat, concrete measures must be implemented ensuring the proliferation of aquatic life and maintaining the true essence of the environment.

Here are some measures that can address this goal: Implementation of Strict Environmental Regulations: Enforcing and strengthening laws and regulations governing water quality and pollution control and imposition of penalties for illegal activities such

as water poisoning, dumping of pollutants etc.

Habitat Protection and Restoration: Establishment of protected areas, sanctuaries, and reserves for aquatic habitats while stringently maintaining the same and undertaking habitat restoration projects to revive degraded ecosystems and improve breeding grounds for aquatic species.

Sustainable Fishing Practices: Implementation and enforcement of sustainable fishing practices, including size limits, seasonal bans, and gear restrictions and promotion of responsible aquaculture to reduce pressure on wild fish populations. For instance the Government of Arunachal Pradesh has identified different locations which are natural breeding grounds of local fishes and imposed hefty fines against individuals fishing in such locations.

Proper Waste Management: Enforcement of proper waste disposal practices to prevent industrial, agricultural, and urban runoff from contaminating water bodies and promote recycling and waste reduction initiatives to minimize the introduction of pollutants into aquatic environments.

Community Education and Involvement: Conducting educational programs to raise awareness about the importance of aquatic ecosystems; the need for conservation and encouraging local communities to actively participate in conservation efforts through community clean-up events and environmental awareness campaigns.

Monitoring and Research: Investments in regular monitoring programs to assess the health of aquatic ecosystems, identify potential threats and support scientific research to understand the specific needs and vulnerabilities of different aquatic species and their habitat.

Water Quality Management: Implementing measures to maintain and improve water quality, such as reducing nutrient runoff and controlling the discharge of harmful substances, promotion of sustainable land use practices to minimize the impact of agriculture and urban development on water quality.

Invasive Species Control: Implementing strategies to control and manage invasive species that disrupt native aquatic ecosystems; monitor, and regulate the introduction of non-native species to prevent unintended ecological consequences. For e.g., some years ago, local media reported the discovery of a unique fish in Tynghor Village, West Khasi Hills which was mistakenly believed to be a new species. The fish, identified as Hypostomus plecostomus or suckermouth catfish, was released back into the water. This tropical species from South America, popular in the aquarium industry, poses a threat due to its invasive nature and prolific breeding. Releasing even a pair into local water bodies can lead to adverse consequences, such as the decline or elimination of native species and the disturbance of the natural habitat, causing an imbalance in the ecosystem. To prevent the introduction of such unwanted species, implementing regulatory measures when importing seeds is crucial to ensure protection of local water bodies from potential nuisances.

Promoting Eco-friendly Infrastructure: Designing and implementation of infrastructure projects that consider the ecological impact on aquatic habitats, such as bridges and dams that facilitate fish migration. For e.g., while erecting dams, construction of fish ladder or fishways are of utmost importance to facilitate the effective movement of migratory fishes such as Garra (Doh sher/ kew), mahseer (khasaw) etc., which migrate especially for breeding purposes.

By combining these measures and fostering a holistic approach to aquatic conservation, stakeholders can work towards preserving the rich biodiversity of aquatic ecosystems and ensuring their sustained health for future generations.

The initiatives undertaken by the State’s Fisheries Department are appreciable. Their dedicated efforts resulted in identifying and proclaiming over 70 fish sanctuaries over the years.

Letters to the Editor

Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely

Editor,
The Constitution of India was adopted on November 26, 1949. The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India is a special provision meant to safeguard the interests of tribals living in the state of Meghalaya, Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram and Tripura. One of our own, Rev. J.J.M Nichols Roy and others from our state too played a pivotal role in making the Sixth Schedule. Every Indian be it young or old individuals, public or private entities etc., respect and honour the Constitution in letter and spirit. Only the MDA Government of Meghalaya seems to be oblivious of the words “Honour” and “Respect” for the Constitution which is the building and binding block of this great nation.
Let me clarify the above.

Recently the Cabinet cleared an approval for seeking consent of the Governor to extend the tenure of the Autonomous District Councils of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills by 6 months under the pretext that the ADCs found it impractical to conduct the elections due to delimitation. This is an absolute fallacy. As per the Sixth Schedule in paragraph 2 Sub paragraph 6A, there are only two conditions where the extension of the District Council is possible. Firstly, when there is an emergency, the District Council’s term can be extended by a period of 6 months and secondly, when the Governor finds that it is impracticable to conduct the elections, he may extend the tenure of the District Councils by a period of 1 year. I find that the decision of the MDA government over this decision is seriously flawed. The Government combined two separate conditions to suit their own interests. If the extension is for six months then it’s safe to say that the premise of this argument by the Government is due

to emergency and not one which is impractical. I find this act of the Government really perplexing as it tantamounts to serious tampering and circumventing the laws of the land designed by our forefathers for our well-being.

One therefore begs to know as to what kind of ‘Emergency’ are we facing or what kind of impractical situation is there that the ADC elections need to be extended. If it is due to an emergency, let’s hope the MDA government is not using the Manipur violence as a reference for their flawed reasoning. If it is impractical to hold the elections due to the so-called delimitation process, then why was it possible to hold elections just 5 years ago in 2019 and not now? Moreover, the delimitation of ADCs was completed in the year 2012, so, what is the need to redo the whole exercise just after 11 years? Interestingly the delimitation process takes somewhere between 2 to 3 years to complete. Firstly, a committee has to be cre-

ated which will be tasked to submit a report of their findings. This process alone takes 1 to 1 ½ years. After report submission, there would be public hearings to ascertain the willingness of raid, shnong, dong etc. to be absorbed in another constituency or to absorb another in theirs.

Let’s not forget the political leaders who will create a hue and cry for losing part of their vote bank to a competitor or gaining a vote bank which is against them. For instance in the last delimitation, the MDC from Laitkroh, during a session of KHADC stood on a table during business hours and tore the delimitation document in protest, since most of his people had been delimited to another constituency. If this is solved then the matter will go on to the State assembly for discussion. Here again counter-sparrring will happen. Only and only if all are on board can the approval for assent of the Governor be sent.

From the above arguments, one can only infer

that there exists a hidden agenda and hence this match fixing by the Government is happening probably out of fear of losing the elections, potential financial loss and the greed for power. So if the delimitation is not complete then we will again face one after another extension till the ruling MDCs are well fed and satisfied. Recently the MDA Government has issued a statement that delimitation is not unprecedented but precedent is absurd and is an absolute disregard for the rule of law and promotion of systematic and illegal activities within the Government. In simple words, just because a crime committed goes unnoticed and unpunished, that doesn’t mean repeating the same act is not a crime. The statement is offensive and an insult to the law-abiding citizens. The Mukul Sigma Government extended the GHADC tenure by 2 years on grounds that they expected some special provisions under the ANVC pact with the Government of India. This too is a heinous crime for disregarding the

Constitution of India. The MDA Government’s action on this matter is appalling, outrageous and a betrayal of the voters of the state whose rights are poised to be robbed.

A case in point as of now is the removal of the Lok Ayukta officers which they succeeded in doing by not honouring and completely disregarding the Lokayukta act. All in all I can safely say that this is one of the many experiments by the people running the Government for their own personal benefits at the cost of our future. Let’s cross our fingers that some sense would prevail and this decision to extend the ADCs tenure doesn’t set a precedent that tampering and circumventing the law is not at all acceptable.

Yours etc.,
Deity H Majaw,
Advocate,
Via email

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"Be thirsty to always try to achieve something more."

— Frank Vogel

The Shillong Times

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Importance of water governance

THE international water conclave being held in Meghalaya has brought many issues to the fore. Meghalaya Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma hit the right notes at the conclave when he pointed to the multiple authorities involved in the conservation and management of water and all working at cross purposes instead of in tandem. Convergence has always been the Achilles heel of governments. Hence investments in water conservation are not commensurate with the outcomes. When it comes to the Agriculture and Irrigation Department, the latter is more concerned with building infrastructure than in the real purpose of bringing water to assist in enhancing agricultural production. There is money involved in construction, hence it becomes the priority but whether water actually reaches the farmers' fields after the irrigation infrastructure is completed is questionable.

Clean water and sanitation is listed amongst the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). All the goals involve providing better quality of life and are connected to water use. The Government of Meghalaya flagged off many important points such as transcending from water sufficiency to water efficiency. It was also stated that there is a shortage of trained manpower in the water sector. Water management in the hills is different from how water is managed in the plains. Very often bureaucrats heading water-related departments have not seen the condition of the water bodies in the states they work in. Reliance on paper reports of the State Pollution Control Board - which actually is a critical department as far as managing the cleanliness of water bodies is concerned, is what makes things go awry. Time has come for the bureaucracy to spend more time in the field than at their desks. That's the only way they can inform themselves of the ground realities as far as the status of water bodies in Meghalaya are concerned. Right now, they are in a sorry state!

Government officials have the propensity to rattle off figures of how many springs have been mapped and how many trees planted across the state. The problem is not even a fraction of the trees planted, survive to see another year. It is also easy to speak of community engagement in conservation processes but evidently not enough community engagement is happening. If the government wants to see results it has to work like an NGO with its people present in the field and constantly hand-holding the communities. Else all calculations remain on paper even while money is spent without tangible outcomes. Water governance is therefore integral and it includes the political, social, economic and administrative systems that influence the use and management of water. Water governance is about who gets what kind of water, when and how and who has the right to water and its related services and their benefits. A robust water governance system also means value for money since the amount poured into the Basin Management Authority over the years is substantial. The question is whether the outcomes have matched the investments.

Letters to the Editor

Dhankheti point no place for hawkers

Editor,
As of today, hawkers and vendors are occupying every space possible, spreading their wares just about anywhere. They have invaded the main roads and the footpaths and are creating a lot of inconvenience for vehicles and pedestrians alike. There is a convergence of the hawkers, the vehicles and the pedestrians which is not a happy coexistence but a very inconvenient and risky one as well.

Hawkers deserve to have a place and space of their own in order to carry out their businesses and earn their livelihoods but certainly that space must not be a parking lot. Shillong has way too many vehicles plying on the road with little to no parking area. As an example, the parking space at Dhankheti point is the only space that people can park

their vehicles while visiting Woodland's Hospital or picking up their children and wards from Loreto Convent or going to any other offices in the vicinity. To convert the parking lot to a designated space for the hawkers and vendors is no solution at all. This has been a problem for a very long time. The government must act quickly and wisely and identify a place for the hawkers that will not create any inconvenience and hassle for anyone.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

India's misplaced priorities

Editor,
A few days ago, the Indian Space Research Organisation announced that the Aditya-L1 spacecraft, which was launched on September 2 last year, had successfully reached the halo orbit, located roughly 1.5 million

The article 'The Meghalaya State Anthem' by PM Passah was quite an interesting read and made some claims that have often been repeated elsewhere. This is the claim that the name Jaintia is actually not derived from Jayanti Devi but from the first state called Jaintia formed by the Monkhmer or Austric-speaking race in Kopili (Kupli) valley, where they settled after fleeing Kamrupa before 500 A.D. (BCE). So, the claim is that the name 'Jaintia' is more than 1500 years old, and therefore it should have precedence over the name 'Khasi'. The author did not inform the source of this information and assumes that it should be treated as an authentic version. A search online, however, did reveal information on the Jaintia Kingdom, which was supposed to have started around 600 BCE.

The particular Wikipedia page mentions four phases of the Jaintia kingdom, viz., the old dynasty, the partitioned dynasty, the Brahmin dynasty, and the new dynasty from 1500 CE. A look at the names reveals a very interesting pattern. None of the names before the New Dynasty had the suffix Syiem Sutnga attached after the first name of the ruler, after which it became common. The earlier names appear all to be Hindu, with the most obvious being 'Kamadeva', who is supposed to have ruled between 1100 and 1200 CE. Kamadeva is actually the Hindu version of cupid. Knowing that the early forms of Hinduism had a close connection to Greek mythology as they were both part of an earlier Indo-European mythology, this resemblance is not surprising. Interesting information given on the page is that around 630 CE, one of the older rulers, Guhak, divided the Jaintia Kingdom into three parts, giving each to one of his three sons: Jyantak got the northern hills, which continued to be known as the Jaintia Kingdom; Gurak got the southern plains, which came to be known as the Gour Kingdom; and Luddak, the third son, got the western plains, which became the Laur Kingdom. A search of the last two kingdoms reveals that both were petty kingdoms of the medieval Sylhet region, speaking Sanskrit and Prakrit, both of which belong to the Indo-European language family, and following Hinduism. The modern north Indian languages, in fact, are derived from the various Prakrits that were used in the Indian subcontinent from around the 3rd century BCE to the 8th century CE. There are some interesting ramifications of this information.

If the word Jaintia has always been understood to refer to the same group of people for the last, at least 1500 years, it means that the

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

present Jaintia people were initially speaking an Indo-European language and practiced Hinduism. But sometime in the past, connected maybe to the migration story of fleeing Kamarupa, they came to the hills, where they started speaking an Austroasiatic language and gave up Hinduism for local animistic beliefs (unless, of course, it is argued that Niamtre is nothing but an offshoot of Hinduism). They must have adopted these new changes after coming into contact with an already existing group that spoke an Austroasiatic language (today known as the Khasi) and had their own belief systems. But this raises another question, that of the origin of Hima Sutnga and its relationship with the Jaintia Kingdom.

In chapter 4 of Betty Laloo's PhD Thesis there's a section titled 'Reconstructing the Early Jaintia State through Oral Traditions' which mentions the story of U Loh Ryndi and Ka Li Dokha under the section 'Origin of the institution of Syiemship or tribal chieftainship of the Jaintias' suggesting the connection of the story to the early state formation among the Jaintias. There are multiple versions presented with one of them stating that the Sutnga clan came from the youngest daughter Ka Nga, and it is from this clan that the Syiem or traditional chief of the Jaintias originated. The next section in the chapter is about the annexation of Jaintiapur to Hima Sutnga. This particular kingdom was a petty Hindu Kingdom in Sylhet and its annexation, according to Betty Laloo, is one of the best preserved legends of the Jaintias. There are quite a few versions but it is clear the people from Hima Sutnga who conquered this kingdom were not the same people who were living in it. But based on the story of the 1500 year old Jaintia kingdom it appears that they are actually the same people. This is quite confusing. How can people who speak a different language (Austroasiatic vs. Indo-Aryan) and follow different culture (Niamtre vs Hinduism) be considered to be the same? Is it the same argument that at one point of time we all came from Africa and therefore we are all Africans? Maybe those who claim that the name Jaintia is 1500 year and refers to the same people today known as Pnar can clarify in their future submissions.

Any construction or reconstruction of history must be done after taking all kinds of evidence into consideration, along with mention of the sources and their authenticity. Till the clarification arrives from PM Passah and those who subscribe to the 1500-year-old version, it

appears that there is an attempt to conflate the history of the Pnars with that of a kingdom that for sure must have existed 1500 years ago but was one influenced by Indo-Aryan culture and not an Austroasiatic kingdom as claimed by some. This kingdom was then annexed by Hima Sutnga, founded by the War Amwi based on the legends of U Loh Ryndi and Ka Li Dokha. After its annexation, the original legend was modified to make it amenable to Hindu beliefs and connect it to one of its rulers from the Brahmin dynasty, Jayanti Devi. This then allowed some to claim connection to another legend, which asserts that the Jaintia kingdom (conquered by Hima Sutnga) is 1500 years old. In the process, the history of the kingdom has been made to appear to be the history of the Pnar. But linguistic evidence points to a different story.

According to the 2013 paper by K. S. Nagaraja, Paul Sidwell, and Simon Greenhill, 'A Lexicostatistical Study of the Khasian Languages: Khasi, Pnar, Lyngngam, and War' all languages under the Khasian branch of the Mon-Khmer languages (this includes the languages and dialects of Khynriam, War, Bhoi, Jaintia, Maram, and Lyngngam) are connected, and they emerged from a common ancestor, with their closest relative being the Palaung found today in the Shan state of Myanmar. Based on the glottochronological dating of divergences, War was found to be the closest to Palaung, which means that the earliest Khasian language must have been one that sounded like the War-Lamin. This divergence, or splitting from Palaung, happened around 4000 years ago. Then, around 2000 years ago, Lyngngam diverged from War. Then, around 1400 years ago, Pnar diverged from Lyngngam, and finally, around 700 years ago, Khasi (standard Khasi) appeared on the scene. The Pnar of today are associated with the Hima Sutnga, who conquered Jaintiapur and ruled over it until the British annexed it in the early 19th century. The origin story of Hima Sutnga in turn points out that it was the War Amwi who founded the Hima, which matches with the linguistic evidence that the War language predates the Pnar language with Lyngngam being the intermediate language. So from the point of view of oral history and linguistics, the link between the War Amwi and Pnar has been confirmed. The fact that the War Amwi is the oldest group among the Khasi was also accepted by Hamlet Bareh in his 1967 book 'The history and culture of the Khasi people' quoted

by Alfons K. Weidert in his 1975 'Itkong Amwi. Deskriptive Analyse eines Wardialekts des Khasi' as mentioned in the 2009 book 'Classifying the Austroasiatic Languages: History and State of the Art' by Paul Sidwell, a world-renowned expert on Austroasiatic languages. His statement on the War Amwi, is reproduced below:

The idea is entertained that the Amwi dialect of Khasi group is more Mon-Khmer than Khasi (which includes Pnar) in construction. This dialect prevails in the southern Jaintia Hills, and we suggest that it constitutes a proper link between Khasi and Mon-Khmer. Is it not possible to assign the true parentage of Khasi to Amwi itself? This suggestion finds support when we remember that the first Khasi tribes settled in the Eastern parts of Jaintia Hills.

How does the story of the 1500-year-old Jaintia kingdom account for the War Amwi? Where do they fit in this narrative? Or is there a possibility that the 1500-year-old 'Jaintia' had never referred to the Pnar but were actually an Indo-Aryan-speaking people who had their own kingdoms in Sylhet, one of which was then conquered by the people of Hima Sutnga, who today are known as the Pnar? And the attempt to build a connection between the Pnar and this 1500-year-old 'Jaintia' group is actually a case of misidentification. Today, the Pnar are known as Jaintia, and there is absolutely no problem with that. What names a group calls itself is not always the name it gives itself but also what others call it; a very important example is Indians or Hindus, which are actually names given by others and not the people to whom they refer today. But that name has stuck, and it will remain so because of historical reasons, and that's perfectly fine. Same is the case with the name Jaintia.

But all this depends on whether the 1500-year-old history of the Jaintia kingdom, as claimed by PM Passah, is the one that is connected to the Gour Kingdom and the Laur Kingdom. Or maybe I am mistaken, and the Jaintia kingdom mentioned by him is a totally different one altogether. In that case, it will be helpful if he can share the sources from which he is getting that information and maybe explain how that is connected to the evidence found through linguistics, oral history, and genetics. That will bring much clarity to the issue. Personally, I would very much like to learn more about it, and if PM Passah and those who claim the 1500-year version can enlighten all of us, I will be most grateful. I know we all will be.

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

care, food and employment. Spending public money on such missions amid poor condition in these sectors, seems like putting on a brand new costly coat over a pair of tattered trousers. If parents go to a foreign country on a holiday trip after cutting spending on their children's food and education, can we call them wise?

Our policy makers must pay heed to what the former World Bank president, Jim Yong Kim had said on hunger and child stunting in India, "This is the bottom line: if you walk into the future economy with 40 per cent of your workforce having been stunted as children, you are not going to be able to compete."

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 delicacies

By Rahil Nora Chopra

Nitish meets, Modi, Shah, Nadda to sort out NDA seat-sharing

Ahead of the floor test of the NDA government in Bihar, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar met Prime Minister Narendra Modi in their first meeting since the Janata Dal (United) president dumped the Opposition INDIA bloc and joined the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) last month, asserting that he would not leave it again. After meeting PM Modi, Nitish also met Union Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP president JP Nadda. Both parties have to deal with a number of influential political issues ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, including the distribution of parliamentary seats for contesting election among them and their smaller allies and issues pertaining to Rajya Sabha polls in the state may also be discussed during the CM's meeting with top BJP leaders. Six Rajya Sabha seats in Bihar are falling vacant, for which elections are scheduled to be held on February 27. There is also a speculation that Nitish wants the Bihar Assembly to get dissolved so that its election could be held along with the Lok Sabha polls expected in April-May but the BJP, which has much more power than the JD(U) in the House, might not be receptive to the idea.

Gaurav Gogoi accuses Modi of turning Parliament into 'King's Court'
Lok Sabha MP Gaurav Gogoi during vote of thanks on the president's address accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of being a "ma-

haraja" who has turned Parliament from a "temple of democracy" to a "king's court". The Congress leader also highlighted grim unemployment situation in the country. Gogoi said that around 42% of graduates below the age of 25 were unemployed in India.

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giving notice to the Secretary. If 38 MLAs support the no-confidence motion, the voting process can be completed. On the other hand, Jitan Ram Manjhi demands two ministerial berths in the Nitish Karmacharya cabinet, adding fresh tension to the government. HAM(S) has four members in the assembly, and their role becomes crucial during the trust motion. While Congress offered the CM's post to Jitan Ram Manjhi of HAM(S), state Congress president Akhilesh Prasad Singh said: "Wo aa jayen idhar, ham log bana dete hain Mukhya Mantri (We will make him the CM if he joins our alliance)." JD(U), however, has said Manjhi was solidly with the NDA. "Their (opposition's) one-point programme is to destabilise the NDA government in the state. However, it will not happen." The JD(U) and the BJP leaders have been asserting the vote of confidence would be a smooth affair as the ruling coalition, comprising JD(U), BJP, Hindustani Awam Morcha and a few other parties, have a majority of 128 members in the 243 member state assembly, while the opposition has 114 MLAs.

Eye on Lok Sabha polls, BJP teams up with TDP in Telangana

Ahead of Andhra Pradesh assembly and Lok Sabha elections, the BJP is all geared to join hands with the TDP, since it has fallen out with Andhra Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy. Telugu Desam Party (TDP) president N. Chandrababu Naidu has met Union Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP president JP Nadda to revive his political alliance with BJP, and an announcement that TDP joining NDA may soon come. TDP and Jana Sena Party (JSP) had formed an alliance in September last. JSP chief Pawan Kalyan had since said that he continued to have a good relation with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other top BJP leaders, and he was confident that the national party would unite with the TDP-JSP combine to together fight the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) in the elections. For the BJP, a tie-up with the TDP would mean a win for the party in at least some of the Lok Sabha seats. (IPA Service)

of a ministerial berth at the center and one in Lucknow. While RLD president Jayant Chaudhary, who was elected Rajya Sabha member from Uttar Pradesh in 2022 with the SP's support, has been maintaining silence on the recent reports of meetings with the BJP, Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav on Thursday said the BJP knows how to break parties and when and whom to 'buy'. He also accused the ruling party of misusing central agencies like ED, CBI and Income-tax. Meanwhile, Congress and the SP are currently engaged in discussions to decide on the seat share in UP, which has 80 Lok Sabha seats. The SP has already declared candidates for 16 seats and offered 11 seats to Congress, which is seeking to contest 20 seats.

Bihar assembly: with 128 MLAs, Nitish to face floor test on Feb 12

Bihar Assembly Speaker Awadh Bihari Choudhary made his stance very clear that he would not step down from his post, besides making the announcement that he would not resign until the Assembly Session, which commences on February 12, when Chief Minister Nitish Kumar is set to face a floor test. Choudhary, who belongs to Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), is currently the Speaker of the Bihar Assembly. The NDA leaders want to remove him before the floor test. On January 28, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Nand Kishore Yadav issued a notice of no confidence against the Speaker to the Secretary. A no-confidence motion can be brought against the Speaker after 14 days of

TEENS AND SCREENS

Technology has become ubiquitous over time, keeping us informed and connected to the world like never before. But for parents, this new digital world can be a bit of a mystery, especially when it comes to managing their kids' screen time and content consumption.

With 95% of teens now owning a smartphone and 45% stating they are online 'almost constantly', understanding healthy screen time habits could not be more imperative. Excessive technology usage can lead to issues like shorter attention spans, disrupted sleep cycles, and reduced academic performance. However, at the same time, the internet is also full of useful information if leveraged wisely.

Let's explore how parents and kids can make the most of technology, without letting it take over their lives.

Crafting Responsible Digital Lifestyles

Kids today are the first generation growing up surrounded by technology. As they grow and develop, digital media becomes a big part of their lives. This puts a lot of pressure on parents to show them how to use technology healthily, and it's completely up to them how they can teach their kids to thrive, not just online, but in the real world as well.

How much screen time is too much?

According to the guidelines issued by the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2016, it's crucial for children, between the ages of 2 and 5, to have no more than an hour of screen time each day. This helps their brains grow healthy and strong. Plus, it leaves plenty of time for important stuff like sleep, playing outside, and spending quality time with the people taking care of them.

The organization recommends setting clear boundaries and focusing on high-quality content instead

of just letting kids passively consume entertainment media. They also emphasize that playtime isn't just for little ones. Even for teenagers, having time to play freely is essential to boost their brain power, keep them physically active, socialize, and even support their emotional health.

While the 2016 recommendations focused predominantly on traditional devices like TV, computers, and video games, today's reality of smartphones warrants even greater vigilance on the back of its constant access.

Potential Risks

Excessive immersion in screens correlates strongly with health issues like obesity, sleep deprivation, symptoms of depression, and reduced academic achievement.

Entertainment content and social media platforms give us instant rewards - a like here, a comment there, and we feel good. But here's the catch. When we're scrolling and swiping, we're not doing much else.

We might be missing out on things that help us grow as individuals - like playing sports, pursuing hobbies, hanging out with friends, getting creative, or even spending quality time with family. And because everything online happens so fast, we might find it harder to be patient in the real world. So, while it's fun to get lost in the online world, let's not forget to balance it with the real one.

Additionally, studies reveal that over 50% of adolescents report being bullied online. Screen time necessitates constant parental guidance regarding cyberbullying, privacy protection, avoiding predators, and reporting abuse.

Benefits

While there are valid concerns about the use of technology, it's not entirely fair to demonize it, especially given how it's woven into every aspect of our lives. When used mindfully, the internet can be



a treasure trove of resources for young people, offering endless opportunities for learning, creativity, and personal growth.

Think about it. There's a wealth of educational content on a wide range of topics, allowing kids to learn at their own pace and in line with their interests. Digital tools spark creativity and let them experiment with things like photo editing, coding, game design, and animation. Staying tech-savvy is key to success and satisfaction in the future.

And let's not forget about social media. It can provide a sense of connection and community support. Young people facing common challenges, like exam stress or college applications, can find solace in shared experiences, especially when these discussions are held openly and under parental guidance. For those who don't have local access to certain hobbies, online groups can be a lifeline, helping them pursue their passions and develop new skills. Even esports and some online games can sharpen strategic thinking and leadership skills. So, outright banning technology seems

like a missed opportunity to tap into its potential in a meaningful way.

Strategies for Finding Balance

Establish Trust Through Open Dialogue: Instead of laying down the law arbitrarily, have an open conversation with your kids about online behavior and boundaries. Make sure they understand the possible consequences of overuse and risky actions but also point out the positive ways they can use the internet. This approach not only shows respect for their perspective but also helps them understand the importance of being responsible online. They'll be more likely to make smart choices and view any restrictions you set (like using parent-controlled apps) as helpful guidelines, rather than oppressive rules.

Set Reasonable Time Limits: It's a good idea to check out pediatric guidelines and recommendations for screen time, keeping in mind that kids with special needs might have different requirements. Using the built-in controls on devices, you can set daily limits and schedules, with some extra time for wrapping up

tasks. This approach helps kids learn to manage their time and prevents the shock of sudden restrictions.

Role Model Healthy Technology Habits: As caregivers, it's important to show kids how to balance tech use with real-life interactions. Simple actions like putting phones away during conversations, meals, and family time, or excusing yourself to take urgent calls or messages, can make a big difference. By demonstrating responsible tech use, you're teaching kids valuable digital etiquette.

Use Built-In Monitoring Tools: Consider activating parental controls on devices to block suspicious contacts or apps and keep an eye out for potential issues like bullying or grooming. Location-tracking apps can also provide an extra layer of safety. These tools can help keep kids safe online without resorting to snooping, which can violate their privacy and trust.

Foster Transparent Dialogue About Online Lives: Try having weekly check-ins to talk about your kids' online experiences. Ask about the apps they're using, who they're chatting with, how they feel

about their screen time, and whether they've encountered any problems like bullying. The goal is to work through any issues together, helping them stay open to discussing problems and learning how to handle challenges on their own.

Encourage Diverse Interests Beyond Technology: Encourage your kids to explore hobbies like sports, music, and arts to fuel their creativity. Make time for offline family activities, like board games or just chatting, especially during device-free weekends. This can help kids develop a well-rounded identity, boost their self-esteem, and find a healthy balance between their online and offline lives.

Parenting in the digital age is all about balance. Technology isn't the enemy, but it's not the only solution either. When used wisely, it can be a powerful tool for a child's development.

By promoting open communication, setting sensible limits, and encouraging a range of interests, parents can guide their kids to make the most of technology while keeping a healthy balance with the real world. (LANSlife)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, FEBRUARY 11, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon conjunct Saturn on your solar return chart brings in a good phase. Your inherent skills and abilities come to the forefront and new doors open up. You may be handling additional or new responsibilities. If businesspersons or entrepreneurs have plans of starting a new venture or expanding the present one then stars will also support you tremendously. Financially you will be secure and will be drawn to luxury items. Success in the academic field is strongly indicated. Socially you gain popularity. An enhanced image works wonders for you. You would travel within the country and make overseas trips too. Make sure that you do not ignore health issues overall you will be in good health.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You need the energies, companionship, and support of other people, and they too draw upon you a great deal. You need space and contact with others in order to feel content. You are blessed with intuition and foresight which leads you in the right direction. You seem to need a good friend with whom you can share your ideas. You focus on balancing your personal interests and objectives with what would be best for a significant other. It's important to give others credit and recognition, and to attempt to harmonize and include others rather than to go solo for the time being.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This is an especially introspective phase during which you have the chance to truly uncover your personal strengths and talents. On a more practical level, you may be dealing with joint finances and shared resources now more than usual. This is an excellent time under which you bring more harmony and pleasant interactions in your relationships with loved ones. All which is deeply personal comes into focus now. Intimate matters are especially important to you during this period. Just how well you are handling your life comes up for inspection. You are more willing than usual to explore life's secrets. Research uncovers new material that allows you to develop a better overall picture of the events.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You feel fun loving, energetic, and willing to explore new ideas. Financial benefits may come your way. Stress may crop up at unexpected turns and this would require you to look at some lifestyle changes and even incorporate some techniques like exercise and meditation. You would focus on intimacy with a partner, or simply retreat a little from the hectic pace of life. This is an excellent time to create a budget or financial plan, or to rid yourself of bad habits that undermine your sense of personal power and self-mastery.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You display great skills in sports, competitive exams, physical activities and this wins appreciation and brings about new opportunities. Close relationships continue to be in focus. Emotions run close to the surface. You may also see the culmination or fruits of a personal project at this time. This week is good for foreign affairs and education. Personal relations are satisfying and you have plenty of goodwill and friendships around you. You are likely to get back to fitness routines and diet programs to enhance health and energy.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You are ambitious, authoritative and courageous. This period is excellent for career and business income. Extra care should be exercised when it comes to negotiations and one-on-one communications. Be as non-judgmental as you can with a partner. There may be the need to revisit old issues in a partnership, or there could be some communication problems with a partner. Misunderstandings with your partner now can do some damage if you focus on words said instead of the meanings behind the words. Stick to regular exercise routine and regular pattern of nutritious diet.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) If you need to talk through problems, do your best to be as non-judgmental as possible, and don't over-react to what your partner has to say either. Re-thinking a partnership arrangement is possible now, but you should avoid jumping to any premature decisions. It would be wise to be especially clear when it comes to communicating with people,

take time to re-examine issues rather than communicating about them prematurely. Communicative abilities will largely be applied to professional world ambitions where knowledge and education are pursued in order to enhance career prospects and financial matters.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This week brings entertainment, communication and popularity among people and harmonious relations in personal and professional life. Intimate connections can be especially meaningful. Intensity appeals in your relationships. It's a good time to work out money problems or other issues of sharing with a partner. You may get the backing you need now-financial or emotional. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive pleasure from these activities. More freedom is likely to be experienced in your career. Integrity and honesty will be the keystone.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) People in fine arts, and communication related fields would give a non-traditional blend to their creations and get popularity by the work done. Routine affairs simply don't seem to satisfy. You receive pleasure from anything that expands your horizons, both physically and mentally. People from overseas and foreign climes may particularly appeal now. You tend to be expansive and generous when it comes to love. A love interest who attracts you during this cycle may be somebody who you previously wouldn't consider attractive, or someone whose cultural background is very different from yours.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You would have a strong desire to cooperate and communicate with others. You feel most comfortable spending time with people on a one-to-one level, or with those with whom you share personal matters. Your own thoughts become clearer through dialogue with others. You may be involved in public relations work, counseling, negotiating, or arbitration during this cycle. There is a lot of emphasis on communications with partners and best friends at this time. You can use the power of words to advise others or to make peace with people in your life.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) The planetary configuration indicates authority figures, elders, parents, or influential people in your life who will support you and whose respect you will earn. They are more willing to help you on your road to success. The more willing you are to be in the limelight and take center stage, the more positive the rewards. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities and family relations. You have a taste for the exotic now that can show up in many areas of your life—who you are attracted to, what you buy, the kind of art or entertainment you enjoy, and so forth. You would be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You are more diplomatic than usual during this transit. Delays and miscommunications are possible. It's a good time for rethinking and revising partnership matters. You are likely to take your hobbies and talents more seriously. This is an excellent week for concentrating on a personal hobby and turning it into a source of income. You accept the individuality of loved ones and that would be helpful to resolve your conflicts and move ahead in harmony. You feel fresh and re-energized. Finding a balance between autonomy and dependence is key for you at this time.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) Negative expression of this energy is the tendency towards ego conflicts concerning jointly held property or money. Conflicts with partners over values or possessions are possible. Occasionally, this transit could bring a crisis or ending of some kind. Something you hear about now might disturb or touch you deeply. You would be more sensitive and dedicated to your personal and professional life. You work hard to meet the goals. This is a good time to build your skills, to get organized, and to attend to your health and wellbeing.

Your unique smell can provide clues about your health

By Aoife Morrin

Hundreds of chemicals stream from our bodies into the air every second. These chemicals release into the air easily as they have high vapour pressures, meaning they boil and turn into gases at room temperature. They give clues about who we are, and how healthy we are.

Since ancient Greek times, we've known that we smell differently when we are unwell. While we rely on blood analysis today, ancient Greek physicians used smell to diagnose maladies. If they took a whiff of your breath and described it as fetor hepaticus (meaning bad liver), it meant you could be headed for liver failure.

If a person's whiff was sweet or fruity, physicians thought this meant that sugars in the digestive system were not being broken down, and that person had probably diabetes. Science has since shown the ancient Greeks were right - liver failure and diabetes and many other diseases including infectious diseases give your breath a distinctive smell.

In 1971, Nobel Laureate chemist Linus Pauling counted 250 different gaseous chemicals in breath. These gaseous chemicals are called volatile organic compounds or VOCs. Since Pauling's discovery, other scientists have discovered hundreds more VOCs in our breath. We have learned that many of these VOCs have distinctive odours, but some have no odour that our noses can perceive.

Scientists believe that whether a VOC has an odour that our noses can detect or not, they can reveal information about how healthy someone is.

A Scottish man's Parkinson's disease onset was identified by his wife, retired nurse Joy Milner, after she was convinced the way he smelled had changed, years before he was diagnosed in 2005. This discovery has led to research programmes involving Joy Milner to identify the precise smell of this disease.

Dogs can sniff out more diseases than humans because of their more sophisticated olfactory talents. But technological techniques, like analytical tool mass spectrometry, picks up even more subtle changes in VOC profiles that are being linked to gut, skin and respiratory diseases as well as neurological diseases like Parkinson's. Researchers believe that one day some diseases will be diagnosed simply by breathing into a device.

Where do VOCs come from?

Breath is not the only source of VOCs in the body. They are also emitted from skin, urine and faeces.

VOCs from skin are the result of millions of skin glands removing metabolic waste from the body, as well as waste generated by bacteria and other microbes that live on our skin. Sweating produces extra nutrients for these bacteria to metabolise which can result in particularly odorous VOCs. Odour from sweat only makes up a fraction of the scents from VOCs though.

Our skin and also our gut microbiomes are made up from a delicate balance of these microbes. Scientists think they influence our health, but we don't yet understand a lot about how this relationship works.

Unlike the gut, the skin is relatively easy to study - you can collect skin samples from living humans without having to go deep into the body. Scientists think skin VOCs can offer insights into how the microbiome's bacteria and the human body work together to maintain our health and protect us from disease.

In my team's laboratory, we are investigating whether the skin VOC signature can reveal different attributes of the person it belongs to. These signals in skin VOC signatures are probably how dogs distinguish between people by smell. We are at a relatively early stage in this research area but we have shown that you can tell males from females based on how acidic the VOCs from skin are. We use mass spectrometry to see this as the average human nose is not sophisticated enough to detect these VOCs. We can also predict a person's age with reasonable accuracy to within a few years from their skin VOC profile. This is not surprising considering that oxidative stress in our bodies increases as we age. Oxidative stress happens when your antioxidant levels are low and causes irreversible damage to our cells and organs. Our recent research found by-products of this oxidative damage in skin VOC profiles.

Not only are these VOCs responsible for personal scent - they are used by plants, insects and animals as a communication channel. Plants are in a constant VOC dialogue with other organisms including pollinators, herbivores, other plants and their natural enemies such as harmful bacteria and insects. VOCs used for this back and forth dialogue are known as pheromones.

What has science shown about love pheromones?

In the animal kingdom, there is good evidence VOCs can act as aphrodisiacs. Mice for example have microbes which contribute to a particularly smelly compound called trimethylamine, which allows mice to verify the species of a potential mate. Pigs and elephants have sex pheromones too.

It is possible that humans also produce VOCs for attracting the perfect mate. Scientists have yet to fully decode skin - or other VOCs that are released from our bodies. But evidence for human love pheromones so far is controversial at best. One theory suggests that they were lost about 23 million years ago when primates developed full colour vision and started relying on their enhanced vision to choose a mate.

However, we believe that whether human pheromones exist or not, skin VOCs can reveal who and how we are, in terms of things like ageing, nutrition and fitness, fertility and even stress levels. This signature probably contains markers we can use to monitor our health and diagnose disease.

(Aoife Morrin is an Associate Professor of Analytical Chemistry at Dublin City University)

"Quality is never an accident. It is always the result of intelligent effort."

—John Ruskin

The Shillong Times

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Modi -- A balance sheet

WITH Parliament ending its last session and the 17th Lok Sabha's life effectively over since Saturday, the nation is set for the season of general elections. Notification to announce the election dates is expected soon. Without doubt, the BJP's mass support has not dwindled thanks to the cautious manner in which Prime Minister Narendra Modi held the reins for two terms. The unalloyed fact, though, is that Modi has less to boast of by way of accomplishments. Ten years was what he sought for at the outset, in 2014, to change India for the better. This change, mostly, is evident in the highways sector and the number of airports and ports too rose. The more important railway sector, however, is ailing. Agreed, its budget has risen from 66,000 crore in 2014 to 2.8 lakh crore now – a three-fold increase – but the ground realities remain the same. India still does not have high-speed trains. The maximum speed is 160kmph, while the speed of trains in China is nearly 500kmph, and Bangladesh is working on a speed of 300kmph. Modi's promised bullet train is still in the works. So much for infra development. Another prominent area is defence. There has been no major headway for India in this sector too, though border defences have been strengthened by way of infra-development. After the much-publicized Rafale deal, what more remains a big question.

The Modi dispensation's main claims are increase in exports, the abrogation of Special Status for Jammu and Kashmir, its successful implementation without scope for violent upheavals, erection of the new parliament building, the solving of the Babri Masjid dispute in Ayodhya, social welfare steps like the Jan Oushadhi that provided medicines at cheap rates or the PM Arogya Yojana insurance, the distribution of cooking gas cylinders to BPL families, the farmer-vendor pension schemes etc. Note that it was the UPA-II that introduced the subsidized foodgrains scheme for BPL families and the rural employment guarantee scheme – stellar steps -- which the Modi government carried forward. On the infrastructure front, while national highways development has been impressive, the related funds mismanagement cited by CAG is a serious concern. Appreciably, Modi and his ministers are not seen to be corrupt, unlike in the UPA terms when looting the exchequer was normalised. Modi provided stability to the nation for two terms, as he acted shy and mostly avoided touching hot spots. There is only a marginal boost to the industrial and job creation fronts. On foreign relations, despite the handshakes, the gains are moderate. Overall, there is neither reason for jubilation nor distress about the way Narendra Modi ruled the nation for two terms. It is like a ship sailing away from the storm.

Lokayukta Snafu:MDA'S Executive Overreach & Imperative for Ombudsman Policy Reform

By Joel B Kyndiah

Eight years ago, in 2016, the High Court was impugned by the state government at the Supreme Court for its suo motu cognizance, calling into question the appointment of the Lokayukta and the failure of the state to constitute the Meghalaya Human Rights Commission. Justice Deepak Mishra, referring to a New York Times tribute of Justice Felix Frankfurter of the US Supreme Court, alluded to Justice Frankfurter's legacy of upholding the judiciary's integrity and imperative for judicial restraint. Noting the HC's suo motu as derelict of judicial restraint and that the separation of powers ought to be upheld, irrespective of the imagined noble result from such action, the HC's order was partially struck down. Observing the lack of locus standi in its suo motu order staying the appointment of non-judicial members as Chairperson of the Lokayukta, the SC reprimanded the HC's division bench for its order as erroneous, since Section 3 of the Lokayukta Act, which outlines the nomination of the Chairperson, had not been challenged in the first place by an aggrieved party, but the court had proceeded with a writ on its own volition.

Presently, in 2024, the developments around the state's ombudsman, however, illustrate an alarming manifestation of executive overreach, seen in the 21st December 2023 notification of the state, terminating the appointment of the Director of Inquiry and Prosecution and the two Investigating Officers (IOs) who had charge-sheeted the 12 accused in the Rs. 6.01 crore GHADC hostel construction scam in July earlier last year.

The present situation regarding the government's alleged interference in the state's parliamentary ombudsman goes beyond typical executive actions in appointing officers to assist the Lokayukta's function, similar to the establishment of various commissions in the state. What emerges is a broader concern regarding the balance between executive power and judicial oversight in ensuring public accountability. Hence the present impasse in the Lokayukta, contrasted with the 2016 development, illustrates the vitality of oversight in exercising governmental authority and the indispensable role played by institutions upholding the rule of law.

Deconstructing the Flawed Interpretation of the Meghalaya Lokayukta Act

In a positivist interpretation of Section 10(2) and 11(2) of the Meghalaya Lokayukta Act 2014, the statement issued by the government at the NPP press conference on the 8th of January 2023 asserted that the appointment of retired officers to serve in the Inquiry Wing of the Lokayukta constituted a deviation from the apparent requirements of officers equivalent to an Additional Secretary and an Under Secretary holding the office of the Director, and Investigating Officer respectively. Hence, realizing this

lapse, the new notification sought to rectify the same. Additionally, the statement provided that the hitherto Director and IOs were retired police officers and, therefore, were private persons and could not be appointed as officers within the meaning of the Act.

However, a reading of the Act, in its entirety, demonstrates that the justification provided is perniciously convenient and deeply flawed, overlooking crucial aspects of the Act. It misrepresents retired officers as mere private individuals, disregarding their official capacity as duly appointed public servants authorized to investigate under the Prevention of Corruption Act 1988, as provided in Section 11 of the Lokayukta Act.

Additionally, the assertion that the investigation conducted by retired officers could be invalidated on jurisdictional grounds is unfounded. Section 52 of the Act explicitly deems officers involved in inquiries under the Act as public servants within the meaning of Section 21 of the Indian Penal Code. Such as the appointment of J Rymmai as the Director of Inquiry and Prosecution on October 19, 2022, for a three-year term by the Lokayukta. As reported, it was stated that at the time of his appointment, there was no indication it was merely an interim measure. And that at the time of his appointment, he was not informed of any clause that his service could be terminated at any time without prior notice or show cause, as afforded to all other public servants as per Article 311 of the Constitution.

Moreover, the previous Directors of the Inquiry and Prosecution Wing were retired officers. During the Lokayukta of Justice (Retd) P K Mushahary, with F D Sangma as the Director, the question of them being retired and, therefore, private persons was not flagged, but only presently, when the Lokayukta has made the significant revelations in the GHADC construction scandal. The assertion that the appointed officers lack jurisdiction to conduct investigations and that the Act only permits serving officers must be challenged in court. Given the circumstances of the termination of the officers, a bare perusal of the facts demonstrates severe arbitrariness, fundamental rights violation, and an unreasonable interpretation of the Act.

Procedural impropriety is apparent in the misinterpretation of the Director and IOs as private persons outside the definition of an 'officer' under the Act and, therefore not entitled to their Article 311 rights under the Constitution.

Moreover, a court challenge should prompt a scrutiny of the government's justification, and must utilize effective rules of interpretation to test the administrative tenability of the state's actions. A purposive interpretation of the Act must recognize that

the Lokayukta aims to address the corruption in public office and establish accountability. Therefore, actions that undermine the appointment of officers tasked with such duties, implicating the government in the GHADC construction scam, represent a classic case of 'Wednesbury unreasonableness' in administrative law parlance and warrants judicial review. Additionally, the assertion that the term 'officer' exclusively applies to those not retired from service is countered by the common practice in the engagement of retired officers from ministries, departments, and PSUs in conducting departmental inquiries, which is not unprecedented. A 2017 office memorandum issued by the Central Government's Department of Personnel and Training clearly outlines the procedure for the empanelment of retired officers in post-retirement service as Inquiry Officers.

Furthermore, if the term 'officer' in Section 10(2) and Section 11(2) is interpreted only to encompass serving and non-superannuated officers, the resulting implication would be absurd. Regardless of their retirement status, officers appointed under these sections are still classified as public servants under Section 21 of the Indian Penal Code, as stipulated in Section 52 of the Lokayukta Act. Consequently, they are entitled to the Article 14 right to equal protection of the law, akin to other public servants, including the right to prior notice and the right to be heard under Article 311(2) of the Constitution.

Furthermore, in pari materia with the Right to Information Act 2005, Rule 13 of the service rules for Information Commissioners provides that upon appointment to the Central or State Information Commission, Commissioners are regarded as retired from their previous service.

Structural Weakening Of the Meghalaya Lokayukta Act 2014

Furthermore, if the termination of the Director and IO is indeed based on the review of the Lokayukta Act, wherein retired officers are deemed ineligible for appointment, it's astonishing that the state has overlooked the most glaring issue in Lokayukta's functioning to date. Sections 10(2) and 11(2) of the Act mandate separate Inquiry and Prosecution Wings, yet the appointment of a single joint director for both positions violates this provision. This should have been the most apparent concern. Unfortunately, since the tenure of Justice PK Mushahary as the Lokayukta with FD Sangma as the then Director, and now J Rymmai, all have been appointed as Directors jointly of both wings in contravention of the Lokayukta Act. However, the gravest functional anomaly in the Act was brought by the 2021 amendment, effectively transforming the Lokayukta into a single-member commission by replacing the conjunction 'and' with 'or' in Section 3

of the Act and introducing sub-section 5. This move represents a regrettable shift towards structural weakening. Moreover, arguments suggesting that the appointment of serving officers would be cost-effective, overlooks the fact that Lokayukta Act stipulates its administration and expenses to be charged to the state's consolidated fund.

Re-Envisioning the Ombudsman Paradigm and the Meghalaya Lokayukta Act

As a parliamentary ombudsman, Section 4 mandates balanced representation from all three branches of government in the Lokayukta's constitution, requiring concurrence from the Chief Minister, Speaker of the Assembly, Leader of the Opposition, the Chief Justice or a High Court Judge, and a civil society member.

Hence, adopting a consultative approach akin to that delineated in Section 4 for appointing the Director and IOs would foster transparency and accountability, mitigating the predominance of unilateral executive control within the Lokayukta's framework.

Drawing parallels of the Lokayukta with jurisdictions such as the European Union, where the ombudsman is elected directly by the members of the European Parliament, illustrates an imperative to re-envision the Lokayukta and robust mechanisms ensuring its independence as an oversight body.

Given that the constitution of the Lokayukta falls under the respective State Assemblies, this is possible. Even if direct elections are not feasible, the concurrence of the Speaker and the Leader of the Opposition, if not the entire Assembly, in Lokayukta appointments is progressive towards realizing transparency and impartiality.

While one could argue that the appointment of officials should be the executive's prerogative, allowing the government to transfer officers at will, without needing to adhere to the prescribed consultation process for the Chairperson and Members of the Lokayukta. It is essential to acknowledge that the Lokayukta is a parliamentary ombudsman, and is therefore distinguished from a typical administrative department, thereby warranting a distinct approach. This is akin to the appointment and oversight of judicial magistrates by the High Court, in contrast to executive magistrates within the state's administration.

The deliberate efforts to constitute the Lokayukta solely with serving officers, thereby bypassing the consultative and concurrent framework envisioned for the ombudsman, indeed constitute an abuse of its intended purpose. It is incumbent upon us the public to safeguard against such deviations from the ombudsman principles, ensuring that its operations remain faithful to the spirit of accountability and public trust. Failure to do so amounts to hara-kiri.

(The author is studying law at NUIS, Kolkata. He can be reached at joel221083@nuis.edu. This is an abridged article of an upcoming law review publication.)

SC nixes widely accepted norm to deny bail to accused under UAPA

Argument based on intent of legislature in framing such a draconian law

By K Raveendran

The Supreme Court has issued a rather contrarian ruling on the grant of bail, by proclaiming that people accused under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) do not deserve bail as a rule. Such people must be granted bail only in exceptional cases, the court clarified. The court further said that delay in hearing of the case is no ground to grant bail.

"The conventional idea in bail jurisprudence vis-à-vis ordinary penal offences that the discretion of Courts must tilt in favour of the oft-quoted phrase - 'bail is the rule, jail is the exception' - unless circumstances justify otherwise - does not find any place while dealing with bail applications under UAPA Act," a bench comprising Justices MM Sundresh and Aravind Kumar said.

The case related to the bail application of a man accused of promoting Khalistani ter-

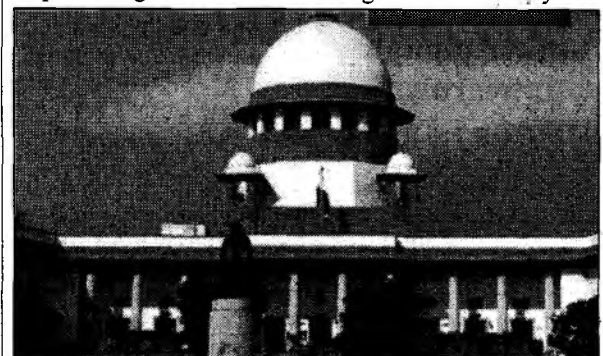
ror movement. But while establishing the rule that bail must necessarily be rejected under UAPA, the court enunciated a two-pronged test to be applied while dealing with bail applications under the Act. These include whether the test for rejection of the bail is satisfied. In this context, the court analysed the particular section of UAPA which imposes restrictions on grant of bail to a person accused of offences under Chapters IV and VI of the Act, over and above those stipulated under CrPC.

The harsh ruling bases its logic on the intent of the legislature while framing a law such as UAPA, which is intended to strengthen national security. The court pointed out that the intention of the legislature, while enacting UAPA, was to make 'jail' the rule and 'bail' an exception. It said the exercise of general power to grant bail under UAPA is 'severely restrictive' in scope, with the courts being required to arrive only at a prima facie satisfaction compared to 'strong suspicion' as in case of discharge, based on material on record.

This ruling, while intended to strengthen national security, raises critical concerns about the thousands of undertrials who find themselves languishing in jails due to an inability to secure bail. The most disconcerting aspect is that a significant number of these individuals belong to vulnerable sections and minorities, adding an extra layer of injustice to an already dire situation.

The UAPA, enacted to combat terrorism and unlawful activities, has often been criticized for its stringent provisions, leading to prolonged detentions without trial. The recent ruling, which narrows the scope of bail in UAPA cases, has the potential to exacerbate the already alarming situation of undertrials in Indian jails.

A significant proportion of these individuals facing prolonged detention are from marginalized communities and religious minorities. The inability to secure bail not only denies them their fundamental right to liberty but also perpetuates systemic inequalities. It is essential to recognize that the impact of such legal decisions disproportionately affects those who are already marginalized in society.



The plight of these undertrials highlights the urgent need for a comprehensive overhaul of the legal and judicial system. First and foremost, legal assistance must be made readily available to those who cannot afford it. Access to competent legal representation is a fundamental right and a cornerstone of a fair and just legal system. By ensuring legal aid for all, regardless of socio-economic status, we can mitigate the disparities that currently exist in the justice system.

Additionally, the financial burden of securing bail often becomes an insurmountable obstacle for many undertrials. The state must take proactive measures to address this issue by implementing a robust system of financial assistance for those who find themselves trapped in the legal labyrinth. A fair and just society must not allow an individual's financial status to determine their access to justice.

The Supreme Court, as the custodian of justice, should take this opportunity to not only safeguard national security but also protect the rights of the vulnerable sections and minorities. Striking a balance between security concerns and individual liberties is crucial to upholding the principles of justice and ensuring that innocent lives are not adversely affected. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Riposte to PM Passah's article

Editor,
This letter is addressed to PM Passah in relation to some of the claims that he had made in his article 'The Meghalaya State Anthem'. I have dealt with a few of his observations in my article 'Constructing/Reconstructing Jaintia History' but I would like clarification on some more points. It is possible that Passah is already formulating a response to my rebuttal, which he can, if he chooses to and can also think of discussing the issues being raised in this letter as well. According to him, it was U. Shyllong between 11th and 12th centuries who led the Jaintias in populating the Khasi Hills. However, this contradicts the archaeological evidence that Khasi people were already present in Khasi Hills at least a thou-

sand years earlier. Radio-carbon dating of charcoal extracted from sites around Nongkrem and Sohra has established that 2000 years ago (500 years before the supposed migration from Kamarupa), these areas already had a thriving iron smelting industry associated with the Khasis. This was reported by Pawel Prokop and Ireneusz Suliga in their paper 'Two thousand years of iron smelting in the Khasi Hills, Meghalaya, North East India'. So, based on the 1500-year-old theory, when the Jaintia came to the hills, the Khasis were already well established in the Khasi Hills. He also discussed the great exodus led by Sajar Nangli in the 16th century that populated the Khasi Hills. In this regard, I would like to inform that Betty Laloo's PhD thesis gives a detailed account of the life of Sajar Nangli, the reason for his exodus, and the routes he took.

It's available online, and I would suggest readers read it and find out if PM Passah's claims stand scrutiny. A map has also been provided to give a visual perspective with the names of the places Sajar Nangli passed through and where he actually ended up. I will let the readers discover for themselves. Finally, there is the linguistic evidence that War and Lyngngam are older than Pnar from which Khasi (Sohra dialect) emerged. The first two languages existed more than 2000 years ago and Pnar emerged only around 1400 years ago. But based on PM Passah's claim, the Jaintias or the Pnar should not be on the list because when the divergence was taking place, they were in Kamarupa and not in present-day Meghalaya, where the earliest groups who are genetically related to the Pnar, the War, and Lyngngam are still found. So, this scheme is all wrong, which also contradicts the genetic evidence

that all the groups belong to the ethnic stock. Maybe PM Passah will come up with his own new scheme or has unearthed some genetic evidence that Pnars are actually not part of the Khasi group. Hopefully, Passah or his apologists would answer the queries raised in the article 'Constructing/Reconstructing Jaintia History' and to this letter.

Yours etc.,
Bhogtoram Mawroh
Via email

The Shillong Times' outcry against ecological exploitation

Editor,
The illegal quarrying near the Wahnianglang reservoir raises many questions. It exposes the glaring incompetence and lack of vision of the state's environmental watchdogs. Where were the

Forest Department and the Pollution Control Board, Soil and Water Conservation Department et al, all these years? The crux of the matter lies in how such extensive quarrying activities could be carried on unnoticed for over a decade and a half, making this a serious case of dereliction of duty. The concerned citizens now deeply lament that the tributaries that feed the Wahnianglang reservoir are already drying up. Given the Greater Shillong Water Supply Scheme's dependence on this reservoir, the likely threat of a severe water crisis in the city is undeniable.

Let me quote words of caution from Friday's special article by Patricia Mukhim, "What's tragic is that people have such short memories and have already forgotten how homes and humans were carried away in the flash floods in May and June 2022 in West Khasi Hills, South West Khasi Hills and Garo Hills. Much of this

devastation is triggered by unregulated stone quarrying, which first involves deforestation and then gouging out the earth to pull out the rocks and boulders as if there is no tomorrow. And most of those boulders are transported to Bangladesh via Dawki." (ST, February 9, 2024). This way we are making our state pale and weaker. What does the future hold for coming generations when the heat of climate change is increasing by the day?

Well, it is so easy to point fingers at the quarry owners. I dare say they practically do not know the horrific impacts of rampant quarrying on the environment and ecosystem. Ignorance is bliss for them. However, the fact is whether the competent authorities have ever launched any environmental awareness campaigns and why we need to conserve the soil and forest. I don't think so. Even coal is still being mined in a crude manner in the state despite

the NGT ban and so much hue and cry and action from no less than the High Court. What is certain now is that our progeny will have to face the catastrophic consequences of our acts of greed.

Yes, we have so easily forgotten the devastating floods that struck Kerala in 2018 and 2019. Environmental experts point to rampant deforestation, "irresponsible mining, and quarrying" as major contributors to these unprecedented disasters. The calamity resulted in the tragic loss of 470 lives and property damage is estimated at Rs 40,000 crores. What more? About one and a half million people had to take refuge in relief camps across the state. I think these frightful facts and figures should be neatly put up on the walls of the offices of the State Disaster Management Authority, Forest Department and Pollution Control Board. Let them know what might happen if they remain complacent.

What if 'The Shillong Times' had not brought to light this massive stone quarrying case of Laitkroh? I am sure we'd probably still be in the dark, possibly for another decade or until some major disaster struck. Kudos to investigative journalism for a better tomorrow.

Incidentally, let's put all our efforts into supplying our surplus oranges, pineapples, ginger, turmeric, squash etc., to Bangladesh, or even, Australia, but not stone, sand, coal and timber. What's the point of this mindless chase for wealth if our children are going to be crushed by a series of climatic catastrophes?

Yours etc.,
Sali Gewali,
Shillong

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

“There is a sufficiency in the world for man’s need but not for man’s greed.”

— Mahatma Gandhi

The Shillong Times

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Meghalaya Budget 2024-25

THE Meghalaya Assembly is soon meeting for the budget session. Budget making is a serious exercise. Since 1972, the Meghalaya Government has been making the annual budget where it allocates resources without proper grassroots planning process. In fact in recent years the district planning process has all but collapsed. Without understanding the needs of people at the village level how can a plan be crafted and budget allocated? And without a pragmatic plan that is grounded on the needs of communities in the rural outback how can any budget meet their aspirations? Every elected government has social, political and economic responsibilities which it has to discharge. In a state which now has huge economic disparities and which requires substantial investments in human development such as in education, health care, communication etc., budget making has to be realistic to be able to make a difference to the lives of people.

What needs to be considered in budget making is to also understand the three important sectors of the economy – primary, secondary and tertiary sectors. The primary economic sector in Meghalaya is still agriculture, yet the allocation to this sector is often not commensurate with the needs. Horticulture is given more prominence because of the ability of those in the sector to market their products more effectively and efficiently. The secondary and tertiary sector require more in-depth treatment. Meghalaya has just recently been declared the third poorest state in the country by NITI Aayog. It is time for the Government to go to the root of the matter and study the reasons for growing poverty and what keeps people from coming out of the poverty trap. With educational outcomes remaining very poor right at the primary school level and the number of drop-outs increasing every year, even as the ability of the system to provide skills to those drop-outs remains questionable, poverty is bound to increase. What strategies does the government have in place to reduce drop-out when the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan which aims to retain students and prevent kids from dropping out seems to have all but failed in Meghalaya. It is also important for the Government to have a strict monitoring system to ensure that funds reach the targeted areas. The MDA Government appears to have made some interventions in terms of skilling entrepreneurs, financing and hand-holding them.

But the numbers are far too small for a booming number of graduates that are on the lookout for self-employment. What is also observed is that the Government of Meghalaya is meeting its fiscal deficit targets not by increasing revenues but by reducing expenditure in key sectors and increasingly borrowing from the market. Meghalaya has very limited capacity to raise revenue internally since it has very few revenue generating industries, after coal mining was banned in 2014. The state relies heavily on borrowings even for infrastructure projects. The question is – how sustainable is this model of governance and how much thought actually goes into the budget making exercise.

State budget (2024-25) wishlist

By Avner Pariat

Wish No 2 : Now reading something called the SDG Budget for the same time period 2024-25, one finds “Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities” with the explicit focus of promoting “socio-economic and political inclusion of all”. That sounds wonderful! But the fact of the matter is that allocation for such a wonderful thing is a measly 7 crores for the entire state. Wishlist item No.2 for me would be to please expand the activities/tasks/projects that will line up with Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities. Also, to not be too stingy with such important allocations.

Wish No 3: Investing in Education is very important for any government which is serious at tackling poverty. I don’t think that we should be offering pointless contracts to Private firms which want to do the job of the government in my opinion. Innovation is what they sell but we don’t need that right now. We need to spend money on basic things to build up human capital. Invest in government institutions first and then we

about this as a hurdle to Planning. But how can we expect otherwise when research departments like Economics and Statistics are badly funded. An obvious lack of manpower, especially skilled manpower can be addressed by the scores of young people who pass out each year and who have been trained in research methods. There is too much extrapolation for most of the project proposals and DPRs here. More allocation for Research, across the disciplines would be a crucial intervention.

Wish No 5: We are spending as much as other states on healthcare. But as a Shillong Times report from Jan 2, 2024 showed, most of the claims under the state health insurance scheme – MHIS – are happening to the benefit of Private hospitals. It is clear people are apprehensive of availing the health services under government management. Increasing this important allocation (in the short run) from approx. Rs 1800 crore in 2023-24 can help address this issue and others. If the health minister

and crippling inflation seems unattainable. Housing as a human right must be budgeted for. In 2023-24, housing schemes accounted for a mere 72 crore approx. These include only the provision of building materials and some money for labour charges. In addition, most of the beneficiaries are rural people who have the chance to own land or be given a land deed on some community property. What about we, the urban youth? Building community apartments and urban housing must surely be the need of the hour. Countless studies show that the provision of housing eradicates poverty. I would urge that a massive allocation be made immediately if we want to tackle poverty and the numerous ills it brings.

Wish No 7: The state has been underperforming in terms of investing in the Power sector which accounted for Rs 700 crore approximately in 2023-24. This is in spite of the fact that this sector is one of the only sustainable sources of revenue for Meghalaya. The old adage is “you have to spend money, to make money” so the state should invest more judiciously in this sector if it wants to bring down the deficit.

Wish No 8: Finally, I would like to urge the government to invest more in the Arts and Culture department because Tourism right now is taking this mantle upon itself. This is ok from the outside but the problem with this MO is that investing in cultural and artistic activities directed exclusively towards tourists does not take into account the intrinsic value that such activities have for the people themselves. The development of an autonomous arts fund would perhaps spur on a nascent Creative industry which might be more valuable than Tourism itself for the local artists, arts practitioners. Perhaps this would lead to different types of jobs emerging. No.9 wish: We need to tackle the serious issue of waste. There does not seem to be much along this sector in terms of government investment. The few overheads and items described in the budget are very small amounts but we have to take this problem as a crisis. We have to drastically raise spending on this because no private player can do it.

In conclusion, I am happy to open the floor to more articles and discussions about economic life and the economy instead of the numerous pointless arguments we indulge in on a daily basis.

Farmers heading for Delhi again demanding fulfilment of promises PM awarding Bharat Ratna to Charan Singh has no impact on Kisans

By Sushil Kutty

In the next few days, lakhs of farmers unhappy with the Modi government will be making banner headlines in national and international media all over again and the Modi government’s Bharat Ratna for kisan leader, the former Prime Minister Chaudhary Charan Singh, will be taken as a failed enterprise of a government in panic. Can’t blame Jayant Chaudhary because which Indian wouldn’t want a Bharat Ratna in the family? The Modi government can also be excused for believing such kneejerk tactics would deliver Jat votes on a platter to the BJP/NDA, whatever.

Thing is, if Jayant Chaudhary is Jat leader, who on earth is Rakesh Tikait, and the others who are waiting with “modified battle-ready” tractors to take on the police? The thing is, farmers are back on the warpath and the Modi government can make sense of what it entails. “Warpath” essentially means – hordes

– zilch? The battlelines have been drawn. Haryana and Delhi have fortified their territories with concrete blocks, road spikes and barbed wires. Police are ready to deploy in massive numbers. Section 144 will be imposed. Haryana particularly is war-ready. Chances are Jayant Chaudhary and the Bharat Ratna to former Prime Minister Chaudhary Charan Singh will not make an iota of difference to the demand for MSP for crops.

The farmers know they cannot compel Prime Minister Narendra Modi to bow to pressure again. And if Modi is returned to power with the massive mandate he keeps talking about, farmers and the opposition alliance backing them will be cowed down to kowtow to brute majority. It is imperative to defeat the BJP/NDA in the 2024 general elections, not in the streets, to deliver the goods. Mind you, the “Ram-mayi” voter is dog-tired of mayhem in the streets.



of farmers from Punjab and Haryana and elsewhere are heading for Delhi, and the authorities in the national capital remember the almost two years when Delhi was encircled by tens of thousands of farmers who forced Prime Minister Narendra Modi to take back the three “black” farm laws.

For a Prime Minister, who

Maybe, doubling the street-veto with a repeat CAA agitation, with another Shaheen Bagh, would be in the cards. Signals emanating out of Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh and Haldwani in Uttarakhand portend such a likelihood. CAA is as much unfinished business as the three farm laws are. Union Home Minister Amit Shah has been very vocal on

“It is an old demand, also an old promise. The MSP will be an election issue. Union ministers, including Agriculture Minister Arjun Munda, who held talks with leaders of the kisan unions couldn’t produce a single ‘Modi Ka Guarantee’ on the farmers demands and that has set the stage for a protracted agitation. The last siege saw 700 kisans die with their demands dead on water. Union agriculture minister Arjun Munda has now promised further discussions but there are no believers.”

is reportedly authoritarian, for whom the three farm laws were crucial, a matter of personal prestige, the humiliation of being shown his place was total. Now, while the black laws lie dormant among the shelves, the farmers have plans to return in a big way, and once again lay siege to Delhi. This, even as central ministers tried to convince farmers’ unions to shelve the planned ‘Delhi Chalo’ march of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha.

Their main demand – a law to guarantee a minimum support price for crops. It is an old demand, also an old promise. The MSP will be an election issue. Union ministers, including Agriculture Minister Arjun Munda, who held talks with leaders of the kisan unions couldn’t produce a single ‘Modi Ka Guarantee’ on the farmers demands and that has set the stage for a protracted agitation. The last siege saw 700 kisans die with their demands dead on water. Union agriculture minister Arjun Munda has now promised further discussions but there are no believers.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had also promised MSP and what had come out of it

implementing CAA before the onset of general elections. Once he sets the ball rolling, it won’t take long for the reaction to ring in.

Point is it wouldn’t be just Ram Mandir alone which will decide who votes for which party and why? Farmers will look at MSP also. Punjab farmers and Haryana farmers will vote differently for different reasons. The farmers of western Uttar Pradesh will have Modi to thank for – for the Bharat Ratna to Chaudhary Charan Singh – Jayant Chaudhary’s word to Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be sacred for his “biradari”. The agitating farmers might find themselves curtailed for reasons beyond their control.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi jumped to the defence of these farmers asking people, those from Delhi, to “uproot those who have put nails in the path of farmers”. He’s talking of reports of “nails laid on roads and multiple barricades” to stop farmers heading for Delhi. Priyanka Gandhi Vadra added her voice to that of Rahul Gandhi and there is every chance that the farmers’ demands will be a major talking point of general elections 2024. One more front to fight. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Why prioritize parking over other needs?

Editor,
In response to the letter, ‘Dhanketi Point No Place For Hawkers’ by Jenniefor Dkhar, (ST February 10, 2024), I completely disagree with the contents of the letter.

Dhanketi Point is the ideal place for the relocation of hawkers as it serves as a commercial hub with various activities already taking place, making it a suitable location for hawker markets without significantly disrupting residential life. It is essential for Loreto Convent and Woodland Hospital to comply with building codes and have their parking facilities. It’s equally crucial to consider the broader impact of prioritizing parking over other community needs. Dhanketi point serves as a public parking area accessible to all, and advocating against relocating hawkers there overlooks the importance of inclusive urban spaces.

Individuals opposing the hawker relocation to Dhanketi point are ignorant and dismissing the concerns of the residents and the right

of livelihood of the hawkers, for their own wants. Residents have legitimate concerns about the potential disruption to their lives. However, addressing these concerns should not come at the expense of disregarding the rights and livelihoods of hawkers and the lives of the residents in the area. Instead, we must work together to find solutions that accommodate the needs of both residents and hawkers. Earlier, Dhanketi Point was a bus stand, but is no longer functional as of today, however it is now a parking spot for Loreto Convent and Woodland Hospital, but such establishments must have their own parking facilities. Furthermore, relocating the hawkers to the area and transforming it will play an important role in promoting public transportation as it is key to reducing reliance on private vehicles and alleviating parking issues. Initiatives by the state government such as the Sustainable Transport & Efficient Mobility Society (STEMS) play a crucial role in promoting public transportation, particularly for students. By encouraging the use of public transportation, we can reduce traffic congestion and create a more sustainable urban environment.

In conclusion, addressing the issue of hawker relocation requires a balanced approach that considers the needs of all stakeholders involved. Instead of prioritizing parking over other community needs, let us work towards solutions that promote fairness, inclusivity, and sustainability in our city.

Yours etc.
Lyzander Sohkhlet,
Via email

Time to deal with stray and dangerous pedigreed dog

Editor,
A mother placed her seven-month-old son on the ground to do her duty. Being a poor daily-wage worker, she could not afford to skip work as there was no paid holiday for her to rear her infant child. No sooner had she placed the child on the ground than a pack of dogs came from nowhere, bit the child and dragged him away. People in the vicinity raised an alarm but by then the dogs had disfigured the baby while killing him on the spot. This incident happened in the Ayodhya Nagar area

of Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh on January 10, this year. A video of the gory incident was widely circulated on social media.

All stray dogs must immediately be sterilised and kept in an enclosed area to minimise colossal loss of human lives. India has around 20,000 rabies deaths a year which according to World Health Organisation, “accounts for 36 percent of the world’s deaths.” Most of the victims of rabies in India are under the age of 15 years.

Rabies is a serious brain infection that spreads from the bite or scratch of an infected animal, often a dog. The disease has been eliminated from many countries. It is a challenging job in a country like India where dogs are allowed to roam freely. Rabies is a fatal disease. But it can be prevented by vaccinating all dogs for a number of years and by sterilising stray dog population.

When India is nowhere near the target, Bhutan has completely sterilised and vaccinated its entire stray dog population after pursuing a 14-year dog population control programme. An all out drive to vaccinate dogs across the country like the way Indians have been vaccinated against Covid-19 must immediately be

pursued to save precious human lives.

The World Health Organisation has recommended oral rabies vaccines (ORV) which can be hidden in dog food in addition with injectable vaccines to increase vaccination especially among free roaming and poorly supervised dogs. According to experts, the combination of an injectable and oral vaccine approach would help reach the minimum 70 per cent vaccine threshold needed to minimise the risk of rabies being passed to people.

Apart from umpteen number of cases of stray dogs attacking people, sometimes a pet dog attacks a gig worker or a passer-by or even its owner especially when it belongs to a dangerous breed.

No kudos is enough for Legal Attorneys & Barrister Law Firm for filing a petition before the Delhi High Court alleging “dangerous dog breeds” like American Bulldog, Rottweiler, Pitbull, Terrier, Neapolitan Mastiff that are banned in more than 12 countries including India are being registered to be kept as pets by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. The petition highlighted many incidents in which such dog breeds attacked people including their owners.

On December 6, last year,

the Delhi High Court delivered a judgement asking the Centre to immediately decide preferably within three months time about banning and cancelling the licence to keep dangerous dog breeds as pets.

Most of the victims of dog bites and rabies belong to the poor working class of our society who build our roads, bridges and houses for all of us and who serve everything at our door starting from morning newspapers to food packets. It is really perplexing that their deaths evoke little public sympathy and a lukewarm response from the authorities. I love dogs as much as I hate such insensitive attitudes towards poor workers.

The government must undertake a programme to vaccinate and sterilise all stray dogs and keep them in an enclosed area. Already issued licences to keep dangerous dog breeds as pets must immediately be cancelled. Authorities should also ensure that no such licence is issued in future.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata,

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*"Effort only fully releases its reward
after a person refuses to quit."*

— Napoleon Hill

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 183 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2024

Unprincipled politics

IT'S a pity that the BJP, the nation's largest political establishment, has no character to it other than its Hindutva obsessions, to which the party is tied steadfastly. Proof is also the way it draws into its fold veteran Congress leaders, who prove beyond doubt that they have no distinctive character and are game with religion-based politics. Maharashtra's former chief minister Ashok Chavan joined the BJP and would go to Rajya Sabha on a saffron nomination soon. Speculations are rife that Madhya Pradesh's former chief minister Kamal Nath, who rode the Congress to defeat in MP, is ready and willing to join the BJP that has extended an olive branch to him. These leaders were the main campaigners against Hindutva and BJP till the other day. Notably, former AP chief minister Kiran Kumar Reddy too joined the BJP recently though he has been given no major position.

While the commitment of the BJP is pro-Hindu nationalism even as it might not openly state so, the ideology of the Congress has always been anchored in secularism. These two ideologies are contradictory in themselves. An overnight change from one side to the other is proof that the sole agenda of the present-day politicians is to promote themselves at the gross expense of the people and their interests. By such change of colour, these men let the people down and demonstrate how unscrupulous and unprincipled they, as leaders, are in their words and deeds. It's all a drama.

Those like Kamal Nath carry with them the stigma of corruption. In the past half a century, such men enriched themselves beyond comprehension. In the last 10 years of governance, Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not touch most of the corrupt politicians. The central investigating agencies danced around them. Modi's aim, it would seem, was only to browbeat them into submission. Hardly any such investigation progressed along proper lines. If making compromises is a part of Modi's political character, the BJP has thus lost its character in most respects. A difference between the BJP and Congress is that till date there are fewer corruption allegations against BJP ministers. This by no means is a certificate that they are incorrupt or incorruptible. Normally, ministerial level corruptions are exposed by the CAG through its reports -- this, in the absence of an alert Opposition. In looting the exchequer, rival political establishments are perceived to be protecting each other. Clearly, India does not have a strong Opposition. Worse, they remain as divided as ever -- a guarantee to the continued domination of the BJP and PM Modi in the political sphere.

Letters to the Editor

Hawkers' zone not at cost of car park

Editor,

On record, I would like to state that I have no personal grudge against my fellow humans who are working hard to earn a living and bring food to the table for their families. In fact, I have always been sympathetic towards the plight and predicament of the hawkers and vendors. For more than a decade, I have been using this platform urging the state government to safeguard the rights of hawkers as citizens of the state. I have been vocal about the need for the hawkers to be allowed to trade freely without being disturbed while at the same time stating that hawkers must not be encouraged to set up shop and spread their wares at any convenient space they find like footpaths or the middle of the road to cause inconvenience and "disruption to the lives" of others.

I do not even subscribe to creating a hawkers' zone in any residential space as it is inconvenient to the residents just as I do not agree to converting any parking lot into a hawkers' zone. This is no solution at all. Just as the residents have the right to their locality, the general public who own both public and private vehicles have a right to be provided with

places and spaces to park their vehicles. A concrete and more definite space must be identified for the hawkers but why choose a space that would inconvenience others? Why not help identify more viable spaces?

Promoting public transport is all very well in order to ease traffic congestion. Perhaps it is much needed but as of today, the ground reality is that the number of vehicles plying on the road are increasing on a daily basis while parking spaces are scarce. Like it or hate it, the truth is as long as there are new vehicles hitting the roads daily, the more is the need for parking spaces just as much as there is need to expand and widen the roads. Hence to convert a parking lot into any other space for any other purpose is unwise. If parking lots are to be used for other purposes then where do we park? Just as the hawkers must not take away our footpaths and require to be given their own space to carry on their businesses, similarly, vehicle owners cannot park their vehicles just about anywhere disrupting the flow of traffic leave alone getting their cars clamped or towed. Hence the need for parking lots!

Most definitely a balanced approach is required but to make space for one by disrupting the other is no balance at all. Yes, we must find solutions and "promote fairness, inclusivity and sustainability in our city," but

It was recently reported in the media that the Imphal-based Central Agriculture University with its branch at Kyrdemkulai, Meghalaya has introduced a Bachelor's Degree in Natural Farming. However, this news did not receive the attention it needed. One may ask why this report is important to discuss. What is so crucial about natural farming, and what exactly is natural farming?

During the launch of the new degree program, Dr. Himanshu Pathak, Secretary Directorate of Agricultural Research & Education (DARE) & Director General Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR), New Delhi, mentioned a few points that led to a change in the strategy of promoting natural farming in the country. He stated that, considering the agro-ecological conditions and resources available to small and marginal farmers, natural farming is emerging as an alternative form of agriculture. Natural farming emphasizes the best possible use of indigenous knowledge and practices in accordance with agro-ecological principles.

The second important point he mentioned was the need to make agriculture in the country both profitable and sustainable. The new thinking today is that farming needs to be a sustainable activity. Natural farming also ensures the integration of modern science and technology with traditional thoughts and practices. Gone are the days when traditional practice is considered old and outdated. Pathak is of the opinion that this integration is the need of the hour, and for agricultural students are crucial to achieving this goal. It is also pertinent to note that agriculture cannot be left without the use of modern technologies; therefore, the judicious use of modern tools and techniques can boost agricultural production without compromising quality.

Hence, the development of human resources and trained manpower in natural farming is the need of the hour. Pathak urges the ICAR to focus on education, research, and extension in the field of Natural Farming. Agri-graduates in the field of natural farming should be made ambassadors with innovative thought processes capable of fostering social, cultural, and economic growth. The focus on natural farming is not only in India, but the entire agricultural world is now shifting towards it. But what exactly is natural farming?

Natural Farming
It is now a new buzzword in the world of agriculture, particularly in India, with many states, including Meghalaya, joining the band-

wagon of introducing natural farming in their state. In short, natural farming is a practice that is chemical-free but embraces modern scientific advancements in agriculture, making it environmentally friendly. It takes into consideration the ecology of the area, resource recycling, and on-farm resource optimization. Natural farming is a practice that seriously considers the ecology of the area. It is, in fact, traditional farming improved with modern science. Unlike modern agricultural systems that encourage mono-cropping, natural farming is based on a diversified farming system that integrates crops, trees, and livestock with biodiversity as the larger canvas of the system.

It is also based on making the best use of biomass produced from the farm, rather than using synthetic chemical inputs to increase production. It is a total shift from the current agricultural practice, which depends on chemical inputs and hybrid seeds. It is also expected that natural farming will help maintain soil aeration and fertility by using locally available inputs, encouraging the soil's biological activity, and managing the complexity of living organisms in the soil. The soil of the land is not looked at as a factor that contributes to production but rather as a living entity. But the most important aspect of natural farming is that it is expected to reduce farmers' dependency on inputs from outside, including making use of locally available seeds. Natural farming is considered to be a low-cost farming method with the potential to engage more farmers in the activity and improve rural development.

In a nutshell, natural farming is a farming practice that takes into consideration soil health, ensures crop diversity, guarantees animal welfare, makes the best use of locally available resources, minimizes the use of outside inputs, and works in perfect relationship with the ecology of the place. In a way, natural farming is similar to traditional farming or, rather, indigenous farming practiced by the local people is natural farming by default.

Natural Farming in Meghalaya

Perhaps it is not wrong to say that in Meghalaya, Carmo Noronha, Executive Director of Bethany Society, first introduced natural farming. Natural farming was introduced when a training supported by the Asian Development Bank was organized by Bethany Society in collaboration with organi-

zations like the Society for Urban and Rural Empowerment (SURE). For many, it was the first time that they were aware of this farming system. For this writer, livestock farming using natural farming practices was an eye-opener. Using bio concoctions that were produced without chemicals and using only local materials helped eliminate the foul smell in the farm, which was the icing on the cake. All the concoctions used as pesticides or compost in natural farming have no chemicals, only local components used in making the different mixtures.

Natural Farming and Seeds

Natural farming also lays emphasis on using traditional seeds, but in some cases, this effort comes too little too late. For so long, farmers were introduced to genetically modified high-yielding varieties of seeds, and in many cases, the popularity of these seeds made people ignore and neglect their traditional seeds. In the process, local seeds gradually disappeared from the area. On January 25, 2020, the Society for Urban Rural Empowerment (SURE) organized a Rice festival at Muckhap, and during the deliberation, where the then Deputy Commissioner, Dykes L.S. Garod, who is from the region and comes from a farming family, reminisced about the many rice varieties in the region that are lost forever. The rice variety that he was familiar with when he was young is nowhere to be found now. In some areas, the presence of some custodian farmers helps keep the seeds of some of the crops that they grow in their areas for posterity.

Natural Farming Bio-Concoction and its Other Uses

In natural farming, the use of bio concoctions is a must, and all these mixtures are made from non-chemical and locally available materials. These mixtures are very effective, especially in animal farming, where using these concoctions helps get rid of the smell from piggeries or poultry farms. But Bethany Society, under Carmo's leadership, used the mixture even in waste management. These concoctions were found to be useful not only in the farming sector but also in waste management. I was told by Carmo that the Merry Maidens of Marten (as he would call them) use these same concoctions to convert biodegradable waste to compost after segregating the waste. It was also found that the Waste Recovery Centre (WRC) at Umpling also uses the same bio-concoction while manag-

ing their waste.

There is an Agroecology Farming System too

On the other hand, the Food and Agriculture Organization, in order to guide countries to transform their food and agricultural systems, mainstream sustainable agriculture on a large scale, and achieve Zero Hunger and multiple other SDGs, suggested the 10 elements of agriculture. The 10 Elements emanated from the FAO regional seminars on agroecology. They include, Diversity; Synergies; Efficiency; Resilience; Recycling; Co-creation and sharing of knowledge (describing common characteristics of agroecological systems, foundational practices, and innovation approaches) Human and social values; Culture and food traditions (context features); Responsible governance; Circular and solidarity economy (enabling environment). These 10 Elements of Agroecology are interlinked and interdependent.

Agroecology in Meghalaya

As a matter of fact, it was the North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity (NESFAS) that introduced Agroecology to the state and the northeast region of the country. NESFAS, in a project with Meghalaya Basin Management Agency (MBMA) and supported by the World Bank, has formed Agroecology Learning Circles in one hundred villages in Meghalaya. The basic activities of these ALCs are to document traditional knowledge on farming practices by the local people and conduct experiments to find out its efficacy. It is, as Dr. Pathak said, the integration of modern science and technology with traditional thoughts and practices. This point was also made by Phrang Roy, founder Chairman of NESFAS many years ago. It is the judicious use of modern tools and techniques to boost agricultural production without compromising quality. Many cases were experimented with, and the same have been documented, and in the future these could be valuable resources for the state and the University.

It is, therefore, important to note that the thinking in the world of agriculture is to 'go back to nature.' A farming system which looks at ecology as a broad canvas, call it by any name, is going back to nature. It may be called natural farming or Agroecology; it is a farming practice which takes into consideration the impact it has on the nature or the ecology of the place.

which was based on India's census reports and the National Family Health Survey. The study was conducted on the changes in religious composition of population, fertility rate, migration and conversions. It found the religious composition of India's population since Partition has remained largely stable, with both Hindus and Muslims showing not only a marked decline but also a convergence in fertility rates.

The study says that religion is not the prime factor affecting fertility rates. It appears from the study that the difference in fertility rate lies in region and not in religion. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh showed a total fertility rate (TFR) of 3.4 and 2.7 respectively in contrast to a TFR of 1.7 and 1.6 in Tamil Nadu and Kerala respectively. Whereas the fertility rate of Hindus has come down to 2.1 and that of Muslims has declined to 2.6.

Every citizen of India needs to highlight the truth whenever she or he is confronted with false information. This is absolutely necessary now to preserve our personal integrity as well as the integrity of our country.

Yours etc.,

Sujit De,

Kolkata

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Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Shunting the 'Ladies Special' Out..!

They're all over; buses, trains, cabs, and now, an all-woman police station in Mumbai! Ladies Specials they're called! Buses, on which only ladies can board, so also trains, designated cabs and a police station with only women police personnel! And each time we create a new 'special', we men smile, look at each other with pride, and think we've done something special for our women!

What we're actually doing is putting them in cages.

"We are caging you to protect you!"

"We are taking away your mobile phones to keep you pure!"

"We aren't sending you to school, to safeguard you!"

A few years ago, my daughter became an anchor for a famous TV channel, a much sought after post. "Dad!" she asked, "Any words of advice?" "Yes!" I told her, "Be a man in a man's world!"

"A man?" she'd asked, "Why?" "Because to compete," I'd said looking into her eager eyes, "Don't get pushed into a ladies special where you are expected to shed tears when upset, scream when angry, show vulnerability when you want something! Be tough just like the men around you and compete on an even keel!"

She did.

I hear about Love Jihad

hundred years ago in what was then and is still, the most advanced country in the world; the USA, women couldn't vote. In so many churches till date, women can't preach or hold leadership positions! And very often whenever women protest about this rather unseemly unfairness, what is thrown at them is not the Constitution of the Country, but the Bible. "Look," we shout in holy righteousness as we with revered hands open the Bible to 1st Corinthians, "Look where Paul says you women should be!"

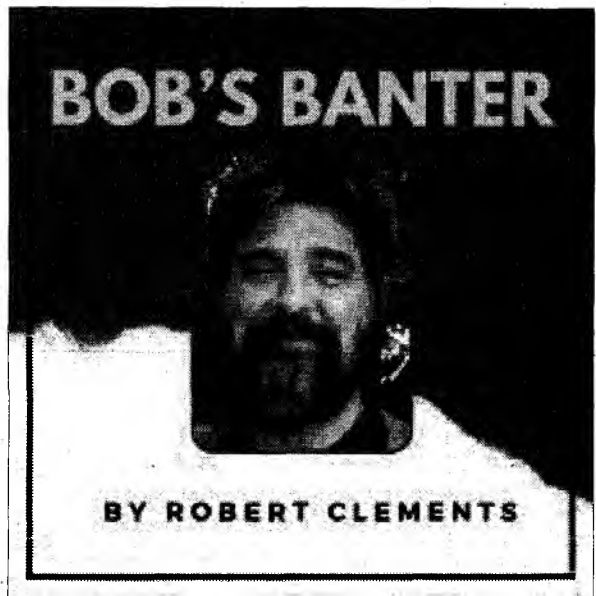
And in words loud and clear as if exorcising a ghost with the Holy Book, we throw, shove and push our women back into the closet, or kitchen while mouthing words like 'Love Jihad'!

As an aside, the Bible was also used by slave owners to tell slaves they were merely obeying the scriptures about keeping blacks in bondage.

But coming back to womenkind: What did Jesus do? Just imagine, in those ancient times, a man going up to a woman at a lonely well and speaking to her so freely!

I wonder what Paul would have said if he'd been at the scene, "Woman don't speak back to him so impertinently! He's a man!"

And when Jesus had his body anointed with costly perfume by Mary, who even used her very hair to tenderly wipe His legs, did Jesus admonish her? Did He draw



groups roaming the country, out to protect women from one faith against so called wily men of another! Do they really think their women are so stupid, they would fall in love so easily? Or, are they actually unsure of themselves and insecure about keeping and holding their woman's love? So, what do they do? Put them in a Ladies Special with barred wired windows!

Ssshhh! I hear the sound of a Ladies Special coming and see a few heads looking out at me, saying, "Stop congratulating us for being the secret behind a successful man, instead start saluting us for being successful ourselves!"

"Stop telling us we look beautiful! Start telling us it's our mind, character and strength you admire!"

"Stop praising us for our stereotypical roles in our films as mother, wife, daughter, daughter-in-law, sister, instead celebrate us as individuals, independent of relationships!"

I look inside the Ladies Special and someone inside looks me in the eye and says, "Stop looking at me from a convenient male viewpoint. Let me be imperfect, whimsical, irresponsible, lazy, fierce, opinionated, loud, flabby, ungroomed, adventurous, unpredictable, unprepared and impractical like you Bob, are happy at being!"

There are others around me, and suddenly someone unlocks the cage and asks the ladies to come out. I hear the sound of drums, of music, and as the ladies stream out on the roads and on the platforms, men and the once caged women dance in happy abandon together, the men, respectful in their behavior and women confident in handling anything untoward.

And then together they tow the Ladies Special coach into the backyard of Indian history!

But the 'Ladies Special' coach exists also in our religious institutions: Just about a

His legs away quickly? Did He shout, "Get thee behind me Satan?"

No, He didn't! He loved it!

He accepted her fragrant offering, even though the very hair she used to wipe the oil was what Paul had said should always be covered.

I'm sure there are many who'll say, "Jesus is God!" Of course He is! But remember, when He lived on earth, He lived a man! So why the difference in what both say about the place a woman occupies? I believe Paul quite often spoke within the framework of local customs, and Jesus addressed people, with a timeless divine view, as His Father saw it.

A Mary Magdalene followed Jesus wherever He went and blasphemous present-day writers who have no idea about the holiness of the Son of Man, have even linked her physically with Him. I am sure Jesus knew this would happen, and yet allowed her to be with Him. Because He knew that there would finally be many who would understand that the Kingdom of Heaven in a true Christian is when we don't look at each other carnally, but as brothers and sisters in Christ!

I am sure Paul knew this, but as a student of English Literature, I know that a person's writing reflects the customs of his or her time, and in Paul's writing we see the same.

Two thousand years have passed and liberation has taken place, "Yes Paul, women can vote and preach!"

Can you feel Jesus smile, even as I whisper to you, "Where do you keep your women, still in a 'Ladies Special'? In a cage or on a stage?"

Shunt that ladies special coach out and allow our women to be as free as the men are..!

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

"No one has ever become poor by giving."

— Anne Frank

The Shillong Times

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Cancer Care Communication

IT is perhaps for the first time that any government function has given space for the media as an equal partner in the deliberations with the noble aspiration of taking Cancer awareness, Cancer Screening for early detection and Cancer cure to the last mile. Normally the media is a passive observer at all government functions and is only expected to report the event. The first ever Cancer Conclave in Meghalaya was organised in collaboration with a private partner - the Apollo hospitals which are known for their excellent and advanced cancer treatment facilities. Doctors lament that when they go for Cancer screening programmes in the districts and beyond, the response is not encouraging as very few turn up for the tests. This time community leaders such as Rangbah Shnong and religious heads were also involved. Cancer is still a much dreaded disease because of the misconception that once it afflicts a person it signals a death warrant. But several Cancer survivors have testified at public platforms and via social media that they have gone through the treatment regimen and are cured or on the way to being completely healed. Early detection is the key. When patients report the early signs, Cancer is detected early and it is curable with little expenditure, especially now that the Meghalaya Health Insurance Scheme covers a large part of the treatment. But doctors testify that most patients come for treatment at the last stages of cancer which becomes a challenge for both the care giver and the patient too.

What also came to the fore during the discussions is the need for communication strategies that can effect behavioral change and where people are no longer wary of openly discussing Cancer. As of today Cancer is still a taboo almost as if talking about it is in itself a bad omen. This is where the disease has to be demystified by using development communication techniques which include information dissemination, education that leads to behaviour change and social mobilization where community members themselves will urge each other to go for early detection as a preventive measure. A communication strategy that brings about social change, and promotes community participation in the fight against Cancer would also mean that what is communicated is done in a language that is understood by people of respective villages. Communication strategies also mean using multiple platforms such as short films, short video messages from survivors and doctors leaving out technical jargons but in simple language that resonates with ordinary folks. Communication for behaviour change is not a one day, one week or one month affair. It has to be consistent and last over a long period.

Development communication has been labeled as the "Fifth Theory of the Press", with "social transformation and development", and "the fulfillment of basic needs," as its primary purposes. The philosophy of development communication is anchored on three main ideas - Purposive, Value-laden, and Pragmatic. Communication that embodies these three principles will hopefully bring about the much needed societal response to the fight against Cancer.

'Garibi hatao' as a numbers game

By Jagdish Rattanani & Sunil Ray

The Union Budget for 2024-25 presented as a vote on account once again spoke of India's reported dramatic reduction in what is called multidimensional poverty. This reiterates earlier announcements with a string of eye-catching headlines. The claim is that 248.2 million Indians have escaped "multidimensional poverty" in the last nine years, including some 60 million people in Uttar Pradesh, followed by Bihar at 38 million and Madhya Pradesh at 23 million.

The data is based on the Niti-Aayog report "National

score equals or exceeds the poverty cutoff of 33.33%.

The MPI calculations admittedly exclude the impact of Covid-19, as if health, schooling, standards of living were unimpacted during the pandemic, contrary to the real burdens brought by the pandemic precisely in these areas, not only in the immediate but also follow-on impacts that carry into the later years. The discussion paper notes that "since part of the NFHS-5 data were collected

ing a scale when the starting point is 0 cm. This proportion drops sharply to 39% when the starting point is moved." In the age group 14-18 years, "more than half struggle (56.7%) with (simple) division (3-digit by 1-digit problems)", which is a skill usually expected in Std III/IV, the ASER 2023 survey notes.

Consider the standards of living indicator that says a household is deprived if no one in the family has a bank

December in the past three years.

The overall unemployment rate in India fell sharply to 6.8 per cent in January 2024 but this fall "concealed the stress in the labour market that was shown by a fall in the Labour Participation Rate (LPR) as well as employment rate. Total employment in India declined, mainly driven by significant loss of employment in agriculture. Although the services sector absorbed labour to a large extent, the quality of these jobs evidently deteriorated," according to CMIE.



Multidimensional Poverty in India since 2005-06 - A Discussion Paper", and was also cited by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi to talk of development as a "chariot of trust" that is changing India. In Jan. 2024, speaking on the Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra, the Prime Minister said 25 crore people have come out of poverty in the last nine years due to the efforts of the government. In his words: "Our government has ... made even the impossible possible ... India is changing rapidly." The period under discussion covers the last two terms of the Modi government, and yatra itself uses official machinery to take claims on poverty reduction to the hinterland close to a coming national election.

How fair is the claim and does it stand scrutiny?

In brief, the multidimensional poverty index (MPI) is based not on income or expenditure of households but on National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data that captures access across three equally weighted dimensions - health, education and standard of living - measured through 12 indicators. The national MPI retains all the ten indicators from the global MPI and incorporates two additional indicators, Maternal Health and Bank Accounts. Each indicator then has a set cut off, below which the individual is considered deprived. A weighted sum of deprivations gives a score. An individual is considered MPI poor if their deprivation

before the pandemic, the estimates presented in this paper may not fully reflect the impact of Covid on the economy or the implications of subsequent government interventions."

In the Indian context, multidimensional poverty calculated thus runs into some very special difficulties. Schooling carries a one-third weightage in the index and within it has two indicators: A household is considered deprived if a) not even one member of the household aged 10 years or older has completed six years of schooling; b) any school-aged child is not attending school up to the age at which he/she would complete class 8.

Even if the Covid impact is left aside, and even if the answer to both the questions on education results in a finding of "not deprived", there is data to show that this may not amount to much. Given doubts on the quality of the school infrastructure, the availability and quality of teachers, and other issues plaguing the school system, it is clear that goals of schooling cannot be said to be met, and in fact are not met. This is amply clear from the Annual Status of Education Report Rural ("ASER 2023: Beyond Basics") under the aegis of the noted non-profit Pratham, released in New Delhi last month.

ASER 2023 notes that "nearly 85% of surveyed youth can measure length us-

or post office account. Bank accounts may have been opened on a large scale but how much of that can be a reliable indicator of lack of deprivation, when there is no view on how many of these are operational, or if this led to banking transactions or related financial activity like, say, insurance coverage?

So apart from methodology, choice of indicators, the extrapolations used for the Covid years, and related technical issues, this raises questions on numbers that indicate progress but may not reflect ground realities.

This is not to say that MPI is to be rejected in toto but that the dramatic numbers and fantastic conclusions being drawn are contestable. They point to an overreach of marketing that tends to overstate achievement, can build a sense of complacency and can stifle new efforts since the picture presented is already rosy.

Meanwhile, jobs and quality of jobs continue to be an area of concern.

The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, CMIE, reported that rural unemployment in December 2023 at 8 per cent marked a record high in the past seven years (barring 2020). The rate has been steadily climbing since December 2017, when rural unemployment was 4.6 per cent. In urban India, the unemployment rate increased to 10.1 per cent in December 2023, similar to the level a year ago but higher than the rate of around 9 per cent in

A dramatic reduction in poverty sits at odds with the need for the Central government to provide free food grains to about 813.5 million beneficiaries under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana for a period of five years with effect from January this year. Almost the same number of beneficiaries were provided free food earlier. The programme in itself is laudable but what happens to poverty if food grain distribution is stopped? Food security covers 75% of the population in rural areas and 50% in urban areas, making it one of the largest programmes of its kind in the world.

The overall and simple fact is that on the road to development, India has many things going for it and many, many others that are failing. Integrity, commitment and the willingness to truly attack poverty demand that we read the indicators with caution and work to fix the deep-seated structural issues that require both time and effort. In the work of development, there are no quick fixes, and there is no magic wand.

(Jagdish Rattanani is a journalist and faculty member at SPJIMR. Sunil Ray, a former director of the A N Sinha Institute of Social Studies, Patna, is advisor, Impact and Policy Research Institute, Delhi and Centre for Development Studies and Communication, Jaipur. Views are personal) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Time to revive debate on state funding of elections beyond academic realm

Supreme Court in a historic moment to become change catalyst

By K Raveendran

Considering the bitter results of uninhibited political funding to the ruling party through the obnoxious electoral bond scheme, leading to the subversion of democratic processes, it may be time to go back to the concept of state funding of elections if democracy is to survive in the country.

It is perhaps the most appropriate time to do this, as a constitutional bench headed by chief justice D Y Chandrachud is set to decide on a batch of petitions challenging the validity of the electoral bonds scheme. The delay in a decision, which the court reserved in November last year, has no doubt disappointed pro-democracy activists and enthusiasts, but the Supreme Court can make amends by making a meaningful intervention and set things right by suggesting a more equitable and fair arrangement. In doing this, the court may have to go beyond the scope of the present petitions, but such an approach would go a long way in preserving democracy in the country, which otherwise stands threatened.

The electoral bond scheme, criticized for facilitating uninhibited political funding to the ruling party, has increasingly come under scrutiny. BJP has pocketed most proceeds from the scheme, leaving other parties, including the main opposition Congress party, with as little as one-tenth of the total. The disproportionate money power has emboldened the ruling party to embark on some of the most outlandish destabilisation plans against opposition-ruled states, manifesting in the ouster of legitimately elected governments and installation of its own puppet outfits with the help of blatant defections. Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Bihar stand out as the worst caricatures of BJP's subversive politics.

Examining the historical perspectives, recommendations from the Indrajit Gupta Committee report of 1998 and the Law Commission of India report of 1999, both advocating for total state funding of elections, underscore the longstanding nature of this debate. The Indrajit Gupta committee recommended two limitations to state funding: firstly, that state funds should be given only to national and state parties allotted a symbol and not to independent candidates. Secondly, that in the short-term state funding should only be given in kind, in the form of certain facilities to the recognised political parties and their candidates. The committee noted that at the time of the report's preparation, the economic situation of

the country only suited partial and not full state funding of elections.

The 1999 Law Commission report by, and large concurred with the Indrajit Gupta panel's report and stressed that total state funding of elections was desirable as long as political parties were prohibited from taking funds from other sources. The Commission also agreed with the premise that only partial state funding was possible given the economic conditions at that time. But additionally, it recommended an appropriate regulatory framework which entailed provisions to ensure that political parties followed internal democracy and maintained internal structures and accounts, their auditing and submission to Election Commission before state funding was allowed.

About a decade prior to that, a report of the Second Administrative Reforms Commission, titled 'Ethics in Governance' had also recommended partial state funding of elections to restrict 'illegitimate and unnecessary funding' of elections expenses.

But unfortunately, the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution, 2001, did not endorse state funding of elections, although it concurred with the 1999 Law Commission report that the appropriate framework for regulation of political parties would need to be implemented before state funding is considered.

The net result is that despite these recommendations, state funding has remained largely academic. Advocates for state funding highlight its potential to bring about transparency, equality, and a reduction in corruption within the electoral process. By providing a more level playing field for all political parties and candidates, state funding could foster a healthier democratic ecosystem, free from the allegations of favouritism associated with the existing system.

The present scheme has also faced criticism for lack of transparency, as the donors' identities remain undisclosed. This opacity has led to concerns about potential misuse and abuse of the system, raising questions about the integrity of the entire electoral process.

The time may be ripe for India to reassess its approach to electoral financing and embrace a system that truly embodies the spirit of a democratic republic. And the Supreme Court is perhaps in a position to initiate such a momentous shift in the country's electoral system. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Preserve the scarce parking spaces

Editor,

Through this letter, I only want to reiterate the fact that every allotted parking space in Shillong is so precious, especially the ones designated only for four wheelers such as the Dhankheti parking lot. It means a lot to us to not have to worry that while parking our vehicles they would not be clamped in the process.

Shillong lacks parking spaces so why do away with a few existing ones that have catered to the needs of citizens be it for those who use it to drop or pick up their children from schools, or patients who need to use it for availing the services provided in hospitals.

We do agree that hawkers need to be relocated from the main road of Laitumkhrah, but to convert the Dhankheti Parking Lot into a hawkers' market is an absolutely bad

choice. Could we appeal to the authorities and other stakeholders to rethink on the issue and to identify a new space for them, but definitely not the Dhankheti parking lot please!

On second thoughts, won't having the hawkers' zone at Dhankheti parking lot cause further traffic congestion? Won't the buyers need a parking space to buy the goods sold by the hawkers? Just a thought!

Yours etc...

Jayanti Shadap.

Via email

Should uniforms be compulsory in college?

Editor,

Fifteen to seventeen years of students' lives are spent under the supervision and guidance of elders. College is the first step towards the real world. — a reality in which an individual is sup-

posed to make decisions in his/her life, and a platform to exercise his/her choice towards becoming a better human. Though the decision of what one needs to wear in college seems to be naive, it is a tiny step towards making decisions and choosing how one wants to represent oneself in society." These words were said by one of the students of Jyoti, Nivas Pre-University College in Bengaluru, Karnataka, on November 28, 2017, when uniform for the college students was about to be introduced in that institution.

Similar thoughts must be running through the minds of many students these days, especially in St. Anthony's College. Let us highlight what the uniform represents. The etymology of the word uniform is from the Latin word unus meaning one and forma meaning form. For the police and those in the army uniform symbolizes trust, honesty and authority.

In general uniforms represent community and unity. Uniforms help remove all

boundaries, distance between people in an organization, school, college, company. The uniform erases the rich and poor boundaries, erases the class boundaries. Office uniforms are a feature of companies and businesses.

Meanwhile the dress code for college students is important for several reasons:

Self-Expression: Clothing allows students to express their personality, style, and identity.

Professionalism: Appropriate attire prepares students for future job interviews and professional settings.

Respect: Dressing respectfully fosters a positive learning environment and shows consideration for others.

Safety: Some colleges have safety-related dress codes, such as lab attire in science programs.

Inclusivity: Dress codes can help create a sense of belonging and prevent discrimination.

Overall, dressing appropriately in college helps students make a positive

impression, both socially and academically. Thus, it is appropriate to have a uniform as the dress code in the college which commonly harmonizes all students' dress codes.

Few days ago, the uniform issue came to light in one of the renowned colleges of our city and it has caught our attention. With due respect to the opinions of others especially some of the final year students who refuse to wear the uniform at St. Anthony's College, I have to say that the uniform creates a community spirit; it breaches diversity; it removes the gap between the rich and the poor; it generates a sense of belonging and loyalty to the college. Further, it works wonders when it comes to encouraging positive attitudes towards working in a team. This is especially important in the case of their representing their institution in inter-college competitions.

Moreover, the Salesians of Don Bosco are working for the young who are poorer

and needy in more than 132 countries in the world. Educating young people is the core purpose of the Congregation inspired by their founder St. John Bosco commonly known as Don Bosco. I'm sure they have thought a thousand times before introducing uniforms in the college with a reasonable purpose. Brother Albert L. Dkhar, sdb the Principal of St. Anthony's is one of the best educationists we have in the state and the North East Region and even in India. Therefore, what he and the committee of the College are trying to do is certainly for the benefit of the students, more so for the parents who spend for their children's education. Buying a pair of uniforms is better than buying clothes regularly for the college students, who could not wear the same clothes several times lest they are looked down upon. For those who could not afford to buy more clothes to wear in college, the uniform is the choice for them for many good reasons.

I would like to put forth a suggestion. For those students who oppose wearing uniforms at St. Anthony's College, the college authority can look at the option of reducing the price of the uniform for them or give them one pair for free.

Yours etc.,

Riwanki Suchiang.

Via email

Women tortured by TMC cadres

Editor,

The recent revelation by women of Sandeshkhali of West Bengal about harrowing tales of torture and assault perpetrated on them by the cadres of Trinamool Congress (TMC) is a blot to every civilized society. The Governor of West Bengal's comments after meeting the victims is, "what I saw was ghastly, shocking, shattering to my senses. I saw something which I should

not have seen. I heard many things which I should not have heard" (My senses shattered, ST 13.02.2024) should put to shame every right-thinking citizen. The legacy of atrocities on women in Bengal is continuing unabated under the present regime as well. Similar violence against tribal women happened in Lalgarh under the erstwhile Left Front Government about a decade and half back. Continuance of such inhuman and shameful incidents in Bengal depict the constant moral and intellectual degradation of the people of West Bengal which was once considered to be one of the most progressive and tolerant states of the country.

Yours etc.,

D. Bhattacharjee

Shillong- 1

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"Whatever the mind of man can conceive and believe, it can achieve."

— Napoleon Hill

The Shillong Times

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Misconceived bonds

WITH just days left for the announcement of Parliament elections, the Supreme Court has called 'a spade a spade' by declaring that the electoral bonds scheme is unconstitutional. The court has also ruled that the amendments to the companies act in this respect, like granting full tax exemption to such donations, were unconstitutional. It asked SBI, tasked with the issuing of these bonds, to halt this process. The five-member apex court bench led by Chief Justice of India Justice DY Chandrachud made it clear that this scheme violated the people's right to freedom of information as anonymity was allowed in respect of companies making such payments to political parties. The bench also took the view that this scheme tended to benefit the party in power more than the other parties. Notably, the decisions on these had been taken by the Modi government in 2017 and implemented the next year, shortly before the 2019 polls.

A major factor that vitiates the election process in this country is money power. Today, parties across the political spectrum are known to be "buying" votes, at least selectively by targeting the poor voters to whom an offer of some currency notes for each vote makes all the difference. Both parties and candidates allegedly do this. This apart, more money at the disposal of a party or candidate for campaigning means an 'undue advantage' over the others. Worse, why anonymity to the companies getting involved in this scheme? It is also beyond one's perception as to why tax exemption is allowed for such payments by companies. Fact of the matter is that the systems in matters of all donations are manipulated to a large extent by the political parties that run the nation by turns. This gives them the leeway for massive corruption. What is given to the party often goes into individual cash chests of leaders, irrespective of whether they contest elections or not.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi waxes eloquent on good governance, but he did precious little to change things for the better when it comes to flaws in the system and in checking corruption. Even actions that he took, as in the introduction of electoral bonds, through then finance minister Arun Jaitley, lacked teeth and failed to serve the stated purpose – namely to reduce the influence of black money during elections. To reform is to improve. A reform cannot be an exercise simply for the heck of it. Modi's investigating agencies too are seen to be ineffective, going by the lack of solid results in many investigations. The Supreme Court deserves praise for its intervention and its action of crying a halt to this misconceived scheme. Kudos are due to Right to Information (RTI) activists and journalists that have pursued the electoral bonds issue to its logical end.

Letters to the Editor

Will CAA, when implemented, impact Meghalaya?

Editor,
The proposed implementation of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019, by the Union Government before the Lok Sabha Elections, 2024, has once again sparked concerns among the residents of Meghalaya, a tribal State. The CAA 2019 aims to expedite citizenship for individuals belonging to the Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian communities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan provided they entered India before 31st of December 2014, and are able to prove persecution on religious grounds in those countries. However, the Act explicitly mentions that the CAA will be exempted in the 6th Schedule areas, includ-

ing Meghalaya, thus allaying the concerns of the residents regarding the impact of the CAA.

Pertinently, the process of citizenship under the CAA is expected to be rigorous, with stringent checks and balances put in place to prevent misuse. The applicant would need to provide various documents and evidences to prove that they are persecuted for religious reasons in their country of origin. As per an estimate found in open channel, approximately 30,000 people across the country would benefit from the CAA, if implemented.

Despite concerns about demographic changes due to immigration, it is premature to conclude that CAA implementation would significantly affect Meghalaya. Meghalaya has a long history where non-locals have settled in the State creating fear that the locals will be outnumbered and employment opportunities will be

The 2024 state budget is upon us, and it will be an important occasion to reflect on and assess the performance of the state and the future that awaits it under the current MDA government. No doubt the opposition parties are already ready with queries to highlight the gaps and failings of the government, which, on the other hand, is preparing their own paperwork to highlight their accomplishments. A particular feature of the claims of this government is to claim a 'first' on every scheme implemented in the state. Stating it once or twice is fine, but repeating it ad nauseam makes it annoying. It's a BJP trope, and while the allegation that the NPP is a BJP-B team is not correct, the party does mimic the national party in terms of its own marketing and branding. Hopefully this budget is less of an imitation and more talks about the substance of the state's performance.

As mentioned above, the political parties must have already done their homework on how to corner the government. But belonging to the working class, people who live from paycheck to paycheck, I am less concerned about the politics of optics but very much about how my taxes are being spent. Are they bringing anything tangible to our lives, or are they surreptitiously being diverted to perpetuate an already widening inequality that should never happen in our indigenous tribal society? So, there are clarifications that should be forthcoming from this budget. If the political parties feel that these are genuine concerns, hopefully they will raise them in this upcoming budget session.

The figures for 2023-2024 will not be available as it will take time to compile them since the financial year will only end on March 31st. But what will be available is the data on the 2022-2023 financial year, which can provide an insight into the priorities and intentions of the government. This data should not be seen in isolation but must be compared with the 2021-2022 data that is already available (if possible since the MDA government took office in 2018) to find out the trend in expenditures under the key sectors. Rather than the Budget Estimates or the Revised Estimates, the past figures will be the Actual Figures, which are more important. According to the document 'Meghalaya Budget Analysis 2023-24' brought out by PRS Legislative Research (an independent research institute that aims to make the Indian legislative process better informed, more transparent, and more participatory), there are thirteen key sectors that constitute more than 2/3rd of government spending. These are - Social Welfare and Nutrition, Rural Development, Welfare of SC, ST, OBC, and Minorities, Water Supply and Sanitation, Agriculture and Allied Activities, Education, Sports, Arts, and Culture, Housing, Police, Irrigation and Flood Control, Health and Family Welfare, Urban Development, Energy, and Transport,

which includes Roads and Bridges. Eight out of these 13 sectors saw a decline from their Budget Estimates to their Actuals in 2021-2022, i.e., less money was spent than what was promised in the initial budget speech.

In absolute terms, the biggest decline was noticed in Rural Development and Education, Sports, Arts, and Culture. Both these sectors saw a cut in expenditure to the tune of Rs 300 crore less than what was promised. In proportional terms, the biggest decline was observed in Social Welfare and Nutrition (35%), followed by Rural Development, which experienced a cut of almost 30% in their final expenditure. Though the Actuals for 2022-2023 will only be available this year, the PRS Legislative Research document did share the Budget Estimates and Revised Estimates for 2022-2023. The three sectors, viz., Social Welfare and Nutrition, Agriculture and Allied Activities, and Police, which saw a decline in 2021-2022, again saw a decline in their Revised Estimates.

Based on this, it appears that these three sectors are not a priority for the government. Incidentally, some of the health indicators that have performed worst in recent years, like child malnutrition (46% stunted) and anemia among women and children (around 50% or more), are related to one of the sectors that continuously sees a reduction in expenditure from the budget estimates, i.e., Social Welfare and Nutrition. The recent border clashes have shown that there is a need to strengthen the Police in order to counter the illegal encroachment by Assam. But with expenditure on Police being one of the first to be slashed it appears that Meghalaya will continue to be bullied by Assam. And finally, despite more than 70% of the people in the state depending on agriculture, this sector does not seem to be a priority for the government. The question that arises is: Where is the money meant for these sectors going then?

The financial cuts from some key sectors is actually going to other sectors. In 2021-2022, there were five sectors that benefited from this reallocation. The highest beneficiary was energy, which in the end got almost Rs 600 crore more than what was initially allocated to it. This continued in 2022-2023, when the Revised Estimates were again almost Rs 600 crore more than the Budget Estimates. If there are no reforms in the power sector soon, it will continue to suck money from the other key sectors. This is the second term of the MDA government, and if it is still unable to solve this then it suggests that it has no intention of doing so in the future as well. But that cannot be said of some of the other sectors, of which a very obvious one that has always seen an increase in expenditure from the initial Budget Es-

timates is Transport, which includes roads and bridges. In 2021-2022, the actuals were nearly Rs 200 crore more than the Budget Estimates, and in 2022-2023, the Revised Estimates actually crossed more than Rs 250 crore. What will be important to find out is how much of the new expenditure from the Budget Estimates is on repairs, digging up the existing roads, and making new ones. And has that ratio remained the same over the last few years, especially under the current MDA government? If it has remained the same or increased, this suggests a waste of scarce financial resources that could have gone to other key sectors like Social Welfare and Nutrition, Agriculture and Allied Activities, or Police. This could be a deliberate attempt to benefit certain groups or an example of gross ineptitude.

In short, the government should be asked why some sectors have always benefited from increased expenditure while others have suffered cuts. Is there a pattern here, and what are the implications of this for the state and especially for women, children, and farmers?

Finally, there's the question of the impact of loans and debt repayment on the economy and the citizens of the state. The debt-to-GSDP ratio has been rising since 2010, with the ratio crossing 40% in recent years. This, in turn, increases the burden of loan repayment, which in 2021-2022 saw an extraordinary increase of almost 200% between the Budget Estimates and the Actuals. In absolute terms, the state had to pay almost Rs 1500 crore more than what it revealed in the Assembly. In 2022-2023, things seem to have improved, with the difference in terms of interest repayment between the Budget Estimates and the Revised Estimates being a negative 7%, i.e., the state paid less than what it initially accounted for. However, the absolute figures were more than Rs 1000 crore - Rs 30 crore more than the Budget Estimates for 2021-2022. In 2023-2024, this figure increased by another 14%. So there is an increasing burden of debt repayment that could be diverting some of the resources that could have been spent on some key sectors.

The government might argue that a major portion of the money for expenditure actually comes from loans, and therefore it is a necessary evil. This then begs the question: why is it that Meghalaya is being made to carry a lot of debt (notwithstanding the claim by the Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma, that 90% is actually paid by the Centre)? Is that model an outcome of less financial resources being made available to the state? Recently, the southern states have raised their protests against what they call injustice in terms of tax distribution, where they are not getting their due share. The 14th Finance Commission in 2015 recommended the devolution of 42 percent of central taxes

to states. But in practice, the actual devolution is just over 30% because, as reported in the story 'Budget 2023, Why has tax devolution to states been falling consistently?' (The Hindu Business Line, February 16, 2023), The Central Government is increasingly using cess and surcharges for tax collection that are not part of the divisible tax pool and do not have to be shared with states. Is that the reason why the state has to rely heavily on loans from the open market rather than the revenue that it gets from the Centre? In that case, shouldn't Meghalaya also join the protest with like-minded state governments over this injustice, which is increasing the burden on not just the present generation but the future generation too?

Another important question is - what the impact of interest repayment has been on jobs in the public sector. According to George Lyndoh, a former MLA from Umroi, job creation in the public sector has been greatly affected by the debt burden. Now the Government can claim that it has instead created jobs in the private sector through the loans it has taken and supported an environment where people have become job creators rather than job seekers. In that case, the Government should provide statistics as to the number of such jobs and their comparison in terms of pay and social security to jobs in the formal sector. Still, a clarification as to whether the increasing debt burden has stifled job creation in the public sector will be very helpful so that citizens can plan their future while keeping the trends in mind. Instead of looking for jobs in the public sector, they can instead demand that jobs in the private sector have good remuneration and be provided with adequate social security. Those who are not satisfied with that can vote for the party that promises to create more jobs in the public sector starting with this MDC election. But at least people will know what to do in the future.

As someone who belongs to the working class and does not have the safety net that is available to the 'Burocrat' class, these are concerns that agitate me. I am sure it does for many others as well, as they look towards the future for themselves and their loved ones. These are also important concerns for the political establishment, particularly the Opposition parties that are looking to question the government. Else we will only have optics where there will be a display of bravado and making of loud noises with chest thumping so that the common people can be entertained like watching the Hindi serials or the Korean dramas. All the while, the state continues to perform badly in its social (health, education) and economic indicators (per capita income), and the future of its people is traded away on empty rhetoric.

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

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

anonymous electoral bonds are violative of the Right to Information under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India and accordingly struck down amendments to the IT Act and Representation of the Peoples' Act, which were enacted to provide contribution through electoral bonds, terming it "unconstitutional". The bench ruled that the information about corporate contributors through electoral bonds must be disclosed as the donations made by companies are purely for quid pro quo purposes. "Allowing corporations to make unlimited contributions to political parties violated a level playing field in polls," the apex court said. The court's unanimous verdict addressed key questions related to the Right to Information and principle of free and fair elections. Notably the top court directed that the issuing bank should immediately stop the issuance of electoral bonds, and tasked

the State Bank of India with providing details of donations made till date through the scheme to the Election Commission by March 6. The apex court also directed the poll panel to share the information on its website by March 13, 2024.

This judgement marks a significant development in the ongoing debate over transparency in political funding in India. I applaud the four petitioners including the NGO- Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), Congress leader Jaya Thakur and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) for having taken the initiative to file a vital and important petition in the Apex Court for "We the people of India".

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

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Stop Playing Politics with Education

By Patricia Mukhim

Education not a priority for MLAs

As a state our priority apart from health should be education yet the further we drive from Shillong the more we witness the decrepit state of our education system. Government seems to focus only on district headquarters and not beyond that. Let me cite the example of Syntung village under Mawkyntse Constituency, (earlier known as Dienglieng Constituency) and asked the villagers if there is a high school in the village and where do the students go for their higher secondary education. I was told there is only one high school and the payment for teachers teaching Classes 9 and 10 is met from donations and collections from the villagers. The school gets government assistance only to pay teachers up to Class 8. After completing their Senior School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) examinations, the students have to either go to Shillong to pursue Class 11-12 or travel all the way to Jongska which is about 35 kms away. Despite the difficulties, some students have managed to excel in their studies and study engineering in distant Kashmir.

At Mawkyntse village about 30 Kms from Syntung there is a school coming up which is intended to provide education up to the Higher Secondary level. It is being run by the Ramakrishna Mission and is work in progress. But currently some disgruntled elements including the former Sordar (headman) of the village have formed a group and gone to court to protest against the construction of the school and questioned why land is being allocated to Ramakrishna Mission. To even question the credentials of Ramakrishna Mission despite their huge endeavour to provide quality education in some of the remotest areas of Meghalaya, reeks of ugly personal motives and the usual village politics that is the bane of this blighted State of Meghalaya. We are a people that rejects all progressive programmes and want to keep people at a disadvantage so that they can then manipulate the gullible village folks who cannot make informed decisions and are liable to be led like sheep to the slaughter house.

Considering that Ramakrishna Mission has been and is providing two sets of uniform, books and shoes free to students from poor households because they are committed to bring the light of education among the people it is pathetic that anyone in their right minds would drag them to court and that the court would even entertain such frivolous cases that have no legs to stand on considering that land has been allocated by the Sordar of that village and the matter has also been authenticated by the Syiem of Hima Khymrim, in the larger interests of the people. Villagers from these areas, including Nongrong and other villages spend a considerable amount of money to educate their children in Shillong from Class 11-12 to college and of course university education. Families that live from hand to mouth obviously cannot afford to do so and end up making their children work instead of study.

The objective of Ramakrishna Mission has been to provide education and healthcare to the underprivileged. They have done so for a century ever since they landed in these hills a hundred years ago. In fact in September this year they will be entering the 101st year of their mission here. There are some who believe that Ramakrishna Mission is on a conversion mission. We have had some of the best politicians and bureaucrats who studied in the RK Mission schools. Have they converted? Was there even an attempt to convert them? There was no such compulsion ever...

Why no land allocated for a hospital at Sohra?

It is learnt also learnt that RK Mission have been approached by the people of Sohra to start a hospital there. The Mission is ready to do that and to seek the necessary funds but their problem again is non-availability of land. If land cannot be allocated for more advanced healthcare for which most people require to come all the way to Shillong because the government CHCs and PHCs work in the breach then there is something seriously wrong with the social commitment of the Syiem and sordars of those villages. Don't they want people to have better and more accessible healthcare? True the affluent population like the Syiem and sordar's family might send their children to the best schools in Shillong and rent a house for them but what about the rest of the villagers that are too poor to follow that route?

Absence of public protests for right causes

What is also a very troubling phenomenon is that people don't have the capacity to agitate when such things happen. The parents sending their kids to RK Mission School at Mawkyntse should have united to protest against those that are intent on closing down the school. The families that are asking for a hospital at Sohra should also have the capacity to build an alliance for the right causes. What is the point in having these traditional heads who are anti-people and anti-development?

Now comes the role of the MLAs. By and large MLAs have never been interested in the education of their constituents. It is the duty of the MLA as an elected representative to step in and sort out the quibbling in their constituencies, especially those related to matters of education. How can anyone prevent an institution that provides education from being set up in a place where it is most needed?

Police as bystander

The RK Mission head says that even the police are silent when the opponents of the school at Mawkyntse enter the premises to disrupt classes and raise an uproar. Are the police not there to prevent trouble mongers from getting their way? Who is directing the police to act in favour of the protestors? It is important for the state government to step in and find out the reasons for the present dispute at the RK Mission school in Mawkyntse? Also why is the state so weak when it comes to acquiring land for philanthropic causes such as the setting up of a hospital where needed? The state cannot be indifferent on the plea that "land belongs to the people." This is a lazy excuse and it is in the fitness of things for the state to iron out all these petty differences that stand in the way of people being provided their basic needs that the state on its own has failed miserably to provide.

Legislators not part of the Executive

MLAs are legislators and schemes are implemented by the government read 'executive'. There are distinct roles here. Legislators are lawmakers and have no right to interfere in distribution of largesse such as CGI sheets, seeds, fertilisers and a host of other benefits that come from the Centre and to play politics with who gets what. Once an MLA is elected he/she has to represent the entire constituency and all voters are to be treated equally. The government has the onus of keeping a watch on non-partisan distribution of schemes to ensure that MLAs don't deprive some constituents because they did not vote for him/her.

These are topics that need to be discussed. Can the public of Meghalaya focus on the right issues?

"Our greatest glory is not in never falling,
but in rising every time we fall."

— Confucius

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No.186 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2024

Repeated Mining Casualties

IT appears that the Police and District Administration of East Jaintia Hills are treading warily on yet another reported mine tragedy by saying they are not yet aware of it. Coal miners are regularly trapped inside the mines either because of mine flooding or some other accident and that this happens despite the ban on coal mining since 2014 suggests a deeper conspiracy between the mine owners who are the so-called high-level operators, the political class and businesspersons of the state. They have a complete hold on the underground business. There are reports that hundreds of trucks continue to ply from the coal mining districts of East Jaintia Hills, West Khasi Hills and Garo Hills to Assam and beyond. Sometimes the coal is rerouted via Assam to Bangladesh in what is a smooth operation with inter-state cooperation and the connivance of the Mining and Transport Departments.

The guarded response of the East Jaintia Hills Police and Administration suggests they are treading on eggshells since they are carrying out orders to look the other way as far as coal mining and transportation is concerned. When the state becomes the chief facilitator of illegal coal mining it would be naïve to expect the underlings to take action against the high and mighty who also wield political power. Such action requires that those paid with public money develop a spine and serve the Constitution and not the political bosses. But that would mean a punishment posting and who wants that? The MDA government and those before it too have pretended that are they ignorant about illegal coal mining and transportation even when it carries on in broad daylight. The 2018 coal mining tragedy at Ksan was itself an indictment of the Government which was literally caught lying. But there appears to be no system strong enough to coerce the government to come down with a heavy hand on illegal coal mining because the political class are perpetually in need of cash and illegal coal mining and transportation yields the money that is needed to fight elections.

The Justice Katakey Committee that has been supervising the entire process and evaluating how much of the coal is previously extracted and how much is freshly mined has virtually been on a wild goose chase because the very system is against them. They are swimming against the tide. The answer as to how long this illegality will carry one and how many lives have to be buried underneath the earth unbeknownst to the world is blowing in the wind. The story of illegal coal mining is also that of desperate people looking for livelihoods and willing to pay with their lives for a livelihood. Poverty is a cruel master indeed!

Letters to the Editor

Victory for democratic values and transparency

Editor,

In a historical decision the Supreme Court has set aside the electoral bond scheme which was started in 2018 treating the scheme as unconstitutional and which goes against the democratic values as well as against the Right to Information Act. The apex court deemed the scheme opaque and highlighted the need for transparent political funding. The same views were expressed ab-initio by RBI and all the criticism and apprehensions about the Electoral Bonds scheme that have been voiced have been validated by the Supreme Court. In a democracy, elections provide a level playing field for both voters and political parties and every vote counts equally. To keep this field on an even keel, parties must be transparent about candidates, policy and funding, thereby enabling voters to make a sound choice. If this standard operating procedure is tampered with, democracy weakens and becomes a parlour game.

By striking down the Electoral Bonds scheme as unconstitutional, the Supreme Court has delivered a victory to the people of

India on a core principle of electoral democracy — that the voter has the right to, and should, know who is funding political parties and their election machinery. In a democracy, people have the right to know who makes contributions to which political parties because parties function in the public realm. They form governments and frame public policies. Even when they are in the Opposition, they represent public opinion and influence policy.

The apex court has held the scheme, under which individuals and companies can purchase bonds issued by the State Bank of India and donate them to parties of their choice in total anonymity and without limit to be violative of the Right to Information and hence ultra vires of Article 19(1) (a) of the Constitution. Whereas previously limit was imposed which was 7.5 percent of average of 3 years profit, under this scheme even loss making firms can contribute up to any limit, which is unacceptable as it could translate to influence over policy-making and hence violative of the principles of free and fair elections. The Court also struck down the amendments to the Representation of the Peoples' Act, the Companies Act and the Income Tax Act brought in to facilitate operation of the scheme.

As per the Court order

Clan Histories and Migration in Jaintia and Khasi Hills

By Isamanda Pariat &
Dr Omarlin Kyndiah

Clans are social organisations/institutions that evolved to maintain social order. They emerged as loose associations of a large number of people connected by kinship ties linked to a common set of ancestors. The Jaintia-Khasi are clan-based societies. A key, yet under-studied institution is the clan. This article presents a feeble step in an attempt to an indigenous history of the Khasi and Jaintia who are of Austric origin. As we unearth the roots of these clans we will expose some of the routes they took as they populated their current homeland.

The Legend of "Ka law Chibidi" follows the story of a woman who came from across the Kupli river and migrated to Jaintia Hills, alongside her children. The Jaintia came to the northeast and settled at Kamrup now known as Guwahati. Due to the threat of raids and conquest by the Brahman of the Indo-Aryan, the Jaintia migrated to the east and settled at the banks of the Kolong River. Subsequently, they moved south to establish an agricultural civilisation on the fertile valley of the Kupli River which they called Kremlamet now situated in the North Cachar Hills. The folklore alluded that she had the calibre to accommodate herself inside a fictile jar or 'lalu' by which she and her younglings in due course were known, therefore leading to the emergence of the Lalu clan. The family thrived during the period when a potent chieftain of the Malaniang clan wielded power in the Jaintia Hills. On the king's demise, a civil war arose, compelling the Lalu family and many others to flee across the Kupli. Here they lived and flourished for a few generations until they were all stricken by a plague that spread through the area. The entire family was erased out of existence, except a girl who came to be known as Ka law law. She eventually became the sole heir of her family's affluence and her riches captivated the attention of many admirers, so it became an issue for her to live there. She managed to run away from that place, reached Jwai, and directly made her way towards the priest's house or Yung Langdoh. Though the priest allowed her to stay, his wife thought otherwise. She did not want to keep her around and asserted to her husband that the girl should be sold

off to anyone who had intentions of acquiring her.

The anecdote continues with the Langdoh being pressurized under the influence of his wife to sell off Ka law law as a bonded slave, but none were willing to offer more than twenty cowries (Chibidi) to buy her. The Langdoh ultimately decided to keep the girl and took her back home, much to the dissatisfaction of his wife. Out of immense gratitude for this amicable gesture, Ka law law told Langdoh about herself and decided to bring all of her wealth from beyond the Kupli River to his house. In these unforeseen turn of events, it made the Langdoh along with his wife happy and Ka law law afterwards was wedded to their son.

Things were running smoothly with the newlyweds until some adventurers from outside the Kupli decided to abduct the bride for her wealth. The Langdoh was able to gather information in advance about the malicious intentions of these people and quickly made arrangements for the couple's escape. The two were taken to an area near Nongkrem, known as Sophphokynrum, located in the Khasi Hills, and settled there. This reminds us that the Jaintias under the leadership of U Long Chyllong and his men crossed the Kupli River traveled on foot and reached the bottom of a mountain later known as Lum Shillong (Shillong Peak).

In this very place, Ka law law was paying every man, who was contracted by her in establishing a bazaar, twenty cowries or chibidi per day for their employment. Here, she was also accredited for introducing the craft of smelting iron and was said to have made abundant iron contrivance which she would export to the plains areas. The tale goes on that she also kept a herd of pigs, which she fed in a huge manger gouged out of a diengdoh tree. For several years Ka law Chibidi, as she was known by then and her children dwelt in peace.

News of her fortune and her insights regarding the smelting of iron and her commerce in iron implements with adjacent areas spread rapidly. The verbal narrative apprises that the Ahom King Swarga Raja (U Long Raja most likely the Raja of Jaintia), and the Assamese

Barphukan joined forces with one another and raided a place called Sophphokynrum. Their objective was to deprive Ka law law of her riches. This coerced Ka law Chibidi to escape from that area towards Lyndiang-umthli, near Lyngkyrdem. In this new place, the family found it arduous to stay together so decided to branch out into four different groups for their survival. One section returned to Jowai and came to be known as the Lalu Clan, another went to Nongkhlaw and became the Diengdoh Kylla Clan; the third group went to Mawiong and was now known as the Pariong Clan and finally, the fourth group went to Rangjyrteh and Cherra, where they inaugurated the Diengdohbah Clan, and subsequently became one of the chief myntri clans of the state.

While we try to comprehend the myth of Ka law Chibidi, one simply cannot fail to acknowledge the process of the exodus of her forebears and that they originally hailed from the fertile valley of the Kupli River which they called Kremlamet. This movement from one location to another has aided them in coming into contact with people and also to adept the craft of iron smelting. In the course of their migration to save themselves, this newest innovation was imparted to the people by appealing to them to work in lieu of payment i.e. chibidi. Ka law's return to Jaintia Hills has played a significant role in presenting not only the skill of iron smelting but also in producing iron implements. Furthermore, the family's struggle for survival has also led to the advent of a number of clans in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Reference to Ka lawchibidi in oral sources traces back to the Jaintia Hills and she was instrumental in popularising this technology in Khasi Hills. Oral tradition does not refer to the dates but if her narrative is accepted then she might be the one whom we can trace back to 2000 years ago.

There are plenty of oral traditions and narratives that trace the origin of many Khasi clans (Kur) from the Jaintia ancestry. For instance, lawtalang-the ancestors of the Talang clan had nine daughters. On the day when the youngest daughter was giving birth, all her

sisters were sowing seeds in the field. Due to the siblings's absence, her husband was enraged at them and this led him to cook the placenta. Then he offered it to the sisters convincing them it was the meat of a sacrificial chef. After they had consumed it, he taunted them by mentioning that they had devoured their own kith and kin, unbeknownst to them. Overtaken by guilt, they fled the village and all of them established different clans in other vicinities. One of them went to Chyrmang village, retaining her original clan. Another went to Thangbuli and there emerged the Buam clan. Another went towards Rymbai but because she stayed the night at Myntdu the clan is known as Nongtdu. Another went to Samynting where the Pyrtuh clan emerged after a religious celebration called Pyrtuh. Another went to Khasi Hills and founded the Syntung clan; another founded the Suting clan. Some say that both these clans are one and the same.

Clan historical narratives provide a rich source of indigenous information that helps us to explain and understand the movement or migration. It also shows how some clans are connected through a common history and ancestry. Many of the clan name changes took place when people dispersed or moved from one place to another. Let me give one example of the origin and dispersal of some clans and at one point in time emerged new clans or sub-clans. Rymbai, the daughter of Bahkhla (ancestress of clan Ryngkhlem, Kyndiah, Kyndait, Sana, Ksoo, etc) originally settled in Rymbai village of Jaintia Hills. Some members of the Rymbai clan migrated and settled in Khasi Hills and their clan name changed to Nongrymbai and some were known as Nongrum. From the Nongrum emerged the sub-clan like Nongneng, Nengnong, and Rumnong.

These are stories handed down from the remote past by word of mouth from one generation to another, reflecting the people's traditions and beliefs. Members of the same clan shared a common identity, and ideal sense of common origin and belongingness.

(Isamanda Pariat is currently pursuing her BA in English at St. Edmund's College Shillong)

Elections manipulated since 2018 using unconstitutionally collected money Can Supreme Court & Election Commission ensure free & fair election in 2024?

By Dr Gyan Pathak

The latest Supreme Court judgement declaring 'Electoral Bond Scheme' unconstitutional, has established beyond doubt that every election held since implementation of this scheme in 2018 was subject to manipulation by use of unconstitutionally collected money to distort the level playing field for political parties and candidates and to influence the electorate so that elections did not remain free and fair, and PM Narendra Modi was the chief beneficiary.

This is the latest swing in political narrative on the eve of Lok Sabha election 2024, and which seems to be most significant of all the narratives since Karnataka election in May 2023, since the Supreme Court judgement would not only stop the chief beneficiary from getting further undue advantage from the unconstitutional funding of election campaigns, but also would open a Pandora's box of electoral evils resorted to by the ruling party when the list of beneficiaries and the donors would be published by the Election Commission of India on March 13, 2024.

After the publication of the list, people would know which corporate entities gave how much money to the ruling establishment led by PM Narendra Modi, and what benefit his government gave to them in return, and which and how many shell companies were involved in such unconstitutional financing to BJP. It may bring a new twist in the current surcharged political atmosphere.

The Opposition has been alleging for a long time that the Modi government has been extorting money from the Corporates through electoral bonds under the threat of raids by Central investigative agencies including CBI, ED, and Income Tax, due to which opposition political parties have been getting too little corporate funds. Lack of funds financially crippled the Opposition which is to the advantage PM Narendra Modi.

Karnataka election results had given rise to the political narrative that PM Modi's so-called charisma is on the wane, and even Hindutva campaign was not working which resulted in a humiliating defeat of the BJP which was thrown out of power by the Congress. Rahul Gandhi was already emerging as the chief campaigner after his Bharat Jodo Yatra. The main narrative at that time was a resurgent Congress.

The second narrative followed with the formation of INDIA alliance which took concrete shape in Mumbai conclave on September 1. Congress was in upbeat mood and deferred the seat-sharing arrangement on account of November 2023 state elections. Congress hoped to win all the three Hindi heartland states — Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan — but lost. However, the party won Telangana, kicking out ruling BRS from power, and changing the political narrative of South India.

During the November state elections, Hindutva raised its head again and BJP won all the three states of Hindi heartland. It was the real swing in the run-up to 2024 parliamentary election, which has been amplified by the Ram Mandir temple inauguration in Ayodhya on January 22, 2024. RSS-BJP clan termed INDIA alliance as conglomeration of anti-Hindu political forces.

During this period another political narrative was built round Enforcement Directorate and other central investigating agencies. PM Modi labelled INDIA alliance as a pack of corrupts, and vowed that his government would continue to take actions against corrupt leaders. Many important political leaders across the Opposition are under the Central investigating agencies' radars, many of them have already been arrested, and many are in the line to be arrested before the general election. BJP hopes it would give them advantage in

the electoral field, while the opposition cries foul.

The rise of INDIA alliance had changed the political narrative in the beginning but by the end of December 2023, it started revealing troublesome signs of its constituents falling apart. However the INDIA alliance had passed a resolution relating to EVM concerns with a demand that old EVMs should be replaced by new ones that roll out VVPAT, and all of which must be counted to tally the actual votes polled. The resolution had significance, since only in August a research paper by Asoka University professor had found evidence of manipulation of election results in 2019, in which prediction of election outcomes was possible for the constituencies with closer contests. INDIA alliance with Congress as a major party had requested to meet the Election Commission, but Election Commission has not yet given them time, which remains a mystery since the issue pertains to free and fair election.

The narrative of ensuring a free and fair election 2024, had another related concern about amendment of appointment and service condition of Election Commissioners of India. Through the amendment, Modi government has just kept out the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India from the appointment process, and given the real power to itself to appoint Election Commissioners. Additionally, two Election Commissioners will not have constitutional protection as the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC).

In a three member Commission, two can dominate the decision, two will be removed at the sweet will of the CEC and the government, and hence the Modi government will have an indirect say in the election process. It should also be noted that our election commissioners have gone in the past to meet PM Narendra Modi, as if working under him. Opposition has always criticised the Election Commission for favouring PM Narendra Modi and BJP while taking stern action even against minor statements of the Opposition leaders during election campaigns and putting hurdles in their way.

The INDIA alliance's political narrative around social, economic, and political justice, had to suffer due to difference among participating political parties. The desertion of RLD and JD(U) and AAP and TMC going it alone have somewhat weakened their appeal. Demand and promise of caste census was just overturned by Ram Temple inauguration on the eve of the crucial Lok Sabha elections.

To offset caste census narrative of INDIA alliance, PM Modi has resorted to Bharat Ratna politics, which denigrated the very award itself. Earlier, Bharat Ratna was given to those who were the most valued people of the country, but the recent Bharat Ratnas were awarded to those whose names were politically most useful — to the ruling party — to appease farmers, Charan Singh and MS Swaminathan were awarded Bharat Ratnas but farmers remained unhappy, and are on the path of agitation demanding legal guarantee for MSP for all their crops. To offset the caste census and demand for social justice, Bharat Ratna was awarded to Kapoori Thakur, but the reservation issue is likely to form a major narrative during the election campaigns.

The Supreme Court judgement of declaring fund raising through electoral bonds unconstitutional is the most significant of them, since it has direct bearing on the narrative of free and fair polling for Lok Sabha elections 2024. It has to be seen how the Supreme Court and the Election Commission of India ensure free and fair elections, and how frequent swings in the political narratives shape the final electoral outcome. (IPA Service)

and the Opposition since the party in power will have an option to get information on the purchasers and beneficiaries of the bonds and retribution always remains a possibility. Electoral bonds have therefore proved to be a cure that is worse than the disease. All it did was to legalise corruption. Worse, it had a direct impact on the fairness of the electoral process, the cornerstone of democracy. As the chief justice of India pointed out in his judgment, information about the funding of political parties is essential for the effective exercise of the vote.

It is expected that the government must now draw lessons from the aborted attempt and sit with people who are interested in the furtherance of democracy to design better and transparent ways of political funding. There are better models available across the democratic world, including in the United States where transparent, limited funding to political parties is legal. Such principles can be adopted in our country too provided there is a strong determination to pursue transparent electoral funding.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

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

Want to beat depression? Running or yoga can help

By Michael Noetel

At least one in ten people have depression at some point in their lives, with some estimates closer to one in four. It's one of the worst things for someone's wellbeing - worse than debt, divorce or diabetes.

One in seven Australians take antidepressants. Psychologists are in high demand. Still, only half of people with depression in high-income countries get treatment.

Our new research shows that exercise should be considered alongside therapy and antidepressants. It can be just as impactful in treating depression as therapy, but it matters what type of exercise you do and how you do it.

Walk, run, lift, or dance away depression

We found 218 randomised trials on exercise for depression, with 14,170 participants. We analysed them using a method called a network meta-analysis. This allowed us to see how different types of exercise compared, instead of lumping all types together.

We found walking, running, strength training, yoga and mixed aerobic exercise were about as effective as cognitive behaviour therapy - one of the gold-standard treatments for depression. The effects of dancing were also powerful. However, this came from analysing just five studies, mostly involving young women. Other exercise types had more evidence to back them.

Walking, running, strength training, yoga and mixed aerobic exercise seemed more effective than antidepressant medication alone, and were about as effective as exercise alongside antidepressants.

Any of these exercises, people

were most likely to stick with strength training and yoga.

Antidepressants certainly help some people. And of course, anyone getting treatment for depression should talk to their doctor before changing what they are doing.

Still, our evidence shows that if you have depression, you should get a psychologist and an exercise plan, whether or not you're taking antidepressants.

Join a programme and go hard (with support)

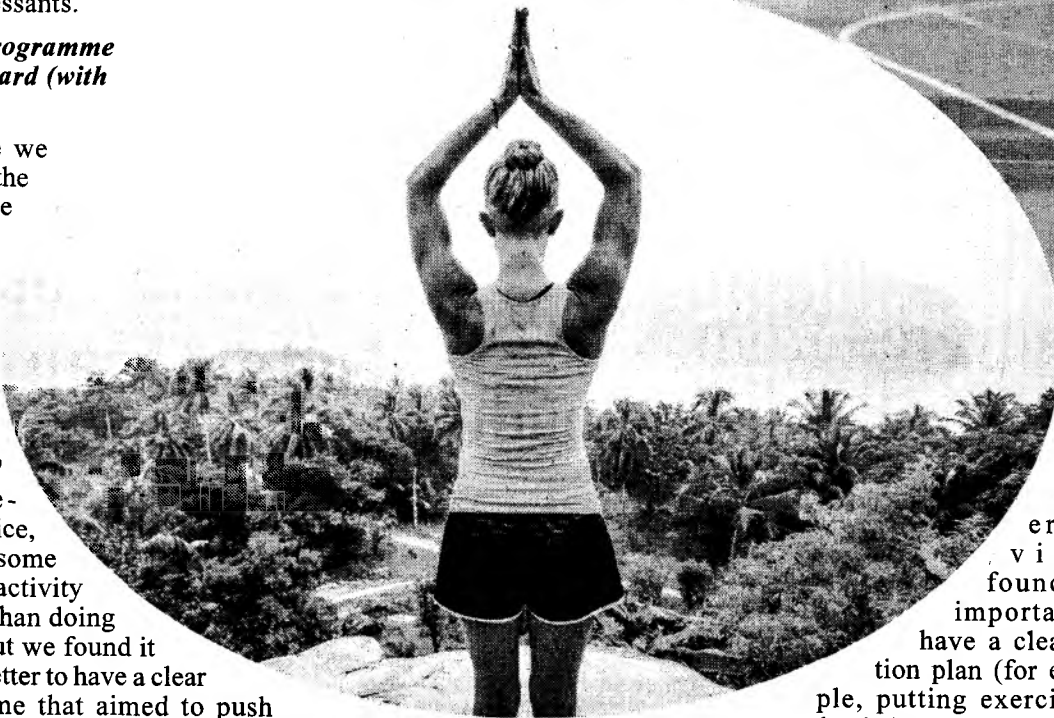
Before we analysed the data, we thought people with depression might need to "ease into it" with generic advice, such as "some physical activity is better than doing none." But we found it was far better to have a clear programme that aimed to push you, at least a little. Programmes with clear structure worked better, compared with those that gave people lots of freedom. Exercising by yourself might also make it hard to set the bar at the right level, given low self-esteem is a symptom of depression.

We also found it didn't matter how much people exercised, in terms of sessions or minutes a week. It also didn't really matter how long the exercise program lasted. What mattered was the intensity of the exercise: the

higher the intensity, the better the results.

Yes, it's hard to keep motivated

We should exercise caution in interpreting the findings. Unlike drug trials, participants in exercise trials know which "treatment" they've been randomised to receive, so this may skew the results.



Many people with depression have physical, psychological or social barriers to participating in formal exercise programs. And getting support to exercise isn't free.

We also still don't know the best way to stay motivated to exercise, which can be even harder if you have depression.

Our study tried to find out whether things like setting exercise goals helped, but we couldn't get a clear result.



Other reviews found it's important to have a clear action plan (for example, putting exercise in your calendar) and to track your progress (for example, using an app or smartwatch). But predicting which of these interventions work is notoriously difficult.

A 2021 mega-study of more than 60,000 gym-goers found experts struggled to predict which strategies might get people into the gym more often. Even making workouts fun didn't seem to motivate people. However, listening to audiobooks while exercising helped a lot, which no experts predicted.

Still, we can be confident that people benefit from personalised support and accountability. The support helps overcome the hurdles they're sure to hit. The accountability keeps people going even when their brains are telling them to avoid it.

So, when starting out, it seems wise to avoid going it alone. Instead: -- Join a fitness group or yoga studio.

-- Get a trainer or an exercise physiologist.

-- Ask a friend or family member to go for a walk with you.

Taking a few steps towards getting that support makes it more likely you'll keep exercising.

Let's make this official

Some countries see exercise as a backup plan for treating depression. For example, the American Psychological Association only conditionally recommends ex-

ercise as a "complementary and alternative treatment" when "psychotherapy or pharmacotherapy is either ineffective or unacceptable".

Based on our research, this recommendation is withholding a potent treatment from many people who need it.

In contrast, The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists recommends vigorous aerobic activity at least two to three times a week for all people with depression.

Given how common depression is, and the number failing to receive care, other countries should follow suit and recommend exercise alongside front-line treatments for depression. (The Conversation)

(The author is Senior Lecturer in Psychology, The University of Queensland)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, FEBRUARY 18, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon trine Mercury on your solar return chart denotes a good year. You may see possibilities everywhere and that you can be more than just a cog in the all-important wheel of change. You also have big humanitarian tendencies, so helping others will be a major focus of the coming year. This year highlights your originality and has far-reaching ramifications. Let's say you invent something new or propose a new idea to a think tank or local charitable organization, and it's not likely to stop there. You're obviously destined to do great things for the world, and this aspect reminds you to go big or go home. Don't think local, think global and beyond.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) The planetary configuration indicates that you would be ambitious, realistic, practical and disciplined towards work and commitments. This is a time when you can be bold and enjoy new experiences. You tend to talk more readily, particularly about your own personal likes and dislikes or your past. This is an excellent time to work on intellectual tasks with more vigour and passion. You are likely to draw emotional and sensitive individuals into your social circle. At the root of this is likely to be a quest for a sense of personal freedom.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This is a period that brings desire for love, harmony and peace in your life. Personal and professional relations are loving, stable, and harmonious. This week brings social meetings and events, and for situations that call for treating others with equality and respect. This would be a good week for financial undertakings involving electronics, technology, arts as well as group activities. Learning new things is your passion this week. You are more sensitive and your artistic imagination is stirred, and you have an increased appreciation for subtleties.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Financial benefits accrue and this week proves good in terms of investments and finances. This is the time when gifts and rewards come to you, as well as opportunities to expand your horizon through travel, a broadening of your "audience" if you have one, or higher studies. Career moves in the form of new offers could also arrive now, is a particularly auspicious period for such matters. You come across as especially articulate, and your good nature is bound to attract some attention. You are blessed with good mood and health to indulge in outdoor activities.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You would be generous, pleasantly emotional and creative. Striking a balance between your attention to career and to your family life is necessary. Taking steps to improve your family and home life as well as your career and public life will be in order. You will also thoroughly enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities, especially in the company of a loved one. This is a good time to build your skills, get organized, and attend to your health and wellbeing. You are able to stand your ground and assert yourself more than usual.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You achieve success as you are brilliant and there is good fortune attending professional, personal and material aspects. You interact with people in position of power and authority gracefully and diplomatically. Your finances could also improve through continuous efforts and follow-ups. In love and romance your personal relationship takes on a special quality as you communicate beautifully. You have energy at your disposal to move your plans forward and you are more enterprising. Health needs care and old habits of excesses need to be discarded; this would benefit both you and your family.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) Self-confidence and quick action are highlighted in this phase. This is a good time to promote harmony and goodwill as you have to garner a good team spirit right now and be more tactful with your co-workers. You need the energies, companionship, and support of other people. It can also be a time of endings and new beginnings, relationship concerns, and wistful-

ness. Personal and social contacts may be secretive as you don't want to disclose personal matters. There may be gains from property, shares and assets in hand.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) The planetary configuration indicates that your domestic and career needs are likely to be fulfilled. New ideas and concepts floated by you at your work place will be appreciated. You find an intoxicating romance and express your feelings to your loved one. At work, you may take up new assignments and projects that would bring creativity and development of new ideas. Your inner hopes and desires come to the fore even as you tackle your job with a realistic and practical purpose of mind. You extend your hospitality to family and expenses occur this week on purchasing of luxurious household items.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You are unusual, introspective and reserved this week. It is good time to organize your workplace and make it more effective and equipped with good infrastructure. This is an exceptionally exciting time as professional and business opportunities are offered to you. You are just fair and generous in family and professional situations. Health needs to be looked at; also be careful in your interpersonal dealings and avoid confrontations. Your mind is focused on private matters and past issues during this cycle.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You may take up assignments and projects and this would end on a winning note for you. Your mind is bright, alert, and active during this cycle, and you have the ability to come up with unusual and inventive ideas. Sharing your thoughts with others is a prime interest. Others tend to particularly enjoy your conversations during this transit--you are willing to listen as well as add your own thoughts. Your ability to grasp unusual subject matters and to intuitively understand what others are trying to say win you some brownie points. You could also do a lot of thinking and muse about your own happiness and long-term goals.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You succeed in areas that require a creative bent of mind as well as technical ability. Some of you may find that your career is moving towards a more service-oriented direction. You have more faith in general regarding your career and the direction in which you are headed. You will have the ability to build up financial reserves and resources, for this placement can bring a good deal of success in all monetary pursuits. You are able to stand your ground and assert yourself more than usual during this transit.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) The focus would be on responsibilities and workload. You want to leave your mark on the world in some way--however big or small--and you are able to make an impression more than usual. If circumstances are such, you are able to easily fight back. In fact, you may be somewhat combative under this influence, and you may have a short temper. If you've been off track, be kind to yourself, but make sure you re-commit to your personal goals. Take charge of your life, but don't bulldoze others in the process.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This week brings for you socializing, romance and stability at the work place. Connections can be made now and networking pays off. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you at this time. This is a period when practical vision may be at a high, during which you can see what needs to be done and just how to go about doing it. Career and vocational issues may benefit from the increased clarity you possess. Much of your energy will be applied to vocational achievement, professional success, and leadership.

Sprain, strain or fracture? You might want to be sure

Kids are back at school, playgrounds, sport and general mucking around. This can lead to two things: happy children and injuries.

Up to 50% of boys and 40% of girls will break a bone during childhood and adolescence. Around 50,000 children and young people are hospitalised due to fractures in Australia each year and the rates of fractures in children appear to be increasing.

But it is not just broken bones that can hamper your children's Olympic dreams - or just disrupt their play.

What are the differences between strains, sprains and fractures? And how can you identify and manage these injuries? Different doesn't mean better or worse.

Sprains, strains and fractures are all different types of injuries - and the type doesn't necessarily indicate the severity.

Sprains are injuries to ligaments and joints. So even a complete anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) rupture (when one of the ligaments of the knee is torn through) is technically a sprain.

Strains are injuries to the muscle. So whether you just pull the muscle (where the muscle is inflamed but not torn) or cause a bad tear, it is referred to as a muscle strain.

Finally, a fracture means any injury to bone. In children, whose bones are more bendy, this can vary from a small crack in the bone (sometimes called a buckle or Greenstick fracture) to a completely broken bone.

Kids are at increased risk

Children seem to be at a relatively high risk of breaking a bone (particularly of their forearm) as their bones are rapidly lengthening due to growth, and with that there is a reduction in the overall bone strength.

ACL ruptures are also common in children, with the highest rise



in ruptures among 5-14-year-old females in Australia, increasing by 10.4% from 1998 to 2018.

Children's formal sporting commitments may have a role to play in why injury rates are increasing. Some kids are not getting so much as a single physical recovery day per week and are training more than elite athletes while their bodies are still lanky, uncoordinated and developing. We also see fractures from trampoline play, skateboarding, and extreme sports such as BMX riding.

In addition to muscle, tendon and bone injuries, children are also at risk of concussion and clear guidelines now exist to inform management of this condition.

With all that energy and commitment going into sport and play, it's not surprising some kids hurt themselves.

Here's what to do next. 5 ways to assess the severity of an injury

1. What does it look like? Is there an obvious visual deformity or huge amount of swelling? Injuries with bigger changes in physical appearance will be much more severe.

2. Can they move it?

If they are unable to bend a joint or they are "guarding" the area and refusing to move it, it is a sign of more severe injury. Sometimes fear will prevent a child from moving the injured area - it's important not to try to force movement in the early stages, even if you think fear is an issue.

3. Can you touch or press on the injured area? Obviously, the more severe the injury the more likely your child will recoil with pain when being touched - or not let you anywhere near them.

4. Can your child bear weight on the injured area? For leg injuries this means can they stand or walk. For arm injuries can they use the arm to push up off the floor or out of a chair. More severe injuries prevent people from being able to bear weight. You should not try to force your child to stand or walk - but if you note them doing so, you can be more reassured the injury is less likely to be serious.

5. Is the injury improving over time?

If the injury does not seem to be changing or getting better within 24 hours it may be a more severe injury, even if the previous pointers do not suggest it is.

Now what? Top tips to manage injury

Do the basics well. No matter how severe an injury may be - the RICE protocol will be useful. RICE stands for rest, ice (with a pack or cold water if no ice is available), compression (with a bandage or fitted fabric) and elevation (position the body so the injury is above the level of the heart) - if your child has an obvious deformity of the bone, joint or muscle, seek medical attention as quickly as you can.

The best thing to do is take them to an emergency department for assessment.

The injury may not be that severe, but if your child is needing to walk in an unusual way or not using their arm we want to get them back to normal as fast as possible - talk to your child and see what they want to do. If the problem is lingering and they are worried about getting back to sport or play, an assessment by someone qualified (usually the GP or physio) can be very reassuring. (The Conversation)

"Peace and justice are two sides of the same coin."

—Dwight D. Eisenhower

The Shillong Times

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Modi's Ram Rajya

WITH parliament elections round the corner, it's naturally time for the BJP to hail the two consecutive terms of the Narendra Modi-led NDA government. The hyperbole that marked a claim at the party's National Council Meeting – that PM Modi ushered in Ram Rajya during his 10-year-rule – may thus be excused. Fact is that Modi managed the affairs of the nation in his own ways, changed things for the better in various sectors as is only to be expected of any functional government. Fact is also that he rounded off his 10-year-rule with the consecration of a new, well-crafted Ram Temple in Ayodhya, which is perceived to be the birthplace of Lord Ram.

Ram Rajya, a vision of governance popularized by Mahatma Gandhi, has its origin in Valmiki's Ramayana and Tulsidas's Ramacharita Manas, both literary masterpieces of epic proportions. In sum, it stands for good governance. It upholds truth and ensures equality, justice, wellbeing of the people and prosperity to the nation. Set against this, between 2014 and 2024, there has been no perceptible change to the nation's governance systems. The administrative mechanism rather turned more chaotic and unjust in several respects due also to wear and tear. Today, this is the land of influence-peddlers and political crooks. Injection of new energy in governance on a regular basis is a pre-requisite. But what we see is a hugely corrupt governance system. Greasing the palms of the bureaucracy is essential to get things done. The judiciary is steadily losing the high aura that it once held due to perceived manipulations on its own and at the behest of the powers that be. The poor and ordinary people are at the receiving end of such uncouth indulgences.

Justice is delayed or often subverted. The law and order machinery is steeped in corruption and nepotism. Modi's central investigation mechanisms were largely ineffective or used to intimidate rivals. Investigations into several high-profile cases reached nowhere, and the sharks who looted the public exchequer are given a long rope or granted escape routes. The police force is swarmed with corrupt elements and political manipulations subvert the course of investigations. Modi's efforts, if any, to reverse such trends rarely met with positive results. This is the antithesis of the vision projected by the Ram Rajya concept. The overall situation in this country when it comes to law and order is close to anarchy. The British Raj had left behind a sound governance system. Jawaharlal Nehru as first prime minister sought to build on it. After his demise, successive prime ministers who led the nation have not shown the grit and determination to change things for the better. They made casual, half-hearted, failed attempts like the farm reforms, demonetization etc., which met with limited success. In all, there is a weak-kneed attempt to actually change the system for the better. Rather the Modi era is marked by bombast and showmanship. Good governance was given short shrift.

Letters to the Editor

The History of the Jaintias & Their Kingdom

Editor,

My attention is drawn to Bhogtoram Mawroh's article (S.T Feb. 10, 2024) captioned "Constructing/reconstructing Jaintia History." At first I was not inclined to respond as the write-up is self-contradictory and confusing. The mistake was detected in the first two paragraphs. This writer never mentioned that the first state formed by the Monkhmer-speaking race was called the Jaintia kingdom; Bhogtoram cannot put words into another person's mouth. The real name of the State was given as JAINTIA from which the name Jaintia was derived. He must be told that the two names are different in both spelling & pronunciation – while JAINTIA is a six-letter word, Jaintia is a seven-letter word. His statement that the Jaintia kingdom started around 600 BCE is a figment of his own imagination. He must also be told that JAINTIA did not last long as the State passed over into the hands of the Pator-Chutia clan of the Bodos. He can refer to this writer's research article on "Nari-Rajya or Women Kingdom & the Name 'Jaintia,'" published in "Golden Jubilee Souvenir" 2020 of the Moosalyngkat Dorbar Chnong, Jowai.

Bhogtoram speaks about the Jaintia kingdom being divided into three kingdoms. But according to history it

was Sylhet kingdom that was divided into three kingdoms, one of which was called Jayantya kingdom. It is erroneous to associate this kingdom with the Jaintia kingdom which originated in Jaintia Hills. Of course, one good historian did make this same mistake. We wish to add that Sylhet was later reunited but split again into two kingdoms. After three generations thereafter, it was again united under Gauda Govinda who organized the State most successfully though ultimately it fell successively to the Mughals and the English.

Owing to the above errors in Bhogtoram's article, his subsequent arguments, criticisms and queries collapse, one upon the other, like a house of cards. It is difficult for this writer to guess the discipline to which he belongs – whether history, anthropology or linguistics. He seems to belong to neither of these three disciplines, so it is not possible to organize this letter to suit his purpose and it will not be possible to respond to his future queries in a newspaper column or letter. If he is a researcher/research student, he could always consult his own guide about the manner of seeking data/information for his thesis.

Apparently Bhogtoram could not comprehend this writer's article and had to write a postscript/letter (S.T. Feb. 12, 2024) raising/repeating his three issues: One, he referred to U Shyllong (& U Sajar Nangli); he must be told that Khasi Hills was not

populated by only these two migrations of the Jaintias but by four to five before the British took over these hills. About iron smelting in these hills much has been written by many authors including Prof. David R. Syiemlieh. Two, he referred to Betty Laloo's thesis which is not accessible to this writer right now, but he must be told that behind every thesis there is an anti-thesis, and there is even a synthesis. Three, he referred to different dialects including that of the Lyngngams and we are already familiar with their existence. If he wants to know more about the Lyngngams he can refer to a comprehensive research paper on "The Lyngngams of Meghalaya" in a Journal called "Northeast Researches, Vol. XII, March 2021" published by the Institute of Northeast India Studies, Kolkata.

Bhogtoram also queried whether at one time we all came from Africa. This is a question that still baffles many anthropologists and other scholars who are investigating the ethnology of the Khasis and Jaintias. Guilio Costa in the conclusion of his important article referred to earlier, has this to say: "Many of the peoples who speak Austroic Languages still possess the physical features of the Negroid Race. (They) must have had the same racial basis as the other peoples who for the same reason belong to the same linguistic family, that is, a race belonging to the Negroid ethnic type." Bhogtoram may like to follow up this trend of

discussion among concerned scholars today. I wish him all success!

Yours etc.,
Prof. P.M. Passah,
Moosalyngkat, Jowai

Farmers in distress

Editor,

While the Father of the Indian Green Revolution, the agricultural scientist (Late) MS Swaminathan was awarded the Bharat Ratna, his recommendations had ironically been put into cold storage. The Swaminathan Commission had recommended that the Minimum Support Price (MSP) should be at least 50 per cent more than the comprehensive cost. This is one of the main demands of the protesting farmers.

What his daughter, economist Madhura Swaminathan said on February 13 in an event held at the Indian Agriculture Research Institute to celebrate the Bharat Ratna for her father, highlighted the irony of honouring MS Swaminathan while ignoring his suggestions and treating our farmers like enemies. She said, "The farmers of Punjab today are marching to Delhi. I believe, according to the newspaper reports, there are jails being prepared for them in Haryana, there are barricades. All kinds of things are being done to prevent them from reaching Delhi. These are farmers, they are not criminals. You have to find some solutions. They are our annadatas. I request, if you have to honour MS Swaminathan, we have to

take the farmers with us with whatever strategy that we are planning for their future."

Apart from MSP, another important recommendation of the Swaminathan Commission was land reforms. The Commission suggested that the diversion of 'prime' agricultural land and forests to the corporate sector for non-agricultural purposes should not be allowed. It also recommended setting up of a mechanism which would help regulate the sale of agricultural land, based on a few conditions.

MS Swaminathan in his report said, "Land Reforms are necessary to address the basic issue of access to land for both crops and livestock. Land holdings inequality is reflected in land ownership. In 1991-92, the share of the bottom half of the rural households in the total land ownership was only 3 per cent and the top 10 per cent was as high as 54 per cent."

Land reforms made China such a strong country in spite of its huge population. Professor PC Joshi rightly said, "Land reforms in India have not assumed the form of gigantic revolutionary upheaval as in China, or that of a dramatic change brought about from above as in Japan."

Land reforms can boost inclusive growth in many ways. First, it will enhance the productivity of land by improving the economic conditions of farmers and tenants. Second, it will ensure distributive justice and eliminate exploitation. Third, it helps create a system of peasant proprietorship. And

the region where indigenous people live. If these languages and dialects die, that will be a great loss to the world; hence there is a need to encourage people to write the different dialect or language that they speak because language is also a treasure trove of wisdom. English had borrowed words from Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, and even Indian language yet, neither English nor the other languages were threatened, similarly, Khasi and other dialects will continue to thrive and complement each other. The different dialects and languages need to be put into writing and in our case to ensure the prayers, invocation, rituals of the Niamtre or Niamtynrai religions remain alive. If the dialects die, the rich culture and traditional way of life of the people and conservation ideas embedded in the language will also die.

Story of Migration to and From Jaintia

There were also debates about migration, and it was assumed that the migration was en masse maybe like the exodus in the Bible. Since we don't have written evidence, from oral stories we found that people migrated individually and in many cases from the clan/the iawbel or the Sen jait story. It was the progenitor who migrated first and that is how the area was peopled. Cases in point are stories of 'ka law chibidi,' the story of 'ka Bon, ka Wet, ka Tet wa ka Doh,' then there is the story of the Mukhim/Shabong who came to Jowai and became the Challam. The san Syngkong from Jaintia which are the Shylla, the Pariat, the Pde, the Lamar, and the Blah are related with the Thangkhiw in Khasi hills; similarly, the Sutnga went on to become the Syiemlieh and etc. These are evidences of cross-migration to and from Jaintia.

There are also stories of intra-region migration in which the Talang who migrated from the north became the Lyngdoh in Nongtalang and the Nalang, the Buam in the other parts of War Jaintia and when they crossed the Myntdu they became Nongtdu. The Rymbai who became Rymbai when they moved to Nongtalang are believed to migrate from the north.

In conclusion, there may be variations in the group's traditions and perception of things, but there is so much that they have in common which only suggests that we are one despite the differences that seem to be highlighting.

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 state of democracy in Pakistan

By Dr Nsungbemo Ezung

The general election of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan held this February 2024 produced a very interesting nature of hung result: a group of independent politicians aligned with Pakistan Tehreek-Insaf (PTI), led by highly popular leader and currently jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan, had won the largest number of seats by winning 93 seats out of the total 266 seats in the country's National Assembly. This unique election result in this politically ever-volatile South Asian nation, where independent parliamentarians became the single largest political bloc in the country's highest seat of government, was necessitated due to the barring of PTI from contesting the election over the issue of party symbol. This means that even if all the 93 newly elected independent parliamentarians come together, they will still need the help of another 41 parliamentarians to stake claim to form a new government in the country.

Although the hung verdict of the general election had once again plunged the nation into a state of uncertainty, which could also lead to turmoil in the coming days, one impressive takeaway of the outcome was the voters' turnout. Since its founding, the country has been going through a series of political crises/instability, constant

left the region, including Pakistan, devastated. The country had to endure three military coups and three major wars with India during its last 76 years of existence which cost the nation dearly. And during its formative years, amidst chaos and conflicts, its founding father Muhammad Ali Jinnah, despite earning a notorious reputation in South Asia due to his two-nation theory, envisaged a secular nation and democracy as a political system for Pakistan. With virtually no competitors to compete against him for power at that time, Jinnah could convert the nation he had created into anything that he wanted. He can make himself a dictator or make his country as his family empire where only the generation from his family can rule the country. He also had the option of establishing a political system where only one political party was recognized to rule the country. Yet he rejected all these options and chose multi-party democracy for his country. And this is something that Pakistan can take pride in its founding father. Today, the state of democracy in Pakistan may be far from being perfect. It may be suffering from many internal contradictions. Nevertheless, Pakistan remains a democratic nation at least in



conflicts between civilian and military leaderships, threats of terrorism and extremism, both from within and outside, and unfortunate abnormal relations with its neighbor, India. All these should be enough to discourage the people of the country from coming forward and participating in the election process. It's a mammoth task also to conduct a democratic, peaceful and free and fair election in such a politically turbulent nation.

Surprisingly, it was reported that 47.8 percent out of an estimated 128 million registered voters had turned out on Election Day, held in a single phase, to participate in the electoral process and cast their votes. Pre-poll violence and post-poll allegations of poll rigging marked the whole election process although it did not bring an end to the uncertainty that the country is already facing. The voters' turnout however shows that all is not lost in Pakistan and that democracy still has a future in the country. If 61 million Pakistanis, in a country with an estimated 230 million population, still have faith in the country's democratic institution and if they choose to be a party to the country's democratic process, then the country can count on them in its effort to transform itself for the better, which is possible.

The Pakistani political leaderships, cutting across party lines, needs to take cognizance of the participation of the 47.8 percent of Pakistani voters who had defied all the risks and responded positively to the call of the nation to participate in electing a new leader for the nation and ensure that they will not feel that they are let down by their leaders. Pakistan as a nation must reward those 47.8 percent of voters who had voted in the general election by forming a stable civilian government and providing good governance to the people of the country as a whole.

Pakistan as a nation had a troubled beginning. The post-colonial nation-making process of South Asia had

form. Pakistan doesn't need to work to transition itself to democracy; it only needs to strengthen democracy, which is already in place.

In the year 1977, Gen. Zia ul-Haq, the then military ruler under pressure to hold a general election in the country as early as possible, had famously remarked that although he was committed to restoring democracy in the country, he was at the same time not in favor of holding an election for the sake of an election. And that the only election that he desires should be an election that brings out a positive result which will make way for forming a stable political government. Here was a curious case where the message on the true meaning and purpose of conducting an election in a democratic country came from a military ruler who had suppressed democracy in his country and ruled the same for more than a decade.

More than four decades on, Gen. Zia ul-Haq's message on democracy echoes in the corridors of power in Pakistan and the world. Pakistan's general election is over. But the big question before us is – will the general election pave the way to what kind of situation develops in the country? The best case scenario for Pakistan at this juncture is for the leaders and newly elected parliamentarians of different political parties to honor the mandate of the people by developing consensus among themselves and forming a stable and desirable civilian government at the earliest. If they fail to do this and if the military has to step in once again to influence the formation of a new government, or even to the extent of installing a puppet government controlled by the military, which will further legitimize the paramount role of the military in the political affairs of the country, then the 2024 Pakistan's general election will be just another of what Gen. Zia ul-Haq had once famously called "election for the sake of election".

*"Most powerful is he who has himself
in his own power."*

—Lucius Annaeus Seneca

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Opportunistic Politics

THERE is no such thing as loyalty in politics. Politicians have one agenda and that is to be where power and influence reside. The attrition from the Congress across the country and in Meghalaya is not a new story. It is an oft repeated tale. The same set of legislators who have deserted the sinking ship and joined the National Peoples' Party (NPP) in Meghalaya and the BJP elsewhere will be the first to crawl back if the Congress at some point in history returns to power for nothing is permanent in politics. That the turncoats choose to shower so much praise on the party they have joined is hogwash. They are saying something they don't believe and the public knows it. The Congress today does not have the resources to shower on its political aspirants. The NPP has the dough after having been in power for the second term. It's the same with the BJP too at the national level. If at all people vote the Congress it is because they believe in its founding principles and its commitment to secular values as opposed to the ideological stances adopted by the BJP today by alienating sections of the population based on religious lines.

It is not easy for those who are used to being in the party that held power for so long to be suddenly out of the power game. When senior Congressmen and women have deserted the ship that steered them through many rough water much earlier, it is no surprise when the underlings also realise that its cold in the opposition and as has been often stated upfront by no less than the Deputy Chief Minister, Prestone Tynsong, that if politicians want to do development projects in their constituencies they had better support the ruling party or be deprived of such projects, the "come hither" message is loud and clear. People here will not even contest Mr Tynsong's scurrilous remarks. It shows how little respect the Deputy CM has for democratic principles where the Opposition is actually what shows the mirror to the government and calls out its propensity to ride roughshod over systems of accountability. What Mr Tynsong actually aims at is an Opposition-less democracy, much like the BJP which has been working towards a "Congress Mukti Bharat."

The role of the Opposition is critical in ensuring that any government maintains the constitutional guardrails. Whatever a government adopts as a policy measure and legislation, the opposition views it from an essentially critical gaze. In Parliament and legislative assemblies, the opposition reacts, questions, scrutinises the government and its committees on a day-to-day basis and does that outside the parliament and assemblies, in the media and among the masses. A weak Opposition is in fact, far more perilous than a weak government. In effect, an irresponsible government in combination with a timid Opposition spells doom. Further a weak Opposition also means that the opinions/demands of a large populace (who did not vote for the ruling party) is left unaddressed. Meghalaya is soon reaching that tipping point.

Peace between Khasis and Karbis: A Legacy of the past

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Recently, I was invited by Jones Ingti Kathar (retired IAS officer and president of the All Party Hill Leaders Conference from Karbi Anglong) to witness a traditional ceremony known as 'Kove Baida' (Kove = kwai or betel nut, Baida = act of giving). This ceremony, which takes place in Khang Khadwui, a location around the village of Umbaru in West Karbi Anglong, commemorates an important occasion in Khasi-Karbi relations that dates back to the days of the erstwhile Hima Jaintiapur. At this site, the Khasi and Karbi people took an oath to maintain peace between the two communities and resolve all issues through mutual dialogue. Thus, on the February 11, my friend and I left Shillong early in the morning to attend this very important ceremony. We took the Um-mulung road, which leads to Khanduli in the Meghalaya side, and crossed into Karbi Anglong.

Because of the importance of the program, I was expecting it to be held in an open field with a lot of space for cultural programs of all kinds. Surprisingly, the spot was along the side of the road leading to Hamren, marked only by a resting shed with a couple of monoliths, fenced by an enclosure. There were already a few volunteers at the location and they knew Pnar and Khasi very well, which was very helpful. We were pleasantly surprised to find that one of the volunteers, Sarin Teron, the secretary of the nearby village of Umjira, had done his schooling in Mawlai. He gladly recounted his childhood days, particularly when he and other kids from the school had gone out into the streets to celebrate an election victory at the behest of one of their teachers. Sarin Teron spoke of his time in Mawlai with great affection.

It was from this affable gentleman that we got more insights into the importance of the venue and its significance for Khasi-Karbi relations. In the past, the location was the site of a conflict between the Khasi and the Karbi. Jones Ingti Kathar later told us that it was over the areas where jhum could be practiced. Eventually both sides decided to come together and establish what the Karbi King (about whom we will discuss later) termed the 'Peace Accord'. The Karbi were represented by Thong Nokbe, the legendary Karbi hero. On the Khasi side, there was Tymmen Borlai and his wife, Katep Nongrong, who acted as the representatives of the Khasi Syiem (most probably of Hima Jaintiapur). The monoliths were called mawmsai, which in Khasi

means an oath stone. Since then, the Karbis have been coming to this spot to mark this important occasion by offering prayers. And it is the Karbi King (Karbi Rico), belonging to the Ronghang clan and presently staying in Diphu, who conducts this ceremony.

Not long after us, the Karbi King arrived with his entourage, all dressed in their traditional garb. On arrival they entered the enclosure and sat around the monoliths, forming a circle. On the Karbi side was an upright stone alongside a broad, flat stone, while the Khasi side had only a single upright stone. Soon after the King and his advisors took their seats, gourds and beer bottles filled with rice beer were kept at the feet of both monoliths. There were six on the Karbi side and three on the Khasi side. Before them betel nuts, or kwai, were placed on banana leaves. The King/Rico then stepped forward and initiated the ceremony.

To begin with, four chickens were brought and the Rico poured water on their heads. Holding them in his hands, he and his advisors offered prayers to the Karbi monolith. Next, the Rico, now acting as the chief priest, made an incision on the neck of one of the chickens using a knife that resembled a Khasi tari. Immediately, blood began oozing out of the wound. Following this, he flung the chicken on the ground and sprinkled rice on its writhing body. He repeated this action with the other chickens and then replicated the ritual in front of the Khasi monolith. Once the chickens stopped struggling, the Rico poured water onto their abdomens. Using the knife again, he cut open the stomach, took out the intestines, and examined them. Satisfied with the 'readings' the carcasses were then handed over to the volunteers, after which candles were lit in front of the monoliths. The Rico and his advisors took their seats again.

About half an hour later, pieces of the cooked chicken were brought and laid atop the rice, now spread on the banana leaf in front of the monoliths. The Rico came forward once again and placed plastic cups filled with rice beer in front of the food. He poured a little bit of the liquid on the stone and offered another prayer with his advisors before both monoliths. This then marked the end of the ceremony, after which food was served to all the attendees, including the guests. Afterwards, we were felicitated with a Karbi shawl by the Rico, which was

a great honour and highly unexpected. Thereafter, we expressed gratitude to our newfound friends and bid them goodbye. Soon we were back on the Shillong-Jowai road and on the way home.

During the ceremony, there was a persistent feeling that the rituals performed appeared so familiar. It was later, when I got home and started reading about the Karbi in the book 'The Mikir' by Edward Stack, published just two years after PRT Gurdon's book 'The Khasi', that it started making sense. According to Karbi tradition, their original abode was somewhere along the eastern portion of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills bordering the Kopili/Kupli river. Staying close to the Khasis, they adopted many of the former's customs and habits, particularly in terms of ornaments, personal names, methods of divination, funeral ceremonies, and memorial stones. The monoliths described earlier have their own Karbi name, long-chong for the upright stone and long-pak for the broad flat stone. Even now, the term used for their exogamous clans is kur, which is the same as used by the Khasi. Thong Nokbe, the legendary Karbi hero, was also supposed to be one of the high-ranking military officers in Hima Jaintiapur. In fact, around the time the conflict in Khang Khadwui took place, Jones Ingti Kathar was of the opinion that Thong Nokbe was still under the service of the King of Jaintiapur. Most probably, for this reason, he was able to represent the Karbi and discuss terms with the local Pnar population, both of whom were the subjects of Hima Jaintiapur. While trying to locate Jaintiapur in Google Earth, I came across a village called Hawai Bhoi in Amalarem, which, as informed to me by HH Mohrmen, is a Karbi village. It is not surprising, as Bhoi is another name for the Karbi, which is used even now by the Pnar. Did this village come about when Thong Nokbe was under the service of the Jaintiapur King?

But the legend of Thong Nokbe also mentions that he had rebelled against the Jaintiapur King and won freedom for his people. There are many versions around him, and at least three were told to me by Jones Ingti Kathar as we were waiting for lunch. Like it is with the Khasi legends, there is some element of truth in all of them, but it is up to future researchers to find out the original one. But one thing that Jones Ingti

thor kept mentioning was the brotherhood between the Khasi and the Karbi and how it must be maintained at all costs. He kept using the term 'Jari Jamai' while describing the two, which means brothers and sisters. There is a rationale for that, as the Bhoi (many of whom are actually Karbi or Karbi who became Khasi) are treated as being part of the Khasi as one of the seven sub-groups, or the Hynniewtep. This was also reiterated by Sarin Teron, who lamented that now that the Khasis do not visit the site, it appears that they have forgotten the Karbi, but the Karbi still remember them with fondness.

It cannot be denied that Karbis were one of the groups living under the Khasi (Hima Shillong and Hima Jaintiapur), and the legend of Thong Nokbe actually came about because of his resistance against the oppression his people endured that rule. At the same time, the common Khasi and Karbi folk mingled, married, and exchanged cultures with each other. Some of the Karbi, in fact, went one step further and became Khasi by adopting their clan to sound more Khasi. For example, Tmung is Timung, and Killing became Klein. A certain type of matrimonial alliance also developed called 'Shim Bhoi' (personal communication) when a Khasi family in Ri Bhoi who have no daughters would marry their son to a Karbi woman so that the children would carry the Khasi surname and the ancestral property would remain within the family.

Recently, there were clashes between the Khasi and Karbi along the border, and the boundary issue, particularly between Block I and Block II, which is the eternal thorn on the side of both communities. The solution to the border will take some time, but the connections between the two communities go back many centuries, maybe millennia. The site around Khang Khadwui is a testament to the fact that peace is possible. It was an integral part of the past, and it can also be part of the future as well. No matter what happens in the future, we will always have Karbi people living in Khasi areas and Khasi people living in Karbi areas. It is for these people that the lesson from the peace accord established centuries ago must be remembered and replicated so that people of both communities can live in peace and harmony while continuing to contribute to each other's welfare.

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

CJI Chandrachud's decision on checking Chandigarh ballots on Tuesday is welcome

BJP leaders already in horse trading game by luring three AAP councillors

By Sushil Kutty

The wrath of Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud fell on the man at the centre of the Chandigarh mayoral election controversy, Presiding Officer Anil Masih, whose surreptitious glances had made the CJI lose his cool nearly a month ago when he had blurted out in indignation, "Why shouldn't this man be prosecuted?" Monday, February 19, he repeated the question in a statement. Presiding Officer Anil Masih delayed his appearance by turning up several hours late at the Supreme Court, but punishment for defacing ballots caught him, nevertheless.

After dealing with the errant Presiding Officer, questioning his actions, the CJI passed this order: "The Supreme Court proposes that the results be declared by counting the present ballot papers, disregarding the marks made by Returning Officer, instead of a fresh election." With that the court asked for the ballot papers to be produced on February 20 "to ascertain if the votes can be deduced". CJI expressed concern about "horse-trading which is taking place". And under the circumstances, only the BJP was in a position for horse-trading.

But Anil Masih, who had taken his own time to turn up at the appointed hour, had this to say, "Besides putting the signs, I put certain marks on eight ballot papers. On ballot papers which were defaced", to which the CJI said, "We'll see the ballot papers tomorrow...Mr. Masih be here tomorrow also." Solicitor General Tushar Mehta sought more time, "day after tomorrow", but CJI Chandrachud stuck firm with "tomorrow afternoon", which doesn't give the Bharatiya Janata Party much breathing space. Meanwhile, of the other players that led to the court drama, Chandigarh BJP leader Manoj Sonkar's short reign as Chandigarh mayor will be forgotten after Sonkar paved the way forward with his resignation on Sunday. The case involved ballot tampering by Presiding Officer Anil Masih.

Sonkar won the contest for Mayor by defeating the Aam Aadmi Party's Kuldeep Kumar on January 30. Sonkar secured 16 votes and Kuldeep 12. Kuldeep was joint candidate of Congress and AAP. Eight votes were declared invalid by Masih, who was charged with tampering with the ballots while appearing to be casting a suspicious eye on people in his close vicinity.

It was anticipated that on February 19, the Supreme Court would come down hard

on Masih and by extension, the Bharatiya Janata Party, whose candidate Sonkar benefited from the blatant rigging in plain sight. However, the hours dragged as Masih was not to be seen, perhaps because Delhi's borders remained hostage to the protesting farmers.

That said, Sunday saw not just Sonkar's resignation, three AAP councillors also quit AAP and joined the Bharatiya Janata Party, a replay of what is happening non-stop at the national level. Dumping parties they were in for donkey's years and then joining the BJP as if there was no other refuge for scoundrels has become the practice in the decade since the BJP came to power in 2014.

AAP councillors Poonam Devi, Neha Musawat and Gurcharan Kala turned the tables on AAP-Congress by joining the BJP, perhaps the "horse-trading" that CJI Chandrachud was referring to in his observations. With the three AAP councillors, the BJP tally of councillors went up from 14 in the 35-member Chandigarh Municipal Corporation to 17.

The BJP also has the support of a Shiromani Akali Dal councillor. Also BJP's Chandigarh Member of Parliament Kirron Kher can vote as an "ex-officio member" which takes the BJP tally to 19 and outright victory if another mayoral election is held, which must be the reason why the CJI wants a fresh recount. The AAP now has 10 councillors and the Congress seven.

The earlier election results were declared on January 30 and Congress and AAP had accused the BJP of tampering with ballot papers with the connivance of Returning Officer Anil Masih, who was "caught tampering" red-handed. The charge was rubbished by the BJP, but Monday Masih proved there was "defacing" when he accused the other side of "tampering and defacing".

Monday, Masih panicked and indicted not only himself, but also put the BJP on the mat. The BJP also stands indicted along with Masih. The alleged defacing took only one glance for confirmation. The Supreme Court had labelled it "a mockery of democracy". The ballots and the video of the electoral proceedings are proof of the crime. "Is this the behaviour of a returning officer? He looks at the camera, and defaces the ballot obviously," CJI DY Chandrachud had said then. On February 20, Masih will face the firing squad. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

West Bengal women traumatised by TMC honchos; Shame on Mamata

Editor, In the calm villages of Sandeshkhali, West Bengal, a terrifying narrative is emerging. It's indeed harrowing tales of numerous women enduring consistent sexual exploitation and abuse by a TMC leader, his aides and party members.

What is shocking is that the ruling TMC government, instead of standing up for the hapless victims, has been shielding the criminals. Many claim that government machinery, including the police, has devised devious plans to spread misinformation or "suppress" the truth. It is unthinkable that the very institutions meant to protect the citizens have become instruments of their oppression.

One victim, in a deep sense of agony, recounts her nightmare -- "TMC members brought me into the party office, where a group of people were drinking. For the next one and half days, two of them sexually tortured me in the party office itself. I

was told that my husband would not 'take me back' after this and so I should stay on with the men in the room -- that they would give me a government job eventually. They said they would place my husband's severed head on my palms if I complained about what they had done to me"; (as reported by THE WIRE with inputs by a journalist Joydeep Sarkar).

Another woman says that any woman found beautiful by TMC leaders and members would be called to the party office on the pretext of a meeting of the Self-Help Group, and leaders would take turns to rape her. This fact has been going on for at least 2 years. There are also several cases of forceful land grabbing by the TMC leader and his aides in the villages Sandeshkhali. These are just a few examples -- the tip of the iceberg!

Can we imagine how scared and frustrated people in the area must be? Another shocker is that some of the victims who were sexually abused were "abandoned" by their husbands and families. Can we genuinely empathize with their plight and anguish now? Practically, as reported by national media, those vic-

tims who wish to seek police help are being silenced, and also are intimidated. Moreover, police beat houses do not entertain FIRs against the TMC members. The hope for justice for victimized women is a far cry.

In the face of mounting evidence and public fear and outcry, the National Commission for Women laments, "Our inquiry committee found that the victims in West Bengal are being threatened by local police, deterring them from coming out and reporting instances of sexual and physical harassment. Victims also recounted instances of physical and sexual violence perpetrated by both police officers and members of the TMC."

Following the distressing development in Sandeshkhali, a Supreme Court lawyer Alakh Alok Shrivastava took a decisive step on February 15 last. He filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Supreme Court, requesting a thorough investigation into the horrific incidents that have shaken the region. Given the recent deliberate attack by TMC supporters on the officials of the Enforcement Directorate, and the main accused being TMC

leader Shahjahan Sheikh, Shrivastava has insisted on fair investigation, either by the Special Investigation Team or the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).

One disillusioned police officer who is a relative of my very close friend from Kolkata informed me under condition of anonymity over the phone that police power in most of the districts in West Bengal has been curtailed and they are unable to take action against certain nefarious elements if they are associated with TMC. These same facts have recently been reiterated by the Governor of West Bengal. Upon hearing the stories of the victimized women and their relatives in Sandeshkhali, the governor C. V. Ananda Bose became deeply emotional and burst in anger, "What I saw was ghastly, shocking, shattering to my senses. I saw something which I should never have seen; I heard many things that I should never have heard. I cannot believe this could happen in Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore's land."

One wonders what sense people make of the increasing heinous criminality in West Bengal. It is totally un-

pardonable and barbaric that the leaders who solicit votes with lofty promises later exploit vulnerable women for their carnal pleasure and the Chief Minister immediately looks for ways to defend the criminals. How could we claim that we live in the most civilized age of 21st century? Here I sincerely hope that my friend from Kolkata, Sujit De, who prolifically writes on the menace of poverty, gender discrimination, mis-governance, and decline of democracy, would not shy away from speaking out against sadistic atrocities inflicted upon women in his home state. Perhaps he is now thinking where to start from! Yes, if we cannot shed tears for women in grief, we waste our life in vain.

Incidentally, what do our TMC leaders in Meghalaya have to say about the increasing brutality, sadism, and barbarism of TMC leaders/members in West Bengal? Is Didi's outright deviation from the commitment of good governance still a pull factor? It certainly calls for a serious soul-searching. How we wish that our state's leaders would follow the "leader of integrity" who believes in humanity and selfless ser-

vice. For every "misstep" by a leader, the state will invariably have to pay the price.

Yours etc.,
Salil Grewal
Via email

Technical Woes & Communication Lapses afflict PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana

Editor, The much-touted PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana, aimed at providing free electricity to households, is now under scrutiny as numerous citizens report persistent issues during the registration process. Many individuals, including this concerned citizen, have experienced a recurring error message that reads, "Error in uploading file, try later," raising concerns about the authenticity and functionality of the registration platform.

Despite repeated attempts by users throughout the day, the registration portal appears to be plagued by technical glitches, preventing citizens from successfully enrolling in the scheme. The

error message has left many frustrated and skeptical about the legitimacy of the initiative.

Several affected individuals, who reached out to the customer support helpline, claim to have received little to no assistance in resolving the issue. In addition to the technical hurdles faced by citizens attempting to register for the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana, the lack of transparency and communication from the government has intensified concerns among the affected individuals. As users grapple with the persistent error, the absence of clear information regarding the nature of the problem or any estimated resolution timeline has fuelled frustration and deepened skepticism.

The government's failure to provide timely updates or address the issues raised by concerned citizens has led to a sense of abandonment among those attempting to enrol in the initiative. This apparent disregard for the grievances expressed through customer support channels has further eroded public confidence in the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana.

Moreover, the silence from government officials

on the ongoing registration problems has given rise to speculation and conspiracy theories among the affected individuals. Rumours circulating on social media platforms only serve to amplify the uncertainty, contributing to a climate of distrust around the entire program.

As citizens continue to grapple with the registration challenges, it is imperative for the government to not only address the technical glitches promptly but also to communicate openly and transparently with the public. Timely updates, clarification on the nature of the issues, and a commitment to resolving them will go a long way in restoring faith in the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana and ensuring that it fulfils its intended purpose of providing free electricity to households. This lack of responsiveness has only added to the growing suspicion that the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana and many more other schemes, might be a possible fraud; a poorly executed government program or an election propaganda of the BJP.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

"The best cure for the body is a quiet mind."

—Napoleon Bonaparte

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVI No. 190 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2024

Outrageous assault on women

SANDESHKHALI in West Bengal is symbolic of the ills plaguing the present-day society in several states. A set of women from poor background, or tribals, have come to the fore with complaints that the ruling Trinamool Congress leaders of the area are harassing them, raping them, and grabbing their land. The police, they say, were of no help and were rather helping the Trinamool gangs perpetrate such cruel acts on them. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's silence for days and her accusation that the opposition BJP was behind such upheavals are condemnable; more so after the Calcutta High Court took cognizance of the matter and allowed opposition leaders to visit the affected areas.

Allegations from the TMC side are that the BJP is trying to turn this into tribals versus minorities confrontation, by citing the fact that the main "villain" of these condemnable acts is TMC leader and zilla parishad member Sheikh Shahjahan, a Muslim. Clearly, the nearly two-week-long protests by women have embarrassed Chief Minister Banerjee and raised questions about her claim to being a champion of women – a claim that helped rally women across various sections in West Bengal behind her in successive elections. In fact, the main vote bank for Banerjee comprised women and the Muslims apart from a cross-section of the population that is anathema to the Leftists. The chief minister's claim that no one has come forward to file an FIR so far in respect of the complaints is ludicrous, considering that it is difficult if not impossible for an impoverished village woman to do so. Besides, the police too are complicit with the perpetrators of the heinous acts. But finally they collectively rose as one and did a public chest-beating about the ordeal they were allegedly put through by the ruling party gangsters.

That some of these accused men hold elected posts is a sad commentary on the way the 'representation' system in our democracy has been hijacked by muscle-flexing, anti-socials with major backing from established political parties. Such reprehensible acts might be happening not just in West Bengal but other states too, where the police are at the beck and call of the ruling party politicians. With considerable grit and determination, the women of Sandeshkhali have come forward to seek a halt to the reign of terror. It's up to the chief minister to act in an impartial manner and book the guilty. If false accusations were levelled at the instigation of the BJP, those who did it and those who were behind it should be brought to book. Filing a suo motu FIR by itself would not exonerate the authorities from the charges of complicity in the acts of rape, land-grab and more on hapless people.

This writer had taken a halt from the pen. It was intentional. When on vacation mode it is difficult to document one's observations in black and white. Now having 'resettled' here are the reflections.

Publishing work all the same

For almost a year this writer, along with his collaborators, set their sights on bringing out a book in the Garo Language. Much time was set aside for writing, compiling, translating, editing and other related tasks. The anthology, "Rongtalga Joseph-Uni Janggi Tangani aru Gunrang" (Saint Joseph-His Life and Virtues) was finally released on January 18 in Satgaon, West Karbi Anglong. Published by Sagan Parish Literature Society (SPLS), the work is an accomplishment in a sense that it has been published from a lesser known location. In fact the latest is SPLS's third publication following a booklet each in 2021 and 2022. Secondly, the society has been able to declare that Saint Joseph earned his livelihood and supported his family through his skill as a carpenter. For youngsters who seek employment and need skills, this crucial aspect has been emphasized in a vernacular language. Of course, there's a lot that Saint Joseph can teach our world.

Challenges in Border areas

One of the privileges of this sabbatical were visits to villages in the Meghalaya-Assam border situated in the Bhoi-Jaintia-Karbi Anglong sector. The condition is pathetic. Naming the villages is immaterial. Readers from both states may contend that the villages are not disputed territories. We therefore focus on the backwardness and the sufferings of the people. Roads are 'motorable' only in winter. A church official informed that for him to visit a village he has to hire a four-wheel drive vehicle at Rs 4000 per trip. This means that people struggle to transport their agricultural produce to markets. No wonder they sell their crops like ginger and broom sticks at throwaway prices.

Government Lower Primary School teachers are hardly seen in the villages. Parents and students blame the teachers for being irregular. Teachers blame the parents and students for the same fault and for their indifferent attitude to education. The blame game rages on

but children are the victims. Even if children 'pass' Class V in the village for them to proceed to middle and high school in another distant location is a challenge. So, most kids drop out of school before they are literate. When boys and girls don't go to school the natural thing is to marry early. Hence in the border areas early marriages and teenage pregnancies are rampant. Using leaves as plates and bamboo as cups and tumblers is not a criterion for backwardness but the other parameters like illiteracy, absence of road connectivity, poverty are the parameters for backwardness in the 'interstate' villages. To drive a point home these villages are at least 40 years behind Nongpoh or Jowai or Khliehriat.

Neglect of uranium villages

This time too, I visited the 'uranium villages'. The condition is similar to the border zones. They are a neglected lot. The villages include Domiasiat, Mawthabab, Nongbah Jynrin (nearest to the abandoned mining sites), Nongtinger, Nongmalang. The road from Wakhaji to Mawthabab, that passes these villages or are close to them, which was constructed by Uranium Corporation of India Limited (UCIL) in the 1990s remains incomplete. Only boulders and gravel were laid along the road. Blacktopping was discontinued as the uranium exploration had to shut shop owing to hostile protests. Now the boulders and gravel have jettied out all along. It is a nightmare to drive on loose boulders especially while coming up from Mawthabab. The less than 30 km stretch takes almost two hours.

The people of these villages have no hope that the Meghalaya Government will improve the road any time soon. Based on the response they received from government sources they say the road was made by UCIL and not the PWD. But why is the Government neglecting the uranium villages? Are they not part of the state? Should UCIL return to make the road for them? Should they get a good road only if UCIL is around? The residents are also quick to point out that the politicians and pressure groups that banished the UCIL are nowhere to be seen when people are suffering. An anti-uranium and

outspoken scientist had even cancelled his project of building and running a school in Domiasiat village. Domiasiat today is approachable only by pickup trucks. Our team was almost thrown down the valley at a point when our vehicle just rolled backward on pebbles.

The lesser Nongstoin -Wakhaji Road

The Nongstoin-Wakhaji road is in progress. However, the two-lane road has been converted to an intermediate one. Now people have to be satisfied with a lesser road. But it is unfathomable as to why the two-lane road is denied to the people of Langrin? Just because of the presence of uranium? Is having uranium deposits a crime? Why does the Government punish the people residing in uranium rich vicinities? In the same districts, the Nongstoin-Rambrai-Kyrshai road is a two-lane road. So also the road to Ranikor, Maheshkola and beyond! Then why not the Nongstoin-Wakhaji Road? The excuse is uranium. It is ridiculous and a blatant discrimination.

A couple of other deceptions are that to this day Ranikor and Langrin are still unconnected by road. There is no bridge over the Rilang river. Ranikor and Langrin are in the same MLA constituency. If the people of Phlangdiloin, for example, want to go to Ranikor by road, they have to traverse a 100 plus km distance instead of a 30 km drive if there had been a bridge over the Rilang river. The road from Shillong to the South West Khasi Hills capital, Mawkyrwat is still in bad shape. Some work is going on but it is not top class. A credible person makes a startling revelation. Local MLAs do not want to hand over the project to companies. They and their proxies have in fact got the contracts for the road. For the record, only Mawkyrwat, Baghmara and Resubelpara are the districts headquarters, out of 12, not graced by a two-lane road.

'U kwai', cigarettes and liquor's heavy tolls

At a social gathering a person narrated his remarkable story. Earlier he was a non-stop 'kwai' consumer and a chain smoker. During the lockdown he took it as an opportunity to give up the habit. He succeeded quite easily. Taking out a double folded mobile phone from his pocket (I have never seen

a phone like that) he said, "In one and half years, from the money I saved from 'kwai' and cigarettes I bought this phone for Rs. 1.5 lakhs." Those present were awestruck but he continued, "The real benefit is health. I don't have headaches and body ache anymore. I think clearer now."

This chance encounter was pleasing as this writer also had the privilege to speak in a two-day seminar on the adverse impacts of 'U kwai', cigarettes and liquor. On a rough calculation if a person spends Rs. 25 per day on 'kwai' after 20 years the total is Rs 1,82,500. If a person also spends the same amount on cigarettes in 20 years the expense on 'kwai' and cigarettes is Rs 3,65,000. If a person also spends the same amount per day on drinks the accumulation is Rs. 5,47,500 in 20 years. If we double the time to 40 years the amount spent is Rs. 10,95,000 on kwai, cigarettes and liquor. An estimate can be arrived at if both husband and wife eat kwai and consume tobacco. Calculations can also be made if 3, 4 or 5 members in a family are kwai consumers and tobacco users. Add the amount spent on drinks where applicable. Make further calculations on treatment of tobacco and liquor related ailments. The sum would be astronomical. Yet we say we are poor!

'NPP is BJP'

Voters in Mawkyrwat were already aware of the Mawkyrwat MDC, Carnes Sohshang's shift to the NPP. But for his supporters the turncoat would have been a 'book' candidate in the last MLA elections. Now that the former Congressman has shifted base, people say he did so because he would not get a Congress ticket again. In 2023 he had the golden chance of winning but emerged a loser from the jaws of victory. Be that as it may, for many a voter of Mawkyrwat constituency and the whole of West and South West Khasi Hills 'NPP is BJP.' The MP election utterances so far are childish. From Amparen Lyngdoh's 'Meinah Panah (step parents) don't vote for me,' to the KHADC Chief's, 'VPP's West Bengal connection allegations to the shouts, 'the NPP is a Garo party,' 'we don't want a Garo book,' 'the UDP is a Khasi party' and 'the Congress is a foreign party,' we have it all. No wonder real challenges are never addressed. Meghalaya is the country's third poorest state while our politicians are ultra-rich.

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Just Plain Coffee Thoughts..!

Was wondering whether to write on politics or plain humour, when I found something staring at me, weird like, and realized it was my jug of coffee: Now I am one who likes my jug of coffee in the morning, and when I say jug I mean jug not mug, and life's good and pleasant what? I tell you it's good and pleasant till you go visiting them folks who read too much into research.

"What would you like in the morning Bob?"

"Coffee!" I say, surprised like, thinking what else can one have early morning but the good ole cup that cheers, "And lots of it," I say all enthusiastic like, "Lots of coffee, maybe if you have a jug..." And then I look at stone faces staring back.

"What?" I ask, "No jug?"

"No coffee!"

"You run out of coffee?" I ask pleasant like.

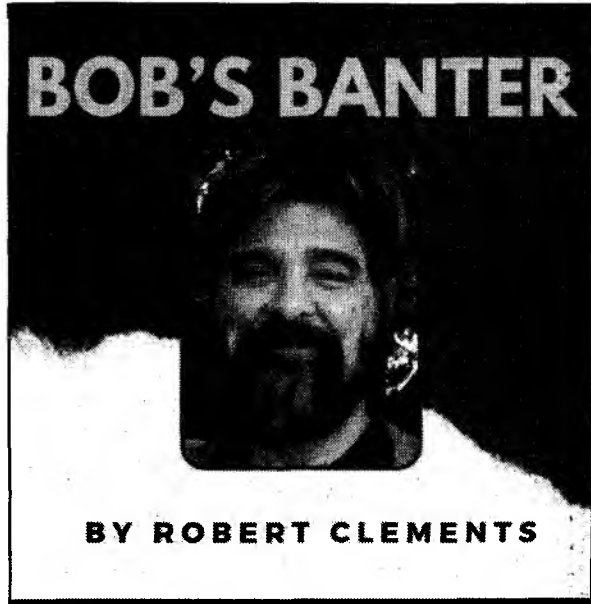
"Coffee isn't good for health, see what it says in the paper!"

And they go into the bedroom while I curse the paper and the editor and all those

coffee mugs were kept, but a packet of coffee powder stared back at me, or was it chilly powder? But they don't keep chilly powder on shelves, do they in America? Let it be, I told myself, not ready to solve the coffee and chilly powder problem right now, and opened the drawer below and nearly had forks and spoons and all the rest of the cutlery fall on my toes. I quickly closed the drawer on those murderous weapons and looked into the shelves on top.

I remember my thoughts and what followed: Where's my coffee mug?

Well it's not mine. Nothing is mine here, it's not my home. My home is ten thousand miles away or somewhere near ten thousand, where my green coffee mug hangs neatly in its place, washed and wiped and wedged in its familiar setting with nobody else going to move it from there. Nobody would dare, I tell myself then look again for a coffee mug in my daughter's home in New York, and suddenly the unfamiliar mocks me, "Who asked you to leave home and health?" ask the shelves and



research fellows who instead of doing some good research on cancer and diabetes and all them diseases that kill people, spoil the lives of us healthy, happy guys by saying, "Hey chaps we haven't found a cure for cancer!"

"Yeah, we haven't found any for diabetes!"

"So what do we tell the world?"

"Tell them coffee is bad!"

Ye gads, don't those research fellows behind them microscopes have any other work than finishing off us good people who are not harming them?

"Okay," I say as they come back with the paper, "I'll settle for a coke!"

"It's bad for your teeth!"

"It's okay!" I say, all growling inside, "My teeth have served me well, they can't get worse!"

"No coke, you can't go home with bad teeth!"

"You read it in the papers right?" I ask wearily.

"No, it came on the internet yesterday!"

I pack my bags and they look at me, sad like, "Why are you leaving Bob? Are you unhappy here?"

"No," I say pleasant like though I'm screaming inside, "I'm going back to where the newspapers don't stop me enjoying the good things in life, like me coffee, tea and coke!"

And here I'm back sitting with my jug of coffee and dreaming of my eleven o'clock tea and afternoon coke I down between my lunch, till the wife she comes up with the newspaper, "Bob did you see..."

"No," I shout snatching the paper and throwing it away, "No, no, and no!"

"Bob," she says patiently, "did you see they're finding a cure for cancer!"

"Ah!" I whisper sheepish like, "Now that those research chaps have got back to work, they'll leave me coffee, tea and coke alone!"

And as I settle down to have the cuppa I missed at that other place, I remember another coffee episode, God knows, why it's all about coffee today, but here goes:

It was two months ago in America, I opened the top drawer where I'm sure my daughter had said the

murderous forks and spoons, "Learn to stay where you belong!"

"Dad, what are you looking for?" asks my daughter, obviously awakened by the purposeful noise of the cutlery, betraying my furtive movements, "Nothing!" I say.

"Are you looking for a mug?"

"A mug?" I ask, "Not, a mug, but my coffee mug, the red one!"

"I think hubby's using it!" says my daughter, "Take the cup!"

I take the cup, and measure only half of what I normally drink. When did I ever drink coffee in a teacup, I wonder.

"You should have stayed at home!" say all of the kitchen gleefully.

And I think of Columbus, and Magellan and Drake and all the explorers who left the comforts of home and hearth, searching the next morning, not just for coffee mug, but for coffee! They left the familiar, and because they did, the world benefitted, they did too, with untold wealth and name, but first they had to leave their coffee mugs.

I look at the teacup as my son-in-law enters, "Dad! Use this, it keeps the coffee warm for hours!"

I take the new mug which is also a flask from him, it's better than the green mug at home, and as I taste the coffee, I realize that yes indeed the coffee stays hot. I look at the kitchen cutlery, and with a friendly voice tell them, "You got to leave the familiar before you discover something better," and suddenly they grin and nod.

Somewhere at home, I know my green mug frowns at me for taking this bold step into the unfamiliar, but my hot coffee grins back at me!

Ah well sometimes you need to leave the familiar in your writing, of politics and other such stuff, and venture into them simple worlds of coffee, cups and coke, and find a simple message there for you, right?

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

Letters to the Editor

VPP — Where is the party heading?

Editor,

The ongoing Assembly session and issues of the recent past, have now warranted to try and question the trajectory of the Voice of the People's Party (VPP), an entity I once admired for its commitment to the well-being of our indigenous populace. However, developments in the status-quo signal a distressing pivot towards a radicalism that the party itself has vociferously criticized in others. The VPP, initially celebrated for its grassroots approach and genuine concern for local communities, seems to have veered into the contentious arena of language and cultural politics now, thus embracing the very radical brand of politics it once opposed.

This shift was starkly evident in the party's unwarranted criticism of the Governor. The Governor's attempt to engage with the local community by speaking the local language this time, despite needing a translator, should have been lauded as an inclusive gesture. Yet, the VPP's dissatisfaction with this effort exposes a troubling insistence on linguistic purity that serves no one's interests.

Further amplifying this concern is the recent behaviour of a VPP legislator who, after years of communicating in English, has abruptly switched to speaking in Khasi in the ongoing Assembly session. This sudden shift, seemingly aimed at garner-

ing sentimental support from the public, raises questions about the new direction of the party's commitments. It prompts us to wonder about the language of discourse the leaders would choose when representing our people outside the state, where unity and diversity must be balanced delicately.

The VPP's radical focus, which is a political playbook to deploy majoritarianism and has been tried and tested by many political parties across the country, carries a threat to polarise society, exacerbating tensions rather than fostering unity. By concentrating on divisive issues such as state job reservations—arguably a misdirected effort given the non-achievement of any result—the party neglects critical areas of public concern. Issues like employment, education, health, clean drinking water, traffic congestion, and livelihood seem to have fallen by the wayside, ignored in favour of a contentious political agenda.

What is perhaps most disheartening is the behaviour of VPP supporters in public forums now. Constructive criticism and dialogue, once the bedrock of democratic engagement, are now met with outright hostility and denigration even to the point where people engage in providing feedback for the party. This aggressive stance against dissent not only undermines the democratic process but also alienates those who wish to contribute positively to our political discourse and also wish to see the VPP grow.

As an admirer of the VPP's

original values, I find this evolution deeply troubling. The phrase, 'There can be no peace without war,' might hold historical truth, but the VPP's current brand of politics seems to misinterpret this as a call to 'Disrupt peace to start a war.' It is a path that promises only division and discord, steering us away from the inclusive, prosperous future we all yearn for.

I urge the VPP to reconsider its approach, to refocus on the substantive issues that it initially stood for and which directly impact the lives of our people, and to foster an environment where constructive criticism is welcomed and debated, not dismissed or attacked. Only through such a course correction can the party achieve greater heights and truly serve the interests of the people it claims to represent.

Yours etc.,
Patrick Kurbah,
Via email

Wrong notion on uniform introduction

Editor,

In the past weeks we have seen people from all walks of life talking about the uniform implementation of St Anthony's college. However, they must think twice before publicly stating such opinions without delving deeper into the main points of the matter. Students are not against the uniform per se. This must be noted. However, some seem to opine that students hate the idea of uniform as they are so engrossed with "fashion." This is a very

wrong concept.

Students simply state that introducing the uniform in an institution is a process that involves students, teachers and parents. It must always start at the beginning of an academic year, stated clearly in the prospectus so students who seek admissions in said institutions are aware of it. However, students who are already admitted in St Anthony's College had no prior information about having to wear uniform at the time of admissions. For final year students who have a little more than a year left in college, it is absurd as they did not agree to any such agreement during admissions. Some have classes straight after work where they'd have to change clothes. These students were not aware that there would be such a drastic ultimatum on them mid academic year creating problems in their everyday life. So dear readers and authorities of St Anthony's, kindly think before making any value judgment.

Students do not mind the introduction of uniforms if it is introduced in a proper manner from the very start of the academic year (1st semester itself). However, introducing it to students of 2nd,3rd,4th etc semesters just simply does not make sense. With this said, as some students have already purchased the uniform my simple opinion is - make it optional because completely changing it again would create more chaos to the already existing one.

No one is against uniform implementation, as we know many institutions already have them. However, these institutions did not create a

bombard ultimatum creating chaos on already admitted students who began their college life without uniforms. It must be a clearly stated policy and must begin from the very start of one's college life not mid academic year. This will also ensure that students choose their institutions that would suit their walks of life and life preferences. Starting from the very first semester also makes it easier for students as they would now have to wear the uniform for 4 years unlike the students who would only wear it for a year.

In conclusion, I urge everyone who reads this to kindly change your notion. Students are not against the implementation of uniforms; they are only against the MID YEAR implementation.

Yours etc.,
Students of St Anthony's College,
Via email

Axe falls on electoral bonds

Editor,

The Supreme Court verdict scrapping an opaque, election funding system has set off powerful tremors in the country's politics and the most important reason the verdict is significant is because it reaffirms the SC's own capacity to push back, disagree and enforce checks and balances in the democratic order. The order comes at a time when even much-respected jurists such as Fali Nariman have said that India's judiciary has typically

been weak when governments have been strong.

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

School timings problematic

Editor,

With regards to the Government of Meghalaya, Education Department Notification dated January 29, 2024, my personal observation as a concerned parent is the school timing which notified that all schools should start at 9 AM for the Lower, Upper Primary, Secondary and Higher Secondary Schools. If all the schools and all the children from Lower, Upper, Secondary and Higher Secondary section are to reach school at the same time, there will be a traffic chaos keeping in mind the traffic congestion in Shillong. Moreover, when work on the package 1 of the Shillong-Dawki Road project from Riblong to Upper Shillong is ongoing, the cumulative impact of traffic congestion will be felt everywhere in Shillong city. Secondly, the school calendar for this academic year where the end date for Class I to XII is December 20, 2024 is worrying due to the climatic conditions in this region. The conditions here are different from the rest of India be it the geographical climate conditions, the infrastructure, developments, mode of transportation etc.

The above is a personal observation and can be taken as a suggestion for the benefit of the public at large.

Yours etc.,
S.Lyngdoh
Via email

“When expectations are too high, sometimes the disappointment is out of proportion.”
— Deco

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 191 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2024

Of (un) smart cities/towns

CHIEF Minister Conrad Sangma revealed in the State Assembly recently that an amount of Rs 418 crore was sanctioned for Tura and Jowai smart town projects. In the first place the word ‘smart’ needs to be clearly defined. Shillong Smart City Project has been in the pipeline for a while now but the smartness either by way of road or internet connectivity is neither visible nor palpable. If ‘smart’ means pot-holed roads that VIPs hardly feel the jolt of because they ride SUVs, then yes Shillong is smart because the number of SUVs (smart cars) are on the rise, courtesy the growing elite, including politicians and businesspersons residing in this city. Football grounds and stadia are supposed to be part of critical infrastructure and not part of the smart city package. Shillong has had a stadium, sports complex and a convention centre at a time when it was ‘unsmart.’ Now that it has gained the status of ‘smart’ it still does not have a state of the art, swish sports complex or anything that stands out to suggest that it has graduated to being ‘smart.’ The traffic jam is one indicator of how ‘unsmart’ Shillong is and will be for a long time to come. Even New Shillong which had the possibility of being better planned and of having wider roads is already largely built up with buildings jutting on to the road – typical Shillong style.

So, Tura has already used up a whopping Rs 338.152 crore for the football stadium and the other notable PA Sangma integrated sports complex which sportspersons who attended the State Games recently didn’t have much to speak about. If everything is to be measured by money spent then it would appear that Tura is now a smart town. But do the residents experience that smartness? What’s the use of a beautified city if water supply, power and public transportation have not improved?

Interestingly, the MLA who raised the question on smart cities/towns did not really desire to seek an account of whether the projects were successfully executed. Rather he was keen that a similar project be implemented in his district headquarter. This is the bane of politics in Meghalaya. Legislators don’t really seek to hold the government to account. They only want a slice of the pie in their constituencies. Such legislators cannot see beyond their constituencies. They are not state level leaders and have no ambition or vision for the state. No wonder in its 52nd year Meghalaya is a poor shadow of what it should have been had it been guided by visionaries and statesmen.

When elections are marked by emotional appeals and voters are led by excitable songs then Meghalaya will continue to get street-smart politicians that excel in bombastic and pompous speech-making.

“Revive, Respect, Remember”
(Celebrating the Monoliths-Cultural Treasures)

By Bymonmiralda B. Lato

A historical and cultural study of monoliths identify that the gardens of monoliths at Nartiang and Nangbah village are evidence that monoliths hold immense value to the Khasis and Jaintias. Pertinently, the residents of Meghalaya are preparing for yet another festival. But how is the Monolith festival different from the rest and why should people celebrate the Monoliths? The aim of this article is to revive the momentousness of the monoliths to the ethnic group of the region. Monoliths have their base in the culture and traditions of the people. Unfortunately, the numbers of Monoliths across the state have dwindled. Therefore, this article will not only create an awareness about the Monoliths but resuscitate the cultural implications of other elements that have been sidelined over the years.

“If we are to preserve culture, we must continue to create it.” It seems Johan Huizinga was in conversation with the Meghalayans when he insisted on that. Monoliths; echoes from the 16th century Meghalaya—reverberating today, will be celebrated in the month of March this year. Mawphlang and its Heritage Village will again be decked with the merriment and joy, after a hiatus of seven years for the ‘Monolith Festival.’ Yet in the laughter and revelry, let us not forget what these standing monoliths symbolise.

Monoliths are not endemic to Meghalaya. From the Khasis of North-East India to central India, Persia, the Crimea and along the north coast of Africa bordering the Mediterranean all have their own monoliths. But there is something unique about the monoliths of Meghalaya that set them apart from the rest of the world.

Three upright stones, each carved out of a single stone, called Maw Shynrang and a horizontally placed stone slab, Maw Kynthel, is what the monoliths traditionally consist of. The upright stones represent the son, the uncle, and the father—protectors of the family, clan, and community. Whereas, the nurturing woman, as a horizontally laid stone slab, rests within their protection. Notwithstanding the fact that the Khasis and Jaintias follow a matrilineal society, the ultimate authority and the responsibility of guidance lies on the men of the family.

Albeit doleful that most

of the traditional monoliths have been dismantled owing to both natural and unnatural causes, the recently erected monoliths are no longer carved out of a single stone, but cemented and moulded from clay and stones. Meanwhile, the traditional art of stone sculpting is surreptitiously dying. One could still catch sights of monoliths scattered all over the state but the traditional monolith clusters of Nartiang village and Nangbah village of West Jaintia Hill District are unparalleled. Misinterpretations of culture and religious faith has crescendoed into people en masse believing that installing Mawbyn-nas or Monoliths are exclusively for religious purposes. However, installing them intrinsically is not to the ethnic identity and culture of the Khasis and the Jaintias, irrespective of their religious faith. Correspondingly, the monoliths in Meghalaya fumes with a weight of tradition and old age practices that seeps out from each one of them.

To the ordinary eye, Monoliths might not reveal their intricate nuances. But to a Khasi or a Jaintia, the length and breadth, the number of stones set upright are crucial to identify the character of the monolith. For instance, Maw Shynrang are divided into two types—Mawbynna-Nam and Mawbynna-Niam. Therefore, if a set of Monolith has three vertical stones (Mawbynna-Niam), it is exclusively used for religious purposes. But, if more than three perpendicular stones are positioned in one set (Mawbynna-Nam) it stands for remembrance of a person or an achievement. Mawbynna-Nam, comparatively, are bigger than the Mawbynna-Niam. That is because they are set up solely for the purpose of perpetuating the legacy of a clan, or to signify a victory or a memorial. On that account, the size of the monolith is proportional to the love and honour of the concerned chieftain or clan. Thus, monoliths are not

mere arbitrarily picked out pieces of stones assembled for beautifying the vicinity. They carry certain emotional value and important relevance.

The weight of the large Monoliths, carried from far off places and installed in their present locations, was borne by our ancestors – a depiction of their strength. The carvings and the sculpturing that encapsulate modern artists—depiction of their skill. Yet, certain European scholars writing in the 19th century, overlooking the meticulously crafted and ceaselessly produced monuments and artifacts, branded them as savages and barbarians. These mind boggling handmade artifacts, that surreptitiously question the skill of modern technologies could surely not be the work of mere ‘savages’ and ‘barbarians’. These so-called savages led a life in harmony with nature. These ‘barbarians’ seeking to preserve their little feats, unintentionally yet successfully, made sure that their ancestry does not go down the drain. If not for the might of these ‘barbarians’, the region would have still been in the clutches of the European powers and they might still have looked at them as mere savages and barbarians.

The long trodden way of our ancestors that was once looked down upon for its eco-consciousness, is now looked up to by the modern environmentalists. From the utensils they eat to the baskets they carry, every aspect of the modern day ‘civilized’ man is an attempt to tread the path our ancestors paved. Substituting the plastic products with the ones made of bamboo and plantain leaves is a welcome step which also aids in reviving the indigenous culture. This would further assist in conserving the environment and promote healthy living. Pertinently, this year’s Monolith Festival will also feature various beautifully crafted handicrafts and handloom products along with various cultural performances ranging from folk dances, folk songs, music, crafts

exhibitions and scrumptious traditional cuisines at Mawphlang.

The reason for choosing Mawphlang for this festival is also quite interesting. This heritage village is known for the sacred groves, divine forests; pure and forbidden to be tainted with either words or actions. This forest appeals for a mutual respect between man and earth (Ka Mei Ramew). Therefore, it aids in protecting the various plants and animal species that are endemic to the region. Indirectly, the reverence shown by the locals towards these forests aim to preserve the rich cultural heritage of the indigenous population. Hence, the sacred groves not only provide but also protect—the identity, culture, beliefs, and integrity of the tribals. Undoubtedly, hosting a Monolith festival in this venue will not only expose the attendees to the belief system of the Khasis and the Jaintias but will also set a reminder to the community, to have a propensity for sustainability and sufficiency. The sacred grove is a reminder that we eat to live and not live to eat. Therefore, one should be on the qui vive for their actions in the name of civility and modernity. While endeavouring for development is certainly a boon, this path should be accompanied with caution towards safeguarding the cultural heritage. Else, the state might progress, but at what cost? Without culture and traditions, we are nothing but second copies of the white world.

The traditional monoliths have dwindled in numbers. The memory of what they stand for and what they mean for the Khasi culture and community seems to be waning. Monoliths are not mere objects of aesthetics. They are not there only for us to merely adorn our social media accounts. Just like how a cornerstone forms the base of the house, these monoliths also form the base of our roots that set forth our identity as a community. Therefore, this festival, even though a recent innovation, aims at preserving the rich cultural heritage of the Khasis of Meghalaya. In the process of celebrating this new culture, we might actually preserve the one that we already have.

(The writer is PhD Research Scholar CHRIST University, Bangalore Department of English and Cultural Studies)

Upholding Student Rights
The Legal and Ethical Case against implementing uniforms Mid-Semester

By Banmankhraw Lyngdoh

Of late there has been significant discourse surrounding the sudden proposal of implementing uniforms within St. Anthony’s College Shillong, midway through the academic semester, without the consultation or consent of the students and the parents. This article aims to articulate the legal and ethical imperatives against such a measure, grounded in established laws, policies, and principles safeguarding individual rights within educational institutions.

Legal Basis:
1. Constitutional Rights: The Constitution of India



guarantees individuals certain fundamental rights, including the right to freedom of expression and freedom of choice. Imposing uniforms without prior consent infringes upon these rights, as it restricts students’ ability to express themselves through their attire.

2. Education Laws: Educational laws often outline principles of student autonomy and participation in decision-making processes that affect their academic environment. Any unilateral decision to implement uniforms without student input contradicts these principles and may be subject to legal challenge.

3. Contractual Obligations: Most colleges have established contracts or agree-

nities comprising individuals from various cultural, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. Uniforms may not accommodate the diverse needs and preferences of the student body, potentially marginalizing certain groups and fostering a sense of exclusion.

3. Impact on Learning Environment: Abrupt changes in institutional policies can disrupt the learning environment, causing unnecessary stress and distraction among students. Moreover, conflicts arising from the imposition of uniforms can divert attention from academic pursuits,



undermining the college’s educational objectives.

Recommendations:
1. Consultation and Dialogue: The college administration should prioritize open communication and consultation with students before implementing significant policy changes such as uniforms. Engaging students in the decision-making process not only upholds their rights but also promotes a sense of ownership and accountability within the college community.

2. Respect for Student Rights: Upholding the principles of freedom of expression and individual autonomy is essential for maintaining a conducive and inclusive

“It is imperative for the college administration to review existing policies and procedures to ensure alignment with legal requirements and ethical standards. Regular engagement with stakeholders, including students, faculty, and legal experts, can facilitate the development of policies that promote fairness, equity, and respect for individual rights.”

ments outlining the rights and responsibilities of both students and the institution. Implementing uniforms mid-semester without student consent may breach these agreements, leading to potential legal liabilities for the college.

4. Legal Precedents: In many jurisdictions, sudden changes to policies or rules that significantly impact individuals’ rights or freedoms can be legally challenged. If there are no clear legal provisions allowing the college to impose such a policy without student consent, it could face legal repercussions.

5. Lack of Stakeholder Consultation: Implementing major policy changes without consulting the stakeholders involved, such as students, parents, faculty, and staff, can lead to resentment and opposition. Collaborative decision-making processes are generally more effective in creating policies that are acceptable to all parties.

Policies and Ethical Considerations:

1. Student Autonomy: The imposition of uniforms disregards the autonomy of students in expressing their individuality through their clothing choices. This autonomy is not only a fundamental aspect of personal freedom but also fosters a sense of responsibility and self-expression crucial for personal development.

learning environment. Any policy changes should be implemented in a manner that respects and safeguards these rights.

3. Review of Existing Policies: It is imperative for the college administration to review existing policies and procedures to ensure alignment with legal requirements and ethical standards. Regular engagement with stakeholders, including students, faculty, and legal experts, can facilitate the development of policies that promote fairness, equity, and respect for individual rights.

In conclusion, the proposal to implement uniforms in the middle of the semester without student consent raises significant legal and ethical concerns. Upholding student rights, fostering a culture of inclusivity, and maintaining a conducive learning environment should be paramount considerations for any policy changes within educational institutions. It is imperative for the college administration to engage in meaningful dialogue with students and stakeholders to address these concerns and uphold the principles of fairness, autonomy, and respect within the college community.

Hopefully, this esteemed newspaper and other media will address the above, so that the people will understand why the students of St. Anthony’s College are against the sudden implementation of uniform in the college.

Letters to the Editor

The different faces of our heroes

Editor,
Please correct me if I’m wrong but I do not recall of any official records available with photographs of Tirot Sing Syiem, Kiang Nangbah and of Phan Nonglait for that matter, yet there are several printed portraits of u Tirot Sing Syiem and u Kiang Nangbah in many publications all with different faces. Even the statues and busts of the above two heroes erected/ installed in many locations bear different faces. The recent installation of a statue of U Tirot Sing Syiem in Dhaka, Bangladesh has a completely different face. Is this not a disrespect to the valour, contributions and sacrifices made by them to the freedom struggle of our country? In our haste to show our respect to their invaluable contributions that inspire the present and I’m sure the future generations of our people as well, are we inadvertently insulting them by giving them different faces according to our whimsical imaginations. Without blaming anyone, for this faux pas, it is time we right this wrong before we become a laughing stock to the world at large.

Even while it’s important to erect monuments of our heroes, but rather than erecting one with an unknown and a make-believe face it

will be more important to remind and to remember their heroic deeds so that they may continue to inspire us to face the challenges that confront us now and even in the years to come.

Yours etc.,
Michael N. Syiem,
Via email

The Sandeshkhali horror

Editor,
First of all I would like to appreciate Salil Gwali for his write up (ST Feb 19, 2024) where he lamented the horrific episode of SAND-ESHKHALI, a story of barbarism by a TMC leader Shahjahan Shiekh and his affiliates. This is an untold tale of destruction and misuse of political power. Here I like to quote a few words from Gwali’s write up as, “Here I sincerely hope that my friend from Kolkata Sujit De, who prolifically writes on the menace of poverty, gender discrimination, mis-governance and decline of democracy, would not shy away from speaking out against sadistic atrocities inflicted upon women in his home state. Perhaps he is now thinking where to start from!” A true speculation and I am in agreement with Gwali. The virtue of democracy should not be endangered by such mischievous politicians. All the stories came out after ED officials

were beaten up when they went to arrest the local TMC leader Shahjahan Shiekh in connection with the Ration Scam. Sandeshkhali village in North 24 parganas district, Bengal which has now a tale of barbarism and a place of revolt is populated mostly by people from downtrodden families as their earnings are limited and their way of life very simple. Hence the mighty TMC goons took advantage of their helplessness. Villagers have alleged torture and human rights violation at the hands of Shahjahan and his affiliates had been perpetually outraging the modesty of women. The police department is totally demoralised as they are working hand in glove with the TMC. So it was possible for Shahjahan to hold the entire population to ransom and for them to keep mum over the barbarism and cruelty inflicted on them over the years as he and his affiliates are encouraged by the ruling dispensation. It’s praiseworthy to note that West Bengal Governor, CV Anand Bose warns that he will fight against the democratically elected state government to ensure justice for protesting women in Sandeshkhali.

The Lok Sabha elections are arriving and we all aware of the past election scenario of West Bengal which tell stories of barbarism with bloodshed, raping of women’s modesty, arson, ransacking public properties and what not. In such circumstances hopefully

this time the central government will gear up it’s forces to tackle such unfair means by TMC goons. The demography of West Bengal is under threat due to nefarious politics by TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee. Illegal immigrants - a strong vote bank of TMC is not only a threat for West Bengal but also a threat for the entire nation’s unity and integrity.

It’s true to say that fury of the tempest can wipe out everything when it’s in force so accordingly we can hope the women of Sandeshkhali will overcome all the trauma they faced by what was meted out to them by the goons of TMC with their (women) will power to fight for justice.

Yours etc.,
Biswajit Ghosh,
Shillong -2

SC ruling on forest conservation

Editor,
The Supreme Court issued an interim order on February 19, 2024 emphasizing that States and Union Territories must adhere to the definition of ‘Forest’ as established in the T.N. Godavaram Thirumalpad vrs Union of India judgement of 1996 during the hearing of a public interest litigation challenging the constitutionality of the Forest (Conservation) Act, which was amended by the Union government in 2023. The Godavaram Judgement

is a landmark environmental case in India commonly referred to as the “Godavaram Case”. Originating as a Public Interest Litigation filed by Mr. Godavaram a retired Forest Officer, it addressed concerns about forest degradation due to various developmental activities without proper environmental clearances.

Key points from Godavaram judgement

1. Defining Forest: The order defined a forest as any area recorded as forest in the government record irrespective of ownership. This definition is broad and encompasses any area recorded as forest in government records, regardless of its legal status or ownership.

2. Impact of the judgement: The case led to stricter interpretation and implementation of forest laws, focusing on conservation and protection. It clarified that the Central government’s authority under the Forest (Conservation) Act extends to all forests, irrespective of ownership, emphasising stringent regulation. The Court stressed the importance of sustainable development in forest conservation and protecting the rights of the forest dwellers and tribal communities.

In summary, the Supreme Court’s 1996 definition of ‘forest’ emphasizes the need for conservation, sustainable development, and protection of forested areas, regardless of their legal status or ownership.

The Supreme Court order of 19 February 2024 affects forest conservation in India by:

1. Reinstating the broader definition of forest: The Apex court directs States and Union Territories to act as per the definition of ‘forest’ laid down by the Supreme Court in 1996, which includes any area recorded as forests in government records irrespective of ownership. This means that more land will be legally protected as forest and subject to conservation measures.

2. Requiring prior permission for Zoo or Safari: The order also directs that the Supreme Court’s prior permission will be necessary for setting up any Zoo or Safari in a forest. This will prevent such activities from being organised inside forests without proper scrutiny and safeguards.

3. Seeking report on forest land identification: The order also directs States to file reports on forest land identified as per Supreme Court’s ruling in the T.N. Godavaram case by the end of March. This will ensure that the States comply with the court’s directions and provide accurate data on forest land.

Yours etc.,
V.K. Lyngdoh
Via email

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"Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity."

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Shillong Times

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Resurgence of opposition unity

WITH the Election Commission all set to release the schedule for the General Elections, the opposition parties are readying themselves for a collective show. Complete opposition unity is a far cry, but the fact that the AAP has announced seat-sharing plans with the Congress for Delhi and also some other states means much. Alongside, the Samajwadi Party of Uttar Pradesh has also sealed a deal with the Congress, which will be extended to Madhya Pradesh too. In other words, the base for opposition unity is strengthening – this, after a lull of a few months after the three conclaves of the INDIA block. Several opposition parties are convinced that they await doom if they stand apart and fight the polls. The BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi are, as of now, in an unassailable position. Between now and April, the mood of the nation may or may not change. All depends on how the Opposition takes the spirit of unity forward to fruition.

Telangana has shown that the Congress came from behind and grabbed power. The party remained dormant for several years after the 2014 bifurcation, followed by the 10-year-rule of the TRS- BRS that set itself on a self-destructive path. The Bharat Jodo Yatra of Rahul Gandhi came as the main prop for the Congress rank and file there to show it still had fire left in its belly. Youthful Revant Reddy harnessed the energy of the anti-BRS forces and won power for the Congress there. Similarly, the BJP was floored in its traditional bastion of Karnataka by a resurgent Congress in the last assembly polls. Word spread that the impossible is possible. But, the state polls in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh proved that the BJP continued to upstage the Congress. If Congress veteran Kamal Nath crosses over to the BJP in Madhya Pradesh and Sharad Pawar casts his lot with the saffron front as is being rumoured, how the ground realities there would change remains to be seen. Question is also whether these ageing leaders, or Nitish Kumar in Bihar, can still wield much influence over the electorate by virtue of a shift from one side to the other.

Claim of good governance in itself is no guarantee to the success of a political establishment, more so in the case of the BJP. The Atal Behari Vajpayee-led rule ended in a whimper in 2004 after big talks about "India Shining." The hoi polloi knew well that their life remained unchanged and they voted en-masse against the BJP and its allies in the Lok Sabha polls, helping the UPA to grab power with Manmohan Singh at its head. In other words, election results are unpredictable in the wider Indian context.

Assembly Session: Good Questions; Answers Blowing in the Wind

By Patricia Mukhim

In this Assembly session Opposition MLAs seem to have burnt the midnight oil and done their homework well. Historians are part and parcel of making their presence felt. Hence we had some MLAs speaking in Khasi as a slap dash retort to the Governor's speech in Hindi. Hindi really is not a foreign language and if the Governor is permitted to speak the language because he doesn't speak angrez then so be it. No big deal about that! Perhaps one might suggest to those who don't understand a world of Hindi to start watching Hindi soaps for at least 30 minutes a day. Nothing like these to equip us in the rashtrabhasha. But frankly, if MLAs are able to express their peoples' – not their personal angst better in the local lingo then they should be free to speak in Khasi, Jaintia, Garo but only after they have circulated their transcripts to a common intelligible language – English.

The Privileged Class – A Charmed Life

The State of Meghalaya (not the MDA-2 Government as we tend to believe) is today paying through its nose, a cabal of failed politicians, comprising some buccaneer businessmen with nebulous motives who are known to babble incoherently when asked even the simplest questions. And the Chief Minister is telling us that these people contribute some divine grass-roots wisdom in running the state? Mr Conrad Sangma, did they teach that sort of governance model at the Wharton School of Business? When you took over we all thought Meghalaya would climb the hurdles of economic and developmental laggardness that we were known for. But in the 6th year of your leadership are we any better today? Has Meghalaya not become a straggler in education? And for crying out loud – its people are today the third poorest in the country. Are these political appointees not adding to the economic burden of the state and using up money that could have been better deployed in improving peoples' economic statuses?

It is painful to see defeated MLAs owing their allegiance to the ruling party/parties enjoying a charmed life while their constituents can barely manage a square meal? Why else would for-

mer Congressmen with no chance of ever winning the next elections jump into the NPP truck? What an easy way of enjoying honorarium and perks which include free medical care not just for the person acting as "advisor" to the Chief Minister or heading one of those nearly derailed committees and commissions, but also for their family members. Who cares as to what they contribute to the state. Does anyone care to file an RTI to find out the outcomes of the investment made on each of these scam-mouchees that excel in cheap rhetoric? These are the types that are a maturing burden on the state.

Questions Left Unasked: Where does the tourist generated garbage go?

The people of Meghalaya who are out of the charmed circle of politics and business and of course the bureaucracy have many questions but don't know where and how to ask them. Rarely if ever do journalists go out of their way to listen to their tales of woe and give voice to their anxieties. So yes, Meghalaya is now a booming tourist destination. No quibble on that! The quarrel is on the waste generated and how it is disposed off. I have said this in the past and will repeat it ad nauseum. Beyond Greater Shillong there is no waste management system; no landfill; now way of disposing plastic waste other than allowing it to litter every conceivable space including water bodies, drains and the roadside.

For those who regularly use the Shillong -Umiam-Nongpoh road I have a question. Do we notice the fast food packages, plastic bottles, throw-away plates etc that litter both sides of the road especially before reaching the under-repair Umiam bridge. Who is littering the road if not the passengers who are waiting to cross the bridge? All those areas fall outside of the purview of Shillong Municipality and are under the watch of a helpless, rudderless, resourceless Dorbar Shnong. Where do we think this waste will finally land up? At Umiam Lake for sure. One must thank the Meghalaya High Court for responding to what could turn out to be an environmental crisis of distress-

ing proportions by addressing the issue of rampant constructions by the side of water bodies like the Umiam Lake and the many rivers that flow through Shillong city. We would have noticed that these questions never come up in the Assembly. Not now; not in the past! The question of garbage management also does not concern the large number of MLAs coming from East and West Jaintia Hills, East and West Khasi Hills, Garo Hills et al where there is no waste management system in place. What will happen to the waste in the long run? Are villagers all expected to burn their plastic and other wastes? At what cost to the environment? Does anyone care?

The High Court as an oversight body might like to take stock of the plethora of commercial buildings coming up by the side of the Wah Umkhrah; some owned by those in the government. If the buildings are allowed to proliferate then we will see the death of Wah Umkhrah (River Umkhrah).

Taking up cudgels for the contractor class:

It's interesting that a political party that claims to represent the least empowered among the 'jaidbyrniew' should instead be taking up cudgels on behalf of the contractor class. This is a speedily growing population. Every second person in every locality is a contractor. If you ask someone what he/she is doing, the immediate answer is, "I am doing my own work" (nga trei kam lajong). It's good that people are finding work in a hopelessly emerging unemployment scenario but the critical point is that this contractor class needs to be reminded of its responsibilities. Firstly, who is responsible for the badly constructed roads or structures? Is there a penalty for that?

It is common today to see roads that were repaired a month ago being dug up again to fit in the JJM pipes. So much for coordination between the PHED and PWD! And when the work of digging is done the contractors leave all the debris behind. Is it not part of the contractual agreement that contractors have to clean up the debris of sand, bricks, stones etc., after their work is com-

pleted? Should they leave the cleaning up to be done by the local residents? Will the VPP which has so kindly advocated the rights of the contractors also remind them of their responsibilities to clean up the mess they leave behind? Why should they clamour for payment of dues when their work is left unfinished? When MLAs take up a cause they should also do their homework on the legitimacy of the demands of those they advocate. Also, should public representatives take up the cause of the business class? Should they not be taking up instead the poor standard of work that these contractors produce? The VPP seems to have muddled up its agenda here!

Where is the data?

The problem with a democracy that relies heavily only on Opposition MLAs to take up every issue that afflicts the commoner is that we all crash-land once the assembly session is over. None of the MLAs have the appetite to continue to pursue the issues they raised in the Assembly. The citizenry in Meghalaya has not learnt to fight their own battles. There is too much dependence on politicians and too much politics in the rural areas particularly. We need civic action groups that are not your normal "seng bhalang," but committed to finding out statistics and data on real issues and acting on them. We can no longer be misled by NOISE.

Unfortunately Meghalaya is very poor in statistics. Perhaps not putting out data helps to buttress the false claims of the government about having achieved the unattainable. I searched high and low for data concerning visually impaired (blind) people and asked several otherwise well-informed citizens, including those working for the disabled in the state for the total number of visually impaired (blind) people in Meghalaya but could not get the number. The last time a headcount of visually impaired persons in Meghalaya was done was in 2001-02 where the number was 17,065. In 20 years the number must have gone up. But those numbers are elusive. So give us citizens the data so we can fight our battles with or without the MLAs.

UN Veto on Gaza Call for reforms

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

The United States vetoed the UN resolution calling for immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. Thirteen out of 15 UN Security Council members, both permanent and non-permanent, voted in favour, Britain abstained and the US voted against. But, since the five permanent members (P-5) have the veto powers, the United States vetoed the resolutions on humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza: October 18, December 8 in 2023 and now this year, February 20. After the veto, the demand for reform of UN organs has become shriller.

The United States is moving, at the time of writing, an alternative resolution calling for a temporary ceasefire linked to the release of hostages held by Hamas since 7 October 2023. On this dark day, Hamas launched a terrorist attack on Israel killing over 1200 people and taking 256 Israelis, including women and children, as hostages. What will happen to this resolution is a matter of time and speculation. Let us focus on the frustrations and desperations by the international community on the controversial veto process in the UN. Let us recall that the veto power has been exercised by all the five members on numerous occasions.

In the recent past, Russia has used the veto 12 times in favour of the Syrian government which is guilty of genocide of over 400,000 of its citizens since 2011. Russia even vetoed a resolution calling for ending the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime in the civil war. China has vetoed more than once resolutions on Islamic terrorists working against India, to declare them 'global terrorists'. Russia has been vetoing any resolution in favour of Ukraine with regard to the ongoing Ukraine war. China is also vetoing any resolution in favour of Muslim Rohingya as Beijing completely backs the military regime of Myanmar.

There is a contentious historical context of the veto power by P-5 members. The P-5 is now divided broadly into two groups – US, France, United Kingdom on the one hand and China and Russia on the other. However, all of them act like a club and the club will not change the rules which take away their privileges. So has been the case.

The question raised now by many countries is whether it is just, inclusive or equitable to let five countries impose their will on the rest 188 member-countries of the world. In fact, in the context of the veto, it is one country out of five imposing its will on the rest. Is this a fair, prudent and practical way to run international politics? Admittedly, the UN Security Council has acted in unity in some cases, like military actions against the dictatorial regime of Col. Gaddafi in Libya and sanctions against Iran etc. But in many cases like the ones cited, the one of the P-5 has been able to monopolise the peace process, in fact in most cases, derailing it.

Let us remember that the UN was created after the Second World War in order to prevent succeeding generations 'from the scourge of war'. The alternative strategy UN adapted to war consists of diplomacy, mediation and peace initiatives. But because of the unequal composition of the UN organs, mainly the UN Security Council, the principal objective of the United Nations has been defeated; hence the call for reforms of its structure.

India, as the biggest democracy and the most populous country in the world is leading the campaign on UN Security Council reform. The principle New Delhi puts forth is 'equity in global decision making'. This will redress the historical injustices committed in the Global South; "cen-

turies of injustices". India's Permanent Representative at the United Nations Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj made a powerful case at the Inter-governmental Negotiations on Security Council Reform on 16 February.

She forcefully put it, "I think we might all broadly agree that the historical injustices perpetrated against the Global South can no longer be ignored. It is time to rectify these disparities by ensuring greater representation for regions like Asia, Latin America and Africa on the Security Council through reform in both permanent and non-permanent categories of membership".

Furthermore, she elaborated, "Equity demands that every nation, irrespective of its size or power be afforded an equal opportunity to shape global decision-making." She added that equity entails that the voices of the marginalised and the oppressed be elevated to the world stage. Including the members of the Global South into the table will lead to more inclusive decision-making. Also, an inclusive Council will foster a broader consensus and legitimacy of its decisions.

Let it be noted that India is not only demanding the expansion of both permanent and non-permanent categories of membership of the UNSC, New Delhi is also asking for restructuring the decision-making process in the Council, which includes abolition of the veto power. Unless done so, mere expansion of the membership will not solve the problem; on the contrary, it will lead to perpetuation of existing inequities.

There is some wind of reforms blowing from the P-5 countries as well. One hears the talk of embracing the concept of 'voluntary restraint'. Prof. Jenifer Trahan discusses this concept in her book 'Existing Legal Limits to Security Council Veto Power in the Face of Atrocity Crimes, Chapter 3 focuses on 'Initiatives to Voluntarily Restrain Veto Use as to the Face of Atrocity Crimes'. There are six initiatives discussed in the chapter.

She addresses a legal issue here, i.e., whether P-5 countries can legally use the veto in the face of atrocity crimes – which has serious implications on conflicts, and on the lives of all those affected by the conflict. Crucially, she establishes the linkage between the exercise of the veto power and 'continuing death tolls on the ground', like it is happening now in Gaza, Ukraine and other ongoing conflicts.

Heeding the arguments and advice of Prof. Trahan, the world must do its utmost to ensure that UN charter's voting provisions (veto) are never used that facilitates or enables the perpetration of genocide, war crimes or crimes against humanity.

The second much-talked about reform is the expanding the membership. The United States, UK and France are apparently open to expansion whereas China and Russia oppose it. The most potential candidates for permanent membership of the UNSC are India, Brazil, Japan and Germany which somewhat operate as G-4. This should happen sooner than later.

To sum up, the United Nations has not been effective in countering conflicts, preventing wars and restraining belligerence by many countries. But, without doubt, the United Nations has done commendable and critical developmental as well as humanitarian work. As we scan the multiple development arms of the United Nations, their works across the globe deserve admiration of the international community. So, one is not writing the obituary of the UN. On the contrary, if the UN did not exist, we had to invent it. More power to United Nations as it resets its structures and functions. –INFA

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

Letters to the Editor

Hynniew Trep, the ancestors of the Khasis

Editor,

With due respect to the article by Rangbah Bhogtoram Mawroh (Peace between Khasis and Karbi: A legacy of the past) published in this paper on February 20, 2024, I would like to say that the Hynniew Trep are not sub-groups. In Niam Khasi, the Hynniew Trep are the Seven Huts or Seven Families who out of the KhatHynriew Trep or Sixteen Huts in Heaven had decided to stay on Mother Earth and came down through Ka Jingkieng Ksar (The Golden Bridge) connecting Heaven and U Lum Sohpetbneng (The Mount Sohpetbneng). The remaining Khyndai Trep or Nine Huts decided to stay in Heaven. Then the Hynniew Trep lived on the Lum Sohpetbneng and in places around the Lum Sohpetbneng. They progenated their descendants, and the descendants migrated to different regions on earth in the present-day Khasi-Jaintia Hills Ri Khasi Ka Bri U Hynniew Trep.

The Hynniew Trep and their descendants did not have a script to keep records of their religious beliefs, religious practices and culture. They did not have a scripture that explains their religion and culture. Their beliefs, and explanations on religious practices and culture were passed down from generation to genera-

tion in oral stories and oral narratives.

However, we the believers in Niam Khasi believe that the Hynniew Trep are our, "Ki Thawlang Ki law-bei," i.e., our ancestors and we are, "Ki Khun U Hynniew Trep/Ki Khun Ki Hynniew Trep", i.e., we are the descendants of the Hynniew Trep. With regards to the Karbi who became Khasi, my late father once told a story, when I and my brothers and sisters were young, that some group of Karbis adopted the culture of the Hynniew Trep. The children (descendants) that were born from the marriage/cohabitation of Ki Khun U (Ki) Hynniew Trep and the Karbi who became Khasi, my late father once told a story, when I and my brothers and sisters were young, that some group of Karbis adopted the culture of the Hynniew Trep. The children (descendants) that were born from the marriage/cohabitation of Ki Khun U (Ki) Hynniew Trep and the Karbi who became Khasi, my late father once told a story, when I and my brothers and sisters were young, that some group of Karbis adopted the culture of the Hynniew Trep. 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"When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful."

— Malala Yousafzai

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Lokayukta Issue Orphaned

THE Meghalaya Assembly is a strange place. What is expected is Opposition unity when an MLA takes up an issue that is in the larger public good. But expecting political camaraderie even from colleagues in the same party appears like a distant dream here. A striking example is that of the VPP MLA from Mawkhra who sought to move an important resolution which is to strengthen the Lokayukta which was created to check corruption in governance. The Lokayukta is a body headed by an official appointed by the government after due consultations with the Chief Justice of the State High Court and the leader of the Opposition to represent the interests of the public. It is an anti-corruption authority or ombudsman. The Lokayukta Act, 2013 provides for the establishment of Lokayukta for States to inquire into allegations of corruption against public functionaries and related matters. The functions of the Lokayukta as an institution include investigating any action taken by a public servant if it is referred to by the State Government. It is tasked with speedy redressal of public grievances. However public complaints are not taken up if there is any alternate remedy. The Lokayukta has an investigating and prosecution wing. Considering that the Lokayukta is intended to look into malfeasance committed by public servants, it has to be completely free and independent. However, there is a dichotomy here since serving officials are appointed to the investigation and prosecution wing. Can it be expected that the investigation be fair and free when complaints are against a senior official of the government?

The objective of the Lokayukta is an alternate and effective system to improve the standard of public administration in the country because the existing systems to handle these issues, such as courts, departmental authorities, and other avenues, were considered insufficient to deal with issues of corruption and other malpractices by public servants. The Lokayukta has the authority to oversee and direct matters referred to it for an initial inquiry. It has the power to investigate, the powers of search and seizure; in some circumstances, civil court power; the ability to employ the services of state government employees; to formally seize assets; and, in some situations, the power to seize revenues, receipts, and benefits obtained through corruption. The Lokayukta is empowered to recommend a public servant's transfer or suspension in connection with corruption allegations. It can give instructions to prevent the destruction of records during preliminary investigation.

Considering that the Lokayukta of Meghalaya had after due investigations come out with chargesheets against functionaries of the Garo Hills District Council for acts of corruption, it would have been judicious to proceed with necessary action but the Government stepped in and dismissed the officials it had earlier appointed in the Investigation and Prosecution Wings. Isn't this a blatant attempt to cover up corruption? Of what use then is the Lokayukta if its powers are curtailed and diluted? And why did the VPP MLAs who were vociferous against the sacking of the two retired police officials earlier on, now not supporting their fellow VPP MLA? Something is amiss here.

A brief history of the portrait of Tirot Sing Syiem

By Raphael Warjri

There was a time when the authorities initiated the application for a commemorative stamp of Tirot Sing Syiem in the Postal Department of the Union Government. It may be stated without doubt that the portrait picture of Tirot Sing Syiem is definitely required and there was no source to derive any authentic picture of the freedom fighter. There were attempts to acquire a proper image of the freedom fighter and the two most preferred local artists emerged at that time, Bashai Rai Dohling and Marius Main Sing Shanpu. Bashai Rai Dohling was an animation artist of the Directorate of Films Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India at Bombay, while Mainsing Shanpu was an artist in the Directorate of Information and Public Relations, Government of Meghalaya. While both of them were preparing a portrait of Tirot Sing Syiem, I was told that Bashai Rai Dohling was engaged in a certain vital assignment at the Films Division and, under compulsion, entrusted the assignment to his junior artist at Bombay. In the absence of a proper image and the urgency of the matter, there was a deviation from the local essence of depiction, because the junior artist was from mainland India.

Fortunately, at the time this writer was engaged as an apprentice of Bah Main Sing Shanpu from 1980 onwards. Hence I had witnessed an imaginary portrait of Tirot Sing Syiem painted by my mentor, Marius Main Sing Shanpu. Although I was a novice at that point in time, from the little that I know about history, I decided to question my mentor saying, "Tirot Sing Syiem died a young man, but in the portrait he appears like an old man." I suggested that it needed to be rectified. However, due to the urgency of the matter, Bah Main Sing was compelled to submit it as it was and the portrait selected for publication of the stamp, which came into the public domain and the rest is history. I was not content and took it upon myself to argue about the authenticity of Tirot Sing Syiem's features. It so happened that, I was simultaneously pursuing arts and was also an ardent amateur photographer. Hence, I learnt that photography was invented in 1839 and that it was also nascent in Europe, but Tirot Sing died in 1835, while Khasi territory was situated in the remotest part of the country without an iota of any exposure to the new vista.

Further, it was also assumed that the British authorities would not have bothered to assign any pictorial sketch

or illustration of Tirot Sing Syiem, a Khasi chieftain, who was a subjugated political prisoner till his demise on July 17, 1835. In the quest for an authentic picture of Tirot Sing Syiem, I was driven towards the media during the 1990s and met renowned personalities: Skendrowell Syiemlieh, a folk music legend, and Kitdor Syiem, a prominent politician and Minister. In the course of my discussion with Skendrowell Syiemlieh, he introduced me to the reigning Syiem Phrestar Syiemlieh, who still is the sitting Syiem of Hima Nongkhaw. We have made a proposal to make a historical documentary film on the Khasi freedom struggle against British colonial rule, where Tirot Sing Syiem was a pivotal figure. However, it didn't work in spite of commitments from Dorbar Hima Nongkhaw and Kitdor Syiem.

Meanwhile, Dr David R Syiemlieh discovered the actual date of the demise of Tirot Sing Syiem in 1888 and I subsequently, pursued him regarding the actual facial features of Tirot Sing Syiem, but to no avail and even the records on the disposal of his mortal remains was not available till date.

Thereafter, we had a discussion with one of the myntri of Hima Nongkhaw. Boldness Lyn-g-doh Nong-um, a former minister and educationist. The memorial heritage monument was proposed at Mairang with a detailed artistic plan and estimated expenditure to be presented to the Dorbar Hima Nongkhaw. In this regard, we conducted a site inspection and the architectural and aesthetic presentation to the Syiem and the Dorbar Hima. Everything was going well until the local MLA, Metbah Lyngdoh, the then Speaker of the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly intervened. Unfortunately, the project was instead awarded to a contractor who made a frivolous structural construction, incorporated with a ready-made and improper statue of Tirot Sing Syiem at Mairang.

After the completion of the commemorative arch gate and relief sculpture mural at State Central Library commissioned by the Government of Meghalaya, Mr F R Kharkongor, Commissioner and Secretary, Arts and Culture, sought a proposal for the sculpture

project of the three freedom fighters of the State as desired by the then Minister, Sanbor Shullai. The same was presented, approved and executed with meticulous research and artistic representation of the freedom fighters. Although there were time constraints to comply with the ongoing celebration of Azaadi Ki Amrit Mahotsav, the larger-than-life statues were completed as desired by the authorities.

It is pertinent to elaborate on the method of research and actual execution of the sculptural project of the freedom fighters of the State. With regards to Tirot Sing Syiem, as mentioned, there were earlier inputs from Bah Skendrowell Syiemlieh, Kitdor Syiem and the present Syiem Phrestar Syiemlieh, including further findings from the family lineage of Raja Kine Sing Syiem and Kedro Manik Syiem. Therefore, a fictional image was innovated from the features of the royal clan justified by biological, and genetic heredity for the closest identity. Moreover, careful attention to the royal attire of a chief and warrior, including the physical structure, was properly investigated and depicted in the sculpture. Some of the significant features are a decorative tur-

ban Khor' in Khasi, intricate designs on the upper garment or Jymphong Syiem and on the lower wrap-over garment or 'Boh Khaial', an ornamental coral and golden pendant, or 'Paila Ksiar' worn across the shoulder to the waist and not like a necklace, a wrist band as protective gear for archers, a sword, shield, bow, quiver with arrows in the Khasi traditional design and more importantly bare-handed and bare footed.

An artistic portraiture of the Khasi essence of freedom struggle is presented as a warrior in action for the defence of the citizens and the homeland. The eyes are focused on the target and the body language is well-composed, gentle with confidence and stability, including a firm grip of the sword and the shield. This is contrary to the conventional depiction of the offensive and aggressive posture of a tribal

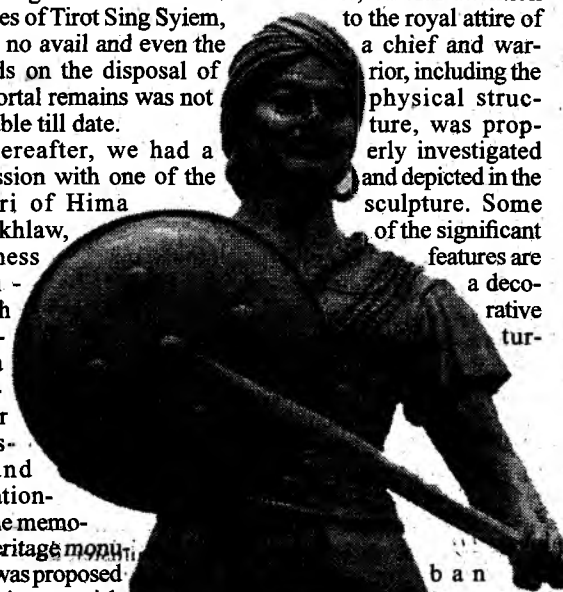
militant fighting with wrath and vengeance or the posed and stiff image of a concealed monarch and soldier.

In a similar manner, the process was also conducted for Kiang Nangbah and it was discovered that the descendants of Kiang Nangbah wandered and fled away from Jowai under the intimidation of the British colonial rulers. There was no trace of the Nangbah clan at the ancestral home of Kiang Nangbah at Wah Nangbah, Tpeppale since then and, ultimately, there were oral narratives about the Nangbah families from Jaraif and Lamin villages. While pursuing the matter, there was hardly any knowledge at Jaraif, except for the family members of a prominent citizen of Shillong, Barnabas Nangbah, who hails from Lamin village. Hence, a feature study was conducted on the family members of Barnabas Nangbah and the portrait of Kiang Nangbah was constructed and the sculpture was carved, while the rest of the attire was investigated and incorporated accordingly.

As regards Pa Togan Nengminza Sangma, there is hardly any knowledge, except for a few inputs from a young artist, Arak Sangma and Ms. Sahana Marak, a Garo cultural exponent and former senior officer of the Arts and Culture Department. One relevant insight into the portrayal of the physical structure of the local freedom fighters is to avoid any exaggerated depiction of the six-packed muscles of modern bodybuilders. Therefore, the physical structure of local freedom fighters is constructed in the manner of an actual encounter with nature in the ambience of domestic activities, agricultural and jungle experience of the related period.

Regarding the statue of Tirot Sing Syiem, the past inputs were taken into consideration, and consultations are ongoing with every resourceful person, particularly an academic authority on Tirot Sing Syiem, Dr David R Syiemlieh, and care has been taken to maintain the same features in all the statues that have been sculpted at State Central Library, the bust statue initially meant for Dhaka, the waist length statue at Raj Bhavan, Shillong and, finally, the waist-length statue at Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre, Indian High Commission, Dhanumudi, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Therefore, the earlier depiction by different artists under various circumstances, which was random imagination and did not comply with acceptable norms should come under judicious scrutiny by the concerned authorities.

(Raphael Warjri is an artist, film makers and media person)



Congress-AAP alliance in Delhi another milestone in opposition politics

India BLOC emerging stronger on eye of Lok Sabha election

By Dr. Gyan Pathak

Within 24 hours after the Congress-SP alliance became a reality in Uttar Pradesh on February 21, the INDIA bloc achieved another milestone in opposition politics on February 22, becoming stronger to take on the ruling BJP led by PM Narendra Modi. The Congress-AAP alliance for Delhi, Haryana, Chandigarh, Goa, and Gujarat has considerably boosted the morale of the opposition and its political prospect in the forthcoming Lok Sabha election scheduled to be held in April-May 2024, much to the discomfort of the RSS-BJP clan.

Congress-AAP alliance is a major step forward, in the background of both the parties going solo in Punjab, which was projected by the RSS-BJP clan as an evidence of INDIA bloc falling apart, after announcement of TMC in West Bengal to contest all the seats alone without any alliance with Congress. Earlier, JD(U) in Bihar had deserted the INDIA bloc to join hands with BJP, while several leaders have also deserted the Congress and several others have been reported to likely join the BJP. The impact of all these was a sagging morale of the Opposition, which has just reversed this week, much to the chagrin of the RSS-BJP clan. Congress-TMC seat-sharing talks have been reported back on track again, which means only Bihar has witnessed a little loss to INDIA bloc so far due to Nitish Kumar's final desertion and joining hands with BJP.

PM Narendra Modi has much to worry for such seat-sharing arrangements because it is potentially damaging to his prospects of returning to power for the third consecutive term despite undue hype of his easily winning 2024 Lok Sabha election. However, he knows how only a few months ago BJP had lost a Vidhan Sabha bye-election in Uttar Pradesh, the BJP's political fort, only because Congress and SP contested in cooperation with each other. Even recently in the Chandigarh mayoral election Congress-AAP alliance ultimately won. BJP had rigged the mayoral election and declared BJP candidate winner, but Supreme Court of India finally declared INDIA bloc's candidate the winner. These show that seat-sharing deals among INDIA bloc allies are potential hurdles in the way back to power for BJP and PM Narendra Modi, despite their dependence on corporate-Hindutva nexus.

There are seven Lok Sabha seats in the National Capital Territory Delhi. All of these were won by BJP in the Lok Sabha election 2019, when the Congress and AAP had contested separately. BJP's vote share was 56.9 percent while INC's 22.6 and AAP's 18.2 per cent. There was a pro-BJP wave created after the Pulwama attack, due to which the party benefited by a 10.46 per cent swing in its favour. On the eve of Lok Sabha election 2024, there is no such strong wave.

The 2020 Delhi Vidhan Sabha election results show that BJP's vote share suffered a considerable decline to 38.51 per cent, while AAP's vote share surged to 53.52 per cent. INC's share of votes was only 4.26 per cent. Municipal election 2022 in Delhi showed BJP's vote share almost stagnant at 39.09 per cent, while AAP's vote share was 42.05 per cent, and INC's 11.68 per cent. If seen in this backdrop, it goes without saying that BJP's support base in Delhi has considerably declined, and the Congress-AAP alliance can upset the BJP's political juggernaut in Delhi. AAP will be contesting on 4, and Congress on 3 seats in Delhi.

In the Union Territory Chandigarh, under Congress-AAP alliance, the mayoral seat has already gone to AAP. Now, as per the latest deal,

Congress is to contest the lone Lok Sabha seat there. BJP had won this seat in 2014 and 2019, but its share of votes declined from 42.20 per cent to 35.75 per cent. Vote share of Congress increased from 26.84 per cent to 28.48 per cent. Though AAP's share of votes went down from 23.97 per cent in 2014 to merely 2.13 per cent in 2019, the latest Municipal Corporation election 2021 result shows that AAP's vote share was 27.08 per cent. BJP's vote share in CMC election was 29.30 per cent while INC's share was 29.79 per cent. It is clear that Congress-AAP seat sharing deal has hazarded the BJP's possibility of retaining the Chandigarh Lok Sabha seat.

Haryana has become one of the most politically sensitive states in the region on account of the ongoing farmers' agitation. There are 10 Lok Sabha seats in the state and all of them were won by BJP in 2019. Farmers are now angry with the BJP government in the state that is using force against agitating farmers. BJP had bagged 58.02 per cent of votes as against 28.42 per cent of the Congress, however in the Vidhan Sabha election held after only a few months, BJP's vote share declined to 36.49 per cent, while Congress' vote share remained almost stagnant at 28.08 per cent. BJP was able to form a government in alliance with Dushyant Chautala's JJP which bagged 14.8 per cent of votes. During the last five years, farmers have been uneasy with both BJP and JJP, while AAP has slowly become stronger. Congress-AAP alliance in this backdrop, may do considerable damage to BJP's possibility of retaining its seats in Haryana. AAP is expected to contest one seat and Congress 9 out of 10 in the state.

There is no deal in Punjab among Congress and AAP, but it does not make BJP's prospect in the state better, barring Gurdaspur, which is influenced by the political situation in Himachal Pradesh. This time, even Gurdaspur seat has become difficult for BJP, due to adverse political wind blowing against PM Modi's farm policies. There are 13 Lok Sabha seats in Punjab.

As per the Congress-AAP seat-sharing deal in Goa, both the parties are likely to contest one each. There are only two seats in Goa. In 2019, BJP and Congress had won one seat each with vote share of 51.19 and 42.92 per cent respectively. AAP's vote share was 3.01 per cent. The political situation had changed considerably by the 2022 Vidhan Sabha election when BJP's vote share declined to 32.5 percent while INC's vote share also declined to 28.4 per cent. AAP's vote share increased to 6.7 per cent. Congress-AAP alliance has put BJP in a difficult political situation.

In Gujarat Congress would be contesting 24 and AAP will be contesting on 2 seats. BJP had won all 26 seats in Lok Sabha election 2019. However, in the 2022 Vidhan Sabha election AAP had won 5 seats with a statewide vote share of 12.92 per cent. INC's vote share was 27.28 per cent. BJP had bagged 52.50 per cent of votes, and in many of the seats it had less than 50 per cent of votes. Congress and AAP's coming together is thus set to impact the electoral outcomes in the forthcoming Lok Sabha election.

Moreover, there are 18 states where AAP has registered its presence and increased its influence in the last five years. Congress-AAP understanding may have a positive impact on INDIA bloc's electoral prospects, offering a tough task before PM Narendra Modi and BJP in protecting their political citadels. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

If you have a dog give it love and care

Editor,

Since the start of last year, there has been an increase in the dog population—not just domesticated dogs but wild street dogs. I say this because, especially in the Laitumkhrah area, as far as I know, there has been a very strange increase in dog population.

Most of these dogs have had homes before because I have seen them with their owners, and their sizes are like nothing I have ever seen before in a local dog. Therefore, it means that they have had a family before. Most dogs are abandoned here in Nongrimmah Block C because it's a very big area and we have a forest nearby, but I have noticed these dogs, these so-called "wild street dogs," are not the ones creating a problem for the residents of Laitumkhrah because for years we've learned to live alongside them; they don't do us any harm. It's the dogs who have

been tied up the whole day—the dogs who have been mistreated or just left alone by their owners or trainers—who have been running around terrorizing other dogs and humans that are dangerous. There's a pack of 10 dogs who usually come to Nongrimmah and create a problem, and as of last year, on November 4, a dog in our locality passed away after he was bitten and almost torn apart by these dogs.

We responsible dog owners of Laitumkhrah have our hands tied; we can't let our dogs out in the morning because of human disturbances, and we cannot let our dogs out in the afternoons, evenings, or nights due to the dogs who are running amok and terrorizing other dogs. The reason is because these dogs are let out without supervision; they're being treated as if they were nothing due to the increase of illegal and legal dog breeders in Shillong. This is a huge problem because no matter what people say about dog breeding, it's still a very dirty business.

Imagine us humans being treated like that, caged up

with a horny man, forced to have babies over and over again, not being able to nurse them or even take them out or see them grow, not being able to cry or show any emotions, being starved or not well kept, or just being sad with no rest, no health and continuously having babies. I know on the covers it says clean, no dirty work, kept well, and all, but I have seen how these dogs are kept, and yet people insist on buying pedigree dogs, which, may I add, do not even belong to our climate, our altitude, or our ways of life.

I have had friends ask me for puppies, and when I find one who needs a home, they say, 'Oh no silly, we don't want that. We want a German Shepherd, a Husky, or a St. Bernard.' And then I ask them, "Why? You say you love dogs, so why not a local Khasi hunting dog?" They say, "Oh well, we want to keep it on the terrace, verandah, or just for fun. They look cute, that's why, and my neighbours, friends, or even family have one, so I want one."

No one seems to care about the dogs who get

tossed out onto the streets. How can you all call yourselves animal lovers when you're not doing anything about it? Shillong Happy Tails is always looking for donations, volunteers, foster homes, etc. So why not help them instead of buying dogs who do not belong here? They suffer because of our pride, jealousy, and first-hand wealth.

Dog breeders have no heart at all. I have people in my kur (clan) who do this business. I have seen how it works, and I'm even ashamed to call them my kur.

As an alternative since I cannot change people and their greed, if you have or want a new dog and don't want your old dog, are tired of getting medicines, he's gotten too big or too much to handle, or you're tired of picking up poop, please do the correct thing and put him down. Let him rest in peace and dignity, and give him a burial instead of throwing him in the river, forest, or drain. You don't need to starve them or let them roam around free because dogs have emotions; they do have anger, and they do remember

and feel. They will become resentful and hatred will build, and they will react with not just dogs but with humans as well.

And for those who do love their dogs, please supervise them and be near them because we can't release our dogs since your dogs are roaming free. Please consider vaccination, spaying, and sterilization; it keeps your dogs healthy and alert and helps the population. The Rangbah Dongs, Seng Kynthei, Seng Samla, the entire dorbar, and even the municipality and animal husbandry department should have a spaying and sterilization drive; a count of dogs and animals; dog breeders, licensed dog walkers, and trainers.

NGOs like Shillong Happy Tails should get proper funding and proper places to put their rescues. I conclude by saying if you really are an animal lover, then don't support dog breeders. Adopt, don't shop for dogs, help, and donate instead of just taking pictures for the likes, shares, and comments. God gave us dogs, or any animal for that matter, not to treat them

cruelly but to take care of them, to be their guardians, and they will take care of you in return.

There is no harm in having a pedigree dog, but don't trade the ones who belong here in Shillong for dogs who don't belong here. If you want a pedigree dog, choose one that is suitable and that can adapt to our climate and altitude. Even my family and I scold our dogs, or even use a stick, but then we feel guilty and start giving them biscuits or food and saying sorry, and they learn from it.

The Hawaiians call pet owners "Kahu," which means guardians, protectors, beloveds, and many more, and I think it's beautiful because God intended it to be that way, so don't just act saintly and loving and God-fearing and animal-loving. Do better.

Yours etc.,
Shailin H. Lyngdoh.
Shillong-3

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

The dwindling saga of animal, bird migration



In 1875, trillions of Rocky Mountain locusts gathered and began migrating across the western United States in search of food. The enormous swarm covered an area larger than California. Three decades later, these grasshoppers were extinct.

This fate is all too common for migratory species. Their journeys can make them especially vulnerable to hunting or fishing. They may move between countries, meaning protecting the species in one jurisdiction isn't enough. And it's hard for us to even know if they're in trouble.

Today, we get a global glimpse of how migratory species are faring, in the first-ever stocktake produced by the United Nations Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species. The report shows falling populations in close to half (44%) the 1,189 species tracked by the convention. The problem is much worse underwater – 90% of migratory fish species are threatened with extinction.

Their decline is not inevi-

table. After all, the migratory humpback whale was headed for rapid extinction – until we stopped whaling.

WHY ARE MIGRATORY SPECIES AT HIGHER RISK?

Every year, birds weighing about 300 grams leave Siberia and fly non-stop to Australia. Some bar-tailed godwits fly 13,000 km without stopping – one of the longest known continuous migrations.

Their journeys are critical for their life cycles – to find food, mates or a better climate. To undertake these journeys, animals must be in good condition with plenty of fat stores, and they must have safe flyways, swimways and pathways.

On land, roads and fences carve up migratory routes for animals like wildebeest. At sea, fishing trawlers chase migrating schools of fish and often accidentally collect sea turtles, albatrosses and whales. On seashores, development or land reclamation take away vital resting points for migrating

shorebirds.

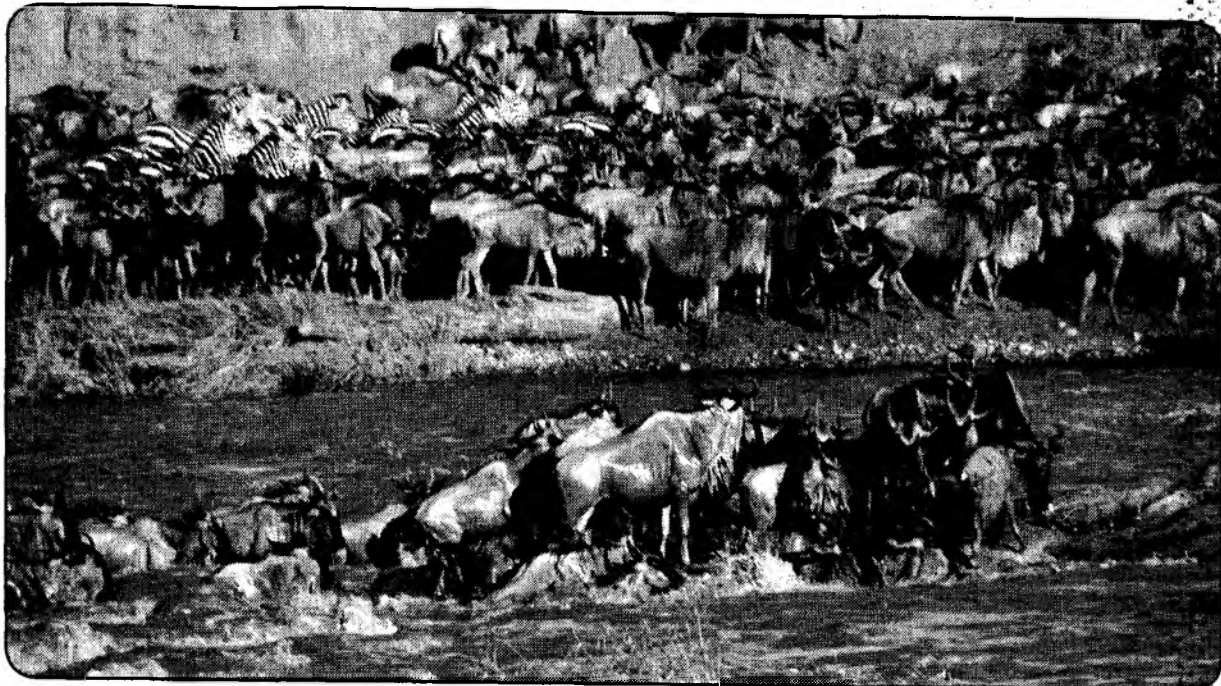
What the report shows us is that migration between countries is getting harder and harder. While a few species are benefiting greatly from farming and artificial wetlands, many more are being severely harmed.

OVEREXPLOITATION IS THE TOP RISK

Human exploitation of migratory species – taken as food, bycatch or exterminated as “pest” species – is the main reason why these species are in decline.

Animals often migrate in large groups, making them an appealing target for hunting or fishing. This is why we no longer have species such as the passenger pigeon, once numbering in their billions but hunted to extinction in 100 years.

Marine species are often out of sight, out of mind. But this report is a huge red flag for ocean ecosystems. Oceanic shark and ray populations have fallen 71% since 1970, which coincides with an 18 fold increase in fishing pressure. By-



catch in commercial fisheries is a huge problem for sharks, turtles, mammals and birds, but it can be massively reduced with existing technology, if deployed across all fleets.

Overexploitation can be stopped. In 1981, Australia and Japan agreed to stop hunting Latham's Snipe, a migratory shorebird that travels between the two countries. It's the same story for humpback whales, which have returned in large numbers – and created a new industry, whale-watching.

ON FENCES AND STEPPING STONES

Direct killing of migratory animals isn't the only threat. Clearing forests and grassland for farming destroys habitat. Light pollution can mess with navigation, climate change plays havoc with the timing of migration, and underwater noise pollution can confuse marine migrants. Even simple actions like building fences, roads and dams can disrupt migrations over land and through rivers.

Many migratory species need stepping stones: resting sites linking up their whole migratory route. If just one site is lost – or if animals are intensely hunted there – the whole chain can collapse.

Once identified, key areas

have to be protected, which is where we often get stuck. But there are glimmers of hope. Last year conservation of these areas in the ocean got a boost when the world's nations agreed to better protect the high seas beyond national jurisdictions, which fills a planet-sized gap in biodiversity governance.

WHAT THE REPORT DIDN'T COVER

This is a groundbreaking report, but it has limitations. First, it only covers species listed under the UN convention, a tiny fraction of all migratory species. Listing unlocks stronger protections and urgently needs to be rolled out to more species.

For instance, around 60 migratory fish species are covered – but more than 1,700 others are not. Of these unprotected species, almost 25% are threatened, near threatened or there's not enough data to know.

That's to say nothing of insects. To date, only one insect is listed on the convention, the famous Monarch butterfly which migrates from the United States to Mexico.

But millions of tonnes of insects migrate through the airspace each year, and we have largely no idea what they are, where they're going or how they're faring.

CAN WE SAVE THESE SPECIES?

We now know much more about why migratory species are in decline. But we're still not acting to protect them adequately.

More than 90% of the world's migratory birds aren't adequately protected by national parks and other protected areas. Only 8% of the world's protected land is joined up, preventing migrating animals from moving safely across their routes. Because of this, animals have to make daring sorties across unprotected land or sea to complete their journeys.

So what can be done?

Agreements between countries can create more action, but in practice, each country needs to actually do what it has already promised. Policymakers can turn to a bevy of new tools, including Important Bird & Biodiversity Areas and the Migratory Connectivity in the Ocean system, to provide easy access to knowledge on how migratory species use and move through the world.

Animal migrations have collapsed on our watch. We need to do all we can to stem the losses and begin recovery if we want future generations to be able to experience nature in all its glory. (The Conversation)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, FEBRUARY 25, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Venus square Jupiter on your solar return chart indicates a mixed year. There can be some intensity in your love or social life this year, as you want to grow and develop in these areas of life. You should watch for impatience or too-high expectations in this regard. Your love nature is strong although given to extremes at times. You may overvalue something (or someone), perhaps in an attempt to dramatize your life. While at times you may feel insecure on a social level, other times this year you feel quite the opposite: sociable, in the mood to party, dramatic, extravagant, and inclined to overindulge as a result of a feeling of inner discontent and a desire for more from life than daily routines.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) People and friends look upon you with more respect, tolerance, and acceptance. You are likely to be more strategic in your actions during this period, as you become aware of the subtleties of human interaction. This is a time when your best course of action is to recognize that you need, or rely on, others for support. Efforts at self-promotion might be made now. This is the time when you're noticed for what you've done or haven't done. Do your best to be in top form, make career adjustments if needed, and don't be afraid to show others exactly what you're made of.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You would move towards a more positive and objective approach to your professional and personal life this week. You have a great desire to expand your work and knowledge. Your might further your education and it's a fabulous time to do so, or you could broaden your knowledge in a more informal manner. Confidence is the key of success and faith in the universe and in your ability to do the right thing will get you everywhere now. This is the best times for realizing the positive potential you have. You would have a feeling of unrest or dissatisfaction with your environment.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) Your idealistic nature is stimulated, and you are likely to be more spiritual or idealistic this week. You are sober and serious in professional and personal relationships. You are getting serious about loved ones, family relationships and children. You are likely to take your hobbies more seriously. You would combine your inner and outer strengths to achieve success and happiness in professional aspects. You achieve success as you are brilliant and there is good fortune attending professional, personal and material aspects. It is a period to be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This week's planetary configuration brings communication, traveling and meeting new people. You have more faith in general regarding your career and the direction in which you are working. Your ideas are higher as teaching may be part of the picture, and your cultural and spiritual awareness increases this week. Pouring your heart and soul into your efforts comes naturally now. You would be able to complete work assignments and personal business this week with good energy and support. Emotional attachments and relationships are rewarded with reciprocity. Some interesting people are drawn to you and invite you to work with them.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You are expected to be involved in lectures, debates, and discussions. With your enhanced communication skills you can convey your ideas powerfully to others, and you may be invited to speak in front of many people. A new project or goal begun at this time has a good chance of being successful and long-lasting. It's an excellent time in which you make a lifestyle change, as your ability to concentrate on what really matters to you is enhanced. A short vacation allows you to enjoy natural surroundings with a loved one.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) There is perfection and beauty in emotional and personal relationships with your loved one. Mental pursuits, new learning, and all forms of intellectual activity are favored. Your ability to concentrate and focus helps you to achieve what you set out to do.

You are more inclined to put your ideas into action than usual. Your position of power and authority is maintained despite many changes all around. You should maintain a positive attitude and face life in a positive way otherwise you will become frustrated and dull. Good luck in finances and opportunities is encouraging.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) A business partnership is lucrative and supportive this week. Good planning and management lead to be more progressive and productive in professional ventures. Good luck in financial opportunities is encouraging. You are also likely to form relationships with people based on a deep level of mutual appreciation and understanding for each other. You may be divided about business and professional matters and finally come to terms with a compromise which might be the best thing to do at this time. You may take a short break before starting on a new project to renew your energy.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You are able to express a greater level of sensitivity and sensibility this week. Your personal charm and attractiveness has a positive effect on your personal and professional relationships. It's a very favorable time for developing your relationships with parents and siblings. Responsibilities and commitments may take up more time than usual this week, so set a target and make a proper schedule so meet the desired goal. Personal relations are precious and need to be treated with tender, love and care. Children look up to you for love and affection. You will be considerably more productive, healthy, and focused this week.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) During this week, elders are supportive and children are loving. It would be in your favor to make new beginnings and forget all old wounds, hurts and past patterns. It is best to let go of negative feelings about relationships and situations gone by. You may disagree mentally with your partner but the love between you allows peace and acceptance. Your social life is expansive and a variety of people connect with you. You are stronger and wiser after having gone through trouble and difficulty. It is time to come back to your inner center to regain physical strength, mental balance, emotional harmony and spiritual awareness.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) Issues of sharing of power and authority with others in personal and professional relationships come to the fore this week. You are likely to experience events that highlight the necessity to share and trust. Events and circumstances are such that you learn about your own personal strength. You may discover a new direction in your career. Watch out for jealousies and manipulative behavior of people around. You could have problems staying calm, cool, and collected at times this week.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You are in touch with dynamic, forceful and assertive energies. Professional power and authority is vested in you to organize and achieve important targets and goals. You bring stability and order in business and professional projects with a dynamic and assertive approach. You come up with original and creative ideas that surprise others in the professional area. Different people from different environments may attract you. Your warrior like qualities of energy, action, swiftness, strength and pride come to the fore this week.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) It is time to breakthrough restrictions and emotional patterns as you are ripe and ready for major professional changes. Do not forget about the long-term commitments while you are dealing with short-term contracts. Opportunities and invitations from overseas take you on an unplanned journey. Visitors, friends and family make this a happy time as an event is celebrated. You are appreciative and caring as you give total support to loved ones through a difficult time. You are physically fit and it is important to keep a handle on and maintain balance in relationships, finances and new business ventures.

A fragrant influence

From Bollywood icons to music superstars, celebrities have long been associated with fragrance endorsements, leveraging their influence and fame to form consumer preferences and drive conversion sales in the fragrance industry.

Aditya Yadav, Brand Manager at Denver for Men, asserts, "In the world of fragrances, celebrities wield unparalleled influence. Their endorsement not only elevates brand visibility but also resonates with consumers, creating an aspirational allure." Each fragrance is crafted with precision, reflecting the sophistication and charisma synonymous with celebrity culture. Rahul Sharma, Brand Manager at Vanesa, concurs, stating, "Celebrity perfumes embody a captivating blend of glamour and personal branding. By aligning with celebrity identities, fragrance brands tap into the emotional connection consumers have with their favorite stars, forging lasting impressions in the competitive market."

Let's take a look into the effect of celebrity endorsements on fragrance sales, explore key developments in the industry, and examine the underlying motivations in the back of celebrities venturing into the world of perfumery.

The Power of Celebrity Endorsements

The phenomenon of celebrity-recommended perfumes has become omnipresent in today's market, with countless A-listers lending their names and images to leaders for fragrance campaigns. But what precisely is the appealing factor of celebrity endorsements, and how do they affect fragrance sales?

Research suggests that celebrity endorsements can have a significant impact on the buying behavior of the audience because they tap into the emotional connections individuals have with their favorite celebrities.

King of Bollywood Shah Rukh Khan is often associated with perfumes that depict his charismatic and gentlemanly aura whereas there are celebrities like Kareena Kapoor Khan who associate themselves with brands that resonate with their royal and classy persona.

Customers are more likely to perceive the product positively and associate it with the glamour and appeal of their idol. This emotional resonance plays a vital role in the purchase choice, as buyers are interested in fragrances that evoke feelings of admiration and desire.

Key Trends in the Fragrance Industry

Personalisation: The upward push of customised fragrances tailored to personal alternatives and existence is reshaping the market. Brands provide customisable fragrance alternatives that allow consumers to create precise blends that resonate with their personalities. Custom fragrance profiling offers are gaining recognition where buyers undergo consultations to discover their fragrance choices based entirely on their character traits, choices, and experiences.



Experience with Digital Fragrances: Virtual fragrance consultations and sampling apps are gaining traction, allowing consumers to discover and enjoy fragrances from the comfort of their own homes. Augmented reality (AR) and Virtual reality (VR) technology are creating immersive digital experiences that simulate the sensory aspects of fragrance to aid in online shopping decisions.

Wellness-pushed Scents: Fragrances infused with wellness components which include essential oils and aromatherapy blends are gaining traction as clients prioritize holistic well-being. Brands are incorporating substances recognized for their mood-boosting and stress-relieving properties, aligning with the growing trend of self-care and mental well-being.

Brand Extension: For celebrities, liberating perfumes gives a beneficial opportunity to extend their brand beyond their expertise, allowing them to capitalize on their fame and influence.

Personal Branding: Perfumes serve as a tangible illustration of a celebrity's personality and image. Personal branding allows them to connect with fanatics on a deeper emotional level and similarly solidify their logo identification.

Financial Incentives: The monetary incentives associated with celebrity perfume deals are regularly substantial and provide celebrities with a profitable source of income outside of their primary profession.

Ultimately, the impact of celebrities on the perfume business is clear, as their famous persona shapes customer alternatives and utilizes income. Through strategic endorsements and private label efforts, celebrities use their image to create captivating fragrances that resonate with lovers around the world. As the fragrance industry continues to adapt, celebrities remain indispensable players, maintaining the symbiotic relationship between fame and perfume. With their ability to command both hearts and noses, celebrities leave an indelible mark on the ever-changing panorama of fragrance. (IANSlife)

"Lost time is never found again."

— Benjamin Franklin

The Shillong Times

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Inferno devours a piece of history

THE inferno that gutted the building that houses the Shillong Bar Association is like a part of a well-orchestrated drama. The fire broke out when the caretaker was away from the building. All wooden structures belonging to the government seem to follow a routine format. They are razed to the ground and another concrete building replaces the old wooden structures. The 125 year old State Assembly building was similarly razed to the ground in January 2001. The new Assembly building is yet to be completed 23 years down the line. No one knows when an alternative Bar Association building will come up if at all a new building is constructed for the purpose. It is the nature of things in Meghalaya that all constructions stretch way beyond the timeline and involve time and cost overruns. There is a contractor-government nexus in such things because after all it is public money that is spent and the spending of public money is never held to account except by the Comptroller and Auditor General which all governments care a hoot about.

The Shillong Bar Association is a piece of Meghalaya's history dating back to the British era of 1913. However it is not celebrated perhaps because it's an old building and the practice here is to bring down the old and make way for the new. There is no respect for heritage buildings and no attempt to ensure that the electrical connections are in ship shape. A little care and concern in that area would have prevented short circuits that could lead to infernos as was seen on Saturday night when the fires consumed any inch of the Shillong Bar Association. It is critical that Government entrusts the central agencies to look into the cause of the fire and to rule out arson. That the caretaker of the place was absent when the fire engulfed the building, raises many uncomfortable questions such as where the fire started from and how.

The Shillong Bar Association is a place where lawyers that do not have an office in the vicinity of the courts, store their important files in lockers. Think of the reconstruction of cases that has to be done if the same have not been stored in computers. Some lawyers say that what's lost forever are the records of the Bar Council and the Bar Association. This would mean the loss of invaluable records. Fire-proofing a heritage building is not an easy task but regular fire-safety surveys are imperative. Very often these old buildings have outdated safety features and most don't even have fire extinguishers but even if they do have them, they don't work because of poor maintenance. It is not known as to who or which department conducts regular fire safety surveys in Meghalaya but this is a much-needed protocol along with the disaster management drills. For now the members of the Shillong Bar Association need to press for proper investigation into the cause of the fire.

CUBs: The neglected vehicle of economic growth in the state

By H H Mohrmen

The two major challenges that government departments and agencies face in improving the economic conditions of the people and the development of the state is in ensuring financial inclusion and to help the public access credit. Any government would know that the economic condition of the state depends on the economic activities of the people; hence, financial institutions have a vital role to play in the economic development of the state. The State Government may dream for a 5, a 10 or even 100 billion dollars economy, but without strong and sound financial institutions in place, it will remain a dream. Financial institutions like Cooperative Urban Banks (CUBs) are, in fact, in a better position to help propel the economic growth of the state.

About 50 years ago, Cooperative Urban Banks were started in the three district headquarters of the state, and since then, one of the three CUBs, the Shillong Urban Cooperative Bank, became very successful. The other two have room for improvement. If one conducts a quick SWOT analysis of these banks, one would find that the strength of the CUBs lie in the fact that the bank is manned by locals who can speak the local language and also has the confidence of the people because the staff are all local. The opportunity for the banks to grow is immense, as these are local banks governed under the Cooperative system, enabling them to reach the grassroots and farthest corners of the state. It also opens wide vistas of opportunity to create employment for the youths of the state. But the most important strength of the CUB is that they understand the psyche and the cultural nuances of the regions. Unfortunately, the banks also have weaknesses and face threat perceptions in the way they operate.

The Current Status of CUBs in the State

The state currently has three CUBs. They are part of over 1500 CUBs across the country. The 3 CUBs together have around deposits of around Rs. 630 crores amongst them and total advances of Rs. 187 crores, i.e., a Credit Deposit Ratio of 30% (approx.), with a branch network of 9 branches between them.

The CUBs operate in a very competitive environment and are vying for business with the public sector

banks, the private banks, and state cooperative banks and lately with the small finance banks. Customers have a wide gamut of banks to choose from. The driving force for today's competition amongst banks is the use of technology. Like in other fields of our lives, technology has become center stage in the delivery of banking services as well.

Hence the question that arises are: Are CUBs competitive enough to compete with other banks in this age of cutting-edge technology? The CUBs will need qualified and experienced manpower to transition to technology-driven organizations. And lastly, they have to have the willingness to transition from the traditional banking method to technology-driven banking.

Dual Control of CUBs

The CUBs run on a dual control model where both the RBI and the State Government, via the office of the Registrar of Cooperative Societies (RCS), control and manage the functions and operations of these banks. As the cooperatives which run the banks are registered with the Cooperation Department of the Government, the banks are run under the Cooperative Societies Act. After the amendment of the Banking Regulation Act, 1949, in 2020, all the functions of the banks, except for registration, are directly under the supervision of the RBI. The dual control of the banks at times poses a challenge for the smooth functioning of the CUBs.

Suggestions to Improve CUBs in the State

CUBs have been in operation for over four decades now, which is evidence of a sustainable business model. However, successful as they may be, these banks are facing challenges. The challenges can be in governance, as the members are all lay people, and therefore, even the directors elected from among the members are mostly people with no banking experience.

The management of the bank by the Cooperative model is both a strength and a drawback for the successful functioning of the bank. The Cooperative system not only supplies people who are members of the Cooperative Society, but members of the bank are also elected as the directors of the governing board of the bank. If one looks at the composi-

tion of the directors in the bank, more often than not, the directors are laypersons with no banking experience or knowledge. This poses a challenge to the functioning and progress of the bank. Even though it is mandatory to appoint at least two directors with banking experience to the board of directors, some kind of experience is needed for a person to be elected as a director.

Remedial Measures

One of the corrective measures that the Government can take to improve the function of the banks is that the officers in the Cooperation Department should be made aware of the Banking Regulation Act, 1949. Since the bank also manages public funds, it is important that they are aware of the Banking Regulation Act. It is mandatory that the officers, especially those working in close tandem with the CUBs, should be well-versed with the Banking Regulation Act, 1949. The other idea that the government can explore is to create a special cell at the office of the RCS for the management and monitoring of CUBs. These officers should be well-versed with the Banking Regulation Act, 1949, and should also keep themselves abreast of the developments and directives sent by the RBI so that they can provide professional advice to the management of these banks.

CUBs, because they are local and because the State Government has a stake in these banks, should tailor-make or customize their products to cater to the needs of the local people of the state. For instance, in the Khasi-Jaintia area, it is very difficult for a male member of the society to avail a loan because the bank would ask for collateral. This is a very challenging task for many men in the society because traditionally, men do not own land as per the culture. Other commercial banks would not understand these challenges, but a local bank like CUB managed by locals, is better positioned to understand the local problems of the area.

Linking IVCS with CUBs

Integrated Village Cooperative Societies (IVCS) are new financial entities instituted by the government to help rural folk access credit and ensure financial inclusion in the state. IVCS also encourages savings among the members of the cooperative. The projects imple-

mented by the Meghalaya Basin Management Agency (MBMA) and sponsored by the World Bank are registered with the office of the Registrar of Cooperative Societies. The goal is that a village or cluster of villages will have its own village bank that will cater to the needs of the local people. Like any government project, there are successful and not so successful IVCS in the entire state. The question that begs an answer is what happens after the funding from the agency ends? How will these IVCS operate? The IVCS can be linked with the CUBs as these are also registered under the Cooperation Department.

CUB and Employment Creation for Local Youths

CUBs will not only help local people access credit because they understand the culture and the land tenure system of the area and the staff can speak the local language, but they can also help generate employment for local youths. The State Government is also a stakeholder in the CUBs not only because the banks are run by Cooperatives registered under the Cooperative Societies Act, but the fact that the State Government is also a shareholder in the bank. It, therefore, has a very important role to play in the function of the bank. Today, we have only three Cooperative Urban Banks in the entire state: they are in Shillong, Jowai, and Tura. The Shillong bank has 5 branches, the Jowai bank has two branches, and the Tura bank has two branches. If the State Government can start one bank in each district headquarters, then we would have another nine or so CUBs in the state to begin with.

More than Cooperatives

The CUBs are more than cooperative societies because they accept deposits from the public and utilize the money for their banking activities, thereby falling under the supervision and control of the RBI and under the Banking Regulation Act, 1949 (as amended in 2020). Another important point to note is that the money in these banks does not belong solely to the members of the cooperative society; a significant portion of the funds in these banks belongs to the general public and depositors. Therefore, the Government and the RBI play a vital role in protecting public interest in these banks.

Assam to be second state in the country to move closer to Uniform Civil Code

CM Himanta Biswa Sarma ruffles Muslim feathers before polls

By Sushil Kutty

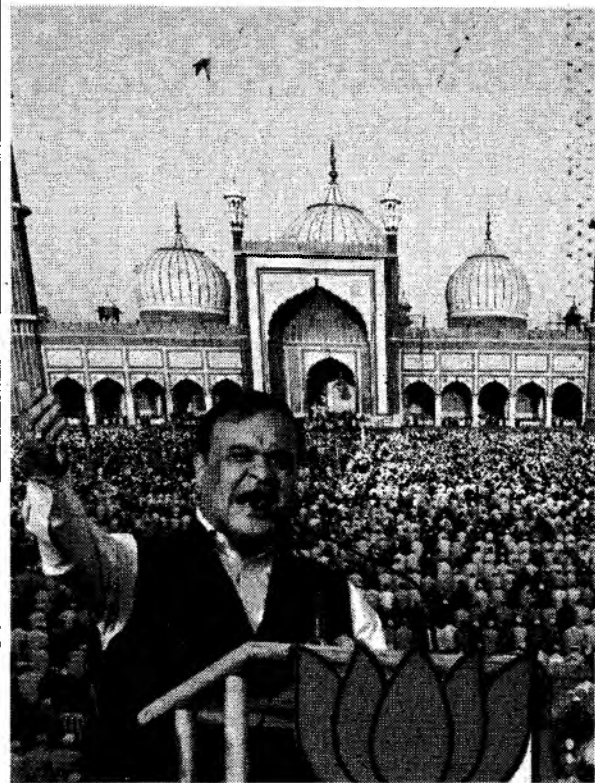
Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has repealed the Assam Muslim Marriage and Divorce Registration Act, 1935, thereby dealing a body-blow to child marriages, which Assamese Muslims are favourable to. Sarma, who even otherwise is bombastic, says this move had led Assam several steps closer to implementing the Uniform Civil Code, which is code for one nation-one law, which has been dormant in the directive principles since 1950.

Reports say the Assam Cabinet took the decision and henceforth, all Muslim marriages and divorces in Assam would be under the Special Marriages Act, 1954. Chief Minister Sarma chaired the Cabinet meeting which

and Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami are under pressure to deliver each their quota of Lok Sabha seats to the target of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's '370' seats.

All senior BJP leaders have to deliver to Modi's target and it's getting on the nerves of these leaders; more so, after the opposition INDI-Alliance has, against all odds, been showing signs of reviving into the force it was expected to become. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra had just recently passed through Assam and Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma was a nervous wreck during those tense days.

Will the repeal of the As-



ratified the decision. Chief Minister Sarma is often seen irritating certain sections of Assam's people with the wide smiles he sports after making such decisions. Removing traces of the "Sharia" is a Sarma specialty.

Chief Minister Sarma's Cabinet wholeheartedly supports the Chief Minister in such endeavours. Jayanta Mallabarua, a minister in Sarma's Cabinet, hailed the step and said it was necessary to achieve the BJP goal of Uniform Civil Code. The Assam government believes that with the repeal of this marriages and divorce act, UCC would become a reality.

The Assam Muslim Mar-

sam Muslim Marriages and Divorces Registration Act get Modi his dream number of 370 Lok Sabha seats? Why does Prime Minister Narendra Modi even need another election issue after having the big one, the 'Ram Mandir Pran Pratishtha'? Perhaps, the ruckus created did not measure up to required decibels. Therefore, the need for the repeal of the Assam Muslim Marriages and Divorces Registration Act.

Opposition parties have already reacted, including one Assam-based state-party and Akhilesh Yadav's Samajwadi Party, which considers itself a party for the Muslims. The first reaction is that "Mus-

"Chief Minister Sarma's Cabinet wholeheartedly supports the Chief Minister in such endeavours.

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The Assam government believes that with the repeal of this marriages and divorce act, UCC would become a reality."

riage & Divorce Registration Act, 1935, provided jobs to 94 Muslim registrars and that was all the good that it ever did. The 94 who have been rendered unemployed would be given a one-time compensation of Rs 2 lakh each and left to fend for themselves.

In a manner of speaking, like it or not, the Uniform Civil Code is already in force in Assam, the second state after Uttarakhand with features of UCC. And because Muslims keep parroting "we'll abide by the law of the land", whenever confronted with accusations of going against the Constitution, they have been swallowing and bearing the consequences of their defiance to certain laws enacted by elected legislatures.

The Uniform Civil Code is an election promise of the Bharatiya Janata Party and had along with the abrogation of Article 370 been touted more times to garner votes than any man would ask for a cup of Assam tea. Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma

lims will follow only Shariat and Quran", which shouldn't surprise anybody. Himanta Biswa Sarma would have been surprised if the Muslims had quietly welcomed the abrogation.

Now what? Muslims are touchy on the subject of "child marriage" and any fiddling with even the thought of putting an end to child marriage to the Muslim is taboo. Heads have rolled for the privilege. Chief Minister Biswa Sarma will have to walk the talk now. His odd manner of speaking Hindi isn't going to help.

Muslim parties and parties that rely on Muslims and Shariat and Quran to win elections have decided to ignore such interventions and for them, it does not matter how "Acts the government drafts" - every religion has its own process and as far as Muslims are concerned. Child marriage has also been a majority community practice, still is with many Hindu communities. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

History razed to the ground: A painful saga

Editor,

Apropos the news of the devastating fire at the premises of the Shillong Bar Association, it was an extremely sad event. One of the iconic structures of Shillong has been burnt down. During the days of composite Assam, this place housed the Assam Public Service Commission. Those days Shillong had only a Munsiff's court and the District Judge from one of the plains areas districts, probably Kamrup, would come in periodic circuit benches. These courts of the independent judiciary exercised jurisdiction only in the original four wards of Shillong Municipality which are excluded from the tribal areas under the provisions of Constitution of India. The bulk of the judicial work would be done in the courts of the Deputy Commissioner, in cases involving non-tribals, and of the District Councils in cases involving only local tribals.

During those days the Shillong Bar Association had a room in the Deputy Commissioner's office, which too was an Assam type building. It is one of the oldest Bar

Associations of the region, having been established in 1913, but the number of advocates were few though many stalwarts were always there. Fakrudin Ali Ahmed, B. B. Lyngdoh and Maham Singh had been members.

In the late 1960s or early 1970s a separate Sessions division was set up in Shillong with a permanent seat of the District and Sessions Judge. As the number of lawyers grew, the Shillong Bar Association was allocated its own premises in a part of the old APSC building. The other offices in that building were those of the Civil Defence, Sanik Board and the Civil Task Force.

In mid 1970s The Gauhati High Court had also begun holding periodic circuit benches here and by 1995 a permanent bench was set up. By the early part of this century the other offices from this building were shifted and the whole building was allocated to the use of the Shillong Bar Association.

Many dignitaries, specially prominent jurists have paid visits here. I was the Secretary of the Association for nine years from 1993 to 2002 and in that period alone four Chief Justices of India and some leading figures like Somnath Chatterjee had set their feet there.

All this is from my per-

sonal knowledge acquired over the years and if I have given any faulty information, I am sorry and stand corrected. The ambience of the place was so friendly and homely!! We advocates, especially the old timers, shall be direly missing all that charm.

There should be a thorough investigation by a very specialized investigation agency, probably the CBI, to determine the cause of the fire and to bring the culprits, if any, to book.

Yours etc.,

Subhasis Chakraborty,
Senior Advocate
Via email

Shillong Bar Association gutted

Editor,

Words cannot express how saddened I am after hearing of our Bar Association building being razed by a raging inferno. It is not only a physical loss but an emotional loss for all of us associated with the Bar. I had joined the Shillong Bar Association 15 years ago soon after completing my LL.B course and joining a Bar Association was not just a membership for me - it

was about contributing to a vibrant legal community and advancing my own career. I had embarked on my first step in joining the legal profession by joining the Shillong Bar association. The SBA provided me a platform to connect with my peers, exchange ideas, and build professional relationships.

SBA was one of Shillong's iconic structures and one of the oldest bar associations of the country. The establishment of the Shillong Bar Association in 1913 was indeed a momentous event in the region and thus, revolutionized the system of administration and justice in our region. Over the years, many members of the Bar Association attained high levels of distinction in professional and public life. The Association has also produced several important public leaders among the stalwarts including former president of India late Fakrudin Ali Ahmed, former Meghalaya chief minister late B.B. Lyngdoh and other former ministers like late Maham Singh.

When a place is no more or, as we have seen, when chunks of that physical site have been destroyed it becomes a kind of anthropomorphic feeling, as though we lost that part of ourselves; a loss of body parts, to put it

bluntly. That connection is really an eternal question but more importantly a loss of the symbol that it represents all of us as a member of the Bar Association

Yours etc.,

M. Haque (Advocate),
Member of Shillong Bar
Association,
Shillong-6

Keeping legacies alive at a cost

Editor,

World Heritage sites are a crowd puller not only for their historical importance and for being a treasure trove of archives but they also create awareness in society on why they are valuable and have economic benefits. Sadly, in Shillong the term 'caring' does not sit comfortably with experts within different verticals of public and private organisations who are specialized in handling architectural conservation. On Saturday night another heritage building bites the dust with the iconic British era structure of the Shillong Bar Association gutted to ashes some containing files on property cases which are critical to the affairs of the state. This is where e-filing

on cloud space and using technology is a significant change from dusty papers. It is too early to speculate whether the fire was an act of God or sabotage, but it is definitely disappointing that we could never learn lessons from the past. It may be mentioned that in a small country like Singapore, there is a focus on nurturing public spaces and colonial landmarks. Non-profit organizations like the Singapore and International Committee on Documentation and Conservation of Buildings (DoCoMoMo) Singapore are leading the way. The urban landscape of Shillong is a catch-22 for planners with the National Building Code of India if there is such a thing in paper to put it in practice but it is time to rebuild and restore many other sites through building audits with a clear roadmap before we are too late in saving the remnants to which future generations could relate to and be proud of.

Yours etc.,

Christopher Gathphoh,
Shillong-10

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

"The end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom. For in all the states of created beings capable of law, where there is no law, there is no freedom."

— John Locke

The Shillong Times

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Courts under scanner

AN efficient, incorruptible justice dispensation system is integral to the cause of good governance. Sadly, courts are today seen to be increasingly coming under a shadow of suspicion over the way they tackle cases. So many ills plague the justice dispensation system to a level wherein perceptions have strengthened that it mostly serves the purposes of only the high and mighty. Often, top judges themselves aired such, but governments are not willing to act or effect reforms to strengthen the judicial system. The observation by retired Supreme Court judge, Justice Madan B Lokur, about the Master of Roster system and his call to end the arbitrariness in this process of listing of cases to various courts, must be taken seriously. This is a process that is often sought to be misused by vested interests to subvert the cause of justice. This though is only a part of the larger problems.

Justice Lokur referred to the perception that if a case is assigned to a particular bench/court, the result can be anticipated. Governments, as also influential individuals, often escape from difficult cases allegedly by manipulations of the roster system. Another retired SC judge, Justice Kurien Joseph, has proposed that a panel of the first three or five judges of the apex court, or other courts, be assigned with this task. Justice Lokur also referred to the unacceptable delay in the disposal of cases through resort to multiple adjournments of cases. A whole lot of cases, from lower courts to SC, run for 20 or more years, by which time the litigant has breathed his last – without getting justice done to him or her.

The problem, essentially, lies with the political leadership. Despite the 10 years' stability that Prime Minister Narendra Modi provided to the nation, he failed to act on several critical fronts during his two terms in office. He stunningly demonstrated his limitations. Beyond getting some Rafale jets, implementing GST, or laying out national highways, the nation failed to properly upkeep the governance system under Modi. Where reforms were the need of the hour, he looked the other way, and satisfied himself with the introduction of some welfare steps to woo the poor and their votes. Modi is now aiming for a third term, which he is likely to get due to the failure of the opposition to project an effective alternative. When justice turns itself into a purchasable commodity, it will have multiple adverse consequences. Modi also failed to control corruption at the bureaucratic level, as is evident in the pussyfooting by the central investigation agencies in tackling cases. These entities themselves are seen to be hugely corrupt under the Modi Raj.

The Great Delusion: Meghalaya's Quest for a \$10 Billion Economy by 2028

By Napoleon S Mawphniang

On February 21, 2024, Meghalaya Chief Minister, Conrad K Sangma, presented the state's budget for the financial year 2024-25. In his speech, the Chief Minister reiterated his commitment to transforming Meghalaya into a \$10 billion economy by 2028. While the ambition is laudable, the reality on the ground paints a starkly different picture – one mired in rampant corruption, exploitation of labourers, and a gross misuse of power by those in positions of authority.

As a concerned citizen of Meghalaya, I have witnessed first-hand the suffering of the state's workforce, particularly the labourers and casual workers who form the backbone of our economy either in Government or private entities. These are the very individuals who will bear the brunt of the government's pursuit of a \$10 billion GDP, toiling endlessly to push the wheels of progress, yet reaping none of the rewards.

The budget speech paid lip service to the empowerment of youth and the creation of employment opportunities. There was a glaring absence of concrete measures to safeguard the rights and welfare of the state's labourers and contractual workers/staffs. How can we speak of economic prosperity when the very hands that build our infrastructure are shackled by exploitation and neglect?

Moreover, the budget document fails to address the elephant in the room – the rampant corruption that has plagued nearly every government department and institution. Through hundreds of RTI (Right to Information) applications, I have uncovered a disturbing pattern of collusion between contractors, government officials, and the ruling elite's "right-hand gangs." Work orders are routinely inflated to benefit these groups, and public schemes intended for the welfare of the masses are instead channelled into the pockets of retired officers, politicians' agents, and their cronies.

The evidence of corruption is overwhelming, and the judicial system, overburdened as it is, will take years, if not decades, to untangle this web of deceit. Meanwhile, the resources that should have been invested in the development of our state and the upliftment of our people are being siphoned off by those entrusted with their stewardship.

It is a harsh reality that the government's lofty dream of a \$10 billion economy by 2028 is nothing more than a mirage; a delusion that will ultimately lead Meghalaya down a path of servitude. Our state risks becoming a modern-day version of the ancient Egyptian pyramids, where the labour of the masses is exploited to construct monuments to the vanity of the ruling class.

The budget speech boasted of increased government expenditure, doubling from Rs 12,159 crore in 2018-19 to Rs 25,052 crore in the current financial year. However, one must question where these funds are truly being directed. Are they genuinely improving the lives of the common people, or are they merely lining the pockets of the corrupt and the well-connected?

The Chief Minister spoke of streamlining the payment of salaries, pensions, and benefits to government employees, pensioners, and

various categories of workers. Yet, how can we trust that these funds will reach their intended recipients when corruption has become so deeply entrenched within the system?

The budget outlined plans for infrastructure development, including the construction of new roads, bridges, water supply projects, and urban developments. While these initiatives are undoubtedly necessary, one cannot help but wonder if the contracts for these projects will be awarded fairly and transparently, or if they will once again fall victim to the machinations of the "right-hand gangs" and their political masters.

The Chief Minister's vision of a \$10 billion economy by 2028 is predicated on leveraging ten identified opportunities, including investment promotion, regional connectivity, urban transformation, IT and ITes, agriculture, women's empowerment, youth engagement, sustainable eco-tourism, a green economy, and power generation. However, without addressing the fundamental issues of corruption, misuse of power, and the exploitation of labour, these opportunities will remain elusive.

The budget speech painted a rosy picture of increased private sector investment, but how can we expect investors to have confidence in a system plagued by graft and favouritism? The ease of doing business, touted as a priority by the government, will remain a hollow promise as long as the playing field remains tilted in favour of those with political connections.

The budget's focus on agriculture, horticulture, and the empowerment of women and youth is commendable, but these initiatives will struggle to bear fruit if the very people meant to benefit from them are denied their fair share due to corruption and mismanagement. The Chief Minister's commitment to a climate-resilient green economy and the development of sustainable eco-tourism is laudable, but how can we trust that these programs will be implemented with integrity when the underlying systems are rotten to the core?

The budget's allocation of funds for infrastructure development, healthcare, education, and citizen services is undoubtedly necessary, but without addressing the systemic issues of corruption and misuse of power, these investments will fail to yield their intended results. Ultimately, the government's dream of transforming Meghalaya into a \$10 billion economy by 2028 is nothing more than a facade, a grand illusion that conceals the harsh realities faced by the state's people. Unless the government takes decisive and transparent action to root out corruption, protect the rights of labourers, and empower the masses to participate in the fruits of economic progress, Meghalaya will remain shackled to a cycle of exploitation and inequality.

The solution lies not in grandiose economic targets but in fundamental reforms that prioritize transparency, accountability, and the equitable distribution of resources. Until the govern-

ment demonstrates a genuine commitment to combating corruption, safeguarding the rights of workers, and empowering the people, any talk of a \$10 billion economy will remain a hollow promise, a mirage that will lead our state down a path of servitude and oppression.

As concerned citizens, it is our duty to demand better from our leaders. We must raise our voices and hold them accountable, for it is only through collective action and vigilance that we can break the chains of corruption and exploitation that bind our state. The time has come to wake up from the delusion and embrace reality – a reality where the prosperity of Meghalaya is not measured by economic figures alone but by the well-being and dignity of its people.

If loopholes are identified, it becomes evident that there is an endless number of them, and as far as we are aware, the budget presentation is merely a document crafted by financial experts to capture the minds of the public by offering them an appealing yet unrealistic vision. In my personal opinion, given the current situation and the prevailing conditions under the Meghalaya government, it is improbable that the stated goals will be achieved, and they will remain an unattainable dream indefinitely. As a concerned citizen, I would like to offer the following suggestions based on my personal understanding and perspective. These are my ideas as well, and it is up to the Meghalaya government to consider and implement them if they are genuinely committed to the budget presentation.

Here are some suggestions that could address the issues:

I. Establish an independent and empowered anti-corruption agency: Meghalaya should create a strong anti-corruption agency that is independent of political interference and has the authority to investigate and prosecute cases of corruption at all levels of government. This agency should be adequately funded and staffed with skilled professionals to tackle the deep-rooted problem of graft.

II. Implement labour reforms and strengthen worker protections: The state government should enact comprehensive labour reforms to safeguard the rights and welfare of labourers, casual workers, and the entire workforce. This should include measures such as minimum wage regulations, safety standards, grievance redressal mechanisms, and provisions for social security and healthcare.

III. Promote transparency and accountability: Meghalaya should adopt robust transparency and accountability measures in all spheres of governance. This can include measures such as mandatory public disclosure of government contracts, regular audits by independent agencies, protection for whistle-blowers, and the implementation of an effective Right to Information (RTI) framework.

IV. Decentralize decision-making and empower local communities: Rather than concentrating power in the hands of a few, the government should decentralize decision-making and em-

power local communities to have a greater say in the development projects and initiatives that affect their lives. This can help reduce the influence of "right-hand gangs" and promote more inclusive and equitable economic growth.

V. Prioritize education and awareness campaigns: The government should invest in public education and awareness campaigns to inform citizens about their rights, the importance of transparency, and the detrimental effects of corruption. An informed and engaged populace is essential to sustaining the fight against corruption and holding leaders accountable.

VI. Strengthen the judicial system: Meghalaya should allocate resources to strengthen its judicial system, ensuring that it has the capacity and independence to effectively investigate and adjudicate corruption cases in a timely manner. This could include increasing the number of judges, improving court infrastructure, and providing specialized training to judicial officers.

VII. Promote ethical leadership and governance: The state government should lead by example and foster a culture of ethical leadership and good governance. This can be achieved through measures such as mandatory asset disclosures for public officials, strict conflict-of-interest rules, and the promotion of integrity and transparency as core values in public service.

VIII. Encourage civic engagement and public participation: Citizens should be encouraged to actively participate in the governance process and hold their leaders accountable. This can be facilitated through public consultations, citizen oversight committees, and the creation of platforms for constructive dialogue between the government and the people.

IX. Foster public-private partnerships with transparency: While promoting private sector investment is essential, the government should ensure that all public-private partnerships are established through transparent and competitive processes, free from the influence of corruption and nepotism. Clear guidelines and oversight mechanisms should be in place to safeguard the public interest.

X. Focus on sustainable and inclusive development: Rather than pursuing ambitious economic targets at the cost of exploiting the workforce, Meghalaya should prioritize sustainable and inclusive development that benefits all segments of society. This includes investing in human capital, promoting equitable access to opportunities, and ensuring that economic growth translates into tangible improvements in the quality of life for all citizens.

Implementing these suggestions will require political will, sustained effort, and the active participation of all stakeholders – the government, civil society, the private sector, and the general public. Only through a concerted and collective effort can Meghalaya overcome the challenges of corruption, labour exploitation, and misuse of power, paving the way for genuine progress and prosperity. (The writer is an Advocate and Trade Unionist)

'Dhaka has no record of Tirot Sing's Jail term'

By Uma Purkayastha

The news item in The Shillong Times of Feb 19, 2024 reported that the Bangladesh government has no official record that the legendary Khasi freedom fighter, U. Tirot Sing Syiem was kept in the old Dhaka Central Jail. It appears that inspecting the old jail complex at Dhaka) the Bangladesh authorities told reporters that they did not have any official record about the incarceration of U Tirot Sing. In this regard I would like to refer to the book 'Tirot Sing' by Jerlie E. Tariang, published in 1990, with a preface by Rajiv Gandhi, Former Prime Minister of India, where in the chapter 'Imprisonment and Death of Tirot Sing', it is stated, "Tirot Sing, Raja of Nongkhlaw, the much-sought-after Khasi chief, ever since the outbreak of the historic 'Khasi Struggle for Freedom' from the foreign rule, boldly faced his trial in the court of Mr. T.C. Robertson, Agent to the British government. This took place shortly after his surrender at Lum Madiang. Robertson pronounced the sentence of life imprisonment on him. He was sent to Gauhati, then to be transported to the Tenasserim province of Burma. But the Calcutta Council of the Supreme government, however, deemed it fit to revise the order of the Agent and instead had him sent to Dhaka for detention". [Ref: Political Letter to Court No. 2 of 1833]

It is said that, 'when Tirot Sing arrived at Dhaka, he had no personal belongings, save a blanket to cover his body. At first, he was confined in the Dhaka Jail but, later, an order was issued by the Supreme government not to treat him as an ordinary prisoner but as a State prisoner. He was then accommodated in a suitable but strong house and treated as a State prisoner. Besides, he was granted a monthly allowance of Rupees 63, with permission to engage two servants'. [Ref: PC No. 55 & 56 March 19, 1833 and PC No. 64 & 65 April 30, 1833]

The above-mentioned orders of the British Government confirm the imprisonment and stay of U Tirot Sing in Dhaka since before 19th March 1833. Moreover, in 1956, the then Governor of Assam Mr. Jai Ram Daulatram, in an article, "The people of the Frontier" said, "..... U. Tirot Sing inherited the qualities which distinguished their (Khasis) ancestors. When forced to defend his land against the British, he showed rare courage and dignity in preferring to die in Dhaka prison than to be a nominal chieftain under British suzerainty." [para 7 of the same article]

With all these references, where 'Dacca prison' is clearly and specifically mentioned, how can we agree that Dhaka has no record of Tirot Sing's Jail term or that, 'the local authorities informed them that they did not have any official record about the incarceration of U Tirot Sing?' As Tirot Sing was jailed and sent to Dhaka by March 1833, the 1st & 2nd paragraph as quoted above, is more than sufficient to establish that Tirot Sing was kept in Dhaka Jail. Moreover, regarding his sudden demise, at the age of 45 years (approximately) it is a mystery and somehow uncertain and unknown to his countrymen. Jerlie E. Tariang, in his book mentions, "The precise date of his death has remained a mystery to one and all. Historians and scholars made their own calculations of the date, but mostly on hearsay

or presumption, without any actual documentation. To ascertain the correct date of the death of this heroic personality of the north-eastern region of India, I contacted the India Office Library and Records, London. I received a photocopy of the letter, written by the Officiating Commissioner of Circuit, Dacca, dated 18th July, 1835, addressed to the Secretary to the Government in the Political Department, forwarding, in turn, copy of a letter addressed to him by S.C.Scott, Officiating Magistrate, Dacca, under whom Tirot Sing was a State prisoner. From the said letter, it is clear beyond the semblance of any doubt that Tirot Sing expired on 17th July, 1835 at 1 p.m."

[Copy of the letter is given as Appendix No.4] as:-

Copy of letter dated 18-7-1835 addressed to the Secretary to the Government in the Political Department, Fort William, Calcutta, by the Officiating Commissioner of Circuit, Dacca Division, enclosing the letter dated 18-7-1835 of Mr. S.C.Scott, Officiating Magistrate, on the death of Tirot Sing:

"Sir, I have the honour to submit copy of a letter from the Officiating Magistrate of Dacca, communicating the fact of the death of the state prisoner, the ex. Rajah Teeruth Sing, for the information of the Honourable Governor of Bengal."

To, The Officiating Commissioner of Circuit, Dacca

Sir, I have the honour to report for the information of Government, the demise of the ex. Rajah Teeruth Sing, a state prisoner under my charge, which event took place yesterday at 1 p.m.

I have etc. Foujdary Adawlat, D/- Zillah of Dacca S.C. Scott 18th July, 1835 Offg. Magistrate

Hence with all these authenticated documents, we should not have any doubts regarding the detention and incarceration of U Tirot Sing in Dacca. It seems he arrived at Dhaka by February 1833, and stayed under British custody till his last breath on 17th July 1835.

It is more essential to collect records, if any from the Bangladesh Government (former East Pakistan), how the last moments came in the young and stout Tirot Sing's life. What happened to him? Was it a normal death? It is not unlikely to think otherwise because Tirot was very much dominant and fearless to challenge any injustice. If it was a normal death due to some ailment why was this not mentioned in the death report? Normally the death report is supported by the last attending physician who attended to the deceased!

All those lapses create suspense for those who admire Tirot Sing and for researchers and writers like this one.

In this regard, I would like to draw the kind attention of Sniawbhalang Dhar, Deputy Chief Minister Meghalaya and Paul Lyngdoh, Minister of Arts & Culture Meghalaya who led the delegates to Bangladesh recently in connection with the foundation of a statue of U Tirot Sing, at Dhaka, to pursue with the Bangladesh Government to revisit the old files very keenly for any clue regarding the sudden demise of the great National Hero under British Custody.

Well spoken CJI Chandrachud!

Editor, The Chief Justice of India Dhananjaya Y. Chandrachud who was on a two-day tour to Bangladesh to attend the 'South Asian Constitutional Courts in the Twenty-First Century: Lessons from Bangladesh and India' conference has very appropriately emphasised on Saturday that the Election Commission and the Supreme Court must rise to the occasion in situations of "ambiguity and uncertainty" so that it helps people gain confidence in

the Constitution. He has rightly pointed out that the "Constitution is not an Income Tax Act." Further he has hit the nail on the head stating, "We, as judges and courts, must ensure that we learn to communicate with our citizens and reach out to them; we cannot expect our citizens to reach out to us. This reflects the evolving nature of our society." Long live the learned Chief Justice of India.

Your etc., V K Lyngdoh, Via email

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Letters to the Editor

Shortage of MBOSE textbooks troubling parents and booksellers

Editor,

The hardship that parents face in meeting their children's needs right after the school reopens isn't difficult to understand. From purchasing school uniforms etc., to acquiring textbooks and exercise books, the list is endless. While money may purchase most necessities,

acquiring school textbooks has proven to be an annoyance. Of course, the decision of Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma to adopt customized editions of major subjects from NCERT books for the new session, 2024 is commendable and a step taken with the students' best interests in mind. However, the non-availability of certain major subject textbooks, particularly those published in Delhi, is causing significant distress among the parents and also among the academic institutes and book retailers in the city and in remote areas of the state.

The key textbooks, such as Mathematics for classes 1-7, Science for classes 6-7

and both Mathematics and Science for class 10, are largely out of stock in the local markets. These textbooks, mostly published by Delhi-based publishers, were "recently" supplied in limited quantities to wholesalers and retailers. The supplied books were quickly sold out and no longer available. Normally, booksellers have to pay in advance before the publishers dispatch the parcel to Shillong and Tura. Many of the small retailers do not have enough cash in hand to send the advance payment to Delhi. Hence it is always advantageous to have the books locally published. Books published by local publishers had begun

to flow into the markets since January 22nd, soon after the launch of the book by the Chief Minister and Education Minister.

The shortage of text books has taken a heavy toll in many ways. Countless parents, especially those residing in remote villages such as Nongstoin, Mawkyrat, Thadlaskein, Ranikor, Pynursula, and Mawsynram, are compelled to journey to Shillong in search of these textbooks, only to return empty-handed, disheartened, and burdened with unnecessary expenses for to-and-fro transportation and food. There might be similar problems in Tura as well.

It should be noted that

the transportation of goods from Delhi to Shillong and Tura typically encounters various obstacles, resulting in extended delivery times ranging from 10 to 20 days, depending on the transport service providers.

In view of the hardship faced by parents, schools and book dealers, it is imperative that necessary steps be taken to address this issue and ensure the availability of these textbooks in our local markets. "Logistical challenges" should not "hinder" access to quality education. On behalf of the parents, teachers and retailers, I urge the concerned authorities to expedite measures to facilitate the timely supply of

these textbooks.

One fervently hopes that Meghalaya will one day achieve "self-sufficiency" in textbook production, reducing dependence on Delhi. Meghalaya should not fall behind in encouraging writers with expertise in their respective subjects. Former Chief Minister, Mukul Sangma has rightly emphasized the importance of promoting local production of textbooks, highlighting the pivotal role that esteemed authorities like MBOSE and DERT can play in this endeavour.

Yours etc., Salil Gwali, Shillong

*"Thinking will not overcome
fear but action will."*

— W. Clement Stone

The Shillong Times

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BJP's Opportunistic Politics

THE foul smell of another round of political defections is in the air. With the Rajya Sabha elections in Himachal Pradesh seeing cross-voting by nine Congress MLAs to the advantage of the BJP. Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Shukla has been put on notice. The BJP claims he lost his majority support in the 68-member assembly. This should be true, as the 40-member Congress block in the legislative house can now count on the trust of only 31 MLAs. A cross-voting in defiance of the party whip could mean these MLAs eventually losing their assembly membership. Clearly, the BJP that has been working to oust the Congress government in the state planned this with clockwork precision. A question that arises is, why adopt unscrupulous methods to gain power.

Notably, the Congress has only a few states in its kitty today. It lost Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh and could not win Madhya Pradesh. Alternatively, it wrested power in Telangana and, a while ago, neighbouring Karnataka too. It would be curious to know that the Congress party in both Himachal and Karnataka are experiencing a fear of the unknown, namely mass defection of its MLAs to the BJP side, if only to unseat the governments in the two states. The scenario of Aaya Ram, Gaya Ram—a la Haryana a few decades ago—has returned thanks to the unscrupulous, ham-handed political styles of the BJP after it assumed power at the Centre in 2014. Then BJP chief Amit Shah's infamous goal was to usher in a Congress-mukt Bharat (an India sans the Congress), which however proved to be wishful thinking. The Congress remains as the largest political establishment, pan India, its roots spread to every hamlet across the country. The BJP cannot claim to have such a reach. In electoral terms, the Congress has been faring badly in many states, also for the reason it does not have the money power that the BJP has managed to garner in Himalayan proportions. Chances are that the more the BJP attempts to play dirty politics, the more it is set to face mass disapproval.

For, with a new frenzy for Opposition unity, chances are that these parties would see reason and jointly take on the BJP in the April-May Lok Sabha polls. If their votes are not divided, there is less chance for the BJP to retain power at the Centre. Narendra Modi's personal charm kept the BJP in good shape through two terms of the NDA government. This might not last. If anything, a lack of confidence on the part of the saffron establishment is evident in the way it is hastily adopting shortcuts to unseat the elected Congress governments.

What's in a name? Apparently a lot

By Bhogtaram Mawroh

Over the last few days, the letters and articles on the origin of the term 'Jaintia' (another name for the Pnar) have been very illuminating in shedding light on the process of how history is constructed and reconstructed in an oral culture that has no written records. The absence of a script, however, does not mean the absence of a history. For example, the Inca Empire was the largest in the pre-Columbian Americas, but they did not have a written language. They left a lot of artifacts, though, which include majestic architectural sites like Machu Picchu, a UNESCO world heritage site, which has given a lot of information about the Empire and the people who inhabited it. The same is not the case with the Khasi, where such works are not yet prolific. Till then, the history of the community will be on contested ground, and from time to time, new narratives will be created to suit a particular purpose.

The attempt by PM Passah in his letter 'The History of the Jaintias and Their Kingdom' to differentiate 'Jaintia' (six letters) from 'Jaintia' (seven letter words) reminds me of a version that someone recently narrated about the origin of the name Khasi. According to this version, the name Khasi actually comes from Kashi, which is another name for Varanasi, implying that the Khasi came from the west and settled in what is today known as Meghalaya. This is completely different from the scholarly consensus that the Khasi came from the east to the present location. But if you look at the words 'Kashi' and 'Khasi', you will be inclined to believe otherwise. You change the position of the 'h', and there it is, Khasi.

My stress on the similar sounding names is because there is a suggestion that the word Jaintia, which is a different name for the Pnar (Synteng being another), does not come from 'Jaintiapur', which after being occupied by Hima Sutnga became known as Hima Jaintiapur. The origin is actually from 'Jaintia', which, according to his article, 'The Meghalaya State Anthem' was the name of the "first state JAINIA formed by the Monkhmer or Austric-speaking race in Kopili (Kupli) valley, where they settled after fleeing Kamrupa before 500 A.D.?" Accepting this argument means that the word 'Jaintia' has nothing to do with Jaintiapur or the versions given in the Jayantia Buranjis linking it to the queen Jayanti Devi. This elevates PM Passah's claim to an absolutely original one and these are not the only ones he makes.

Connected to the earlier claim, it was not the Jaintia Kingdom, according to

PM Passah, but the "Syhet kingdom that was divided into three, one of which was called the Jayantia kingdom. It is erroneous to associate this kingdom with the Jaintia kingdom, which originated in the Jaintia Hills." Let's assume for the time being that these claims are correct and see where this line of argument takes us. Accepting these claims gives rise to three possibilities.

The kingdom captured by Hima Sutnga was not Jaintiapur but 'Jayantia(pur)', and after capturing it, they changed the spelling from Jayantia(pur) to Jaintiapur, taking inspiration from the original 'Jaintia' by adding an additional letter 'i'. And that's how the subjects of this new kingdom got the name Jaintia, which continues to this day. So the oral history of Hima Sutnga capturing Jaintiapur got the name of the kingdom wrong? Or, accepting that, based on oral tradition, Hima Sutnga did capture a kingdom called Jaintiapur, but it is different from the aforementioned Jayantia kingdom. In other words, Jayantia(pur) and Jaintiapur were two different kingdoms, and only Jaintiapur was captured by Hima Sutnga. So, it's just a coincidence that Jaintia, Jayantia, and Jaintia sound so similar and existed in proximity to each other but have different origins. That's absolutely freaky and incredible. But there's a third possibility that is even more incredible, i.e., the kingdom captured was not Jaintiapur (to whom the name was given later by Hima Sutnga), but one whose name has been lost to time. The oral tradition simply gave the new name having forgotten or deliberately ignoring the old one.

Leaving aside these fanciful speculations, archeological evidence has proven that 2000 years ago (500 years before the 500 AD, when according to PM Passah, the 'Jaintia' people were fleeing Kamarupa), Nongkrem, which is more than 100 km from Kopili/Kupli (where the JAINIA state was formed), already had the presence of a population practicing iron smelting. Does it mean that people in Nongkrem do not belong to the same ethnic stock as the 'Jaintia/Jaintia, i.e., the Pnar? I am wondering what original research PM Passah has done to contradict oral traditions, genetics, literary, and archaeological evidence.

This 'original research' according to PM Passah is in his article "Nari-Rajya, or Women Kingdom, and the Name 'Jaintia'", published in "Golden Jubilee Souvenir" 2020 of the Moosalyngkat Dorbar Chhngong, Jowai. I would request that he scan

the article and tag me on Facebook so that I and others can read it. My own concern will be with the sources that he might be citing so that we can go to the original sources and see the mention of not just the term 'Jaintia' from which Jaintia is claimed to be derived but also about the 'Syhet kingdom' and the most fascinating one, the 'Jayantia kingdom' which is different from the kingdom of Jaintiapur. I hope he has mentioned some sources and not just based the article on hearsay. In particular, as mentioned earlier, it will be important to see if his version matches with the other evidence in linguistics, genetics, archaeology, literature, and oral tradition. PM Passah did not do that in his letter, and his endeavor appears, to me, to be an attempt at indigenizing the term 'Jaintia'.

Those claiming indigenous origin for the term 'Jaintia' appear to be uneasy with the foreign origin of the term, connected to the Indo-Aryan-speaking kingdom practicing Hinduism. For me, however, it represents a great achievement for our people, who were able to build a great kingdom whose boundaries in the past covered areas beyond the present-day international border and under whom many different people lived: the Austroasiatic (us), Tibeto-Burman, and Indo-Aryan. The catalyst of it all was the conquest of Jaintiapur, and therefore the name of the new political entity became Hima Jaintiapur, after which the people living under it also came to be known as Jaintia. I feel confident in this version because it is based on historical events (Jayantia Buranjis), which agrees with folk legend (the origin of Hima Sutnga and the many versions of how they captured Jaintiapur). We should assess PM Passah's version similarly and see how it conforms to peer-reviewed evidence.

Then there was his clarification regarding the population of the Khasi Hills. Initially, (and I am quoting him verbatim so that I am not accused of being inaccurate), PM Passah wrote that he "would like to see someone write on the various stages of migration of the Jaintias to populate Khasi Hills—the greatest exodus being the one led by Sajar Nangli in the 16th century, but the FIRST ONE led by U Shyllong is believed to have taken place between the 11th and 12th centuries."

Notice the emphasis that he placed on the one led by U Shyllong as being the FIRST ONE. Suddenly, in his recent letter, he wrote that "Khasi Hills was not populated by only these two migrations of the Jaintias but by four to five

before the British took over these hills." This change in emphasis happened because his argument regarding U Shyllong was found to be false. Based on the dates given by Passah, Nongkrem and Sohra in Khasi Hills already had a thriving population a thousand years before the migration of U Shyllong took place. I am not arguing that there were no migrations from what is known today as Jaintia Hills to the Khasi Hills. But the one by U Shyllong was not as significant as PM Passah claims, or even the FIRST ONE, his original claim, from which he has now backtracked. His retraction of the earlier claim about U Shyllong raises a question mark on PM Passah's previous claims as well. How genuine are those claims and what are his sources?

History has always been a contested arena and susceptible to manipulation to create a certain narrative. Scholarly consensus now exists that Sanskrit and the earliest form of Hinduism have their roots outside the subcontinent, having been brought by an Indo-European group around 3500 years ago. Khasi and the other indigenous Tibeto-Burman groups in the North East were already present at least a thousand years earlier, before these Central Asian migrants arrived on the subcontinent. Scholars had arrived at these conclusions decades ago through an analysis of linguistic, literary, and archaeological evidence. The recent genetic evidence corroborated these earlier conclusions.

However, there are those who still cling to the Out of India theory, which claims that Indo-Aryans (today's majority of North Indians and upper castes in South India) are indigenous to the subcontinent. Except for Hindu nationalists, no one takes this claim seriously. However, in the case of the Khasi, scholarship on its antiquity is not as voluminous as that of ancient India. Still, some work has been done, and it's from those few that we can get some insights into who our people are and how they came to be.

The attempt to indigenize 'Jaintia' is nothing but the Out of India version in the local context. These, though, are the growing pains that the historiography of our Hills has to undergo. In time, we will learn more from research done by serious scholars with scientific rigour and not have to pay attention to flights of fancy and the deliberate destruction or deformation of history (both oral and written) to suit a particular agenda. Till then, let us be careful of claims made without substance.

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

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Your Ticket and Your Phone..!

There's so many of us who wonder why we've been thrown into this cruel, hard world, with it's misfortunes, betrayals, dishonesty and more. Some shudder at hardships, depression and tough days they wearily crawl through, grey, dark and dim, with no sign of abatement.

Nanda Devi is surrounded by a ring of mountains enclosing the Sanctuary, which despite decades of attempts, no one was able to enter. In 1934 Eric Shipton, and his associates succeeded in finding a climbing route into the Sanctuary, via the Rishi Ganga gorge. Eric Shipton it was who in 1951 came upon the footprint of the 'Abominable Snowman' He placed his ice axe next to it for scale and took a picture, showing how huge the Yeti was.

Mount Everest was conquered by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing. They climbed from the south, from Nepal, via the Khumbu Glacier, again a route first pioneered and discovered in 1951 by a team led by Eric Shipton! What a discoverer was Eric Shipton! But here's an interesting account by the same famous explorer, and listen to what he says, "When I reached Bergen, Norway, I found that due to some miscalculation, I had only just enough money for my ticket by boat to London and none to spare for food. In those days I had a healthy appetite, and the prospect of a two day fast was not pleasant. I grew more and more ravenous as the voyage progressed. Finally, I could stand it no more and, as the other passengers were entering the ship's dining for the last meal, I asked a kindly looking old gentleman if he would bring some bread when he finished."

Shipton said, "He looked at me in astonishment and asked, but why don't you come in and eat?" I explained my plight, to which he replied pityingly, "But you don't have to pay; meals are included in your ticket!"

Can you imagine one of the greatest discoverers, a man who discovered the Rishi Ganga Sanctuary, who found the footprint of the yeti and the route that led to the climbing of Everest, not looking closely at his ticket, to finally discover at the end of his journey, that he never needed to have gone hungry? What about you and me? Have we looked closely at our ticket called life? Have we seen that it includes all the help you and I need to face and conquer what we think is a cruel, tough and dark world? What a waste!

Start looking at that lifeline called 'prayer' so boldly engraved on your ticket and use it unashamedly, unconditionally and unassumingly all the time. Stop going hungry because you, the conqueror, successful businessman, single parent, brilliant mind, clever child, aren't using your ticket! Using our ticket reminds me of last night, when I was out for dinner with friends and I'd come back late, but did what I normally do, which is charge my phone before jumping into bed and off to sleep.

This morning, I looked

puzzled at a blank screen. The phone had not charged. Now, I've spent quite some money on getting the latest iPhone, have the best charger, and have disciplined myself, that in whatever sleepy state I am, I get to charge the phone. And yet the phone showed a dark screen. I bent down, and I guess you know by now what had happened, the charger had got disconnected from the charging point, and though I'd done all the appropriate actions to charge the phone, I had not realised the charger was disconnected from the source of power.

Maybe it was meant to be, because the first thought that struck me after that was that there was a message here on that blank screen, and through my pen to all of us:

How often, we do all the right things. We go to our place of worship, bend our knees, ring the bell, prostrate ourselves, and then come back uncomfortable in the realisation we have got nothing from the whole experience, and the whole point is that the best charger in the world, which could be the highest church steeple, the largest mosque, or grandest temple could actually be disconnected!

The charger does not reveal the power of God, the connection does. And how do people around us know whether we are connected or not? By what we reveal of the power that we get from the connection. If your connection does not show the qualities of the divine, which are, what is known as the fruits of the spirit; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, then my dear friend you are lying disconnected. If you are charged with an attitude of intolerance towards other communities, anger against people of another caste or faith, and bear ill feelings towards people who hurt you in history books, then you need to check whether your charger is connected. No spiritual charge, whatever your faith, can bring such low qualities into you.

Electricity does not flow depending on how big a charger you have. God's power does not come into you depending on the size of your church or temple or mosque, but simply on a good connection. It's time individuals and nations realise this; that what we are showing to the world is nothing short of a charger, huge, big and gigantic, but disconnected, and useless!

My phone, it's screen now vibrant and bright, looks back at me, happily connected!

So there's a ticket called 'Life' which entitles you to use this wonderful app called 'prayer', but more than the ticket in your hand, is the question you need to ask yourself, and that is, "Am I connected?" Because if you aren't then all you have is a charger, and a useless ticket.

So, get yourself connected right now. The ticket in our hand gives us the right to do so..!

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

Letters to the Editor

Fiscal profligacy of the MDA-2 Government

Editor,
I am writing to express my deep concern regarding the employment of political appointees by the MDA-2 government who lack any real-life job experience within the department they have been put in. It is incredulous that such individuals are entrusted with advising on critical matters that directly impact the lives of citizens. It is my opinion that most of the people appointed by this government lack the necessary practical knowledge and understanding of how things work in the real world. Their theoretical expertise, often derived from textbooks and academic research which is not their own field of expertise, is insufficient when it comes to making informed decisions that affect industries, businesses, and the economy as a whole.

For instance, who is Jemina Shylla? What is her qualification to be put in

the Political department? What great businesses has Auguster Jyrwa established to qualify as vice-chairman of the Meghalaya Economic Development Council? Does Dr Aman War (an MBBS) know cement so intimately that he qualifies to be on the board of the Mawmluh Cherra Cement Ltd Company? What does a political science teacher like Charles Reuben Lyngdoh or Donkumar War know about the dealings of the State Planning Board or something called the Meghalaya Infratech Consultancy & Innovations Ltd? As per the recent revelations in the Budget Session, the list goes on.

This practice not only undermines the credibility of the government but also raises serious questions about the effectiveness of its decision-making processes. Furthermore, the reliance on such people perpetuates a cycle of ineptitude and inefficiency within the government. By not prioritizing the hiring of people with practical experience, the government is failing to tap into a valuable resource that could significantly improve its decision-making and operational efficiency.

I therefore urge the Chief Minister and his cabinet to take immediate action to address this issue and ensure that talented young people with real-life job experiences are given the opportunity to contribute their expertise to the state. Many young people are unemployed but willing and able to do a much better job. I am sure of it.

Yours etc.,
Avner Medon Pariat,
Via email

Meghalaya Budget 2024 - 25: A fiscal tightrope walk

Editor,
VPP President and Nongkrem MLA, Mr. Ardent M Basawiaimoit through his intervention in the ongoing budget session has raised a pertinent issue on the sustainability of burgeoning state's debt which in turn has piqued public interest in the state of Meghalaya's finances and the public debt. The issue, therefore, requires some clarity which is offered below.

The revenue account of Meghalaya which reported a healthy surplus of Rs. 652 crore in 2021-22 has gone red showing a small deficit of Rs. 44 crore in 2022-23 despite the revenue deficit grants of Rs. 1033 crore received from the 15th Finance Commission and overall growth in revenue receipts. Deficit in the revenue account implies that the excess of revenue expenditure over revenue receipts is being met through borrowings. This situation is undesirable for two reasons: (i) revenue expenditure involves spending mainly on salaries, pensions, interest payments and subsidies—commonly known as committed liabilities—which do not result in creation of assets, (ii) the multiplier effect of revenue expenditure on State's income at about unity is almost a third of that of the multiplier effect of capital expenditure. Therefore, state's borrowings should be restricted to expenditure on capital outlays which boost the productive capacity of the economy through asset creation and also leads to a greater expansionary effect on GDP, both of which increase the capacity to repay the loans

in the future.

Staying with capital outlay, expenditure on this account which touched an all-time high of Rs. 2752 crore in 2021-22 (an increase of 59 percent over the previous year) has shrunk marginally in 2022-23 to Rs. 2742 cr, with capital expenditure on Social and Community Services contracting by 27 percent in this period. In line with the target of creating a \$10 billion economy, the State government has set an ambitious target of more than doubling expenditure on capital outlay in 2024-25 to Rs. 5870 cr which it plans to finance mainly from revenue surplus that has been budgeted at Rs. 3862 crore in 2024-25. This is a very optimistic projection given the trend in the past few years.

The outstanding debt at Rs. 17000 crore at the end of FY 2023 is nearly 41 percent of the SGDP which is significantly higher than the all India states average of 28 percent. However, the debt service ratio, measured in terms of interest payment to revenue receipts, at 7 percent is still below the 10 percent threshold above which the debt servicing becomes un-

sustainable as per RBI. Any drastic shortfall in revenue realization in 2024-25 will compel the government to fall back on borrowings if it is to implement the projects and schemes laid out in the budget.

Meghalaya Budget 2024-25 is an attempt to transform the economy from the low productivity trap to high productivity growth by leveraging the 10 sectors/areas/activities which has been identified as being the strength of Meghalaya's economy. However, the financial resources that are needed to catapult Meghalaya to a \$10 billion economy will have to be mobilized without compromising the long-term fiscal sustainability of the State.

Yours etc.,
Sumarbin Umdor, NEHU
Via email

Meghalaya's development & minority rights

Editor,
I write this letter with a plea for introspection and action from the citizens of Meghalaya, particularly the

youth. As we celebrate 52 years of statehood, it's crucial to reflect on the state's development trajectory since its inception in 1972. Despite significant allocations from the central government, Meghalaya remains heavily reliant on external funding, with little clarity on how these funds are utilized.

One glaring issue is the state of our roads. Despite hefty road taxes, navigating Shillong's roads remains a daunting task, wasting both time and fuel. Our healthcare system is also in dire need of attention, exemplified by instances of even government officials seeking treatment outside the state. It's imperative to scrutinize where these allocated funds are truly being spent.

Pressure groups advocating for the welfare of the marginalized have been active, yet tangible progress in crucial areas such as road infrastructure, healthcare, education, and sports facilities remains lacking. We must push the government to prioritize these essential needs, including the construction of modern stadiums that could not only host major sporting events but also boost tourism and employment

opportunities.

Furthermore, the neglect of linguistic minorities in Meghalaya is a stain on our society. Despite constitutional safeguards, these communities continue to be sidelined. As a representative of the Meghalaya Linguistic Minority Development Forum, I urge the establishment of a Linguistic Minority Board to address their needs comprehensively. We have submitted our demands to the Chief Minister, and we remain hopeful for a favourable resolution that fosters peaceful coexistence and inclusivity.

In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "A civilization can be judged by the way it treats its minorities." It's time for Meghalaya to uphold the principles of equality and justice enshrined in our Constitution.

Yours etc.,
S. K Choudhury
President MLMDF
Shillong -4

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"Defy your own group. Rebel against yourself."

— Cathy Guisewite

The Shillong Times

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Railroading the Opposition

THE Opposition walk out on account of the ruling MDA Government's intent to push through the budget with minimum discussion and without following rules 142 and 143 of the 74 page, "Rules of Procedure And Conduct of Business in Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, 2018, is unfortunate as the public is unaware of how public funds are spent. Rule 142 says the Budget shall be dealt with by the Assembly in two stages, namely :- (i) a general discussion, and (ii) the voting of demands for grants. Rule 143. (1) says, "On a day or days to be appointed by the Speaker subsequent to the day on which the Budget is presented and for such time as the Speaker may allot for this purpose, the Assembly shall be at liberty to discuss the Budget as a whole or any question of principle involved therein, but no motion shall be moved at this stage, nor shall the Budget be submitted to the vote of the Assembly.

But the voting for demand for grants was voted even before the Budget was fully presented. Audit reports for 2022-23 shows an unexpected expenditure of Rs 3439.41 crore. This is a violation of the fund approval threshold set by the State Assembly. This was pointed out in the latest C&AG Report and includes seven grants and one non-grant. The Appropriation Accounts which is a report on the Government's spending well above the 'charged' or 'voted' amounts by the State Assembly from the Consolidated Fund showed that an amount of Rs 804.75 crore was spent without prior allocation. These are the areas that needed scrutiny within the Assembly Budget documents are not just about numbers. By scrutinising them, the public can learn the government's intentions, priorities, policies, and financial resource distribution. The government is obligated to report on "what is done" and "how much is done" for the good of the people in the 'Outcome Budget' which Meghalaya does not appear to have or follow. The Outcome Budget was developed in 2005 to measure the outcomes of the schemes for which huge amounts are allocated.

The Meghalaya State Budget does not have a statement on Gender Budgeting which contains details about schemes that have 100 per cent allocation for women, or at least 30% allocation for women. How these women-specific schemes are implemented will indicate whether women are truly empowered. Schemes intended for the welfare of children too should be separately allocated and have measurable indicators. Article 203-of the Constitution mandates that the estimates of expenditure from the Consolidated Fund of the State are voted by the Legislature. The statements of these expenditures are to be presented to the Legislature in the form of Demands for Grants. Generally, one Demand for Grant is presented for each Department. However, more than one Demand can also be presented. Each Demand for Grants classifies the total expenditure into 'voted' and 'charged' and 'revenue' and 'capital' heads of account. The Appropriation Bill is the final document presented to the legislature for voting after which the state government is legally mandated to spend money from the Consolidated Fund of the State. Obviously, this procedure was given short shrift leading to a walk out by a discontented Opposition. This does not augur well for democracy.

On February 17 in our neighbouring state, Assam a detestable incident happened to a Catholic nun in a bus from Dudhnoi to Goalpara. The nun works in Siju town, South Garo Hills under Tura diocese. Having already travelled for over 100 km from her convent she never imagined that she had to encounter the horror on-board. A report says, "The nun was mocked by co-passengers, mostly Hindus, for her religious habit and faith before she was forcibly boarded." Midway she was ordered to alight from the bus by the conductor amid cheers from the passengers.

The uncalled for incident echoed in Meghalaya legislative assembly. Charles Pynogrope of the opposition, raised the issue during zero hour on February 22. He informed that the nun was harassed and subjected to derogatory and humiliating remarks by some passengers for her dress and Christian faith before being forced to get off the bus in an isolated location. The TMC MLA sought the government's intervention with the Assam government to bring the culprits to book.

Agreeing with the concern, chief minister, Conrad Sangma, in his reply stated that he had already taken up the matter with Assam Chief Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma who assured action against the perpetrators. Sangma also informed the House that a bishop from Tura had already briefed him about the unfortunate incident. According to reports Auxiliary Bishop, Jose Chirackal who took up the matter with the Meghalaya government told that the nun was "traumatized" adding that the diocese demands action against people who humiliated the nun.

Siju MLA and education minister, Rakkam Sangma, also promptly wrote a letter to the Chief Minister urging him to raise the matter with the union government and the neighbouring state while seeking a probe on the condemnable treatment of the religious woman.

Details are awaited but why should such a shocking incident take place? This is the first time one has witnessed such abnormality. Everyone is free to don any religious dress. We see sadhus, seers, saints, gurus, mullahs, ordinary Muslims, priests and other nuns in religious attire in public places. 'Yogi' chief ministers and ministers wear their religious outfits even in offices.

Anti-Christian Elements in Assam

By Albert Thyriani

Even in parliament religious attire is not outlawed. Why should the particular nun be ridiculed in such a manner? How could one imagine that passengers did what they did just because the lady was a Christian nun?

The shameful instance is suspected to be a direct effect of the hate propaganda against Christians in the BJP ruled Assam. The chief minister himself is enthused with the right wing ideology for political mileage. He might have been taken into the BJP and was made chief minister to carry out the Hindutva agenda. As recently as February 12 the chief minister came up with the hardliner pleasing idea - banning 'magical' healing. His Cabinet approved a bill vowing to prohibit healing by evangelists as these practices dupe tribal people into conversion. This is the latest occasion when the chief minister has made accusations, purportedly also against Christians, for using inducements and allurements to convert tribals. Earlier he was often heard at gatherings counselling tribals to preserve their indigenous faith and practices and not to convert to other religions.

Why should a chief minister preach religion? Why should a chief minister say, 'Let Hindus remain Hindus, let Muslims remain Muslims, let Christians remain Christians, let adherents of indigenous religions remain so? Then why does anyone have a problem when and if others openly advocate for religious conversion? After all, all citizens under the union have the right to freely practice, profess and propagate a religion of one's choice. If cases of fraud exist, prosecution must proceed, but without any basis, allegations are made for political expediency. Christian groups termed the chief minister's equation of "magical healing" with proselytisation as 'misguided and misleading'.

It is ironic that the chief minister has been giving financial incentives to tribal groups. Should we infer that without such 'enticements' they would not remain in their forefathers' religion? We have also seen in the media cases of 'ghar wapsi' in the state. It is speculated that groups give cash and other rewards to individuals who renounce their adopted faith. These too are allurements and inducements. This too is illegal.

The government's attitude has emboldened fanatical individuals and groups in the state to create fissures on religious lines. A person named Satya Ranjan Borah, president of the Kutumba Suraksha Parishad on February 7 led leaders of 10 organizations into a press conference issuing an ultimatum to Christian schools to remove all religious statues and other symbols from their schools within a fortnight. They also demanded that priests, nuns and religious brothers cease wearing their religious dresses in the school campuses. As always the right wing Hindu group accused Christian institutions of using their facilities for conversion. Subsequently some posters then appeared on walls of some schools. School authorities also reported that individuals went to Christian run schools demanding the dethroning of statues from their pedestals.

Why are such groups permitted to utter unconstitutional statements and indulge in such intolerance? Why are they patronised to create panic and inflame hatred? Why is no action taken against such groups for threatening to upset harmony in the society? Statues and religious symbols adorn many private institutions across the world. The likes of Yogi Adityanath don their religious costume as chief minister in his office, in public functions and at all times. Then why should priests and nuns be deprived of the choice to wear their dresses? Even in some police stations, government and military establishments, religious altars are kept? Why should private schools be denied the right to have statues and symbols in their properties?

Fear and jealousy could be also a factor. Many don't understand why Christian schools are so successful? In comparison to their tiny percentage (in Assam and nationally) Contribution of Christians towards education and general nation building are legion. A year ago the Assam, RSS-Affiliated organisation, Janajati Dharma-Sanskriti Suraksha Manch demanded that Article 342A of the Constitution of India be amended, that is, Christian tribals be delisted from the Scheduled Tribe status. The "Challo Dispur" call promising to gather one lakh tribals to make the union and state government punish tribals who have embraced

Christianity was scheduled for a date.

It is amusing that Hindutva elements consider conversion as such only when ingenious tribals convert to Christianity. They don't count when tribals convert to Hinduism. This is because they mislead the public by saying that tribal indigenous religions and Hinduism are the same. This is far from the truth. Tribals who follow their indigenous religions are not Hindus. In indigenous religions there is no concept of temple and deity. Certainly there are no Hindu deities in indigenous religions. They are animists who worship in nature. When Ram Mandir was consecrated in January many 'indigenous tribals' went to Ayodhya chanting 'Jai Shree Ram.' Ram is certainly not part of indigenous tribal religions. So those who did so might have converted, to Hinduism. If Ram or any other deity makes his or her way to an indigenous religion then that is a new phenomenon. That indigenous religion is diluted if not changed. Conversion is conversion if one embraces Christianity or Islam or Hinduism or any other religion.

Religion is a matter of conscience. It is not political. In Assam a situation is crafted to prevail where Christians are made to feel targeted and threatened. As noted above Christianity made immense contributions to Assam. During the Assamese Language Movement for the recognition of Assamese as the official language in courts, government offices and as a medium of instruction in educational institutions right from the British rule in the nineteenth century, Christian missionaries played a big part.

One giant is Nathan Brown, the American Baptist missionary who is acknowledged for his invaluable works on Assamese language, grammar and script. Orunodoi, the first Assamese periodical was his creation. It was responsible for the survival of the Assamese language. He also promoted the language by publishing works of contemporary and historical Assamese scholars. Brown is one of the pioneers and champions of Assamese language and literature. The good works of Christians have continued ever since. However, there are elements today who are anti-Christian in their attitude and activism. If they are not subdued many other 'Dudhnoi-Goalpara bus' incidents will occur.

Meghalaya's political butterfly effect

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

The butterfly effect phenomenon denotes that every action no matter how big or small matters in the wider scheme of things. Every action of the past and present impacts upon and shapes future outcomes. Butterfly effect is a reminder that everything is interconnected. Even a very small action can have huge implications. For instance, X is now an IPS officer and this was possible because of his hard work which was in turn possible because of the dedication of his parents which was in turn possible because of Y who provided them with employment and Y could do that because he himself was working in company Z. It can hence be said that X became an IPS officer because of the existence of Company Z. This is the beauty of butterfly effect! It is like a butterfly flapping its wings over the Indian Ocean which then causes a cyclone over the Bay of Bengal which spilled over to Bangladesh and far-off Meghalaya.

Butterfly effect can be positive or negative. When applied to Meghalaya's political landscape the butterfly effect that emerges is of great concern.

FOMO syndrome

A positive butterfly effect is good as it results in better outcomes. For example, the concern of all the politicians on the status of generation and distribution of electricity is good. Positive outcomes can be expected from it. The problem is the negative butterfly effect. The wrong actions no matter how small do percolate into gigantic problems. Take the ban on coal mining for instance. Non-compliance is causing ripple effects on the environment, miners' deaths, image of the state government, etc. Negative butterfly effect mostly happens in a situation when everyone wants to be on the winning side. This is commonly known as fear of missing out (FOMO) syndrome which has seeped deep into Meghalaya's politics. Every politician and party wants to be on the ruling side. Many do not see any value in Opposition politics. That way the politicians enter politics for power and authority. There is less inclination towards the inherent nature of politics which is to serve the people. The FOMO syndrome of the politicians in turn influences the decisions of party workers. In recent times many party workers of other parties have jumped ship to NPP. Although flawed, the narrative of the NPP that you have to be in the ruling side to get development is working. That way the Opposition is weakened not only in the assembly but also at the grassroots. The butterfly effect of a weak opposition is that MDA 2.0 has too much of bargaining power and a free pass on all matters.

Votes for money

Before the MLA election, 2023 there was a lot of discussion about clean politics spearheaded by the Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP). Beyond VPP, there were also vote banks of other political parties who narrated on the need for clean politics. But, it will be fresh in the memories of many that when voting day approached all talk of clean politics became futile. There are two things to learn from the episode. Firstly, the effort and action towards clean politics has to be consistent and not talked about only when election time arrives. Secondly, clean politics is not only about politicians and governance, it is also about voters. In fact, it concerns the voters exclusively. There can be no clean politics without clean voters. As long as voters continue to cast their votes in return for money nothing will change. In many poll platforms politicians are found to brag openly about giving money to the voters. This is then justified

for non-performance of the politician and even financial misappropriation. Instead of this being a huge red flag for the voters they in fact laugh and clap about it. If voters are not awakened then they would not have the moral authority to demand performance and development from their political representatives. The butterfly effect of votes for money is that the voters become indifferent to the issues of corruption, bribery, nepotism, environmental degradation, etc. The rich become richer and vice-versa. Then a mindset is created that for anything good to happen, one must have political connections.

Just a feel good factor
The US\$ 10 billion economy talk is in danger of becoming just a feel-good factor. It seems more evident that MDA 2.0 is copying the central government's NDA handbook of marketing and advertisement by using fancy words and fancy statements. The US\$ 10 billion economy simply means the doubling of the state GDP to around Rs. 80,000 crores by the year 2027-28 as against the base year 2022-23 when the state GDP was around Rs. 40,000 crores.

The state has been growing at the rate of 11% for the last two years. Now, to double the state GDP by 2027-28 Meghalaya's economy needs to grow at the rate of 16% for the next four years. Reaching 16% growth per year is possible and as such the state GDP will double. However, it is to be factored that the doubling would be at current prices. This means that inflation plays a huge role in the doubling. This also means that the majority will not benefit from the doubling. It would be better to measure growth in terms of constant prices by using 2022-23 as the base. Using constant prices is a convention for measuring GDP. This would mean that growth has occurred because of the increase in production of goods and services and not inflation. This in reality reflects the livelihoods of people accurately. That way the state GDP by 2027-28 would be around Rs. 64,000 crores in real terms at 9% growth rate. This has better substance and is truly indicative of Meghalaya's real progress.

Doing the right thing
Thus far Meghalaya's political butterfly effect is mostly negative. MDA 2.0 has mostly concentrated on doing things right. For example, procrastinating on checking illegal mining and transportation, covering details of alleged miners' death, not dealing swiftly with illegal coke plants, etc., are cases in point of managing issues by doing things right. On the contrary, doing the right thing would entail acting fairly and promptly on such issues. Again, the salary given to political appointees can be saved and spent on more productive interventions like the up-coming state university. A good state university would be a wondrous butterfly effect on the lives of many students and ultimately on their livelihoods and Meghalaya's development. For instance, students who thus far have been denied higher studies due to short-ages of seats and/or high fees from private institutions can now avail of a new opportunity to shape their careers. What is needed is to do the small things right. Like in this case, putting money into the right places.

In the end the butterfly effect works most dangerously in politics. This is because politics decides the lives and livelihoods of the people. Legislations, policy formulation and implementation, etc are all political exercises. As such, the only way to ensure progress and growth is to have the right set of politicians by awakened voters.

(The writer teaches at NEHU; email: blyngdoh@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

Police force: need to trim the flab

Editor,
On September 26, 2011, India Today's special issue covered a story with the headline 'FRIEND OR FOE?' which examined the problems of the police force in India. The Opposition Congress on Monday spoke on the ills plaguing the force by going the extra mile and requesting the Meghalaya government to terminate police personnel who do not meet the physical requirements.

Policing in India is a grim reminder of a colonial spent force, attuned to using high-handed tactics to tame anti-social elements or petty criminals. Corruption creeps in and the higher the rank, the higher the level of corruption. Extortion to bribery for failure to comply with law, their range of powers are unlimited in areas such as drug trafficking, gambling dens, traffic penalty among others. Coming to grooming of the force, high-profile individuals have backed some of these bloated personnel, so to uproot this sore, one needs to understand the nexus between different parties. A strong political will is necessary to trim the flab, giving space for good nutritionists, psychologists and fitness trainers in re-shaping a peoples' force rather than a militarized, rulers' force. There was a synergy between the police and different stakeholders to break the morale of GNLA in 2018 which can be termed as 'population centric' warfare

so one needs to pay careful attention to mental resilience apart from physical prowess.

Former Deputy Commissioner, Counter Terrorism, New York City Police Department Michael A. Sheehan stressed on a vetted force which removes troubled officers which is critical for success and a also a small sized force which is paid well so that they do not fall prey to street-level dealings.

Yours etc.,
Christopher Gathphoh,
Shillong-10

The Sandeshkhali violence

Editor,
Gender violence be it in Sandeshkhali, Hathras, Kathua, Unnao, Uttarakhand, Manipur or be it against Bilkis Bano or women wrestlers must be condemned by the people in general and by the media in particular irrespective of the political dispensation in power. Also, a political party and a democratic institution must not take selective approach and adopt double standards while dealing with such matters. While criticising the government of West Bengal over alleged atrocities on women at Sandeshkhali, CPM politburo member Brinda Karat pointed out, "The (national) women's commission was here but it didn't go to Manipur or Unnao in Uttar Pradesh." If there is a doubt about the impartiality of an institution how can it instil faith in the minds of the victims?

The Opposition parties should highlight the misuse of power by the ruling party in a democratic country. But in the name of agitation, fomenting hatred is totally unacceptable. During their protest against what happened in Sandeshkhali, BJP leaders allegedly called a turban-clad IPS officer a 'Khalistani'. The malicious comment directed at the police officer was as unwanted as much as the one made on the people who protested against the CAA that they could be identified by their clothes. India needs peace and harmony not divisive politics and hate speeches.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata,

Mamata criticized for having no empathy for women

Editor,
I extend my thanks to Saili Grewal for his letter, "West Bengal women traumatised by TMC honchos; Shame on Mamata," (ST Feb. 19, 2024). Grewal's concern for the vulnerable women of Sandeshkhali is shared by every right-thinking citizen. As a concerned citizen I believe there is no greater crime than torturing and sexually exploiting women. Is the TMC party synonymous with crime and violence? In every election, there are murders and brutal attacks by TMC goons across West Bengal. This

demonstrates how dangerous this political party has become over time.

Both the National Commission for Women and many Supreme Court lawyers have condemned the TMC and have called for thorough investigations into the horrific incidents perpetrated by TMC party members.

The Calcutta High Court and the National Human Rights Commission have intervened. They have requested reports and inquiries into the allegations, emphasizing the seriousness of human rights violations and concerns regarding press freedom. Many journalists were also attacked and not allowed to enter Sandeshkhali for reporting. Even a fact-finding committee headed by the former Chief Justice of Patna was not allowed entry by the West Bengal police.

The response of the Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, to these grave injustices and her defence of the perpetrators is condemnable. This indicates that Mamata completely lacks empathy for women.

It is also surprising that we have not heard any comments from the TMC leaders of Meghalaya on the situation in Sandeshkhali. I would like to know whether they also support the criminals like their high command, Mamata Banerjee. I would also like to have an answer from former Chief Minister, Dr Mukul Sangma, as to why the TMC is silent on the sexual atrocities committed by his Party. Is the TMC so

gender insensitive despite being led by a woman?

Yours etc.,
Neha Dhananjay
Shillong-2

Debt servicing versus loan repayment

Editor,

Recently there was a debate in the Meghalaya Assembly on borrowings and debts while discussing the Budget which was not at all inspiring as nothing substantive came out of the discussions by the concerned MLAs who took part in this topic. Indeed, there was a sane letter to the editor from Sumarbin Umdor of the North Eastern Hill University on the subject (ST February 28, 2024) which made interesting reading as it was substantive. However, it will be interesting to note that Paul Krugman, the Nobel prize winning economist, has an interesting perspective on the relationship between government debt and economic growth. He argues that the US government doesn't necessarily have to pay off its \$31 trillion debt in the same way the individual household pays off its debts. Here is why:

1. Different context: Krugman emphasizes that government finance cannot be directly compared to a household's finances. Unlike people, governments don't die, and they continue to exist across generations. Therefore, the dynamics of debt repayment are distinct.

Yours etc.,
V.K.Lyngdoh
Via email

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