

"Far and away the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing."

— Theodore Roosevelt

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 199 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, MARCH 1, 2024

One nation, one poll

LATEST hints are that the 'One Nation, One Poll' system could be introduced by 2029, when the further round of the General Elections is scheduled in the normal course. The idea emerged during the first term of the Modi government, it dragged on for many years and could not be implemented for the 2019 and 2024 polls. For one, such a reform cannot be undertaken without a thorough study, which is time consuming. It takes more time in a nation where the leaders' and babus' lazy styles ensure things move at a snail's pace. What can be done in a day would be accomplished in a year's time. As a result, expenses from the exchequer for such exercises would rise sky-high. Yet, the idea of holding polls in one sweep go across the country for both assemblies and the lower house of parliament is appreciable. It can save money, time and effort at multiple levels.

So many questions naturally crop up. For one, if a government in a state falls midway through its term, a tricky situation arises. The next election can be held only after the end of the five-year term. For this, a proposal under consideration of the national law commission and a panel headed by former president Ram Nath Kovind is to form an all-party government for the rest of the term. Or, a midterm election can be held for that particular state. A question would arise, what of Parliament, if a government falls. The political leadership should sit together, discuss, sort out such issues until some clarity emerges.

Systems need to be changed or reformed for the better. Every system faces wear and tear over a period of time. The systems in this country were set in motion at the start of the post-Independence era some 77 years ago. They have rusted over the years. Vested interests tightened their grip over these systems. Even the system of democracy itself needs a relook. As Indira Gandhi once testified, different nations adopt different forms of democracy. It's only that the fundamentals – of people's will shaping their collective destiny – need to be preserved. A leadership with grit and determination can plan and implement reforms. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's two terms saw fewer attempts at reforms other than that he implemented Manmohan Singh's idea of a unified market taxation system, the GST.

Romancing the Past for the Future is Daunting

By Patricia Mukhim

As a society we have some congenital disorders that defy any attempt at correction. Every society has these defects but unlike us, people either laugh at their flaws or correct them through societal conversation. We prefer to be silent or in denial of the wrongs that merit hasty correction. So we have just celebrated the putting up of a sculpture of Tirof Sing in Dhaka. Think about it! Tirof Sing died in 1835 which is 189 years ago and we have not produced another person of such heroism who can take on the present day rulers under whom we are under another form of mental and intellectual slavery. I often wonder what if Tirof Sing were the Syiem today. Would he sit with folded hands and allow a reign of corruption to flourish and even be part of it? Can the Syiems of today not unite the people under their jurisdiction to elect responsible MLAs who will not buy votes? Have we ever heard a single Syiem publicly counselling the people to work at cleansing the electoral process because it is the dirty process of buying votes with money that has ensured that the least competent, least educated, most self-serving men and women with money to blow have been elected?

What is the result of such elections? People are abandoned while the elected feather their nests. This has been stated ad nauseum but it bears repetition. The education system which is represented by dilapidated schools, badly paid teachers and teachers who join the profession because they have nothing else to do is in complete shambles in rural Meghalaya. The educated elite, especially the privileged lot teaching in colleges and universities couldn't care a damn if the state and its people go to the dogs as long as they enjoy their charmed lives with assured pay and perks. How many universities care enough to do outreach work in villages where teachers are in need of better, more effective pedagogies. There are too many schools in the rural areas where students are taught not just English as a subject in Khasi but also the other subjects such as Social Science etc., too in the local lingo. This is because school managing committees don't have the luxury of appointing qualified teachers because there aren't any! Hence they have to take in what's available from the pool of resources. The teachers themselves are products of teachers that didn't know the simple art of communication.

We are also a very selfish society. The urban populace hardly know the plight of those beyond Shillong. We

are cosy in our own little worlds while rural Meghalaya continues to slip into a situation of depression – yes depression in terms of livelihoods; too many children to look after; too many young, abandoned mothers; too many children with no fathers and therefore not knowing what it is to experience a father's tough yet caressing love. We cannot feel the treacherous situation of the average rural folk because we don't experience them ourselves. Many of us have hardly traversed beyond Sohra and other tourist desti-

provide a sense of superiority. Those who feel powerless derive some agency from conspiracy theories. They can say, "I have the power to reject experts and expose hidden cabals." It is difficult to argue people out of their paranoia. The only solution is to reduce the distrust and anxiety that is the seed-bed of this thinking. But how do we build trust and assurance? And who will do that if not the more enlightened and privileged amongst us? But it has to be done with empathy and over a period of time. If we don't do this

"Tirof Sing died in 1835 which is 189 years ago and we have not produced another person of such heroism who can take on the present day rulers under whom we are under another form of mental and intellectual slavery. I often wonder what if Tirof Sing were the Syiem today."

nations but have been to the best locales in the world.

We also have self-proclaimed NGOs whose members travel abroad more frequently than they do within their own state and then make tall claims about their achievements. Often it's insufferable to listen to these self-sung paeans of glory which a blind world led by a shallow desire to applaud anyone who orates well with a twang is gung-ho about. The trouble is that such individuals are applauded without them having provided any evidence of life-changing situations on ground as case studies. How many lives have such rockstars helped change for the better? It's pointless trying to heal the whole world when your backyard is replete with the ugly picture of stark poverty.

In the 21st century Meghalaya, there are many in the rural outback who will not get an Aadhar Card because of some religious belief that the numbers on the card are those of Satan. Of course, this paranoia has been ably propagated by some from the urban locales who perhaps themselves own the Aadhar card, else how would they access anything or open a bank account in this day and age? Those already bedevilled by poverty in terms of access to basic needs and who feel things are spinning out of control, conspiracy theories are an effective emotional tool. David Brooks the American writer says, "For those in low status groups, conspiracy theories

now and ensure that the thousands of school drop-outs are reclaimed and sent back to school or are given some skills training, we will have another bout of militancy and this time things may not be as easy to deal with as it was in the past.

The level of obscurantism in Meghalaya is appallingly high. Imagine people willing to forgo the Meghalaya Health Insurance Scheme with a cover of Rs 5 lakh for medical treatment just because they don't want to register for an Aadhar card. Since the Aadhar is now a compulsory identity card many have decided to do without government assistance rather than register for the Aadhar. Some Christian religious denominations have been propagandists here and telling people that the Aadhar is a sign of the end times mentioned in the Bible. The learned have other issues. They claim that Aadhar is intrusive and allows the government to spy on individuals. I wonder what there is to hide from government surveillance in this day and age. Sadly, now the poorest are also the ones who cannot avail sundry government schemes because they cannot establish their legal identity.

Quite a good number of the rural populace also don't have an Election Photo Identity Card (EPIC). No amount of convincing people that voting is a fundamental right and that it is also what establishes one as a citizen is in vain. We have not as yet developed the communication

strategies that are locally relevant to convince people that documents like the Aadhar, PAN Card and Voter ID card are not satanic but intrinsic to our existence today since every government scheme demands that we have these documents.

Recently when the Cancer Conclave happened in Shillong, several instances of people not able to avail subsidised treatment for cancer for want of the MHIS card, had come to the fore. Cancer treatment is expensive yet people prefer to die than avail the Insurance scheme. How backward are we in Meghalaya that people still link such integral documents to either witchcraft or satanic powers? And when will we get out of the trap of these conspiracy theories?

In April 2022, the Hindu Businessline did a story which said that over 40% of adults in Meghalaya (out of a total population of about 33.6 lakhs) do not have the Aadhar Card. It means that these 40% don't have bank accounts and do not avail any government schemes including MNREGA, subsidised rice from the ration shops and of course no health insurance which is most critical.

The present is dismal and the future bleak for so many in Meghalaya. Our society has become a zero-sum war where conversations are stilted and keep revolving around love of Ri and Jaidbynriew (country and people) and nothing beyond that. How that love for the people is actually translated into action is of course no one's brief. Instead of pursuing change through conversations and negotiating the rough paths together, we tend to veer towards isolated paths. And because the future is so intimidating we need to rely on the past far too much for our own good. Since there are no heroes in the present we keep turning back to the past. But we know the dangers of clinging to a constructed past and living in illusions.

This world is present and real and we need the wherewithal to face it. Those who have a generous dose of this resource – have a bounden duty to share the resource with others who are deprived. Only then can we call ourselves a society and community. Otherwise, we are all just individuals placed in this state called Meghalaya. Every once in a while we think we are one people and get together to celebrate, nay to dance, but once the celebrations are over we are back to our cubicles. This is a reality we are living. A self-deception of sorts. Unless we are ready to open up our wounds to be healed by addressing the sore parts of our being we will be trapped in this hell here on earth!

Tirof Sing and Meghalaya Looking South

By Rudi Warjri

The life size statue of the legendary folk hero Tirof Sing was unveiled at the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre, Dhaka, Bangladesh on February 16, 2024. Why Dhaka? Because Tirof Sing died a political prisoner in Dhaka on July 17, 1835. Tirof Sing was actually the Chieftain of one of the then Khasi States, the Nongkhlaw Syiemship in West Khasi Hills. His exemplary act of defiance and valour against the colonial depredation by the British grew up to historically inscribe Tirof Sing as the eponymous hero Chieftain of the entire Khasi Hills. His name evokes the collective emotions and pathos of the Khasi community even after nearly 200 years after his death. The famous lines attributed to Tirof Sing by Victor Barih, "better die an independent King than reign as a vassal" have become timeless, comparable to poignant extracts from the Greek or Shakespearian tragedy literature.

One saw on social media the warrior's impressive looking sculpture created by local Khasi sculptor Raphael Warjri. The vivacious and colourful art and cultural programme that filled up the occasion with Shillong's leading music band Summersalt on the stage with all the traditional regalia, attire and musical instruments was a treat to watch. It makes one wish that one were part of the function. Also got a glimpse of the extent to which the next of kin of the Jaintia kingdom had spread its royal presence and writ in much closer Sylhet posted by a creative and dynamic bureaucrat. It may be also recalled that one Wickcliffe Syiem, Deputy Chieftain of the then Hima Nongstain had refused to sign the Instrument of Accession in 1947 and chose to go to and settle in Sylhet, Bangladesh till he died.

According to media reports the unveiling of the statue was made possible because of the interest taken by the Meghalaya Government with the support of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India and the High Commission of India in Dhaka. It would have also been in the fitness of things if the inauguration had been done jointly by a Minister from the Government of India and the Government of Bangladesh.

Now is the time to build up on the historical and emotional ties between the shared ancestry of Meghalaya and Bangladesh. The installation of the monumental Tirof Sing statue should not end up only as a culmination of historical emotions and panegyric or live in the past. It should also serve as a reminder of the vision that Tirof Sing dreamed for his people, which is to be free not only politically but also willing to negotiate and open doors for relations with the British. In the current context, it means an economic opportunity for a democratic Meghalaya to look south towards Bangladesh. Exploring more opportunities for trade and commerce, investment, tourism more land and waterways connectivity etc.

We can start with implementing the Border Haats which are already in the pipeline like Kalaichar in Garo Hills and work with the concerned authorities in the Government of India, not only for more Border Haats but even Border Points, thereby exhausting all possibilities to restore the bilateral border economy to pre-partition days. The India Bangladesh Joint Statement issued during the visit of Prime Minister Hasina to India in 2022 had included a land connectivity project between Hili in West Bengal via Bangladesh to Mahendraganj in Garo Hills. Then exploiting the natural waterways. Umngot or Dawki river becomes Goyain river in Bangladesh which then joins the bigger Surma river and finally enters into the Bay of Bengal. A joint tourism activity could be created where tourists visiting either side could enjoy the boat rides, the human activities especially

fishing and angling, the flora and fauna, the biodiversity etc. The people to people relationship can spin off into other larger projects like railways, power export, etc.

Changing the mindset of the majority tribal population in Meghalaya vis a vis Bangladesh is however fundamental. Bangladesh came into being in 1971. Yes, a new country which has suffered colonialism inexorably inherited widespread poverty like India was in 1947. Bangladesh suffered double colonialism first, under the British and then under Pakistan. The prevailing sense of condescension over people of Bangladesh should go. More significantly, data is proof about the transformation taking place in Bangladesh that is better off than Meghalaya and even India itself.

The latest Hunger index of India out of 125 countries is 111 whereas Bangladesh is at 81. Bangladesh has maintained an average annual GDP growth of 6.4% between 2016 and 2021 better than even India's. Its GDP per capita was \$2,800 in 2022—already higher than India's besides other improved indicators like infant mortality rate, maternal mortality rate and women empowerment.

According to the London Based Centre for Economics and Business Research the key factors shaping investments in Bangladesh are its investor friendly policies and a strong domestic market. Bangladesh's young demographic turning professional is boosting their spending capacity and creating a strong consumer base for attracting foreign companies. Consumer spending is further augmented by an expanding digital economy. The start-ups landscape has attracted over \$880 million in funding over the last decade, with about 90% of these investments being external and has created more than 1.5 million jobs. Bangladeshi firms are also using their positive global rankings to leverage equity capital from overseas investors and Venture Capitals. All this convergence adds to an ecosystem building like other ventures around the world leading to a stable supply chain of suppliers, customers, technology partners, bankers, among others. These are concepts which are still alien to Meghalaya.

Moreover, looking south for Meghalaya is also the only choice. The much touted Act East Policy land connectivity with Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and other South East Asian countries has come to a dead end. The signs and realities with regards to the situation that prevails currently in Manipur as well as its immediate border country Myanmar portrays an irredeemable scenario for the near future. Flagship Government of India projects like the Trilateral highway via Moreh in Manipur have stopped. The Kaladan multi-modal project connecting Kolkata via the Bay of Bengal and Sitpore port in Myanmar to Mizoram has been taken over by the rebel Arakan Army in Myanmar. This means that the Government of India will now have to explore ways of connecting with Mizoram via Bangladesh. Tripura is the only State from Northeast so far which has been able to cut across through Bangladesh by road, railways and waterways connecting with West Bengal and other parts of India bypassing the much longer chicken neck via Siliguri thereby saving on transport cost and distance dramatically. Assam should be doing the same but as a former High Commissioner of India in Bangladesh told me that the kind of pejorative narrative emerging out of Assam vis a vis Bangladesh was not helpful at all in building relations.

So Meghalaya should take courage from Tirof Sing. Look south, learn from and partner with Bangladesh to generate employment, growth and prosperity!
(The writer is former diplomat)

Letters to the Editor

Are we looking at a presidential form of election?

Editor,
According to news from the Press Trust of India on 27.02.2024 Himanta Biswa Sarma, Chief Minister of Assam made an interesting statement "I am not interested in knowing the names of the candidates (MPs). People will vote for Prime Minister Narendra Modi." Interestingly, there isn't a specific constitutional provision in the Indian Constitution permitting voters to directly vote for the Prime Minister, as the electoral process involves a combination of local representation and national leadership. In fact, it was the late Brington Buhai Lyngdoh, the first Finance Minister and later Chief Minister of Meghalaya who advocated long time back that the electorate in India should not only vote for their MPs or MLAs but simultaneously vote for their Prime Minister and Chief Minister.

From the statement made by the Chief Minister of Assam as well as the Union Home Minister recently to vote for the Prime Minister, I think it is time to amend the Indian Constitution and incorporate an article that facilitates electorates to simultaneously elect their Prime Minister and the Chief Minister in their respective states.
Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Repeated Violation of Human Rights in Tibet by China

Editor,
I am writing to draw attention to the rampant violation of human rights and brutal oppression being experienced by Tibetans inside Tibet every single day under the draconian rule and wrathful watch of People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Chinese authority.
The recent news of illegal detention and brutal assault

of more than 1000 Tibetans by Chinese authorities, mainly monks and villagers protesting peacefully against the forceful relocation and planned construction of Gangtuo Hydro Power Project on Drichu river in Derge region, south east of Tibet is one such case. The villagers and monks were only pleading with the Chinese officials to stop the construction of dam and defend their land comprising two villages and eight monasteries that will be destroyed due to the proposed 2240 megawatt Gangtuo hydro power station, leading to their submergence.

These 2 villages are home to more than 2000 Tibetans and one of the monasteries, the Wonto monastery is believed to date back to the 13th century and has huge historical significance with some of the most ancient forms of Buddhist paintings – a group of murals dating back to the 14-15 century are preserved in the monastery. Many under detention are also being reportedly admitted to hospital as a result of brutal assaults during the interrogations.
This is completely against

and sheer violation of basic human rights and disregard to the Tibetan way of living, cultural heritage and Tibet's environment on the part of Chinese authorities. The protest which initially began on February 14, 2024 after receiving a forced relocation order from Beijing by local Tibetans inside Tibet, is today being continued by Tibetan diaspora across the world by organizing demonstrations/protests at Chinese Embassies/Consulates at major cities of the world including Delhi, New York, Toronto, Paris and many more to support and express our solidarity to every single arrested monk and villagers during the recent protest and also to heavily condemn this wanton act of repression and draconian rule by Chinese authorities in Tibet.
Yours etc.,
Yangchen Dolkar
Shillong

Where's the inclusive spirit?

Editor,
Once again I wish to re-

iterate on the point of the omission of the Pnar language in the State's anthem. After writing a couple of letters on this issue, looking back, I perceive that the Government did try to justify its stand by quoting the 2015 act passed in this regard (but which can be easily taken care of, as even our Constitution had been amended from time to time).

What amazed and perplexed me was the excitement, the invaluable research work done on history, the lineage system, the language problems and so on and so forth on the Pnar people by many authors, historians, writers and researchers who went out of their way to justify their stands/reasons to prove that we the Pnar are not the main tribes of Meghalaya. Hence the exclusion.
Looking at these, it seems that there are people who are hell bent on opposing our request even though we had asked for inclusion of only 1/2 lines in Pnar language in the anthem. The question that arises, is - Why? Why bring in such a heated debate on almost a daily basis on this issue? Why as the Khasi- Jaintia

we do not have big hearts to support one another? We are not asking for the moon, the sun or the sky....

Why did vehement arguments arise out of this? Are we not living all these years as one, like one big family? Why create a crack in our unity? I am saying this from the perspective of a common person not the elite because the stakes are not so big and are not conducive for a thorough in-depth study.

My fervent prayer to all is that we must have golden hearts and concrete feelings towards each other and work on strengthening our roots so that our future generation would emulate the same.
To conclude, I would like to say that there may be those who would be offended by this letter and to them I offer my apologies in advance and also I reiterate that there are no puns intended here.
Yours etc.,
Helen Dkhar,
Via email

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

"Tolerance is giving to every other human being every right that you claim for yourself."

— Robert Green Ingersoll

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 200 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, MARCH 2, 2024

Maxwelton Estate Conundrum

THE 9-acre Maxwelton Estate has been under litigation for several years now. It's one of those remnants of British acquisitions under a 99 year lease which was perhaps not taken possession of legally after the British left this region. Naturally land sharks then would have set their eyes on this prime land. In fact, a sizable chunk of revenue land around that area and elsewhere is converted to private land through subterfuge. That it would take a pressure group to step in and protect the land from so-called illegal settlers who have, over a period of time turned the entire place into a slum is characteristic of governance in Meghalaya. The district administration has been spineless in terms of protecting revenue land over a period of time. But whenever the district administration has taken it upon itself to evict illegal settlers from the river front (Wah Umkhrah) such as had happened in Polo- Fourth-Furlong- Demseiniong area, the courts have been quick to step in and the case continues interminably thereby exhausting the energies of administrators who are dragged into such cases.

Earlier, in 2017 the High Court had ruled that compensation to the claimant to the estate would have to be paid as per the Land Acquisition Act, 1894 whereas the claimant wanted to be paid at the rate payable in 2013. If the ownership of the Estate is established beyond reasonable doubt it is not understood why the State Government has not proceeded with the matter and allowed it to drag, thereby allowing the area to turn into a slum in the heart of Shillong. In 2019, the then Environment Minister, James Sangma had stated in a cabinet meeting that a public park would come up at the same disputed space - Maxwelton Estate at Kench's Trace. If the matter was still sub-judice, how did the minister say that a park would be built there? Between then and now what action has the Government taken to ensure that it reclaims what is essentially revenue land? Interestingly, in 2019, James Sangma had stated that though the area was earlier claimed by JN Bawri, it is currently under the possession of the Government following a court case. If such is the case then should the Government not evict the illegal settlers who have been staying there over the years? The question that arises is also whether the Government has a record of all the revenue land under its possession. It is doubtful

Now the matter has reached a point of confrontation where the student's body is building houses ostensibly to allow indigenous people to settle there. The students' body is well aware that an ultimatum to the Government (district administration) is meaningless when the matter is sub-judice but how does that matter to it?

Smart Cities need Community Involvement

By Sanjoy Hazarika

Above Lumsophoh is a fine forest that stretches for kilometers, one of Shillong's green lungs. Opposite the Accountant General's quarters at one entrance to the forest where I walk many days, is an informal rubbish dump of plastic, discarded clothes, bottles and even footwear. As you go along for the first few hundred meters you see chips and biscuit wrappers and empty bottles. Then it becomes near pristine.

I believe that communities (whether through the local garbage disposal groups or the NGOs and clubs or the Shongs) need to be active to protect one of Shillong's greatest assets and treasures.

The forest paths and other walking areas (e.g. above Lumsophoh) can have occasional signages with icons and names of birds, insects/flora to be found there with a little explanation and a website description (as in Europe - Black Forest in Germany; the famous Jacob's Weg or the Way of St James. The latter is a network of pilgrim paths leading to the shrine of the apostle Saint James the Great in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia in northwestern Spain. I've done parts of this and en-route you meet many people cycling and walking too as you travel by streams, windmills, meadows with horses and cattle, through forests and over hills).

In Shillong, local trek guides can be encouraged and trained and trekking maps can be developed. Keep enough garbage bins for recyclable and non-recyclable trash. Visitors may be encouraged to carry their own trash out. The idea is to build a repository of knowledge that can be accessible worldwide; these treks can be marked on the scale of their physical challenge. Thus, travelers who wish to come this way, can design their own programmes for treks, travel and enjoyment not just book their accommodation.

These to me are illustrations of priorities. We are all familiar with the Post pandemic situation when governments sought ways to bring people safely out into public spaces. We can recall those difficult, desperate times when there were challenges in getting food and health access to vulnerable communities or lakhs of people were trying to get home across hundreds of kilometers.

But in India, what is regarded as a placemaking movement is still at a nascent stage with the approach still very centralised, with governments exerting control over who has access to and uses public spaces

Yet, streams, forests and

these hills called home are natural harbours for public recreation and social as well as personal interaction and reflection. Nature created the original habitat. We have to protect it.

Let's look at a few government initiatives and some suggestions for citizen-friendly ones.

In India, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) has been spearheading a top-down process of placemaking initiatives through challenges (like Streets for People, Cycle for Change) delivered under the umbrella of the Smart Cities Mission.

Placemaking projects (as part of Smart City initiatives) are implemented in a fragmented manner, often with hidden social and economic costs, with minimum efforts to integrate the small-scale placemaking projects with the broader city network).

Institutions that seek to help through the provision of programmes and services have been criticized for providing supports that are often regarded as:

1. Done to citizens: coercive, educative/directive, seeks to fix/cure, or

2. Done for citizens: less coercive; moving towards deeper involvement, but where the professionals nevertheless remain in control.

In recent years there has been a shift in institutional practices and policy discourse, for example in Ireland, towards:

3. Doing with citizens: this approach, sometimes referred to as a partnership or co-production approach/co-design, co-decision-making, aims to transcend "doing to and doing for", by promoting more equal and reciprocal relationships. Place-improvement can happen at all levels and is most effective and impactful when the smaller-scale quick wins and major strategic initiatives work together to help create great places.

The effort needs to start with what residents (inhabitants) can do themselves as an association of citizens, without any outside help. (Done by)

• Then looking at what they can do with a little outside help. (Done with)

• Finally, once these local assets have been fully connected and mobilized, citizens decide collectively on what they want outside actors to do for them. (Done for).

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals 2030 were set by the United Nations and endorsed by all countries; through a common plan of action, they seek to address

interdependent challenges before three dimensions - economic, social and environmental - to meet current and future needs.

Although all the goals seamlessly connect to each other, states like Meghalaya and other parts of the region need to look at four cross-cutting subthemes: SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities, SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Infrastructure SDG 12 Responsible consumption and production as well as SDG 13: Climate action.

At the heart is the definition of the word sustainability: 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

What I've described so far are part of the tangibles and intangibles that make up a living heritage, energetic spaces, an amalgam of all the microcosms of all its communities, cultures, living conditions and spaces. Where do we start? I gave one suggestion right at the beginning.

As climate change impacts everyone, both in rural and urban spaces, one practical way of conserving water is by insisting on water harvesting systems in all houses, apartments, whether old or new. The district administrations should mandate the local dorbars/doloi/nokma to implement this.

Various groups are making yeoman efforts to clean the city especially its highly polluted water bodies. Instead of depending on any one group or business or government agency, perhaps the improvement of the immediate environment in areas with high footfalls such as Police Bazar (PB), Laitumkhrah, Polo Grounds etc., may be best tackled by residents and communities of the area itself. Such areas are common spaces which are used by tourists and local residents, families and professionals, taxis, shops, eateries, chemists and businesses (large and small).

At the end of a busy evening, Police Point in PB is a shambles, littered with plastic and food refuse, with winds blowing trash everywhere, impacting conditions. It is unhygienic, unattractive and unfriendly to local communities and visitors. There are no traffic wardens to help pedestrians cross the road; the latter have to depend on the goodwill of drivers to cross safely. Indeed, there is a segment of the Smart Shillong plan which talks about traffic awareness. But where's the training, the knowledge, the common sense and how and where

have the funds been used? There are few hygienic public toilets for men and women. That is surely a marker of a 'smart city'.

Involving neighbourhood communities in such simple efforts could help foster a sense of common ownership. It could be a small start but one that could be replicated in other towns such as Jowai and Tura. For one, specific points with high footfalls can have large size rubbish bins, separate toilets for men and women, regular cleaning staff and monitors.

Other steps could be to have clear good visual signages on roads indicating distances to various points or places of public/tourist interest.

The suggestion is 'start small, start local but plan incrementally. Bring in communities and knowledge holders, open up shared spaces, create opportunities.

We are located in a larger region that is called the North-east - the question arises, east of what and north of where. It is often forgotten that the coinage grew from colonial times but with a specific geographical location. It was north-east of Rongpur, now in Bangladesh, then Bengal, and a premier trading and administrative post in times past.

Today as I walk up and down the Fire Brigade slope, there are trails of plastic everywhere. The footpath to Laitumkhrah bazar looks new but isn't much broader so you have to twist and turn to avoid bumping into people. That's not the indignity with which residents should be moving about. Perhaps Chief Minister Conrad Sangma may like to take a stroll there in the afternoon to see how people manage.

We must exercise our right to know by asking questions through social media and RTI, for this is for the public good, for sustainable spaces which are public spaces and need to be safe. Ultimately a city is that of the citizens. And if we have citizen-journalists then why not a new group -- citizen-academics? Citizen-academics are equipped with technical tools and skills, undergirded by theory, and are uniquely placed to bring research to bear on policy and practitioners.

At the end of the day, we're storytellers. We share stories, through these we share life experiences. We share spaces.

(Sanjoy Hazarika is an author, columnist, film maker and activist. This is part of his address to the ICSSR national seminar in Shillong on Placemaking and City-scaping of Shillong through Narrative and Cultural Representations)

Is police arrest of Trinamool strongman Sheikh Shahjahan a scripted drama? Bengal administration has much to answer for the delayed action

By Sushil Kutty

A video of Trinamool Congress strongman Sheikh Shahjahan striding down a corridor with several police running to keep up with him has surfaced online. Shahjahan is a blocky, chunky fellow, and the video was of Thursday, February 29, morning, shortly after Sheikh was arrested following a 55-day absence from police eye that triggered speculation with the women of Sandeshkhali - an island in the 24 Parganas district of West Bengal - accusing him of serial rape and sundry other sexual harassment crimes. The man also is an alleged land-grabber and extortionist. Men run scared of him and women cover in acquiescence. Intimidation of men whose wives he and his henchmen took away for pleasure is now part of dark lore. Believe it or not, Sheikh Shahjahan - no descendant of the Mughals - upset the lives of a large number of Bengal denizens. One journalist found himself behind bars and one TMC leader continues to be in jail. Shahjahan will be meeting this leader soon enough. The leader was Shahjahan's mentor and then second fiddle as Shahjahan flirted with fortune and rose higher than the mentor. Shahjahan was 'Bhai' and there is a lot that is fishy about him including that he is the 'Kingfisher of Sandeshkhali', making the fishery business count for him and his "people". Early in his "political career", Sheikh Shahjahan impressed Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. Sheikh Shahjahan faces charges of torture, sexual harassment and land grabbing with the Trinamool Congress and the BJP fighting over the question of his arrest - is it true arrest or false arrest? The BJP calls it "staged arrest," fixed and carried out only after the high court said any central investigating agency can arrest Shahjahan. The Trinamool Congress calls it an arrest that was waiting to take place once a few legal irritants were brushed aside.

Sandeshkhali burst crackers and some women danced on the dusty pathways when news of Sheikh Shahjahan's arrest trooped in. From all the stories told and heard, more than half Sandeshkhali's women were walking-talking sexually harassed survivors of Sheikh Shahjahan and his procuring agents' sexual advances. It was a sordid drama played out in plain view in Sandeshkhali.

A story so unusual and so weird that it confounds with each new telling. The parts where the male of Sandeshkhali prove their impotence against Sheikh Shahjahan's open season on their helpless women-folk is the worst kept secret of Sandeshkhali. Police will not get to the bottom of this lost manhood phenomena, but it sits on the collective conscience of Sandeshkhali and will remain there for decades if not centuries.

For the Trinamool Congress, Sheikh Shahjahan like any political operative is an asset and the Trinamool Congress is taking credit for arresting him. "The much maligned West Bengal Police is doing its job" is the refrain. Police were aware of the Sheikh's exact whereabouts but arrested him only after the high court said CBI and ED can also "arrest". Sheikh Shahjahan has been "Most Wanted" for the Enforcement Directorate ever since he masterminded a mob attack on an ED team that had come to fetch him. The court order was to arrest Sheikh Shahjahan within seven days. TMC leader Kunal Ghosh said it showed the state was "confident of the ability of the state police." Sheikh Shahjahan's arrest will come in handy to claim the police of West Bengal was not a political tool of the Trinamool Congress unlike the Modi government which used the CBI, ED and the IT Department to forward its political agenda with arrests and interrogations of vulnerable politicians. Come to think of it, the BJP would have liked the Sheikh Shahjahan drama to continue to play for another couple of weeks, at least till as long as the dates of the Lok Sabha polls were not announced. Now, with the arrest of Sheikh Shahjahan, the excitement of Sandeshkhali, the titillating finer details of what went on behind the curtains, and the brigandish tales of Sheikh Shahjahan rub out in time and then what?

All that will be left for the BJP is to claim that the arrest was scripted drama; and that the Trinamool and the police were in cahoots. One thing is for sure, Sandeshkhali at least is out of Sheikh Shahjahan's spell. Perhaps even out of the Trinamool's hand. Minus the strong arms of Sheikh Shahjahan and his henchmen, Sandeshkhali will slip out of orbit. Question is how many Sandeshkhalis are there in West Bengal? The Sandeshkhali culture goes back decades and is not a Trinamool invention. If anything, it was a discovery and Sandeshkhali was in the "safe custody" of Sheikh Shahjahan. But for the BJP and its penchant for letting loose central investigating agencies on political rivals, there wouldn't have been a Sandeshkhali and the opposing narratives. The ED added fuel to the fire. And Sheikh Shahjahan gave to the unfolding drama colour even if the dark undertones never let go. Long after these elections are over, and long after justice has been delivered to the survivors of Sandeshkhali, the one figure who will not be forgotten will be the 'Ravager of Sandeshkhali'. It's a wonder West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee couldn't spot a blemish on Sheikh Shahjahan. On Thursday, the Trinamool Congress suspended Sheikh Shahjahan from the party for six years. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

After abolishing Matric Examinations, What next?

Editor, Yesterday professor Jacob Shylla shared valuable information on CUET. What I gathered from his generous explanation has drawn me to this - that a premonition of educational disaster is hovering dangerously over our children's future. Our well-fortified bunkers of reservation policy will have to stand the acid tests of NEP. Our colleges and universities will no longer be safe havens. That's the time when only the fittest survive educationally. At this rate, where will our pampered students fit in? I don't use the word "learners." Where are our heroes (we don't choose heroes here though they are many) to show the way?

Last month's meeting with class 11 students from a school in Bangalore must have awakened us to the reality knocking at our doors. Their inquisitive nature, acumen, knowledge beyond

classrooms were overwhelmingly educative. Where are we heading? Here, our student haven't even got the first taste of learning, motivation for independent learning, knowing our capabilities; application of prior knowledge; reading et al, especially in rural schools.

Taking a cue from the present trends, our education will only become worse with the abolition of exams. Surely this is laissez-faire attitude! Who will even waste an ounce of energy to memorize those archaic notes? Well, that's the time for school admins and teachers to scratch their heads; but will they? Do we have the knack and the honesty to relearn and unlearn, and redesign the learning programmes, assessment scales and so on? These are not the duties of the government; its duty is only to see that schools paid by it have to perform and conform to the demand of the times. The admins have to carry the responsibility of setting learning objectives at various levels (level of questions to be set, learning environment etc). The best thing the department can do is sending its experts to guide and assess the respective schools,

and reduce the number of redundant nuances on teachers and the schools. We can't afford to reduce our IAS officers to mere writers of letters to remind teachers about the attendance in the portal like TIMS and other non-essentials for we have many things more important than these. The choice left is only to evolve, adapt, improvise, or be doomed! Only time will tell.

Yours etc.,
Isaid Khongjee
St John Bosco Boys' Hr
Secondary School
Sohra,
Via email

In solidarity with Tibet

Editor I am writing to express my anguish and strong solidarity with the people of Tibet, especially those protesting (peacefully), the "planned construction of Gangtuo Hydro Power Project," on the Driчу river in the Derge region -- as reported by Yangchen Dolkar in a letter to TST (Mar 1, 2024). Regarding PRC's brutal assaults on Tibetan activists, as Yangchen Dolkar says, poi-

gnantly, "This is completely against and sheer violation of basic human rights and disregard to the Tibetan way of living, cultural heritage and Tibet's environment on the part of Chinese authorities." PRC's authoritarian methods confirm my hunch -- that communists can be as materialistic as capitalists -- but with greater authoritarianism. PRC's actions in Tibet bode ill for the world, as they give us a glimpse of how China might act once it becomes the next superpower. Once China rules, we might miss freedom-loving America -- despite its imperfections. Yes, America has been known to support dictators. But by the American government -- not by its freedom-loving, generous people.

It is obvious that the structured democracy is waning from the face of History. I always thought this is because the great Spirit of History washes away all errant ideologies, to make room for Truth. It was my hope that democracy is being washed away to make room for a better and truer democracy. But PRC's actions in Tibet seem to point to the onset of a dark authoritarianism that can only spur

protests and revolutions. For the human spirit needs freedom as essentially as the human body needs oxygen. All sentient beings need freedom -- not just humans -- which is why animals suffer so much under conditions of factory farming. Often spurred by crude materialistic ambitions, dictatorial regimes crush this spirit of freedom, bulldozing alternative worldviews and quieter priorities -- like the sustenance of an ancient culture like Tibet, and its intangible treasures.

So I offer my fervent solidarity to the worldwide protests against PRC's current actions in Tibet. Let us not forget PRC's brutalities against the unarmed Tibetan people, when it first invaded Tibet in 1950, using revanchist arguments similar to Putin's with respect to Ukraine. Small wonder that Xi Jinping and Putin are such good "friends." Yes, I use quotation marks because friendship is inherently virtuous. Two crooked dictators like Xi Jinping and Putin cannot be friends. Unworthy of friendship, they share (at best) a deal -- not a friendship! I hope the world will, one day, find an island on which to place all violent

dictators -- so they can leave the rest of us at peace. To Xi Jinping and Putin, we may add Assad, and many others!

Technically speaking, India may still be a democracy. But I can well imagine similar things happening in India -- especially to those who are poor, downtrodden, and at the mercy of the rich.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Need for Outcome Budget in Meghalaya

Editor, The editorial, "Railroading the Opposition" (ST 29 Feb 2024) made interesting reading. From the narration of the editor, it appears that most if not all of the Members of the Legislative Assemblies past and present in Meghalaya are ignorant about the 'Outcome Budget' otherwise, they would have raised the issue in the House especially during the budget session. Having been instrumental in preparing the Outcome Budget for the North Eastern Council since

2005-06 till superannuation in 2014, one must share that this concept was first introduced by the then Finance Minister, P. Chidambaram. This approach aimed to transition from mere "Outlays" to result oriented "Outputs" and "Outcomes" in developmental schemes. Since then, both the Union government and 11 States across India have been publishing Outcome Budget Statements (OBS) to align with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

The Outcome Budget in India serves the purpose of shifting the focus from mere financial allocations (Outlays) to measurable results (Output and Outcomes) in developmental schemes. By emphasising outcomes, it aims to ensure that public funds are effectively utilized to achieve specific goals and improve the quality of services provided to citizens. This approach encourages transparency, accountability, and better governance by linking budgetary allocations to actual performance and impact. It is strange that out of 28 States and 8 Union Territories in the country only Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Mad-

hya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab and Rajasthan currently bring out Outcome Budget Statements (OBS). These states actively publish Outcome Budgets to track the progress of developmental schemes and ensure effective utilisation of public funds.

The Outcome Budget in India is published annually by the Government of India. It is typically released towards the end of February each year. This budgeting technique focuses on measurable results and outcomes rather than just financial allocations, ensuring effective utilization of public funds and transparency in governance. It is time for the Government of Meghalaya to publish an Outcome Budget as the traditional budget focuses only on financial allocations while the former emphasises achieving tangible results and improving governance effectiveness.

Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

Music therapy could help manage the pain of bereavement



Grief has always inspired songwriters. Popular songs including *Let Me Go*, by Gary Barlow, Eric Clapton's *Tears in Heaven* and *The Living Years* by Mike and the Mechanics, were all written as a way of working through the grief of losing a loved one. *Tears in Heaven* deals with the sudden loss of Clapton's four-year-old son. *The Living Years* addresses the songwriters' mutual regrets over disagreements with their fathers while they were alive.

The songs are as poignant and heartrending as you might expect from something written about close family bereavement. Barlow's *Let Me Go*, however, is a remarkably upbeat and joyful record, written from the perspective of the pop star's stillborn daughter, Poppy. Barlow has said that writing the song in the voice of his daughter helped keep her memory alive and offered an opportunity for celebration as well as grief.

But you don't have to be a famous musician for music to play a role in helping you to work through grief. **Music helps communicate the unspeakable** Music can help people cope with grief in a variety of ways. It can help create connection with a deceased loved one. It can help those grieving to explore spirituality (hope and meaning in life) and deal with challenging emotions. Many people have an intimate

connection to the songs that have helped them through bereavement. Music therapy harnesses people's innate connection to music as a means of expression. The therapy helps them communicate and deal with emotions that might otherwise be overwhelming, painful and hard to put into words. The therapy is conducted by a professionally trained music therapist, using activities like singing, playing instruments, writing lyrics or listening to music to help patients and their loved ones navigate end-of-life and bereavement. This could include helping to improve communication and intimacy between the patient and loved ones, aiding spiritual exploration or even managing physical pain and symptoms. Music therapy boasts a rich history in end-of-life care, supported by a growing body of academic evidence. As part of a research, music therapy was offered to people with life-limiting illnesses, such as terminal cancer, in hospice care. The research suggested that music therapy may not only be of benefit to patients, but also to their loved ones. Music can evoke positive memories and allows a depth of communication that can't always be achieved through words. Music therapy at end of life, then, can help provide a more comforting environment to say goodbye to a loved one and helps create a unique, lasting memory to hold onto after they die. It is common for music therapists working in end-of-life care settings to include the person's loved ones in their therapeutic practice. This suggests there is demand and recognised value in music therapy as a support for people both before and after the death of their loved one. But what does the evidence tell us? **Preventing prolonged grief disorder** A systematic review was conducted to identify all the research published worldwide on music therapy with loved ones of people with life-limiting illness, before and after death. It was discovered that a total of 34

studies, which used music therapy in different ways. For example, by supporting people with life-limiting illness and their loved ones within the same session or by bringing groups of loved ones together. It was found that no conclusions could be made on the effectiveness of music therapy as a form of bereavement support, as there was a lack of high-quality trials. However, rich accounts of people's experiences of music therapy provided insight into how it can influence the ability to cope with grief and improve quality of life and mental wellbeing. Music therapy also seemed to protect against prolonged grief disorder or complicated grief (when someone experiences debilitating long-term emotional distress after a bereavement). Family and loved ones of people with life-limiting illness shared how music therapy helped reduce depression, anxiety, family conflict, poor perceived social support, difficulty accepting loss, and difficulty accessing positive memories - all of which are warning signs of complicated grief. The research review showed that group singing "fostered feelings of connection, awareness, and support". Other studies with loved ones also shared insights into how music therapy helped them prepare for the loss of their loved one, and increased their spirituality. The care industry is increasingly seeing the importance of social connections when it comes to supporting the grieving process. This is especially important in a post-pandemic world where the risk factors for complicated grief such as depression, anxiety and poor perceived social support have been heightened through severing of personal relationships and community groups. A report by The World Health Organisation recently suggested that the arts can help improve health and wellbeing by addressing complex problems, such as prolonged grief, which are resistant to other more conventional treatments. This suggests there may be an important role for music therapy in bereavement support. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, MARCH 3, 2024

Birth Day Forecast
Moon sextile Mars on your solar return chart, which is going to bring excellent results for you. Your imagination will create wonderful environment for growth. You will have the energy and ability to do perfect things. You will be popular and sociable at work and will be appreciated by peers and superiors. You will be raring to go and achieve best in your field. New job opportunities will come with a good pay package. Those already in job will get promotions. Those in business may enter into partnership or joint venture. They will get good profits. And will also plan expansion of their business. You will be able to take people along with you. Your popularity in family and social circles will increase. Some body known to you may get attracted towards you. And it would result in a cosy affair leading to marriage. Your overall health will be fine. Financially you will remain strong and stable.

This week for you!

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) This week brings forth a powerful and energetic approach to resolve professional projects in hand. As you travel you will find that it brings in luck in another aspect of your life. Some of you may have to make some critical decisions due to situations in your life that force you to make choices between career and family goals. The challenge is to find a healthy balance to improve home life, while at the same time tending to your career needs. Meditation is needed for gaining deeper insight into personal relations and complex situations.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You are likely to spend time in different places and work closely in new associations as you combine luck and good management. This tends to change your outlook in life, perhaps stimulated by travel or contact with people of different cultural backgrounds. You are more determined to achieve your personal goals, and more strategic in the manner you go about doing so. Fundamental changes in your domestic situation and career orientation are likely. New friendships are likely to emerge during this time, supportive and easygoing ones.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You are energetic, and willing to explore new ideas. You go beyond the individuality of people around, and would like to resolve conflicts and differences. You feel the need to be more liked by family members, and the need to be more open to others. Events are such that you move towards a more objective approach to your life and you become more frank. Stress may crop up at unexpected times. You may find it necessary to look at some lifestyle changes and to give up some techniques like eating and meditation.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You are rejuvenated and you are likely to relate well on the interpersonal level as you move towards a long-term commitment. You are likely to meet people who are very considerate and understanding. You are also likely to form business relationships and to get on a deep level of mutual appreciation and understanding for each other. You are in touch with people who are sensitive and spiritual qualities. You are able to exhibit a greater level of sensitivity and sensitivity towards others. Walking and gardening can be very therapeutic.

Leo: (July 23 - August 22) This is a good time for romantic relationships. You will have the energy to create energy to achieve success in your life. You are bold, courageous and confident in dealing with your professional and family matters. It's a very favourable time for developing your relationships with parents and other relatives. At times life may seem to be very challenging and you may need to remain in touch with your family and friends. You may give attention to fitness and to related programs.

Virgo: (August 23 - September 22) You are attached to you for your excellent work. Your social life is enviable as you interact with people. You need to remain in touch with your family and friends. You may stand to lose valuable energy and time in your domestic

issues and spend quality of time with people you care about and in activities that are rejuvenating. A light and playful attitude takes you to high places and to important people. Don't allow old fears to get to you but confront important issues and people that are likely to change. A happy surprise awaits you.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) Trust your feelings and intuition about people and situations when taking decisions. Work and pleasure can be combined. You connect with well known personalities and artists. You could find relationships with others confusing and hard to define. Although you may enjoy an increase in your intuitive capabilities, you can also be too open to influence so that fears or delusions impact your ability to see your life clearly. This could also be a time when you are more creative, yet not always in a reliable or organized manner. Explore, look for adventure and keep your eyes open for opportunities this week.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You feel fresh and re-energized this week. You may take up new assignments and a project that would call for creativity and 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. There may be gains from property and fixed assets. You are nurturing and caring in personal relationships. You are likely to experience events that highlight the necessity to share and trust. You may have to deal with willfulness and issues of power and competition in others and in yourself.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) This is a special time for romantic relationships. Your credibility is important at this time and efforts at self-promotion might be made now. It is time to come back to your inner center to regain physical strength, mental balance, emotional harmony and spiritual awareness. A comfortable level of personal popularity helps to keep conflict to a minimum. With the ability to handle your emotions successfully, there is less stress on both your mind and body. Your self-confidence and positive attitude will reward you.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) The planetary configuration indicates responsibilities and commitments may take up more time than usual this week, so set some time aside. Also, parse your schedule so that you don't take on too much and that you don't wind up handling more errands and odd jobs than you meant to. The key to success is adopting a realistic, practical and disciplined approach to your life which comes easily to you. Certain elements of your social and financial lives are stabilized, secured, and more reliable. You may solidify a romantic relationship under this influence.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) This period proves good in terms of investments and speculations. It's a good time to join religious organizations and groups. You move on the path of success and betterment in terms of better financial stability, emotional and mental satisfaction and intellectual growth. Circumstances may be such that you need to handle money more carefully or this may simply come naturally to you. You would focus to regain mental balance and emotional harmony. Travel will be meaningful.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You are compassionate and generous with family, friends and relatives, drawing respect from them. You have new attitudes towards love matters, finances, and social relationships. Your creative urges are powerful indeed. New friendships, or new spins on established connections, are indicated. A period of hard work and effort is also in store. You take on new responsibilities, but enjoy the challenges. Beware of over indulgence of any kind by maintaining balance in all areas of life. Walking can be a therapeutic pastime. You would be dynamic, forceful and assertive in professional ventures to establish a position of authority. Health and energy need to be conserved through a busy time at work.

Exploring Corbett Tiger Reserve through a captivating photographic guidebook

By Abha Anindita

Wildlife In and Around Corbett Tiger Reserve: A Photographic Guidebook is a visual masterpiece that transports readers into the heart of India's magnificent wilderness. Whether you're an avid nature lover, aspiring wildlife photographer, or simply curious about the natural world, this book promises a journey through the Corbett Tiger Reserve, even while you are on your armchair.

Put together by Rajesh Chaudhary and Vinesh Kumar, who are passionate nature lovers and photographers themselves, the book has been published by NIYOGI Books and comes at a minimal cost of Rs 1495. Packed with over 1500 high-quality photographs, the book offers a comprehensive look at the diverse fauna and flora within the Corbett Tiger Reserve (CTR) and its surrounding areas.

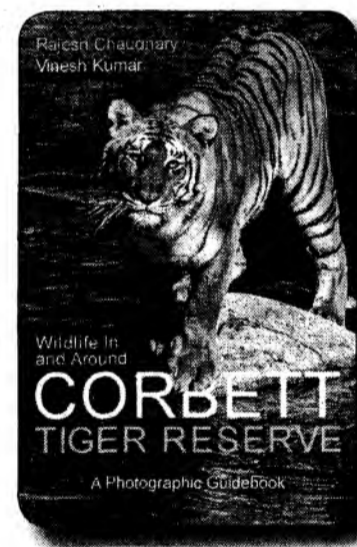
Beyond the stunning visuals, the book provides informative descriptions for over 700 species, making it a valuable resource for identification and learning about the complex ecosystem. The easy-to-use format and clear organisation make it suitable for both casual readers and experienced naturalists.

CTR isn't just about tigers and elephants. It's a thriving ecosystem where every species plays a vital role. The book encourages readers to appreciate the interconnectedness of life within the reserve. The clear organisation and easy-to-use format make this guidebook interesting for everyone alike. The cover, featuring a tiger staring into the reader's soul, sets the tone for the captivating experience within. The authors' aim to entice nature enthusiasts is evident throughout the book, with each page offering something new and engaging.

One of the book's standout features is its user-friendly design, allowing readers to dive into any page without feeling out of place. The seamless integration of beautiful photographs amidst informative descriptions adds to the book's charm. From mammals to birds, reptiles to butterflies, the guidebook covers a wide range of species found in the region. The inclusion of virtual tour maps for ecotourism planning enhances its practical utility.

Moreover, the book goes beyond the boundaries of the Corbett Tiger Reserve, providing insights into wildlife in the nearby Himalayan foothills of Uttarakhand. This broader perspective adds depth to the reader's understanding of the region's biodiversity. The book also separates mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, butterflies, dragonflies, and damselflies, and other flora and fauna. Each section of the book is accompanied by captivating images, such as a tiger walking with its prey or a peacock displaying its vibrant plumage.

These visuals not only enhance the reading experience but also provide valuable insights into the secret lives of the featured species. The inclusion of trivia columns adds an extra layer of interest for readers, mak-



ing the book both educational and entertaining.

Whether you're learning about the hunting habits of a tiger or the intricate scales on a butterfly wing, there's something for everyone to discover.

This photographic guidebook invites you to explore the rich wildlife heritage of Corbett Tiger Reserve, one of India's premier wildlife sanctuaries. Through stunning

photographs and informative descriptions, you'll encounter the reserve's dazzling array of mammals, birds, reptiles, and more. Beyond the iconic tiger and elephant, Corbett is home to over 700 species, each playing a vital role in the intricate web of life.

The guidebook has top-notch print quality and paper, making it stand out in the small niche of nature guidebooks in India. Its design is excellent and thoughtful, pleasing to the eye, and makes liberal use of images - an astounding 1,500 of them. To exploring enthusiasts, the cover image of a surprised melanistic leopard looking straight into the camera, and thereby into the reader's soul.

Beyond the stunning visuals, the book provides informative descriptions for over 700 species, making it a valuable resource for identification and learning about the complex ecosystem.

The best part of the book is you can dive into any page and not find yourself out of place.

One of the images that caught the attention of this reader was an image of a magnified view of a part of a butterfly wing, teaching that butterfly wings are covered with scales arranged like roof tiles. The concluding portion which provides insight into the plant populace in CTR is well detailed and could be the best thing to happen to a botany aficionado, and well for others, the pictures do the job.

The most interesting part is that the book, along with the English names, the scientific names, also has the animal names in Hindi.

Wildlife In and Around Corbett Tiger Reserve is more than a guidebook; it's an ode to nature's grandeur. Rajesh Chaudhary and Vinesh Kumar have crafted a masterpiece that celebrates the intricate web of life within this sanctuary. Whether you're flipping through its pages at home or exploring Corbett in person, this book will ignite your passion for conservation and leave you in awe of our natural world.

"Society is the union of men and not the men themselves."

—Montesquieu

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVI No. 202 SHILLONG, MONDAY, MARCH 4, 2024

Merit, Lateral Entry

A fertile mind is a prerequisite for those running governments; something that Jawaharlal Nehru as first prime minister won wholesome praise for. Yet, the systems that Nehru set in motion at the start of Independence are ageing; and the wear and tear is palpable if not spectacularly visible too. The Indian administrative system was largely, if not exclusively, modelled on the British Raj. It served the nation well, overall, evident also in the fact that India recorded steady growth in all sectors, unlike in Pakistan where the reverse is evident. Change is the only constant it is said. In this context, a significant step introduced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his first term to facilitate lateral entry in the bureaucracy, from the private sector etc., needs to be appreciated. So far, nearly 40 specialists with expertise in various sectors have been inducted into the top echelons of central government services. Adding to this, the Cabinet Committee on Appointments has cleared the induction of 25 more such worthies in ranks of Joint Secretary etc. This should help the nation immensely in creative governance.

The bureaucracy of course resisted this change in 2018 when the first set of appointments was made. They sought to create an impression that the sky would fall on Delhi. But there is widespread appreciation at the ministry levels for the way expertise came in. What bureaucrats have is administrative experience. This has its merits. The handling of emerging fields, several of them technical in nature or even commercial, demands a different mental equipping. New ideas, new approaches to tackle issues, would build on the administrative experience of the bureaucracy. Significantly, the private sector has more success stories than the public sector. Most PSUs are ailing, not necessarily because the bureaucrats that headed these were incompetent but more because of the hand-holding by politicians in their functioning. In a democracy, such a role for politicians cannot be wished away. However, the same problems might arise with the functioning of directly recruited experts in various departments. On the positive side, such indulgences might reduce, mostly, these experts directly report to the ministers or even to the PM.

India's problem in emerging as a super power, despite its huge human resource potential of 140 crore, is the way merit is sidelined in the functioning of every governmental entity. Nepotism has held this country hamstrung and often takes the upper hand in the government sector. The present sets of experts for the lateral entry are selected by the UPSC. Rather, it would be well-advised that the PMO itself executes this task, if only to avoid chances of favouritism by vested interests. For India to grow incrementally merit must get its due recognition across various sectors of governance.

Letters to the Editor

Narendra Modi's latest public opinion survey vis-à-vis the Opposition?

Editor,

The latest public opinion survey indicates significant trends for both Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government and the Opposition. Here are the key takeaways:

NDA's Strength: The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by Prime Minister Modi, is projected to secure a third term with a commanding majority in the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

The NDA is likely to win 335 seats says Mood of the Nation survey while Zee News-MATRIZE Lok Sabha opinion poll says 377, comfortably surpassing the 272-seat threshold required for government formation. The BJP itself is anticipated to secure 304 seats, reaffirming its capacity to command a simple majority independently.

Opposition's Challenge: The INDIA opposition bloc, which includes the Congress, is expected to secure 166 seats according to Mood of the Nation Survey while Zee News-MATRIZE Lok Sabha opinion poll puts it at 93 seats. However, this falls significantly short of posing a substantial challenge to the NDA's stronghold.

The Opposition's struggle to present a unified front and an effective leadership alternative to PM Modi remains a critical impediment to their electoral ambitions.

Economic Focus: The survey highlights that the economy is a central con-

cern for both the ruling party and the Opposition. For the NDA, it serves as an alarm bell, emphasizing the need for effective economic policies. For the Opposition, this situation presents both an opportunity and a responsibility to address economic issues and present viable alternatives.

Regional Factors: While the NDA is predicted to perform well in North, East, and West India, the southern states appear to favour the opposition INDIA bloc. Regional variations in voting behaviour continue to play a significant role in Indian politics.

Summing up, PM Modi's influence on the nation's political landscape remains significant as he gears up for a potential third term. The survey underscores the importance of addressing economic challenges and the need for a cohesive Opposition strategy.

Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Supreme Court's landmark judgement on healthcare as a right

Editor,

Responding to a PIL filed by an NGO - 'Veterans Forum for Transparency in Public Life,' the Supreme Court said the Right to Health includes affordable treatment. Two cases demonstrate the exorbitant charges by hospitals. A resident of Gurgaon alleged he was charged Rs 15.88 lakh for 21 days when his child was admitted to Medanta Hospital. The child had severe dengue and succumbed

Genesis of the Jaintia Kingdoms

By HH Mohrmen

Interest in the Jaintia Kingdom has attracted so much debate that articles on the subject appear almost every week in this newspaper. In fact, no other subject in the recent past has received the same importance; even the recent report on the statue of U Tirod Singh barely lasted a few days in the media space. The reason this debate has lasted for months is that, unlike other tribal chieftains, the Jaintia Kingdom is different, and there are sources to support the study, including coins and historical monuments that have not been exploited to date.

Is the ancient female kingdom the same as the Jaintia Kingdom?

The matrilineal aspect of the dynasty is also an interesting subject to deal with. The Buranjis state that it was a female kingdom, which finds mention even in the Hindu Scriptures. Does this mean that the kingdom was ruled only by female rulers, or does it have to do with the dynasty following a matrilineal culture? The unique aspect of the Jaintia Kingdom is that, though it is situated in a culture which is patrilineal and patriarchal or predominantly male-oriented, it has profound and strong matrilineal characteristics. There is evidence that even at the height of the kingdom's glory, inheritance to the throne was through the female line; only the son of the king's sister could inherit the throne. Ascendance to the throne by the nephew is in line with the matrilineal system followed in the society now.

Different versions of the genesis

People who live in the hills are only familiar with the story of U Lo Rynndi and Ka Li Dakha, but many are not aware that there are similar stories about the genesis of the Jaintia Kingdom too. The Jaintia Buranjis recorded three versions of the story of the genesis of the Jaintia Kingdom, and all three versions have similar storylines. In fact, the story about the beginning of the Jaintia Kingdom, popular among the Pnar, also shares the same motif with the narratives in the Buranjis, or at least the last part of the story. In a nutshell, the story is about a loner or lonesome man who caught a

fish from the river and kept it to rot so he could eat the maggot, and the fish turned out to be a nymph who bore the man children who later became the originators of the dynasty.

The first version as recorded in the Buranjis

It was recorded that Jayanti Rai was the last king of Jayantiapur and he did not have a son. The goddess he worshipped blessed his house with a female child named Jayanti. Jayanti then married Landhabar, a son of Chandabar, the royal priest, who was a scholar of religion and a well-mannered person. Later, Jayanti was enthroned as the queen and took the title Rani Singha. The family lived happily until Landhabar was cursed because while propitiating the Goddess, he was overcome by sexual passion towards the Goddess. The angry Goddess cursed him to live in the condition of a Mlecha (The Jaintia Buranjis define Mlecha as someone who belongs to a non-Aryan tribe of ancient India; a non-Hindu given to unscriptural practices). It is therefore not wrong to say that Mlecha here would fit the description of a tribal with Mongoloid traits. Landhabar was therefore condemned to live in the condition of the tribal who did not follow the Hindu scripture.

Landhabar lived at the house of a Garo

Jayanti chased Landhabar away from home and he wandered aimlessly until he arrived at the house of a Garo man named Suttanga. The terms Garo and Suttanga are interesting because there are no records of the Garo community living near Jayantiapur. However, in the Buranjis itself, it was clarified in the endnote that the name Garo was used by the inhabitants of Kamrup in speaking of their Khasi neighbours to the south (S.K. Dutta, Introduction, Jaintia Buranjis, July 10, 1937). Garo could therefore be the Pnar or the War community that lived in the hills then; in fact, the only tribal communities to the north of Jayantiapur were either the Pnar or the War. On the other hand, S.Q. Sumer in his book, citing oral

narratives, mentioned that the children of ka Li Dakha were orphaned and were taken care of by a man from the Beate community, and Beate are non-Hynnew Trep Community.

Another important term here is the man named 'Suttanga,' and the story has it that he lived with the Suttanga couple who had no children of their own. The couple took him as their own son, and he also treated them as his foster parents; later, he was also known as Landhabar, the son of Suttanga.

Two important points which emerge very prominently and that need to be discussed are that Landhabar, during his wandering, met a tribal couple and went on to live with a family, and the name of the man who adopted him was Suttanga. It is also recorded that since then, the village folks called Landhabar 'the Suttanga Garo.' The first version in the Buranjis also recorded that the stream that flowed nearby where Suttanga lived was also known as Suttanga. The striking resemblance of the name of the man who took him as his son, the name of the stream, and the name of the kingdom, the story of which the people continue to tell till today, is exceptional. It is therefore no surprise that the term Suttanga is also similar to the name of the Pnar kingship and the place where it started.

The narrative also recognizes that the Mlecha has existed in the region since long and has even had a role in the origin of the Jaintia dynasty, which is also an important point to be noted here. When Landhabar went renegade, he was also referred to as Mlecha by his neighbours and others around him. As stated earlier Mlecha is used to refer to people who are non-Aryans of ancient India or non-Hindu persons (Genesis of the Jaintia, Chapter 1, the Jaintia Buranjis). Could it be that the Mlecha that he had mixed with, as mentioned in the Buranjis, are the Pnar and the War of the Khasi Pnar community who have non-Aryan attributes, who eat anything, and are uncultured by Hindu standards?

Meanwhile, in the story, Jayanti lamented at the mistake that she had committed and invoked the goddess and her wish to remain devoted to her husband was fulfilled. The goddess produced a mirror image of Jayanti herself, and the girl was devoured by a Barali fish. The fish, which would later be caught by Landhabar in his 'khoka, or khoh' an elongated conical fish trap made of bamboo. Later he hung the fish. When his friend Bhabola asked him what he would do with such a big fish, he said he would let the fish rot and fry the maggots. On the first day, he forgot to cook the fish and went to work in the field, and upon his return, he found that someone had cleaned his house and cooked for him; the next day, the same thing happened. He decided to cut the fish into pieces, but as he raised his machete to cut it, the machete broke into two.

The next day, he pretended as if he were going to the field but kept watch, and soon he saw Matchyodari come out of the fish and doing all the household chores. He grabbed her and asked, 'who are you?' She told him that she was sent to be with him and she would give him everything, and he no longer needed to work. She told him not to ask questions, and they lived happily ever after. She revealed that she is Matchyodari and she became his wife.

He became rich, and they were soon blessed with a son, and they named him Bargohain, and he organized a feast in honour of his son. Landhabar was accepted as a chief of a few villages and later expanded his influence to other villages too. He marched to Sultanpur and killed Muhammad Sultan and assumed the title of Landha Sultan. In the first version, it was not recorded that Landhabar invaded Jayantiapur, but it was recorded that he instead invaded Sultanpur, which could be another small kingdom at the foothills.

The versions established that Jayanti Rai was the last king, and after him, his only daughter ascended the throne, and she too had no issue because she banished her husband without him giving her a child. Jayanta Devi later handed over the reign of the kingdom to Bargohain, whom she considered her nephew.

Birdwatching: A High-Value(s) Activity?

By Ezra Lawanker Rynjah

It is often heard within tourism and conservation circles that the mass volume (MV) model that is most commonly used in Meghalaya has significant drawbacks in terms of environmental degradation. This is evidenced by the disturbed waters of the Umngot at Shnongpdeng or the trampled living-root bridge at Riwai/Mawlynnong, and the dilution (or adaptation) of local culture indicated by changing menus of jadoh shops around different destinations. An MV tourism model, as the name implies attracts a large number of visitors who would, ideally, contribute to the economy surrounding a destination or sight. However, such visitors often merely end up at a scenic location, but have no visceral engagement with the area, and therefore no connection or sense of stewardship.

The alternative model that is then put forth is what is termed as high-value low-volume (HVLV) tourism, one that seeks to reduce the footfall of visitors to a site. The idea is that a small number of "high-value" aka "high-expenditure" visitors would still significantly contribute to the local economy of a destination without causing ecological and cultural degradation. Such visitors would supposedly be seeking

as education or healthcare, while also conserving, preserving and promoting their environment and cultural practices.

In such a scenario, birdwatching-based tourism has immense potential. The global birdwatching community is extensive. The recent global Great Backyard Bird Count, which I was coordinating in Meghalaya, is estimated to have had around half a million contributors from across the world. Additionally, there are birdwatchers who aren't on the platform at all. These are people willing to travel and spend money and engage in locations where there are birds. Furthermore, birders would love to see rare or endemic birds at designated locations rather than trampling through scrubby undergrowth somewhere and this aligns well with notions of conservation and preservation. Therefore, appropriate infrastructure could be created where rules of behaviour are clear, thereby creating a high-value environment that needn't exclude people through a price cap.

Birdwatching is ideal in terms of setting up a tourism ecosystem as well since it is a skill that can be taught and learnt fairly easily where technique and

"Birdwatching is ideal in terms of setting up a tourism ecosystem as well since it is a skill that can be taught and learnt fairly easily where technique and ethics of observation can go hand in hand. There are low barriers of entry as well, requiring at most a pair of long-range observation tools such as binoculars or a scope, and a trusty field guidebook to aid in identification."

more engaging experiences, and be more sensitive to local people and conditions. An example of this could include Bhutan's tourism policy of having a minimum daily charge on their visitors so that only those who are very interested, and can afford to, will visit. A problem of this model though, as you may have already noticed, is the tendency for exclusion - only those who have the money will be able to experience a place and what it has to offer. This can have adverse impacts that may not be evident at the outset, such as increasing existing wealth disparities.

A possible middle ground to these models can be considered to be "high-values" tourism, with an emphatic "S". Here, the concept is to meet the goals and values of the local people first, and then attracting people to participate in those objectives. For example, conservation-based tourism, such as in Kaziranga National Park, prioritizes the conservation and well-being of the animals of the park first and foremost, and then attracts tourists to the destination who wish to share in that experience. This example is also illustrative of how visitor behaviour has to change to local settings since they are instructed carefully on how to behave within the park.

Following from this idea, I aim to use birdwatching and its associated requirements as a means to illustrate how high-value tourism can be a potential model for sustainable tourism and development in Meghalaya.

Firstly, imagine a location that wishes to boost their local economy through tourism. The first step would be to define the collective goal of the people there. Let us assume that it is monetary income and to address fundamental local needs such

ethics of observation can go hand in hand. There are low barriers of entry as well, requiring at most a pair of long-range observation tools such as binoculars or a scope, and a trusty field guidebook to aid in identification. Furthermore, several of our people are already very good naturalists, being able to identify many species of birds by sight and sound, requiring only a bridge of language to communicate this to visitors.

This fairly nuanced idea requires further explanation and I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to explore this avenue of progress at Mawphlang during the Monolith Festival, 2024. There I, and experienced professionals like Gaurav Kataria and Dr. Arpit Deomurari with the encouragement and support from Alan West Kharkongor, the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council, and Hima Mawphlang, have set up a few events that would help introduce this idea to the people around Mawphlang, members of the public, birdwatchers, as well as tour operators and guides of Meghalaya. The Lawkyntang at Mawphlang is a very good example of a values-driven form of tourism since the culture of the local people comes first, and then follows the tourism. It is my hope that people visit us at our setup and sign up for some of the events that we have planned over the three days of the festival. Together, we can perhaps find a way to move the needle forward in Meghalaya in the realms of conservation and development.

(The writer is an ecologist with international academic and practical experience in forestry, wildlife conservation and natural resource management).

private hospital is immense. However, the treatment expenses at such hospitals many a times are unbelievably enormous. Healthcare institutions, especially the corporate ones need to understand that saving a human life is more important than earning huge amounts from their "critically ill patients."

The central government must ensure that the state governments take regular reviews of such hospitals under their jurisdiction vis a vis the fees charged. It is for this reason that the Supreme Court has come down heavily on the Central Government over the rising disparity in medical expenses between government and private facilities. For instance, a cataract surgery in a government hospital costs up to Rs 10,000 while the same cost between Rs 30,000-1,40,000 in a private facility. The apex court has taken strong exception to this particular disparity. The petitioner informed the Supreme Court that the central government promptly implemented standardized treatment rates for patients during the COVID-19 pandemic. The petitioner further suggested that in cases where states did not cooperate in framing a range of rates for various treatments, the Centre could use its authority under central laws to unilaterally declare fees for different medical procedures.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

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

to his illness. Before his death the child was transferred to a government hospital and thanks to the intervention of the government hospital the amount was refunded to the parents.

Another private hospital - Fortis was accused of charging Rs 16 lakh for 15 day's treatment of a patient suffering from dengue. A committee formed by the Haryana government has found criminal negligence on the part of the hospital. The above two examples show that the decision of the Supreme Court is in the interests of the common man who is unable to spend exorbitant sums for medical treatment. The apex court's push for standard hospital rates is good news for patients.

Health has been a contentious issue in India not because health care facilities are unavailable but because the amenities are beyond the reach of many. A country with 1.42 billion people would definitely have a large population suffering from various ailments. Some of these illnesses require hospitalisation and prolonged treatment. We saw how huge amounts were spent for Covid vaccinations. Thankfully it was provided free by the Central Government due to the fundamental right to health.

Expenses for healthcare in private hospitals are exorbitant and could destroy a family. Recently for a gene related disease the government had imported 6 vaccines from the US. Each injection cost Rs 16 crore and it takes about 10 years to prepare one injection. While India has several hospitals they cannot handle all patients. As per information provided by

Central Bureau of Health Intelligence (CBHI), there are a total of 23,581 state government hospitals and 22 central government hospitals around the country, with a total of 11.57 lakh allopathic doctors attached to these government hospitals. For a vast country like India, these hospitals and medical workforce are insufficient. Hence private hospitals step in to meet the needs of the patients.

This is where the problem starts, as the majority of privately-run hospitals blatantly operate as commercial ventures without caring for the economic condition of the patients. Hence a PIL was filed by the NGO so that some relief may be sought for the commoner who is unable to bear the high cost of medical treatment.

The Supreme Court has directed the Centre to take a call on standard hospital charges or face implementation of Central Government Health Services rates. It has also censured the Union Government for not implementing Clinical Establishment Rules for standard rates. The apex court has further questioned the Centre why no standard rates of treatment have been notified yet. After this decision of the Supreme Court the shares of all private hospitals dipped because their daily incomes will be impacted.

Surprisingly, the central government told the Supreme Court that though it had repeatedly written to state governments on the matter they had not responded. The apex court has finally observed that citizens have a fundamental right to healthcare and the Centre cannot shy away from its responsibility on this

ground. It has also advised the central government to use central laws if states don't fix uniform hospital charges. The apex court has directed the Union Health Secretary to convene a meeting of his state counterparts, to ensure notification of a standard rate within a month.

The apex court noted that if the Union Government fails to find a solution, then it will consider the petitioner's plea for implementing CGHS-prescribed standardised rates. The NGO had sought a direction that the Centre should determine the rate of fee chargeable from patients in terms of Rule 9 of clinical establishments (Central Govt) Rules 2012. Under these rules all hospitals and clinical establishments, to retain their registration, must, "display rates charged for each type of service provided and facilities available for benefit of patients at a conspicuous place in vernacular as well as in English language and charge rates for each type of procedure and service within range of rates determined and issued by the Centre from time to time in consultation with state governments.

The Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) launched by the central government, aims to be one of the world's largest health insurance schemes. It had planned to offer an annual health insurance plan of Rs 5 lakh per family, for secondary and tertiary care hospitalisation. This scheme had benefitted many. The vicious circle will break only when private hospitals genuinely believe that medicine is a noble profession. One understands that the cost of setting up and running a

"Our intention creates our reality."

— Wayne Dyer

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 203 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, MARCH 5, 2024

UDP's no mudslinging decision

PRIME Minister Modi has cautioned his ministers to be economical with abuses and avoid controversial speeches but to speak of the schemes instead during the election campaign. The United Democratic Party (UDP) has also decided to toe this line and avoid mudslinging during the election campaign. The fact is that the UDP is a junior coalition partner of the MDA-2 government and the NPP which is the leading partner in the coalition does not really need the UDP to be able to form a stable government with partners like the HSPDP already supporting it and the PDF having merged with it. In fact it would have jeopardised the chances of the UDP to continue in the government. In any case the public too are not foolish to get carried away by pre-election rhetoric of any party. Both the NPP and the UDP would have to have a solid set of agenda to convince voters why the present Congress MP, Vincent Pala should be voted out.

In other words both the UDP and NPP have to be thinking on how to campaign against the Congress Party rather than against each other. Both the above parties are also aligned with the BJP at the Centre and this cannot be lost sight of. The Congress will tear them apart on this single agenda as a claimant to the upholder of secularism and democratic tenets. In light of what has been happening in the Assam-Meghalaya border where schools have been told to take down all Christian religious symbols and the attack on the nun from Garo Hills by radical Hindu groups from Assam, the Congress would now have enough grist for its mill even as the NPP and UDP would have to defend why they are aligned with a party that is anti-minority; in this case anti-Christian. The BJP is yet to announce its candidate but it is expected that it would set up a lady advocate as its candidate from Shillong, although chances of the BJP winning the Lok Sabha seats are slim in Meghalaya which has only two MLAs. There is the VPP candidate also to contend with.

The NPP and UDP will have a hard time convincing people why they should vote for its candidates and why the two parties could not come to a pre-election agreement to field a common candidate. That would have consolidated the votes and considering that the two parties are coalition partners in the Government it was the natural thing to do. It also means that there was no consultation between the MDA partners before setting up candidates. What were the points on which the UDP had aligned with the NPP to form the government other than the quest to be on the side of power? Does this not show up the shallowness of the UDP here?

Letters to the Editor

Child marriage and women's empowerment

Editor, In the 21st century, if leaders advocate for child marriage, then they should completely reject what has been brought forth by modern civilization. With such a regressive idea in mind, they have no right to claim themselves as learned and secular. They should not indulge in the luxury of modern technology either! We may not agree with the Chief Minister of Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma, on many of his ideas, but his determined stand on eradicating child marriage in Assam deserves our appreciation. If nothing more, it will certainly save the girl child from the onslaught of various detrimental circumstances.

Child marriage has a profoundly negative impact on the lives of young girls and society at large. Apart from hindering their academic studies, it adversely affects their physical, emotional, and psychological growth and well-being. They are likely to be shut out of the opportunity to become true human beings. They are

forced to be cooped up in homes and suffocated, thereby depriving them of seeing the world from a proper perspective. Realizing the plight of child brides, historical figures such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Mahatma Gandhi fought relentlessly for the abolition of child marriages in India.

Moreover, evidence from the past clearly shows that girls subjected to child marriage are most "vulnerable" to various forms of domestic violence and sexual abuse, which are unmentionable. No exaggeration, they also might fall victim to incest, a reprehensible reality that is often reported. Such occurrences are usually "silenced" by intimidation, moral policing, and social stigma. It is unimaginable that a child, who should be playing with toys and friends of her age, is forced into relationships with adult males. Is marriage without consent not outrageous in this day and age? A Supreme Court lawyer, Lelehi Khan, says that child marriage is the most immoral practice driven by perverse desires.

What's particularly appalling now is the opposition of many political leaders to the repeal of the Child Marriage Act. Their open support

Sadhu Sundar Singh and his visit to the Khasi Hills

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

It was hundred years ago, in 1924 when Sadhu Sundar Singh, the Indian Christian mystic embarked on a pilgrimage to the land of Hynhiewtrep. Primarily, his visit was to bear witness to the Christian Gospel and share his personal experiences with Jesus amidst his fellow Christians in the Khasi Hills. In this article, I must thank these individuals, Babu Horju Roy Khongwir, Capt H.Lyngdoh, Babu Joel Gatphoh, Babu Kubur Singh and Rai Sahit D.Ropmay, who had taken pains to record the visit. They also translated, compiled and published Sandhu Sundar Singh's sermons which were delivered in different Churches and Assembly meetings across the Khasi Hills in 1924.

To mark the Centenary year of Sadhu Sundar Singh's sojourn in the Khasi Hills, I am writing this brief account about the Indian Christian Mystic based on records which are available. However, it is also interesting to note that Sandhu Sundar Singh added to the list of many great Indians who had visited and made these hills their homes (even for a short period), including Rabin-dranath Tagore, the bard of Bengal, who first visited these hills in 1919, Subhas Chandra Bose, founder of Indian National Army, who visited Shillong in 1927 and during his Presidentship of Indian National Congress in 1938. Also, C.V Raman, India's Nobel laureate who had acquired the Rao Bhavan in Kench's Trace in the 1920s and had made Shillong his home.

Shillong and Khasi Hills in 1920s

In the 1920s the Khasi Hills was an integral part of the British colonial rule and for administrative purposes the region was brought under the Assam Province. As per the decadal census published in 1921, the population of Khasi and Syntengs (as per Census column of 1921) in Assam was 124, 053 (one lakh twenty-four thousand and fifty-three). There was a significant growth of Christian Population and in ten years the number had almost doubled. By 1924, the year of Sadhu Sundar Singh's visit, the numbers of Methodist Presbyterian adherents alone stood at 37, 693 (thirty-seven thousand and six hundred and ninety-three). This period witnessed a remarkable transformation in the region's religious landscape, with Christianity becoming a prominent faith. Christianity had taken deep roots via institutions like schools,

hospitals and congregations et al, which facilitated the growth and domination in all aspects.

According to K D Saha, "when Assam was ceded to the British Territory via Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, the administration felt it necessary to connect Sylhet with the Brahmaputra Valley across the Khasi and Jaintia Hills....In 1826 David Scott, the agent of the British for the North East Frontier of Bengal undertook the construction of a road through the K & J Hills. Further in 1862, a committee was formed to search for a locality better suited climatically to the need of a large and important station. Amongst the various places in view, the Committee recommended the high plateau of Shillong (now known as Upper Shillong) for the Civil Station and lewduh (the present town) for the invalid European troops and the lines of Regiments. Subsequently, in 1863 an agreement was entered into between the British Government and Mile Sing, the Sjiem of Mylliem. Under this Agreement, the Sjiem ceded the Raji Lands known as the Shillong lands, Nongkseh land and Shillong-Laban land. Besides, some private lands were also purchased.

The real expansion of the town (Shillong) took place since 1874 and it must be remembered that in 1874, by the proclamation dated 6th February and 12th September, Assam was carved out of Bengal and became a separate Province under a Chief Commissioner and in effect Shillong was chosen as the seat of the new administration. Therefore, as the Capital of the new Province, Shillong became the home of diverse communities who have converged into the town as officials/babus in Government services and those who were driven by economic compulsions and in search of livelihoods. Apart from the Khasi populace, the wide range of settlers' communities are reflected in the decadal Census data. These data shown in both numbers and percentage the population distribution across linguistic communities, which include the Assamese, Bengalees, Biharis, Nepalese, Rajasthani, Punjabi etc.

Among the earliest settlers, the Mazhabi or Dalit Sikhs need special mention as the oldest and vital community which catered to the basic needs of the new Capital. They were regarded as the sweepers of Shillong. Al-

though the records about the first immigration of sweepers of Shillong are scant, their early presence in Khasi Hills and Shillong in particular, can be traced to colonial rule. In his article "Sweepers of Shillong", published by the Anthropological Survey of India in 1979, Jayanta Sarkar presented the data on immigration pattern of the sweepers who were employed in Shillong Municipality and Shillong Cantonment Board. The pattern clearly shows that the majority of sweepers of Shillong had immigrated from two districts of Punjab, namely, Amritsar and Gurdaspur. Their misfortune of being the anawim and people who belong to scavenging community are haunting them to this day. As Himadri Banerjee pungently remarked, "...they lived in slums and in spite of their long ties with the region, they are despised as undesirable and foreigners..." Against this backdrop, one reads and re-reads Sadhu Sundar Singh's new-found faith and his mystical experience with Jesus Christ.

Sadhu Sundar Singh in Khasi Hills

There was no record to indicate that Sandhu Sundar Singh had met or preached to the Punjabi community of Shillong then, even though he was kept at the residence in Mawkhra, (which is a stone's throw away from sweepers line at Them Lew Mawlong), during his sojourn in Khasi Hills. But it can also be deduced that he must have been aware of their presence as these sweepers were employed to provide services to residents of Shillong Municipality, including Mawkhra and Laban localities etc.

The visit of Sadhu Sundar Singh began with the correspondences between him and Babu Joab Solomon, the elder of Mawkhra Presbyterian Church, Shillong. In his response to the letter from Joab Solomon dated June 26, 1923, Sadhu Sundar Singh keenly intended to visit the region in the following calendar year. He wrote, "Dear brother in the Lord, many thanks for your letter. I am quite well by the grace of our Lord. God willing, I shall try to visit Shillong next year. Please give my best compliments and Christian love to all Christian brothers sisters in Assam and tell them that I hope to see them some time next year..."

According to available records, Sandhu Sundar Singh arrived in March 1924 and

delivered his first sermon at Mawkhra, Shillong on March 7. In 1968, Babu Wilson Reade narrated from his memory the reception given by the Mawkhra Presbyterian Church when Sadhu Sundar Singh first arrived in Khasi Hills and the Church building which was two times bigger than the numbers of members then, was filled to the brim as people came to attend and listen to Sadhu's preaching. I was told that the family of Babu Joab Solomon at Mawkhra, Shillong, extended the hospitality to the Sadhu while he was in Shillong.

Besides, Sadhu Sundar Singh travelled to other places in the Khasi Hills, and he preached in the following Churches and special services, (a) at Mawkhra Church Shillong on March 7,8,9 (b) at Laitkynseh Church on the March 10 (c) at Sohra on March 11 (d) at Shillong on March 12 (e) at the Assembly meetings of the Presbyterian Church held in Mairang from March 14- 16 (f) at Laitumkrah Church on the March 18 and (g) at Mawphlang Church on March 19.

Sadhu Sundar Singh was an influential Indian Christian mystic, known for his spiritual teachings and dedication to spreading the message of love and unity. Born in 1889 in Punjab, he was raised as a Sikh but converted to Christianity later in his life. It was quoted, "the Sadhu acknowledged the Holy Spirit made him a Christian, but it was his mother who made him a Sadhu...and openly confessed that if he could not find his mother (who died a pious Sikh) in Heaven, he would not stay there but would rather ask the Lord to send him to the place where he could find her." (Sadhu Sundar Singh: The Apostol of Bleeding Feet, NCCI Review Vol 109, 1989).

Prayer was central to his life and mission. He preached that to attain abundant life was to be able to fight back, to stand up and live a life of victory against the odds. He was an ardent seeker of truth and inner peace.

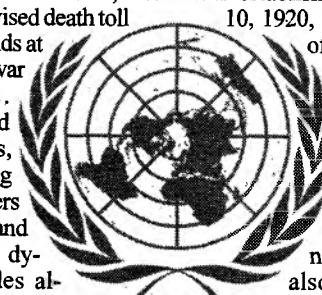
United Nations has failed to keep peace and security in the world Speedy reforms alone can save the UN from going the league of nations way

By Nantoo Banerjee

Two ongoing devastating wars – one in Ukraine and the other in the Gaza strip – have so far killed and injured tens of thousands of civilians since last year. The Ukraine-Russia war started in February 2022. As of February 15, this year, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) verified a total of 30,457 civilian casualties in the course of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Of them, 19,875 were reported to have been injured. Nearly 3.7 million Ukrainians were internally displaced. Around 6.5 million refugees from Ukraine have been recorded globally. Approximately 14.6 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in 2024. In Gaza, at least 29,782 people have been killed and 70,043 wounded in Israeli attacks since October 7, last year. The revised death toll in Israel stands at 1,139. The war continues. Gaza-based Palestinians, comprising large numbers of children and women, are dying in hordes almost every day. So far, little pressure has been exerted by the friends of Israel and Palestine on the two sides to bring the mindless war to

In the Red Sea, controlled by allegedly Iran-backed Yemeni Houthi pirates, a trillion-dollar annual global sea trade has been severely impacted. All the countries mentioned in the list are UN members. Yet, the UN stands totally ineffective, if not unconcerned, to help establish peace and security in the region.

The helpless condition of the UN and its rarely cooperative five-member Security Council, led by two rival groups (one under the US and the other a Russia-China combine) are increasingly creating a situation which the world witnessed in the 1930s under the League of Nations. The League was the first worldwide intergovernmental organization whose principal mission was to maintain world peace. The League of Nations was established on January 10, 1920, at the initiative of victorious Allied powers at the end of the first World War. The League of Nations failed as aggressor nations – as also its powerful members such as France and Britain – undermined the authority of the world body. France and Britain even ignored the



UNITED NATIONS

"In Ukraine, the US and its allies are actually fanning the war by providing massive arms and financial assistance adding to the endless suffering of the people of the east European nation."

an end. So far, the UN, including its all-powerful Security Council, proved to be totally ineffective to stop the wars in Ukraine and Gaza to establish peace and human security in the two politically explosive regions. In Ukraine, the US and its allies are actually fanning the war by providing massive arms and financial assistance adding to the endless suffering of the people of the east European nation. Last week, French President Emmanuel Macron went to the extent of openly discussing the possibility of sending European troops to Ukraine to help the country fight the war against Russia, threatening a major escalation of the largest ground war Europe has witnessed since World War II and challenging the authority of the UN. Russia has responded immediately with the possibility of a nuclear war in Europe. France is one of the UN Security Council's five permanent members. In a way, President Macron's public outburst once again undermined the authority of the UN.

There are at least 10 other countries and regions where civil wars, armed violence and terror attacks have been causing human disasters for years and even for decades. They include Afghanistan, Burkina Faso and the Sahel, the Central African Republic, Chad and the Lake Chad Basin, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria and the Yemeni Houthi rebels-controlled Red Sea. In Afghanistan, nearly 150,000 civilian casualties have been recorded since the US military withdrawal in 2021. By now, some 28.3 million people need humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. The inter-communal conflict in Chad and the Lake Chad Basin has been going on for nearly 15 years. The conflict in Congo has so far affected 26.4 million people who badly need humanitarian assistance. The violence and brutality in Somalia, ethnic cleansing in South Sudan and inter-communal conflict in Sudan have sent millions of peoples in utter distress. Syria is one of the world's worst affected countries trapped in the violence assisted by outside powers.

League in their efforts to appease Germany's Hitler at the early stage, which arguably led to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. By 1937, the League became a totally useless body. It was formally disbanded on April 19, 1946.

Right now, trust between the UN's member-governments appears to be reaching a breaking point. Not many countries trust the UN for resolving or reshaping critical intergovernmental issues. China is seriously questioning the legitimacy of the US to help establish the world order. New intergovernmental bodies such as BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa group), Quad (Quadrilateral Dialogue involving the US, Japan, India and Australia), US-Japan-Australia Strategic Cooperation, Aukus (the Australia-UK-US strategic pact), and Beijing's own world trillion dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or a Chinese Marshall Plan for global dominance involving so far some 60 countries pose a new challenge to the diminishing UN authority. Interestingly, China is believed to be the main opposer to the UNSC reforms for now. Earlier, the western powers resisted the call for the reforms.

To be effective, the UN needs to be urgently revamped. The UNSC must recognize the changing world order – economic and strategic. It is unthinkable that some of the world's most influential countries today such as India, Japan, Germany and Brazil are still to become permanent members of the UNSC. India is the world's most populous country, fifth largest economy, and the fourth largest military power after the US, Russia and China. Japan and Germany are economic and technological super powers. Brazil is South America's most influential country. Their presence as permanent members of the UNSC would have made the council much stronger to deal with the global political impasse. The deepening global crisis demands a fundamental and rapid shift in the operational style of the UN. The UNSC must recognize and represent contemporary global power dynamics. (IPA Service)

where there is the freedom to practice one's beliefs. Democracy is now threatened by religious majoritarianism, claiming that the basic definition of nationalism derives from religious communities. Considering that religion or belief, for anyone who professes either, is one of the fundamental elements in his conception of life, that freedom of religion or belief should be fully respected and guaranteed. Assam-Meghalaya border in the past few weeks witnessed a series of sectarian violence. The February 17 incident that happened to a Catholic nun inside a bus from Dudnoi to Goalpara and the Assam-based organisation allegedly threatening to dismantle a statue of Jesus Christ at the Sacred Heart Secondary School, Marmain in Ri Bhoi district should be condemned "unequivocally".

Communal violence is not a recent phenomenon in India. It has its root in the British divide-and-rule policy since the late 18th century. The British government used communalism to counter and weaken the growing national movement and the wedding of the Indian people into a nation. It was presented by the colonial rulers as the problem of the defence of the minorities.

Hindu-Muslim disunity was cited as the reason for the continuation of British rule.

Religions have influenced our life most profoundly. Religious violence across the world is committed in God's name. If Ram, Jesus, Abraham, Prophet Muhammad, Buddha, and Confucius and U Lakriah were all alive and gathered in the same place, would they argue over who is right? Or would they respect and admire one another's teachings? Religious conflict can often be blamed not on the founders of religion but on their fanatical followers.

Yours etc., Dr Omarlin Kyndiah, (A believer of Niamtre) Via email

Travesty of justice

Editor, It is a shame that the house of Wakeel Hassan was demolished by the Delhi Development Authority. It is alleged that laws granting possession of encroached government land to those who have lived there for more than 30 years were not followed and even the required 15-day notice had not been served to him.

He along with 11 other

rat-hole miners deserve Padma awards, permanent jobs and houses for rescuing 41 labourers who were trapped in a tunnel in Uttarakhand's Uttarkashi behind a 57m-thick barrier of debris after all the technology-based efforts to drill beyond 45m was failed. Their heroic act freed the trapped workers after their 16-day ordeal inside the tunnel when the whole world was on tenterhooks for two weeks waiting for the results in November last year. They did it after working at a stretch for nearly 24 hours squatting inside a narrow steel pipe of 800mm diameter on their toes, crouching as low as possible with their knees folded to clear the debris with hand held tools to rescue the trapped workers.

Each of the rescue workers was awarded only Rs 50 thousand. Apart from this nothing more - no permanent employment - no house was given or promised. Now the residence of Wakeel Hassan has been razed. It is a complete travesty of justice.

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

"History is a vast early warning system."

— Norman Cousins

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 204 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6, 2024

Please - All rulers

WOMEN empowerment is a cause dear to all in every welfaristic and civilized society. Through generations women have been at the receiving end, many of them leading a miserable life as is widely evident here and the geographical region as a whole. Many have difficulty making ends meet. However, the urge to see women lead a better life alongside their male counterparts cannot be confused with the urges of our politicians. Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, for one, has come up with a Mukhyamanthri Mahila Samman Yojana in the Delhi budget for this fiscal, which promised a monthly dole of Rs 1000 to every woman below age 18 in the national capital. A sum of Rs 2000 crore has been set apart for the scheme. This, with a rider that those who are income tax payers and/or receiving other pension would be excluded from this welfare scheme.

Delhi has a population of over three crore people, of whom half could be women; and of these, two-thirds could be outside of the income tax bracket. Having substantial wealth by itself does not mean one must pay tax. Tax is paid on the basis of recorded earnings beyond half a lakh a month. Clearly, large numbers of women from middle class families do not require a government dole for a normal living. An argument could be that the chief minister, having enjoyed the fruits of power, is going out of his way to remain in the saddle for as long as is possible, as the assembly polls in Delhi would soon follow the parliament polls.

India, sadly, is overtaken by a doles raj, which reduces the urge of the people to work and earn a living. This creates a potentially dangerous situation. For a nation to progress, the productive energies of its people should be tapped to the maximum. Money that reaches the exchequer by way of tax is precious and its judicious use is important. It was Kejriwal who first introduced free travel for women in government-run transport buses. Fair enough, perhaps, as largely those from the lower strata of society or working women or students travel by buses in Delhi. The present indulgence, granting a monthly dole to women across the board, is baffling. Governments need not go out of their way to extend financial support to those capable of leading a comfortable life. Sadly, dole as a political culture is spreading fast as was also evident in Karnataka, Telangana etc., based on promises made by the Congress party in its election manifesto. Good governance or good leadership is far from such questionable indulgences. This, rather, is the antithesis of good governance.

Indian Knowledge System and Pseudo Science

By H. Srikanth

Introduction of Indian Knowledge System (IKS) at all levels of education is one of the avowed objectives of the New Education Policy (NEP 2020). In pursuit of the objective, the Ministry of Education and educational bodies like the UGC and AICTE have constituted different committees to draft the syllabi and suggest modes of executing its goal of promoting the IKS. The UGC is training hundreds of teachers to teach the courses at school levels which are declared as part of IKS. Free online courses are designed and the students are encouraged to opt for the courses. UGC has introduced IKS as one of the subjects for UGC-NET exams, and seeks to incentivize research on topics adjudged as IKS. Several conferences, workshops and seminars are financed and organized across the country to emphasize the need for introduction of the IKS at the school, college and university levels. As Meghalaya is embracing the NEP 2020, it is necessary for the policy makers, academicians, teachers and students in the state to understand what this IKS is and whether we should welcome the introduction of IKS.

There is no doubt that India had its own glorious past. We had our own scientists and scholars well-versed in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, medicine, linguistics, arts and architecture. Mention may be made of stalwarts like Aryabhata, Bhaskara, Kanad, Varahamitra, Susruta, Charaka, Pathanjali and others. It is necessary to make the students in our country aware of their intellectual contributions, and none would have any objection if the purpose of introducing the IKS is just that. But if one examines carefully the utterances and declarations of politicians and policymakers in the country, it is not difficult to understand that the IKS is a political project introduced in pursuit of the Hindutva ideology of the ruling regime.

What is the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) that the government is talking of? If one looks at it critically, the India that the IKS talks of is only ancient India, that too Hindu India. You rarely come across the advocates of IKS talking of the rich materialist and agnostic intellectual traditions such as Charvaka, Buddhism and Jainism that were critical of Vedantic traditions in ancient

India. They also ignore and denigrate the contributions of Muslim scholars and intellectuals who were the constitutive part of Indian heritage. Contributions of modern scientists like C.V Raman, Jagdish Chandran Bose, Vishweshwaraiah, etc., are also not their focus. In substance, what they seek to nurture in the name of IKS is the blind belief that all Indian knowledge is inscribed in the Vedas and Upanishads, and all that modern science says is already known to our ancient Munis and Rishis. Starting with the Prime Minister of the country, several other ministers, bureaucrats, so-called scientists and some Vice-Chancellors in the country are vying with one another to make us believe that our ancient scholars knew everything about the universe, about atom, stem cell and test tube technology, plastic surgery, aviation and war technologies. Secular academic forums like the Indian History Congress, the Indian Science Congress, etc., are used to promote such lies and half-truths. One Minister in the government openly declared Charles Darwin's theory of evolution as nonsense and said that he does not believe that monkeys were his ancestors. Subsequently, the lesson on Darwin's theory of evolution was removed from the CBSE syllabus from the Class 9 and 10 class text books. As part of the IKS, UGC is introducing courses such as 'cow vigan', astrology and yoga in different universities. The government is promoting research on 'panchagavya' which claims that the mixture of cow urine and cow dung can cure several diseases, including cancer. Systematic efforts are made to denigrate Allopathy and project that indigenous medicines are a panacea for all diseases. Taking advantage of such an anti-science environment, entrepreneurs like Baba Ramdev dared to produce the vaccines, and he promoted a cough and cold syrup produced in his Patanjali Ashram as an antidote to the Coronavirus. In the name of imparting ethical values, some state governments wedded to Hindutva ideology are trying to make the study of the Bhagavad Gita compulsory and writing books as if all the Hindu mythological characters are

real men and women in history. The same governments oppose the convent schools and the madarasas for imparting religious education. Can India become a Vishwa Guru by fostering such obscurantist and retrogressive ideas in the schools and colleges? Does the IKS guarantee jobs for our students in the highly competitive global markets? Let the defenders of the IKS honestly answer whether in times of medical emergencies, they and their family members worship the 'spirits' and consume cow urine, or rush to AIIMS or to America for medical treatment? If our ancestors knew everything about 'Vimana Shastra' and atom bombs, why is the Indian government spending thousands of crores of rupees to buy airplanes and war technologies from foreign countries? If all knowledge is in the Vedas and the Upanishads, what prevents the Indian government from using them to develop automobiles, computers, cell-phones, etc., using those technologies? Why are we begging the foreign companies to come and invest in India to manufacture different goods that the country needs? The UGC, which is forced to cut allocations for the universities and colleges, is very liberal in financing conferences and academic courses on the so-called Indian Knowledge Systems. Several NGOs like Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, close to the RSS ideology, are devising the courses and organizing the conferences with the help of the government. One should only attend the government sponsored seminars, symposia and workshops on the IKS to understand who all are gathering in such congregations. The IKS has now become a launch pad for many aspiring mediocre academics to earn money and positions, to seek jobs and promotions, to receive invitations as speakers and discussants, and to come close to the power centers. The rewards are so high that many pragmatic teachers, principals, and Vice-Chancellors are competing with one another to prove how committed they are to introducing and teaching the so-called Indian Knowledge Systems in their educational institutions. Every rational human being knows that knowl-

edge is universal. It has no national boundaries. We all acknowledge and honour the scientists who have contributed to the treasure house of human knowledge and paved the way for human welfare. When we talk of the contributions of Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Edison, Einstein, etc., it makes little sense to know to which countries they belong. So is the case with our own scientists—from Arya Bhata and Susruta to M.S. Swaminathan and Abdul Kalam. True, India had some of the greatest minds in the past. But such great minds were there in the Greek city states, Roman Empire, in Arabia, in the Chinese, Egyptian and other civilizations. To claim that only we knew everything and others were fools reminds us of our colonial masters who believed that only the white men are knowledgeable and the people living in other parts of the globe are all illiterate and ignorant. We need to fight against the colonization of knowledge by the west, but that should not make us frogs in the well who cannot think beyond the little spaces where they breed. It is foolish to assume that everything declared as Indian is good and great, and all that emanated from other places are foreign and bad. Harping on the past glory makes little sense. Despite its economic backwardness, India has made tremendous progress in atomic energy, space technologies, agriculture and medicine. Today our doctors, scientists and technocrats are visible in every part of the globe. All these could happen because of modern sciences, not because of the Vedas and Vedanta. The manner in which and the purpose for which the government seeks to introduce the Indian Knowledge System in the education system are objectionable, as they are narrow and retrogressive in their vision. Far from fighting the colonial mindset, it promotes a communal mindset, instills false pride and fosters blind hatred against everything and everyone dubbed as 'foreign' and hence alien to ancient Indian traditions and heritage. Several progressive and democratic minded intellectuals, academicians, and scientists in the country, therefore, view this ideological project named the Indian Knowledge System as threats to secular and rational values enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Oops, What an Extravaganza...! Two incidents got my attention in the last week, one a lavish wedding and the second a bridge going nowhere, and I'm going to talk about both, so here goes:

Was enjoying my toast and butter this morning, when my wife told me, "He's been staring at you for the last ten minutes!"

"Who?" I asked, then realised it was Noah, my daughter's dog, who is kept at my home, whenever my daughter and family go out.

I looked down and saw his eyes, steadfast on the piece of toast I was about to bite into and realised how easy it was not to get bothered by a hungry stare.

Today's papers have hardly any news than details of the lavish pre-wedding bash a billionaire is giving his son. Millions have been paid to performers to entertain guests at a series of planned events and the papers carry pages and pages on pictures of dignitaries arriving and expenses involved.

All this while millions upon millions of our countrymen, with no food in their belly stare at hopelessness. Nobody notices their hungry stares, because we have also told the world that reports of where we stand on the hunger index is all fabricated.

But the stares are real. Around ten years ago, I

repaired Gokhale bridge, connecting Andheri East and West, drove high above the railway line, and then found to their shock they could not drive to Juhu, because the Juhu arm of the bridge was six feet lower!

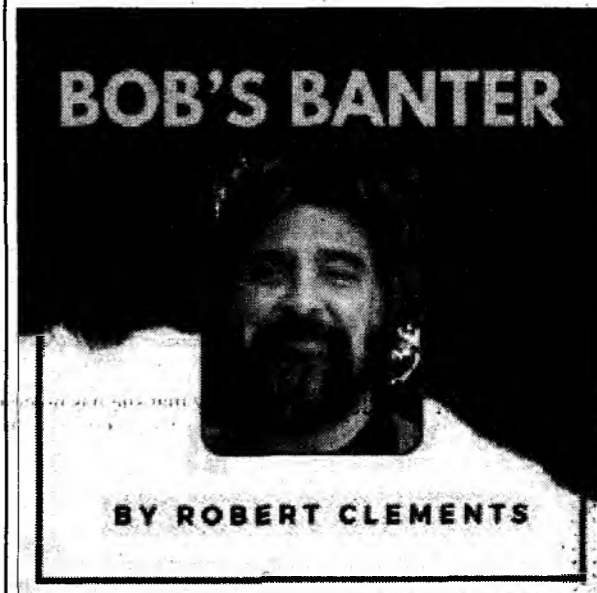
Wait a moment folks, this is not 2000 years ago, not a hundred years ago, but today! A day and time when we could have fed all the data into a small laptop and got all the measurements for construction before the work was started.

The bridge is a concrete example, and pun intended, of policies going wrong, especially the ignoring of checks and balances which tell us if our beloved country is going in the wrong direction.

One check that is being removed quickly, are thinkers, intellectuals, and journalists. Instead of heeding them, we think they are anti-national. Far from it. These men and women have only the betterment of their country in mind. Instead of listening to them, we act like spoiled children, spoilt by a misguided, ill-informed mandate, fed on fake news and non-issues:

"Mother," says the spoilt child returning from school, "A few boys were making fun of me!"

"I'll get them removed!" says the mother, "How dare those children make fun of



was elected president of an international club, in which my installation would have been held in a posh hotel. A few weeks before the event, I saw the 'stares'! They came from the old and ill people around the area where I lived, and I told the members we would have my installation in the open pergola of a local park, call these old people for refreshments and distribute four-pronged walking sticks to them, with money we would otherwise have spent on a lavish five-star installation. The members agreed, and what a joy it was that for the first time in the history of the Rotary where an installation was held in a shed with plastic sheets shielding us from the rain, but with all the seats filled with the old and needy.

The next day seeing them walking around the park for the first time in many years was a joy to behold. My club had noticed the 'stares', looked back and addressed their needs.

Today it has almost become a crime to get affected by the 'stares' as those who fight for the rights of the poor and marginalised, are branded with all sorts of names and even jailed. Priests, activists, and social workers, whose hearts are filled with compassion are despised and terrorised.

How are we allowing ourselves to reach this state, where only these garish activities of the rich make news, while help given to those unfortunates are viewed as a crime?

Noah, stares at me, his eyes steadfast on my last piece of toast, and I guiltily give it to him, even as he lifts his head, then looks at me with grateful eyes!

And here's the second incident, when the nation gulped and said 'Oops!' Yes, Oops, is what the people in Mumbai said, who drove their cars across the newly

my son," shouts the mother as she storms into the school, I am the managing trustee's wife "Expel them!"

"Do you know what they said?" asks the flustered teacher, "They told your son he was wearing his pants the wrong way!"

"How dare they!" shouts the mother.

"And your son was!" says the teacher.

"It doesn't matter, throw them out!" says the mother. And that is what is happening in our country. What we are seeing in that misaligned bridge is the beginning of many results of pants worn wrong like that child.

Just as we build statues, memorials and monuments to extoll acts of triumph and victory, we need to preserve this misaligned, misjudged piece of concrete work as a museum piece. Because, this can either be a turning point, as we the people become aware of where we are headed, and where we will land or sadly we will continue turning a blind eye, will bring rope ladders, pulleys and other contraptions, stop our cars, jump down that six feet, turn smilingly and help our obliging spouses and aged parents down, telling the world with an artificial smile, "So what?"

So what if unemployment statistics show a huge rise, so what if we are placed somewhere last in the poverty index, so what if we are losing our freedom of speech. So what?

Even as you say 'oops', and if you are one of those who have been staring fixedly at the pre-wedding extravaganza pictures, decide where you want the nation to go, as you go to the polls soon..!

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

Letters to the Editor

Clarification

Editor, Apropos of the letter written by Avner Medon Pariat in your newspaper under the caption, "Fiscal Profligacy of the MDA-2 Government (ST February 28, 2024) I, the undersigned, for and on behalf of my client Dr. Aman Warr, R/o Shillong, Meghalaya, would like to inform you that several baseless, misleading and concocted statements were made against, my client in above letter.

As such, I would like to clarify the following points in such regard, which

1. That the allegation that my client holds the position as a Board Member of Mawmluh Cherra Cement Ltd. (MCCL) is entirely false, incorrect and misconstrued.

2. That presently, my client does not hold the post of Chairman/ Vice Chairman and/or any Board Member and/or any other analogous post(s) in the Mawmluh Cherra Cement Ltd. and/or in the Government of Meghalaya.

3. That my client am a retired Government employee, who last served as the Director of Health Services (MI), without any adversity or complaints.

4. That after his retirement from service, my client had contested the General Election to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly 2023, from the North Shillong (ST) LAC, however unfortunately, he was not successful.

5. That nevertheless, till date, my client am working

tirelessly for the welfare of the citizens of the state of Meghalaya in his own personal capacity and to the best of his ability.

It is very shocking that the author, viz., Avner Medon Pariat, has made such false and misleading statements against my client in the media without initially verifying the actual facts, and the same only goes to show that the said false and misleading statements were made with oblique motive to deceive the public and with vested interest to gain undue political mileage. It is quite apparent and obvious that the author of the said defamatory article has made such baseless and concocted allegations only to satisfy his own pseudo intellect. Needless to say, the current MDA 2.0 is moving in the right direction and my client wishes the State Government the very best!

It is all the more shocking and surprising that such false and misleading statements have been published in your newspaper as well as on your official website, without prior verification of the actual and correct facts and the same is also in contravention to the applicable Journalistic norms.

Therefore, the undersigned requests you to immediately publish the aforementioned clarificatory facts in your newspaper and further, not publish any such concocted articles/statements against my client without prior verification of the actual and correct facts from him. This is for your information and necessary

action,

Yours etc.,
Ms. N. Rajee,
Advocate High Court of
Meghalaya Bar Association,
Shillong -1

(The Editor Replies)

1. At the outset, a letter to the editor is not a view of the newspaper and nor is it a news report as alleged. The disclaimer clearly says that the newspaper is not responsible for the views expressed by the public since the 'Letters to the Editor' space is provided for readers and concerned members of the public to air their views..

2. The above letter was sent along with the list of 188 appointees of the MDA-2 Government of which Dr Aman War has been shown to have been appointed as Vice Chairman Commerce & Industries Department (Mawmluh Cherra Cements Ltd) in Category 'A' which the writer Avner Medon Pariat obtained from government sources.

3. The Office Memorandum No FEM 44/2003/Pt-II/264 of the Government of Meghalaya dated August 17, 2023 signed by the Chief Minister who is also the Finance Minister had also revised the perks and facilities of the Chairmen/Co-Chairmen/Vice Chairmen/Deputy Chairmen detailing what they are entitled to per month with honorarium, POL, Conveyance allowance, Medical benefits, Telephone, TA/DA, House rent, Furnishing of house, Maintenance of furniture, Electricity allow-

ance, Free accommodation or House rent, Driver, Office space either at the Secretariat or a designated space outside the Secretariat.

4. If Dr Aman Warr had not accepted the appointment nor availed the above facilities he could have made the information public. After the letter was published Dr Warr could have sent a rejoinder which this newspaper would have published instead of resorting to legal means to address his grievances.

'A food - deficit state' & farmers' uplift in Meghalaya

Editor, As a follow-up to the letters and articles of Saili Grewal, Patricia Mukhim and others on the problems and hardships faced by farmers especially marginal farmers, in our State, I would like to offer a few suggestions on how to help them alleviate their sufferings and help improve their agricultural activity thereby increasing their income.

The current agitation by farmers in India, notably north India, to demand among other issues a legal guarantee on minimum support price (MSP) from the government to protect them against exploitation by middlemen, should be extended to the farmers of our state who are often at the mercy of middlemen and deprived of the true value for their produce. I'm glad that this

issue is also being taken up by the Hills Farmers' Union of the State

The importance of launching a co-operative farming movement for medium and small agricultural land holdings to allow them to avail of mechanised farming equipment and other facilities that will help reduce the cost and improve productivity cannot be overemphasized.

The role of the state to set up warehousing and cold storage facilities in strategic centres/locations to help the bargaining powers of the farmers to sell their produce at their price, is an important step and for which the Government of Meghalaya, as per media reports, is on the job, hopefully.

There is need to encourage farmers to shift to terrace cultivation to prevent soil erosion among other benefits derived from this method of cultivation.

The target set by the Government of India for the entire north eastern states to become organic by 2030 has to be taken seriously by our Government because it is now realised that indiscriminate use of chemical fertilisers pose a severe threat to human and animal health and a danger to the fragile ecosystems to our hilly state.

But most importantly the availability of water and the creation of an irrigation infrastructure, is vital for agriculture to sustain and give it's maximum output. To further elaborate on this subject with reference to our state, I would like to quote from an article "Why isn't there a second crop in Meghalaya"

(ST 26/10/21) by Mr KN Kumar, IAS and Chairman, Meghalaya Farmers' (Empowerment) Commission, that speaks for itself. "With an average rainfall of 988 mm, Tamil Nadu grows three crops of paddy from the same land every year thanks to their superior water distribution system, while we grow only one crop, despite receiving three times more rainfall (2818mm).....Why do we need a second crop of Paddy at all? Because we are a food-deficit state, because we currently produce only 30% of our food requirement and because we are dependent upon other states for meeting the rest of our demand."

It's time for the Department of Water Resources/ Agriculture Department of the state to take note of these observations and suggestions made by it's most senior officer.

And finally, coming to the men and women who come and sell vegetables at our doorsteps and in our footpaths, I remember an appeal being made that we should not bargain with them for the prices of their produce because they come to sell them not to make money to build mansions but to make sure that their loved ones don't sleep on an empty stomach at night.

Yours etc.,
Michael N.Syiem,
Via email

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

"Try to learn something about everything and everything about something."

—Thomas Huxley

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVI No. 205 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MARCH 7, 2024

Rent seeking economy is fraught

THE Smart City Project appears to be getting nowhere. Like every other project in Meghalaya this too is marred by delays and will not meet the timelines laid for it. The worst part is the road in Lachumiere behind the office of the Directorate of Information and Public Relations which has been in the state of being constructed for months together. The road cannot be more than a kilometre in length yet it remains incomplete. There is in fact no sign of any smartness in this city other than the burgeoning number of vehicles during school hours.

Meghalaya has suffered from this peculiar malaise of projects stopping halfway and contractors packing up and leaving either because they are heavily extorted or because their labourers are intimidated. If those in government, particularly the political class are unable to deal with this persistent malady then Meghalaya will continue to remain the laggard state. Everywhere else and our neighbouring state Assam is a good example, the city of Guwahati has seen several flyovers come up in order to ease traffic movement. One major hurdle in Meghalaya is that of land acquisition. Even when land has been acquired for different projects including the Shillong-Dawki road project, land owners suddenly realise they can hold the government to ransom by demanding a price higher than the negotiated one. This leads to unnecessary delay.

The Dorbar Shnong are supposed to work in tandem with the government in speeding up road projects that cut through their shnong. But sometimes the Dorbar Shnong themselves become the biggest obstruction to the smooth completion of a project — particularly road projects because they become the disrupters instead of facilitators who should be keeping watch that the contractors are not held to ransom by sundry groups whose preoccupation is rent-seeking. Wherever the Dorbar Shnong is cohesive and its members work in tandem with an eye on bringing development to the villages, it is seen that progress is smooth and the villages are well connected. There is also the issue of too many contractors from the shnong vying for the same piece of work and when one wins the bid and the other does not then there is bad blood within the village. Different pressure tactics are used against the labourers of the contractor especially if they are non-tribal labourers. Every contractor looks to make a profit out of the work order. He/she looks for labourers that produce outcomes and often the locals are least bothered about putting their sinews to the task and spend more time idling with their mobile phones but because they are locals, the contractor cannot take action. How long can such differential treatment carry on? A contractor should have the liberty to choose labourers that give value for money; the best masons, the best road laying experts without being intimidated. Will this ever happen in Meghalaya? Meanwhile the state is backsliding.

2024 Lok Sabha polls: Parties and their prospects

By Albert Thyriani

The election bugle has sounded. The BJP has already announced the first list of 195 candidates for the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. No surprise that the most prominent names are PM Narendra Modi and his deputy, Amit Shah. However, the juggernaut display in Gujarat and in other states is missing in the largest 'Lower House state', Uttar Pradesh. Apart from Modi none of the 79 seats has a contestant so far. The saffron party is clearly wary of the SP-Congress combine. To portray itself as a development oriented party, four controversial MPs, Parvash Verma, Jayant Sinha, Ramesh Bidhuri and blast accused, Sadhvi Pragya Thakur are shown the door. Always in election mode the BJP is much ahead of the Election Commission of India.

Meghalaya is a shade smarter than the BJP, electorally. Long before the Delhi rulers made the maiden set of competitors public, here most parties had already named theirs: The only party which is still struggling to figure out who its candidate will be is ironically the BJP. South Shillong Legislator, Sanbor Shullai is publicly lobbying for Fenela Lyngdoh Nonglait for the Shillong constituency. The other parties are already heating up their campaign for their respective nominees. First among them all is the much talked about VPP which declared its candidates since June last year, nine months in advance, Dr Ricky AJ Syngkon is the choice of the most nascent party, The Congress believes Vincent Pala will emerge victorious for the record fourth time. The NPP's bet is on Ampareen Lyngdoh to upset her former boss. The UDP has chosen the ex-HYC chief, Robert June Kharjinh with the hope of edging out national parties. An independent, Lakhon Kma, NEHU's Biochemistry professor has thrown himself in the ring. The TMC will resolve the Shillong conundrum depending on the situation in Tura.

For the western segment, Tura MP, NPP's Agatha Sangma has no competition. The Congress has decided to put up the lone MLA, Saleng Sangma from Gambegre. In Tura too, for the BJP is still a mystery. The TMC is still hopeful that the Congress will opt out of the race as part of the I.N.D.I.A deal to take on the NPP/BJP jointly. No other candidate is expected to enter the fray in Garo Hills.

What are the prospects of the parties in our state? What do they stand on while they vie for their right to be Shillong's and Tura's spokespersons in the national capital? What are their planks for their campaigns? What are their ideologies? Whom will Meghalaya send to the Lok Sabha? Who will be the two MPs for the next five years?

Let us state upfront that the NPP will win the Tura seat. A tighter contest is expected only if the TMC and the Congress agree on a joint candidate. The Trinamool wishes the grand old party to direct Saleng to stand aside in favour of the I.N.D.I.A block formula. This arrangement will see Charles Pyngrope and company supporting their old friends from the Congress in the eastern region. Given the much publicised differences between the Meghalaya PCC chief, Vincent Pala and TMC leader, Mukul Sangma, not even the number one goal of defeating the commonest enemy, the BJP might lead to a patch up. Even if the TMC-Congress pact materialises, Congress leaders will be disgruntled and parts of the vote bank will line up for the NPP. Even if there is a TMC-Congress alliance, the final prediction is that the NPP has a better chance of winning the Tura seat. Next will come the TMC-Congress combine followed by the BJP. If the Congress goes it alone its position is third.

In Shillong, the Congress' main ground is anti-BJP and pro secularism. It will position itself as the only party that is able to take on the BJP's might nationally and the best party committed to secularism and peaceful coexistence of all religions where minorities too thrive. The declining party has already loudly appealed to all supporters of NPP, UDP, BJP, TMC and VPP to rally behind its tested candidate to add to the tally that will oppose the BJP tooth and nail. "For the sake of secularism, vote for us," will be the Congress' cry. The party will elucidate the vitiated atmosphere in the country and the instances of persecution of Christians in the last 10 years. The speakers at Congress' rallies and election meetings will point to the threats Christians currently face in Assam. In case the INDI Alliance manages to topple the 'communal'

BJP the fear psychosis will recede, will be the claim. These voices will resonate with the voters, no doubt.

The most popular party at this given point in history is the VPP. Its 'unofficial song' continues to make waves in the state captivating the young and the old. Others are rattled by its fame. Ampareen Lyngdoh foolishly cast slurs on the song accusing it of bringing disrepute to the Khasi society because, she alleges, the song eulogises the 'panah and meinah' (stepfather and step mother) culture. She even declared that step-fathers and step-mothers should not follow her. The NPP's candidates were trolled on social media. Her anger against the song has alienated hundreds, if not thousands, of 'Panah and Meinah' in her constituency. The reputation of VPP is not only due to the hit song. Its firebrand leader, Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit led people to the street on the issue of job reservation policy and the sacking of Meghalaya Lokayukta officials who 'were investigating corruption' in the state. Advocating clean politics and taking anti-wasteful expenditure stance has brought dividends to the party, if the party draws crowds sans 'Ha U Prah' song and if voters vote on the basis of ideology and principles and not on emotion derived from 'Kongdeng Kongnah' the change for the better could be tangible. Otherwise when another more catchy election song comes about, crowds will then flock there.

The NPP will try to amplify its achievements and development drive. However, the BJP might counter that projects for the state have come from the centre. The VPP has already pointed several times that the cash for the infrastructural initiatives are through loans. It is the tax payers who will ultimately face the brunt while the government glorifies itself. The close nexus with the BJP is hard to draw enough voters as far as the MP election is concerned. The support of Agatha Sangma to CAA will feed on opponents to convince voters to stay away from the NPP. The rumours that the same Tura MP objected to the Khasi language being elevated to the 8th Schedule might also add to the disenchantment. The party, however, is confident

because it secured the highest voter share in the last Assembly election and has the most number of MLAs and MDCs in the Shillong seat. Strengthening its base the party has lured legislators and councillors of other parties to its fold.

The UDP, with eight MLAs and 6 MDCs in KHADC is the next biggest party. Thus it claims it has a chance to wrest the seat from the Congress. The Khasi-Jaintia Hills centric party could work to its advantage in Shillong parliamentary election. Recently the party top brass has decided not to indulge in mudslinging. This is not an indication of maturity. Please recall Sohiong! The main factor for its win were personal attacks. In the last MLA elections all we got was throwing thick dirt at the NPP. Though UDP was part and parcel of the MDA-I it put all the blame of 'high level' and misgovernance on the NPP. However, it could afford to hurl the dirty mud at its partners since the contest was to form a new government. At the moment, only one year has passed, UDP has no room to throw even genuine allegations at MDA-II, firmly led by NPP. If it criticises the NPP, people will laugh saying, "Hey, you are in the same boat." The two ministers and chairmen and co-chairmen will also be thrown out. The BJP too is a partner. So whom will the NPP have a go at? The Congress? The UDP was with the Congress earlier and will be with it in the future. The VPP could be the target, for, the UDP is losing its space to the 'Prah.' But this tactic would find no takers.

The BJP is not anticipated to be a serious contender. The prevailing anti-Christian sentiments will fetch few votes for the nationally dominant party. TMC may or may not be in the picture but its presence or absence will make little difference. On merit one wishes the voters seriously consider the lone independent candidate, Lakhon Kma. However, realistically, when fighting elections a lot depends on the political party's organisational structure. The chances for the NEHU Biochemistry professor this time, sadly, are bleak.

In the final analysis, Shillong 2024 could be as follows. The fight for poll position might be between the Congress and VPP. The NPP, UDP, BJP, TMC, independents will occupy their respective spots.

Need to triangulate GDP data with other indicators

By Ajit Ranade

India's GDP during the three months ending December 2023 grew at 8.4 percent. This is the highest among all large economies of the world. It is extremely heartening to have the economy growing at a relatively healthy pace for three years in a row after the pandemic. It brings good cheer, and the stock markets responded resoundingly. The stock market index keeps attaining new peaks, indicating investor optimism. The slew of announcements, such as approval for setting up of 15 billion dollars of investment in semiconductor manufacturing speaks of the enthusiasm and confidence of a bright outlook for the economy.

It is important to go "below the hood," to understand the significance of the headline of 8.4 percent growth for the December quarter. This is particularly so, because the news of such high growth beat all expectations by a wide margin. For instance, the Survey of Professional Forecasters on Macroeconomic Indicators, conducted regularly by the Reserve Bank of India, had predicted a GDP growth rate between 6 to 6.9 percent for this year ending in March, very recently. The actual number for December quarter is nearly 2 percent higher than the annual forecast. Of course, forecasters go wrong quite often, but not by such a big margin. These forecasters are tracking the economy based on high frequency data all the time.

The other puzzle is the gap between GDP growth rate and that of Gross Value

added youth can discourage consumption spending.

The recently released fact sheet on the household consumption survey gives a granular view of monthly spending on consumption. The survey came after a gap of 11 years, and over this period the growth on average has been 164 percent in rural areas, and 146 percent in urban areas. These numbers are in nominal terms i.e. they do not account for inflation adjustment. Adjusted for inflation, the real growth in consumption as per the survey works out to 40 percent for rural areas and 34 percent for urban areas, over a period of 11 years. Thus, the consumption growth based on National Sample Survey (NSS) is barely 3.5 percent over a long period. Of course, there has been this well-known discrepancy between consumer spending as revealed by NSS and as revealed by the Central Statistical Organization (CSO). And this gap is still too wide. But it is important to look at the data from these two lenses, and try to get some consistency, and remove defects in measurement if any. The fact is high GDP growth and low consumption spending growth do not sound consistent.

A third aspect when we look "under the hood" is the performance of industry and the agriculture sectors. GDP can be measured from the spending side (i.e. consumption, investment, net exports and government), or it can be measured from the production side (i.e. agriculture, industry and services).

"The recently released fact sheet on the household consumption survey gives a granular view of monthly spending on consumption. The survey came after a gap of 11 years, and over this period the growth on average has been 164 percent in rural areas, and 146 percent in urban areas."

Added (GVA) for the same quarter. The latter gives a true measure of the real value of goods and services produced and sold. The world over it is the preferred indicator of economic health. The difference between GDP and GVA is usually minor and reflects the net effect of taxes minus subsidies. Indirect tax collection adds to GDP while subsidy outgo reduces GDP. These two mostly balance each other out. The GVA growth for the December quarter is only 6.5 percent, nearly two percent lower than GDP growth. This gap is the highest reported in the past ten years. It has been caused by a steep fall (more than 50 percent) in subsidy outgo, and a big increase in indirect tax collection. We need to probe deeper to understand whether these are one off spikes (both positive and negative) or whether such volatility will continue. The GVA growth reported for the past three quarters has been sliding down from 8.2 percent down to 6.5 now. Since the total growth rate for 2023-24 is around 7.3 or 7.5, it means that the fourth quarter ending in April will likely report a GVA growth rate below 6 percent. That data is released only by the end of May.

Another puzzle apart from the GDP and GVA divergence, is the growth rate of consumption expenditure. This constitutes more than 55 percent of GDP and forms the bulk. That is growing only at 3 percent and is at a multi-year low. High growth cannot be sustained without a big push from consumer spending. That in turn depends on the sentiment of consumers, their current spending and their plan for future spending (like on white goods, furniture, tourism travel, etc). Consumers feel optimistic about the future when their job prospects are bright. High unemployment rates, especially among the college

When we look at the latter, agriculture growth has fallen below zero for the December quarter. This negative number is explained as a base effect, since the quarterly numbers are growth over corresponding numbers one year ago. Since that number for the December 2022 quarter was above 5 percent, and was a "high base" the present number is negative. Be that as it may, the overall contribution of agriculture to GDP growth this year will be below 1 percent as per latest estimates. This is worrying for various reasons, most importantly for what it means for the livelihoods and incomes of rural families. Industrial growth at 11 percent too is because of the "base effect" of just 0.6 percent a year ago.

Finally, one more piece of the puzzle is the difference between nominal and real GDP growth. It is because of inflation, and the correction at the national level is done by the GDP deflator. This number has been reported to be just 1.6 percent indicating nearly no inflation at all. But surely that is a gross underestimate. If GDP growth is 8.4 percent then nominal GDP growth is expected to be at least 12 or 13 percent. It was only 10 percent higher in nominal terms during the December quarter, as compared to one year ago. The GDP deflator is too low.

Whether it is the gap between GDP and GVA growth rates, or between GDP and consumption spending, or the relatively low sectoral rates, or the very low deflator, all of these point to the need to triangulate the aggregate GDP data with more granular and high frequency sectoral data. This calls for a massive overhaul of the machinery that collects data on a real time basis.

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

Letters to the Editor

Indian Knowledge System needs robust questioning

Editor,
I am writing to express my deep appreciation for the article, "Indian Knowledge System and Pseudo Science (ST Mar 6, 2024), by H. Srikanth, who is spot on right in pointing out the Hindutva agenda underlying BJP proposals for the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) for all levels of Indian education.

After being invaded so many times and colonized by Britain, India's hankering for authenticity is natural. But which India should we return to? The current nation state of India never existed in prior times. So Indians have to invent a new India as the most authentic ever. Our authenticity lies in the future -- not the past.

Almost all authenticity projects in the former colonies have gone religious and wrong. Westernization was the fate of the world. There is no escaping this fate, except by true authenticity, which comes from self-purification and humility - not irrational narcissism. Moreover, not everything western is bad. There are great virtues in the west, as well as great intellectuals and saints.

Greatness of any kind is universal. Finally, a politics of envy, and emulation usually goes wrong. Hindutva politics has perfected this genre of narcissistic protest politics that always leads to absurd conclusions. Almost all our contemporary protest

politics, worldwide, belong to this genre.

Just outside Belur Math (bastion of the highest rationality, spirituality, and pure holiness), I once saw a bus stop painted with bizarre Hindutva slogans claiming that ancient Hindus had invented all the glories of modern western inventions (airplanes, etc.). Given the stark contrast between them, it is hard to believe that both Belur Math and Hindutva belong to the same religion. The feeling of inferiority is perhaps more dangerous morally than that of superiority. Feelings of inferiority before the west cannot be conquered by bizarre myths, but by assiduous practice of truthfulness and moral purity.

It is possible to believe in the multiple divine incarnations of higher Hinduism, without losing sight of empirical reality. This means accepting Rama, Krishna, Buddha, and others as historical figures, while at the same time, acknowledging that we must have evidence of their historical lives. Moreover, it does not matter if they did not exist historically. That they exist in our consciousness suffices. For, their very presence in us sanctifies the world through us.

One may say the same of Christ. Today there are questions about the actual historicity of Christ. Did He really exist historically? Spiritually speaking, it does not matter if He did not. His very presence in us sanctifies and redeems and saves fallen men. In short, true belief and faith should

take us beyond the extremes of Hindutva credulity and western cynicism.

It is this kind of true faith and the universality of real goodness that should be reflected in India's knowledge projects for the youth -- especially for children. They need exposure to ALL worthy religions, so as to develop a rounded consciousness and possess the wisdom they need to face the challenges of life. If we deny them this wisdom and faith, we not only betray them -- we feed the therapy industry, which is minting money off the misery and emptiness of modern man.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Another landmark judgement!

Editor,
The Supreme Court on 04.03.2024 made a significant ruling in the JMM bribery case, which has far-reaching implications for lawmakers.

Background: In 1998, a five judge Supreme Court bench had granted immunity to Members of Parliament and Members of Legislative Assemblies from prosecution for accepting bribes. This immunity applied specifically to situations where they accepted bribes in exchange for making speech or casting a vote within the legislative house. The 1998 ruling was based on the interpretation of Article 105(2) (for MPs) and

Article 194(2) (for MLAs) of the Indian Constitution.

Recent decision: On March 4 2024, a seven-judge bench of the Supreme Court overruled the majority judgement from 1998. The new ruling states that lawmakers who engage in graft have no immunity. In other words, MPs and MLAs can now be criminally prosecuted under the Prevention of Corruption Act for accepting bribes, regardless of whether the bribe was related to a vote or a speech. The court emphasized that the crime is complete the moment the bribe is accepted, irrespective of any subsequent voting or speech-making. The location where the bribe was offered or received is irrelevant; lawmakers cannot escape prosecution by claiming parliamentary privilege.

Impact and significance: The groundbreaking decision opens the doors for the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to initiate prosecution against accused legislators involved in bribery cases. The court highlighted that taking bribes undermines the fabric of representative democracy and erodes public trust in parliamentary debates and processes. Voting or speaking in favour of a party after accepting money from them is considered a breach of discipline and goes against the fundamental duties of a legislator.

The JMM Bribery Case: The reference for this ruling came from an appeal filed by Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) leader Sita Soren. She was accused of accepting a bribe to vote for a particular candidate in the

2012 Rajya Sabha elections. Although she later denied culpability, the CBI had filed a chargesheet against her. The Jharkhand High Court had refused to quash the chargesheet, leading her to approach the Supreme Court. Notably, Sita Soren is the daughter-in-law of JMM chief and former union minister Shibu Soren, who was also involved in the alleged JMM bribery case. In 1993, four JMM MLAs and eight other MPs were allegedly bribed to ensure the survival of the then PV Narasimha Rao government during a no-confidence vote.

The verdict was delivered by a distinguished bench, headed by Chief Justice of India (CJI) D Y Chandrachud, and Justices A S Bopanna, M M Sundresh, P S Narasimha, J B Pardiwala, Sanjay Kumar, and Manoj Misra. "We disagree with the judgment in the PV Narasimha Rao case. The judgment in PV Narasimha Rao which grants immunity to legislators for allegedly bribery for casting a vote or speech has wide ramifications and overruled," Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud said, while reading out the order. "Such a claim for immunity fails to fulfil the test whether such immunity is necessary to discharge legislative functions." This ruling marks a significant shift in the legal landscape, reinforcing accountability and transparency in our democratic institutions. Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted "A great judgment by the Supreme Court which will ensure clean politics and deepen people's

faith in the system."
Yours etc.,
V K Lyngdoh,
Via email

Justice for Brazilian woman tourist

Editor,
Through your esteemed daily I appeal to the citizens of this country to step forward and join hands in demanding justice to a woman tourist of Brazilian-Spanish nationality who was allegedly gang raped by seven men in Jharkhand's Dumka District on the night of March 1 last. This incident, along with other cases of harassment and assault on female tourists in India, has once again put India's security concerns in the spotlight. As per the National Crime Records Bureau an average of nearly 90 rapes were reported in India every day in 2022. The crime of rape is a major problem in India. The accused has usually gone free either because the victim did not file a complaint or because of poor evidence collection and investigation. Other countries have brutal punishments for committing such crimes whereas in India justice is a long-winded process and justice is always delayed. We hope that this case proceeds in fast track and the rapists are punished as per the law of the land.

Yours etc.,
Pinaki Nandy
Shillong

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

"The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any."

— Alice Walker

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 206 TURA, FRIDAY, MARCH 8, 2024

Biden or Trump

AMERICANS, it appears, believe stoically in the phrase, 'Old is Gold.' With Democratic Party's Joe Biden and Republicans' Donald Trump winning the primary push in the minimum required 15 states each already, the die is somewhat cast for the November US presidential elections followed by the installation of a new president in January. Biden is aged 81 and Trump 77, both not in the best of health. After Indian-American candidate Nikki Haley exited from the race when she lost to Trump in the Super Tuesday pre-poll challenge, the former president has emerged as the presumptive Republican nominee for the exalted post in the party's July meet. The grit and determination of Trump to seek presidency again, a term after his exit from power, must be appreciated, but a larger question is why is the American democracy not sound enough to throw up smarter faces to guide the destiny of not only their nation but also of the world.

Incumbent Joe Biden has a wealth of experience as a seasoned administrator, having served as vice president during the term of Barack Obama. Yet, his low profile set against the aggressive high profile of Donald Trump came as an advantage to him in the last presidential polls. Trump rode to power practically with no administrative experience and his popularity was anchored in his images as a businessman and TV debater. His rough and tough styles won him admirers, and these would again be projected as and when he runs for the presidency again. The world requires a strong president in Washington to tackle situations in hotspots like Ukraine, West Asia and Taiwan. Keeping Russia and China under check is important. Joe Biden did not concede ground to the Islamists targeting Israel in West Asia, the Russians in their offensives against Ukraine or China in its continued attempts to take on Taiwan, the breakaway Republic. Without strong US backing, none of these small nations could have survived the odds. The last word is not heard yet in the two theatres of war. Even granted that the US should first and foremost mind its own business, the American leadership of the world cannot be wished away. This is because the UN today is not very effective on its own.

The strength of the US is also the strength of the world. It acts as the big brother, often justifiably interfered in the affairs of other nations, overthrew dictators like Saddam Hussein or throttled nations like Afghanistan, but did not annex these nations. Rather, these were left to their own people to govern and survive or perish. America as a society opens its arms to draw in people from around the world. In a sense it has enriched its own experiences.

International Women's Day: A ritual that's lost its moorings?

By Patricia Mukhim

International Women's Day (IWD) this year is just like it was last year and before that. There's nothing significant to celebrate other than a few homilies thrown out to women across the world that we are still struggling and will continue to struggle to bridge the gender gap in our workplaces; in livelihoods, in our capacity to spend; our ability to access our rights, particularly our legal rights. Women's empowerment which is the alter ego of IWD above all means women's empowerment. And what does women's empowerment really mean beyond the phrase? It means to overcome the poverty of voice, poverty of quality healthcare, poverty of rest and of time for oneself amongst other things. Gloria Steinem, world renowned feminist and activist who had visited Meghalaya some years ago and who we were fortunate to meet had said, "The story of women's struggle for equality belongs to no single feminist nor to any one organisation but to the collective efforts of all who care about human rights." Yes women's rights are human rights! This indeed is an awakening for all who tend to look up to a few role models to help turn our world around. That model has failed. The government would not like to see empowered women for they are a dangerous species. They question policies, schemes, budgets and ask, "Why is there no gender budgeting in Meghalaya?"

For the uninitiated gender budgeting means creating or assessing budgets from a gender viewpoint. This is also known as gender-sensitive budgeting which aims at bringing equality and equity both through fiscal policies by critically analysing the impact of the budget and its effects on men and women. Let's also not forget that gender today has moved beyond the binary of male and female and includes transgenders as well who are trying their best to cope in a very unequal world. Gender budgeting requires deep insights and the government needs to train its officials especially those closest to the people — the Block Development Officers and Gram Sevaks and Sevikas. Not every woman understands the gender disparities that creep in through faulty and gender-blind government policies. Such policies

bring no tangible outcomes. A gender sensitive government needs to set goals and targets for achieving equality and allocate funds to achieve those aspirations.

Gender equitable policies need sensitive implementation. An official who does not understand the nuances of gender will not be able to effectively implement such policies. This is the reason we see no outcomes despite years of talking about women's empowerment. What we don't have in the government system are effective yardsticks to measure outcomes. If Rs X is spent on a programme what are the outcomes? They have to be visible and tangible. Sometimes the outcomes are intangible because they involve mindsets, which are not measurable. There are still huge gender disparities in public life, especially in politics, the workplace, entrepreneurship and education. Hence the government should use the budgeting process to bring about gender equality by implementing gender budgeting from the next budget session in Meghalaya and we expect the MLAs also to demand this but to also educate themselves on what gender budgeting implies.

Women in politics: One of the areas where women are way behind in Meghalaya is politics. Sure women are coaxed and cajoled to join political parties because those at the top of the political ladder know that women can convince other women who to vote for, especially if those women leaders lead by example. Hence political parties encourage their women's wings to branch out especially before elections. Sadly, once the elections are done and dusted those women are forgotten. Meghalaya's ordeal is the resistance by the Dorbar Shnong to allow women to take active part and contest for various posts including for that of the post of Rangbah Shnong. There are alibis galore that men cite as to why women cannot be the Rangbah Shnong, such as the need to be out at unscheduled timings in case of problems in the shnong etc. These same men are silent on women ministers who do more than their share of duties in the day or night or at dawn. Without political empowerment women's specific

necessary.

Anganwadi workers also visit homes to mobilise families to bring their children to the PHCs and CHCs for timely immunisation/vaccination. They also conduct awareness on health and nutrition related topics so that mothers understand what to feed their children for better nutrition.

To add to the existing burden Anganwadi centres are also expected to provide pre-school education and thereby prepare kids for formal schooling. The question is whether these Anganwadi workers are even trained to teach kids. Most times one hears them teaching kids to sing and then they put the kids to sleep or organise play time for them. It is too heavy on the Anganwadi worker to be piled with so much work for so little pay. Government should be told that paying so little for so much work is injustice and a violation of women's rights.

Over and above all the responsibilities stated above the Anganwadi worker is expected to provide care for pregnant and expectant women and also after they have given birth. This is to ensure safe delivery. Being the primary contacts with the community, Anganwadi workers also actively engage with the community to partner with them so that they participate in health and nutrition programmes apart from assisting families to access government schemes and services.

To be just and fair to the Anganwadi worker we must admit that they carry a load of responsibilities and we need to be fighting for their right to better pay. It's only when we pay attention to these different levels of the women workforce that we can speak of women's empowerment. Else we are only chanting eulogies in the air.

Last but not least, Meghalaya has been without a Chairperson to head the State Women's Commission for over a year now. Should it take so long to find a capable person to head the Commission or is political loyalty a more important criterion? We want answers to these ticklish questions.

Incidentally, this year's theme for IWD is "Invest in Women: Accelerate Progress." Will the Meghalaya Government pay heed to this call?

Democracy: Beyond the Ballot Box

By Dr Sabzar Ahmad Bhat

In a world where the concept of democracy often revolves around the mechanics of free and fair elections, a deeper exploration reveals that true democracy extends far beyond the ballot box. Imposing the will of the majority is not democracy. It encompasses a diverse set of values, institutions, and principles that collectively ensure a just and equitable society.

Democracy, as espoused by western thinkers like John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Montesquieu, finds its roots in the social con-

"will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures." This means the will of the people as the basis of governmental authority.

In the words of Canadian author Naomi Klein, democracy is not just about casting a vote; it is about the right to live in dignity. This sentiment echoes throughout history, with voices like Clare Boothe Luce emphasizing the importance of empowering citizens



tract, the general will, and the separation of powers, respectively. Locke proposed that individuals enter into a social contract to form a government, which exists to protect their natural rights to "life, liberty, and property". Rousseau argued that legitimate political authority arises from the general will of the people, which represents the common interests of the entire community. Montesquieu advocated for the separation of governmental powers into distinct branches to prevent tyranny and ensure accountability.

Locke's concept of the social contract resonates profoundly in today's discussions on democracy. He asserted in his Two Treatises of Government, "The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions." Here, Locke emphasizes the importance of individual rights and the necessity for government to protect them.

Genevan philosopher, Rousseau's notion of the general will underscores the collective interest of the community. He famously stated in his The Social Contract, "Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole." Rousseau's emphasis on the collective decision-making process highlights the importance of inclusivity and community participation in democratic governance.

The French philosopher Montesquieu's advocacy for the separation of powers continues to shape democratic systems globally. He argued in his The Spirit of the Laws, "When the legislative and executive powers are united in the same person or body, there can be no liberty, because apprehensions may arise lest the same monarch or senate should enact tyrannical laws to execute them in a tyrannical manner." Montesquieu's insights remind us of the necessity for checks and balances to prevent the concentration of power and ensure accountability.

However, democracy is not merely a theoretical construct—it is a lived experience that must uphold a myriad of principles and rights. John Stuart Mill's Harm Principle reminds us that individual liberties must be protected from undue interference. He stated in his On Liberty, "The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others." Additionally, Article 21(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares the

to become active participants in governance.

As we reflect on the essence of democracy, we are reminded of the words of John Stuart Mill, who eloquently stated, "If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind." This underscores the fundamental importance of protecting individual dissent and diversity of thought within democratic societies.

Indeed, democratic principles have been echoed by numerous voices throughout history:

1. "The very essence of democracy is the absolute belief that while people must cooperate, the first function of democracy, its peculiar gift, is to develop each individual into everything that he might be." Clare Boothe Luce

2. "The people, in delegating authority, do not give their representatives the right to decide as they please, but to represent them, as faithful agents would." Jean-Jacques Rousseau

3. "No man is above the law, and no man is below it." Theodore Roosevelt

Yet, the true essence of democracy lies in its ability to foster socioeconomic equality, environmental sustainability, and the empowerment of marginalized communities. It is about upholding the rule of law, protecting civil liberties, and ensuring transparency and accountability in governance.

To deepen democracy beyond the ballot box, it's crucial to prioritize community engagement and participation through initiatives like citizen assemblies and participatory budgeting, while also investing in civic literacy programs. Addressing systemic inequalities and promoting social justice, environmental sustainability, and transparency are essential. Empowering marginalized communities, fostering global collaboration, and leveraging technology for democratic processes are key. Strengthening civil society and promoting ongoing dialogue and reflection on the evolving nature of democracy are vital for building a more inclusive and responsive society that upholds principles of justice, equality, and the common good.

As we navigate the complexities of the modern world, it is imperative that we redefine our understanding of democracy. It is not enough to rely solely on elections; we must embrace a holistic approach that prioritizes justice, equality, and the common good. Only then can we truly honor the principles upon which democracy stands and build a society that is inclusive, participatory, and responsive to the needs of all its citizens.

Letters to the Editor

Hunger and malnutrition a curse in India

Editor,

The theme for 8 March 2024 - International Women's Day is "Invest in Women: Accelerate Progress." India needs to invest in daily wage earning mothers to accelerate progress in the field of fighting hunger and malnutrition among children. Mothers in many economically disadvantaged households work very hard to earn wages even while rearing their infant children. As a result, they do not get adequate time to feed their starving children. They face double torture in the form of anaemia for not getting adequate food for themselves plus starving children for not getting adequate time to feed them.

Vandana Prasad, a paediatrician and public health specialist said that many infants are deprived of complementary feeding because their mothers' circumstances prevent them from providing the children with feeding care. He pointed out that maternity entitlements and childcare services could help address the issue but many women do not have access to such services. This causes 1 out of 5 infants in our country to starve for a long period of time.

Population health researcher S. V. Subramanian from Harvard University, Omar Karlsson from Duke

University in the US and Rockli Kim, a public health researcher in Korea conducted a study across 92 low-income and middle-income countries on zero-food children. Zero-food children (ZFC) are infants aged between 6 months and 24 months who have not received any food over a 24-hour period. For their study on ZFC in India, they used the data from the Union Health Ministry's National Family Health Survey for 2019-21.

It was found that in terms of the total number of zero-food children, India is at the top of the list with over 6.7 million infants and the third highest in the world percentage wise. India has 19.3 per cent of zero-food children. India's position is better than two West African nations Guinea (21.8%) and Mali (20.5%). But much worse than 89 other low-income and middle-income countries like Bangladesh (5.6%), Pakistan (9.2%), Nigeria (8.8%) and DR Congo (7.4%).

The nutrition indicators for children under 5 years shows that 1 out of 3 children (35.5 per cent) is a victim of stunting and 1 out of 5 children (19.3 per cent) is a victim of wasting as per the Union Health Ministry's, National Family Health Survey - 5 (2019 - 20) report. India's child wasting and child stunting rates are horrific in both the government's NFHS report and the 2023 Global Hunger Index report.

India has slid into a horrific 111th rank among 125 countries in the 2023 Global Hunger Index. India is behind China (at the top bracket that includes 20 countries), Sri Lanka (60), Nepal (69), Myanmar (72), Bangladesh (81) and Pakistan (102) among our neighbours. The report says that India's child wasting rate (18.7 per cent) is the highest on the global level.

The New National Educational Policy has proposed that the midday meals provided to students in government and aided schools should be supplemented by breakfast as children are unable to learn optimally when they are hungry.

A few days ago, the Supreme Court of India has left it to the states and union territories to decide on setting up community kitchens for providing nutritious food to the underprivileged to tackle hunger and starvation deaths. Community kitchens can also effectively tackle malnutrition.

Every woman should enjoy maternity entitlements and childcare services. Moreover, free milk for infants of poor families, breakfast plus midday meals for the students and community kitchens for the needy must be started. Lifting children and their mothers out of hunger and malnutrition should be given top priority.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Has 5G really revolutionized Bharat?

Editor,

Almost a year into the rollout of 5G services by Reliance Jio and Bharti Airtel, the two now cover nearly 10,000 cities and towns and aim to have pan-India coverage by the end of the current calendar year, or March 2024. 5G is available in India in almost every city and in our state as well, but has it really lived up to its promises? Or to the glorious perks that were promised?

5G is great on paper. But in real-world use, it has been synonymous with call drops, constant shuffle between 4G and 5G, and network vacuums. It has basically been a disaster, and in this piece, I am digging deeper into the poor experience.

5G speeds are not consistent across the country, and there is patchy coverage, especially in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities. Sadly, in our city, many areas have not been totally covered by 5G, both in the SA and NSA modes, as per the 5G network deployment provided by Jio and Airtel. Vi and BSNL are still on the queue to deploy this technology.

In my locality, both Jio and Airtel are providing stable and good 5G networks and data speeds, but once I move to another location within the city's vicinity, horrible is the word I am

using because there is no uniformity in the availability of the 5G network and my cell phone is always switching between 4G and 5G, often greatly impacting my cell phone's battery life. Hence, I am restricted to keeping 4G mode only while moving out of my abode, which is frustrating.

Keeping my problems aside, for many cell phone users in our state, transitioning or being able to use this technology is not easy as bread and butter for them, as they need to buy a new cell phone with 5G compatibility, and truth be told, there are limited and specific 5G bands where the telecom giants are deploying their 5G networks.

Many cell phone manufacturers have claimed that they have 5G technology in their cell phones. However, when the consumer has bought the device, it is sad to say that their cell phones are not compatible with the 5G bands deployed by both telecom parties in our country. Hence, this matter needs to be clearly understood and addressed, and the 5G network providers should make the consumer understand this before transitioning to this technology.

The surveys conducted of subscribers in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, they are still latching on to 4G and, to my amazement, 2G networks too on Dumb phones.

In May 2023, India hit the \$100 million milestone for the sale of 5G smartphones.

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) has proposed stringent performance benchmarks for telecom operators, especially related to call drops, incorporating parameters for 5G services and the 5G Bands for the first time as it looks to improve the consumer experience.

Sure, Indian mobile phone users—at least those who are using either Airtel or Jio—can see the 5G mark on their phones in most Indian cities. But can they use it and experience 5G the way it has been promised? No. So far, the 5G rollout in India has been a disaster for users as of now.

Disaster! A big word, right? But I have my reasons, based on my shoddy experience with 5G on multiple phones and on too many occasions. And I believe that by the time I am done sharing all these reasons, chances are that you will agree with me.

Here's the thing: while 5G is the buzzword in the country and the speed test results have been a great source of praise for the network providers, the truth is that 5G's real-world accessibility in India remains limited. The reality beyond the speed tests is very different.

Yours etc.,
Chanmiki Laloo,
Shillong 02

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

"We shall never know all the good that a simple smile can do."

— Mother Teresa

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 207 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, MARCH 9, 2024

Common platform for election campaign

A common platform where candidates for the Lok Sabha election can state their objectives before the public and explain their party's stand is imperative. Such platforms cannot be one-sided lectures from the candidates. Instead they must have space for people to raise questions and for those questions to be answered to the satisfaction of the public. At such platforms there can be no personal attacks. The focus should be on the tasks that the winning candidate would undertake on entering the Lok Sabha. If a brand new candidate is elected from Shillong Lok Sabha constituency that person will take months to learn the ropes and to build solidarity with fellow MPs. That MP would, amongst other things, have to know Hindi or he will be at sea during the deliberations in Parliament. These issues can come up in public platforms and the candidates could be asked how they will negotiate their way around such situations.

The range of issues to be discussed at common platforms would be decided by the particular Dorbar Shnong and an office bearer of the Dorbar would moderate over the meeting. No wisecracks should be allowed which some people seem to be experts at. The people who come to listen to the candidates have not come to listen to humour but to real issues that the State of Meghalaya can benefit from.

The VPP's recent walkout of the Assembly on the use of Hindi in the Assembly by the Governor is a petty ploy aimed at public display of jingoism. Hindi or its hackneyed version has been spoken by people in Meghalaya since time immemorial because they had to transact with non-tribal traders and negotiate their way around the businesses transacted on a daily basis. It was a mutual thing. The non-tribal traders also got around with their scanty knowledge of Khasi and that's how business was transacted. In so many decades the people of this state could have learnt Hindi as much as they learnt English knowing fully well that once they step out of Meghalaya, they would have to know Hindi because not everyone outside this state speaks English. Students going out of the state for medical, engineering and other professional courses to North and Western India would be lost if they did not know Hindi. Hence Hindi has become a compulsory part of life. There was no need for the VPP to make a public display of love for the mother tongue and for English. Their action has only encouraged leaders of the NPP to make jokes about the VPP by saying that if their candidate is elected he will be sitting in protest for the next five years outside Parliament since Hindi is the accepted language of transaction there. This sort of verbal calisthenics would not have been allowed in a common platform where candidates are expected to observe decency. Hence the need for a common platform!

Jobs in the state budget: Where are they?

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

In the recently concluded Budget Session, Meghalaya Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma was asked about his claims about creating 5.5 lakh jobs in the next 4-5 years. In reply, the Chief Minister listed the several schemes and programs introduced by the government, which included PRIME, MGNREGS, CM ELEVATE, FOCUS, FOCUS+, and mission mode programs in agriculture. Amongst the schemes and programs listed, one program stands out from the rest, viz., MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), for not being designed to create employment but actually guaranteeing it for every rural household for 100 days in a year.

It was, therefore, shocking to see that the budget allocation for MGNREGS was just Rs 604 crore, which is Rs 400 crore less than the previous year's total expenditure for the program, Rs 1042 crore. Either the rural sector does not need the jobs or the rural infrastructure that the scheme creates is reduced by almost 50% from 2023-2024 which is highly concerning. This is despite the fact that in this year's interim budget, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman increased the allocation for MGNREGS from Rs 60,000 crore to Rs 86,000 crore, an increase of 43%. If the revised figures do not show a change in the original allocation, reducing it by such a large margin doesn't bode well for the government's claim of job creation. As a matter of fact, a look at the Chief Minister's speech reveals that jobs were mentioned only three times in his entire speech, which, in the copy I have, is 29 pages long. Let's look at those mentions.

The first mention of jobs is in relation to the New Shillong administrative city and the New Shillong Knowledge City that are being planned to be built at Mawkanu-Mawpdang. The Chief Minister claims, "these two new cities will create 50,000 well-paying jobs." What does it mean to have well-paying jobs? Surely it means that the average salary in these jobs will be a minimum of Rs 50,000 per month, with a yearly increment and all the other allowances and social security benefits included in the package. It seems highly likely that these jobs will still be contractual in nature, so job security will very much depend on the length of the contract. But as long as the salary is good and there is opportunity for growth in a fair manner without bias and discrimination, these '50,000 well-paying jobs' appear to be a good prospect. However,

what was also mentioned in the speech is that the DPR for the New Shillong Knowledge City, estimated to cost Rs 5,400 crore, has just been submitted to the Government of India. It looks highly unlikely that these jobs will be filled by the next budget session, i.e., the 2025-2026 session. These jobs, therefore, are very much in the future, and as such, they do not meet the needs of those who are seeking decent jobs at present.

The second mention of jobs in the Chief Minister's speech is in relation to the Shillong Tech Park. It was mentioned that the second phase is currently being developed and is expected to create 20,000 jobs. There was no mention of the jobs being "well-paying," which is a clear indication that these jobs will be of the nature of casual labour where people will be paid according to the daily wage rates. Currently, the minimum wage, including the Variable Dearness Allowance (VDA), ranges from Rs 9648 to Rs 13,512 per month. With the cost of living increasing day by day, these amounts are highly insufficient to enable workers to enjoy a decent way of life. Even at this moment, there are many people who are working multiple jobs to make ends meet. These include the contractual workers working in the different government departments who are driving Rapido before and after office hours (personal discussion). They are compelled to work for almost 12 hours a day, leaving less time for rest and spending time with the family. The "20,000 jobs" appear to be much more precarious than this lot, and therefore, while it is good that jobs are going to be available, it is more important that jobs are 'decent' in nature.

Decent work is actually an international obligation mentioned by the ILO's Director General, Juan Somavia, during the 87th Session of the International Labour Conference held in June 1999 in Geneva (Switzerland), wherein he stated that the primary goal of the ILO (International Labour Organization) is "securing decent work for women and men everywhere." Decent work has four major elements, viz., international labour standards and fundamental principles and rights at work—preventing exploitative working conditions; employment creation—employment not only as a source of income but autonomy, status, self-respect, etc.; social protection—ensuring protection against the risk of losing income, e.g., social security

benefits; and social dialogue and tripartism—the rights of workers to form unions or organizations for discussing matters of work with employers and authorities. Will the 20,000 jobs have all these elements?

A good beginning can be made by initiating the discussion on "living wage", which, according to the Committee on Fair Wages set up in 1948, is "one that should enable the earner to provide for himself and his family not only the bare essentials of food, clothing, and shelter but also a measure of frugal comfort, including education for his children, protection against ill-health, the requirements of essential social needs, and a measure of insurance against the more important misfortunes, including 'old age.'" This is clearly different from the definition of minimum wage, which is "the amount of money that must be made in order to sustain both the productivity of the employees and their ability to meet their basic needs... by covering the price of amenities like education and healthcare." While the present minimum wage ranges from Rs 9648 to Rs 13512 per month, the living wage will have to start from at least Rs 16,890 per month, which is the minimum wage for highly skilled workers if they were to work for the entire month without taking any break. In fact, unless jobs are 'decent' in nature, workers will end up being exploited or exploiting themselves in order to survive. Hence, in the next year's budget, the Chief Minister should be asked about how many 'decent jobs' the government has created. The emphasis must be on 'decent jobs' and not only jobs.

This brings us to the third mention of jobs, or actually "job opportunities," as termed by the Chief Minister in his speech. This was in regards to the women beneficiaries of FOCUS and CM-ELEVATE applicants, which, as claimed, will "generate about 1 lakh job opportunities." The veracity of the claim has to be judged in relation to what is meant by 'job opportunities' and how they are different from 'jobs'. In a question put before the house, the Chief Minister gave an explanation of what actually is meant by "job opportunities" which, if I have understood correctly means this: suppose there is an SHG or an enterprise focused on value addition of sohiong/blackberry into fruit wine which has been set up with support of the Government in a village; the first level of job opportunity will be for members of the

SHG/enterprise - e.g., three members; second level of job opportunity will be the farmers who will sell the fruits to the SHG/enterprise for processing - e.g., two farmers; and the third level of job opportunity will be for the shop who will sell the bottles for the wine - e.g., four helpers and one proprietor of the shop. If all these are counted, the total number of job opportunities comes to ten (10). Now let's imagine that there is another SHG/enterprise that is also engaged in the value addition of sohiong but for Jam. They also have a similar number of members and are sourcing fruits and bottles from the same farmers and the same shop as the previous SHG or enterprise. The total number of job opportunities in this second case will also be ten. Does it mean that the total number of job opportunities is now 20? But wouldn't this be a case of double counting? Also, except for the SHG/enterprise members, no new jobs have been created unless the farmers who are selling the fruit would not have been able to sell any fruit before the SHG/enterprise approached, and the shop came up only after the SHG/enterprise. How does one actually calculate job opportunities, and does it really meet the demands of people who are looking for decent jobs? The example I have given above is based on the little I heard the Chief Minister discuss about the concept. I hope that others more knowledgeable will shed more light on it. To me, it appears to be more about strengthening the existing livelihood networks, which will increase income and hopefully encourage more investment and, in the long run, create jobs. But the term 'job opportunities' is misleading as it gives the impression that new jobs are being created when that is clearly not the case.

After this, there is no more mention of jobs in the speech. The most glaring omission was noticed in the Ten Guarantees of 'Mission 10', which, though quite progressive, fail to mention the provision of decent jobs as part of the mission. That is unfortunate since it is decent jobs that should have been the focus of the speech and the subsequent discussions in the Assembly. But hopefully, this will be rectified in the future, and, especially, the opposition parties will make decent jobs the basis of their critique of the government and part of their own pledges starting this MP election.

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

BJP opens up to its estranged allies to score high in Lok Sabha polls

PM Modi is reconciled that Congress-Mukt Bharat not possible

By Arun Srivastava

Just 13 months back, precisely on February 10, 2023, Narendra Modi had made an audacious boast on the floor of Rajya Sabha "ek akela sab par bhari" (he alone was overpowering for all). He had even said, "one person is prov-

Mohan Bhagwat, he thought his jibes against Rahul Gandhi and Gandhi family would turn the Congress redundant. He even launched his campaign to create Congress Mukt Bharat.

Just imagine the party



ing too much for so many." He is so confident of his abilities, dexterity and political power that he was heard offering "Modi's guarantee" to the common people.

During his ten-year rule he virtually turned his allies irrelevant and pushed them out of the political ring. Un-

which was written off the political canvass of the country only ten years by the Prime Minister, has started emerging in an aggressive manner. What is most significant is the people at the grass level have been responding to the calls and moves of Rahul Gandhi,

"Though the Akalis had severed ties with the BJP over the three controversial and now-revoked farm laws, the fact is Badals were feeling let down. Telugu Desam had walked out before the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, protesting the Centre's failure to honour the promises made to Andhra after the 2014 bifurcation of the state. Navin was maintaining an ambivalent approach towards BJP. Chandrababu Naidu and his ally Pawan Kalyan, chief of Jana Sena Party have already begun seat-sharing talks with the BJP leadership. In fact two rounds of discussions had already taken place with Naidu. Modi has also succeeded in assuaging the hurt feelings of Badals. Seat negotiations are also in progress with them."

fortunately, one feels real pity to watch the same person, the iron man of Indian politics, begging his former allies to come back, join the ranks, for fighting the challenge of the INDIA bloc. Modi abhors the idea of listening to advice and suggestions from any other person. He is the wisest person.

It is an open secret that after winning the 2014 general election he had pushed away leaders like Chandrababu Naidu of Telugu Desam and Sukhbir Singh Badal of Akali Dal, once both were the strongest allies of BJP. He even ignored Navin Patnaik of BJD of Odisha. Modi behaved in a very ruthless manner with them. Modi sent an intelligible message that he did not care for such allies and he was capable of single-handedly winning elections, whether in the states or at the Centre.

Though the Akalis had severed ties with the BJP over the three controversial and now-revoked farm laws, the fact is Badals were feeling let down. Telugu Desam had walked out before the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, protesting the Centre's failure to honour the promises made to Andhra after the 2014 bifurcation of the state. Navin was maintaining an ambivalent approach towards BJP. Chandrababu Naidu and his ally Pawan Kalyan, chief of Jana Sena Party have already begun seat-sharing talks with the BJP leadership. In fact two rounds of discussions had already taken place with Naidu. Modi has also succeeded in assuaging the hurt feelings of Badals. Seat negotiations are also in progress with them.

Modi was so disdainful of opposition that he never took the Congress challenge seriously. Moving around in the make-believe world of superhuman created RSS chief

who in the true sense is yet to emerge as an alternative.. What is most interesting is that the Congress has no other face except him to counter a battery of saffron stalwarts led by Modi. It is for Bhagwat and Modi to decide. But one thing is certain that Rahul symbolises a new philosophy. During his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, he is talking of the core values of the Indian Constitution and how to protect that.

His losing trust in his own forecast and projections is reflected in the observation of a senior BJP leader. "We are trying to get back all the NDA partners who had left us. For retaining power it is imperative that we must at least get the seats we have in the current house. Modi's focus is on crossing 400 marks obviously to achieve this we must have our old allies on board". According to him the BJP leaders must not bully the allies.

The main focus of the PM and his leaders is on the southern states. With the east and north Indian states already reaching saturation level, the party can hope to increase its share in the southern states. For attaining this it is imperative that it has a major share of seats in Odisha, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. The BJP is working on the formula to leave the space open for the regional parties in the assembly elections.

The BJP is facing a major challenge in Bihar. It is finding it tough to make Chirag Paswan and Jitan Ram Manjhi accept its offer. The JD(U) is also not agreeable to the suggestion of the BJP leaders to leave the claim on some of the seats, out of 16, it had won in 2019. With Nitish going to the UK for treatment, the BJP leadership is hopeful of JD(U) yielding to its pressure after his return. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Poll predictions for 2024 elections - BJP on top

Editor, There are 15 parties in the North Eastern Region that are members of the North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) headed by Assam Chief Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma. They include the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), National People's Party (NPP), Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP), Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM), United Democratic Party (UDP), Tipra Motha Party (TMP), Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), United People's Party Liberal (UPPL), Naga people's Front (NPF), Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP), Republican Party of India (Athawale) (RPI(A)), Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) (LJPRV), Independent and Indigenous People's Front

of Tripura (IPFT). Presently there are 25 Members of Parliament in the Lok Sabha from the North Eastern Region. The BJP has 15 MPs, NPP 1, NDPP 1, SKM 1, NPF 1 and Independent 1, that makes up a total of 20 MPs of the NEDA or the NDA. Press Trust of India reported on March 7, 2023 quoting Himanta Biswa Sarma, Chief Minister of Assam stating that, "The NDA will win 22 of the 25 seats in the North East. Barring Assam, we hope to win all seats in other States of the region." Sarma also added that only three of the 14 seats in Assam are "uncertain at the moment." However, the India TV-CNX Poll conducted in all 543 constituencies between February 5 and 23, with a total number of 1,62,900 respondents which included 84,350 males and 78,550 females predicts that the BJP will win 15 seats in the NE Region, the INC 2, AGP 1, UPPL 1, AIUDF 1, NPP 2, ZPM 1, NDPP 1 and SKM 1. That makes 21 seats for the North-East

Democratic Alliance or NDA in the 8th Lok Sabha election that is expected to be held in April-May 2024. This number is short of 1 to the prognosis of the Chief Minister of Assam. If the poll predictions are right, it is surely going to be a big boost for the Modi Sarkar with 84% of the MPs in Lok Sabha from the region. Yours etc., V K Lyngdoh, Via email

Have a heart for the farming community

Editor, I fully endorse what Michael N. Syiem has put across through his letter, "A food-deficit state" & farmers' uplift in Meghalaya" (ST, March 6, 2024). Every single point he mentioned carries considerable significance, and his concerns for the farming community are evident. It is very good news that the state government has

finally begun to set up warehousing and cold storage facilities in strategic locations. This is indeed a ray of hope for struggling agrarian communities. As per my observation, this endeavour not only offers a sanctuary for their harvest but also extends a warmth of compassion, rescuing farmers from the clutches of uncertainty and the exploitation of rapacious middlemen. The government should adopt every possible measure so that farmers are not victimized by middlemen. These brokers often use deceptive tactics to siphon off a major portion of the profits, leaving the farmers with minimal returns for their labour. It is a very sad situation. I am also thankful to Mr Syiem for acknowledging my previous letters, emphasizing the importance of not "bargaining" with the vendors who come to our doorsteps with their vegetables and fruits. Of course, a true human always sympathizes with the plight of the poor. In this respect, I always cherish memories of my father, who owned a shop in Lewduh. He

used to take my elder brother and me to the vegetable market in our younger days. I was probably less than ten years old at that time. While purchasing vegetables from underprivileged vendors, he never bargained over the price, instead, he paid them more. Initially, we were confused. His intention was to instil in us the value of showing compassion to the poor. Let me also share one interesting anecdote, in short. As many village farmers/vendors were familiar with our bookshop in the market, they would often pay us visits. One day, a lady from Upper Shillong, who sold silver berries, squatted with a cane basket near our shop, waiting for buyers. However, a sudden and prolonged rain shower left her stranded. As dusk approached, my father offered her one of his umbrellas so she could return home. Much to our surprise, after three days, the same lady returned unexpectedly. Not only did she bring back the umbrella, but she also gifted my father with some rice and bean dal. Despite

my father's insistence on paying money to her, she graciously refused, stating that these gifts were a token of her gratitude. We were all overwhelmed. I also realised later, though in rags, she a farmer is always rich at heart. Yes, should we not consider their heartfelt longing for our care and empathy! Thus, it is very disheartening that these simple-hearted farmers are ruthlessly exploited by middlemen and outsmarted by urban dwellers on a daily basis. One strongly believes that not only the government but also every urban citizen has the responsibility to ensure that these vulnerable farmers receive their "rightful" dues. Still ponder over the consequences if our farmers were to stop cultivating their land from tomorrow. Yours etc., Saik Gwali, Shillong

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

Allowing dogs to lick your face could be unhealthy, even fatal

Any dog owners reading this will know the joy of getting home and being greeted with utter delight by their pet - tail wagging wildly before enthusiastic but face-drenching licks. While some owners will push their pooches away playfully to discourage face licking, others positively revel in their dog's affection and may even offer up pursed lips for a canine kiss.

It's a heartwarming scene. But think of what that doggy companion has been licking throughout the day. Their food and water, their paws, their toys and chews - and maybe their bottom and genitals. Do those cute kisses seem a little less appealing now? Not matter what pets have licked, many owners are so taken with their dogs that they're willing to overlook the potential hygiene issues.

And licking is important for dogs. It's an instinctive canine behaviour. When dogs repeatedly lick their mouths, it can be a subtle sign of stress or fear, especially when combined with ears back and a tense expression. In fact, observing lip licking frequency is a way to gauge dogs' welfare during training sessions and when kept in kennels.

Dogs also use lip licking as a behavioural response to humans' emotional states. Evidence suggests that dogs are empathetic. They can recognise emotions in both humans and other dogs using visual and audio cues. A study showed that dogs lick their lips more frequently when looking at angry human faces.

For dogs, then, lip licking is a natural instinct - and that applies to relationships with their humans, too. For anyone living with a dog, being licked is a common event, and many dogs will try to lick the faces and mouths of their humans. Almost half of canine owners report being licked on their face by their dog. But, given the penchant that many dogs have for consuming items owners might not find appetising (quick poo snack, anyone?) is it hygienic, or even safe, to let your dog lick your face?

What hides within

Owners usually love their dogs, and dogs' companionship and affection can do wonders for their owners' wellbeing and mental health. But there's no doubt that, for some humans, canine saliva might do more harm than good.

For people who are immunocompromised,

have open wounds, or a dog who likes to supplement their meals with a spot of coprophagia (poop eating), then it's best to avoid those face licks.

Dogs' mouths can harbour a range of microorganisms that are usually low risk for humans. However, in rare cases, zoonoses (infectious diseases passed on between species) can be transmitted from dogs to humans by bites, licks and scratches.



Most of the time, humans who come into contact with dog saliva do not become ill. In fact, many people manage to live alongside their pets, licks and all, without encountering any health issues.

However, there are rare cases where people have become seriously ill following contact with dog saliva. For example, Capnocytophaga canimorsus, a bacteria found in the mouths of up to three quarters of otherwise healthy dogs and cats, has caused life-threatening sepsis.

Other microbes such as Pasteurella multocida can be spread by contact with dog saliva, potentially resulting in serious outcomes including meningitis.

People considered to be at high risk from zoonotic infections are the immunocompromised, very young children, older adults and pregnant women.

If you fall into one of these groups, then it's in your interest to dodge dog licks. Additional measures should also be implemented for at risk dog owners. Keep surfaces clean, minimise contamination of household items and maintain

scrupulous household hygiene at all times, especially after contact with animals.

Antibiotic resistance is recognised as a major global health challenge. Canine saliva can be a potential source of bacteria carrying antibiotic resistant genes. These bacteria are capable of colonising humans after exposure to dog saliva.

However, in 2023 a German study of 2,800 hospital patients and their companion animals verified "that the sharing of multidrug-resistant organisms between companion animals and their owners is possible", but the study only identified a handful of cases. The researchers therefore concluded that "cat or dog ownership isn't an important risk factor for multidrug-resistant organism colonisation in hospital patients." It is possible, then, that being licked by your dog could contribute to the spread of antibiotic resistance - but it isn't likely.

Doctor dog

Despite potential threats to health, can dog licks be beneficial? Records suggest that in the past, animal saliva has been used for wound healing, with some dogs specially trained to lick open wounds. However, there is no research to suggest that allowing animal companions to lick wounds will help them to heal. Allowing animals to lick open wounds, in fact, could put an owner at increased risk of infection.

The relationship between humans and their dogs can confer other potentially healing benefits. Animal-assisted therapy helps people with a range of issues, such as anxiety, eating disorders and trauma. Cuddling and stroking dogs, for example, can help patients to feel calmer and lower blood pressure and heart rate.

Dog owners tend to benefit from their pets through increased physical activity and social connections, as well as companionship and improved mental health. Licking, however, is not essential to the close bond between human and canine.

Within reason, for most people, letting your dog lick you is probably safe. With good management, healthcare (for you and your dog) and excellent hygiene, the risks of an occasional lick are likely to be minimal. But it's a good idea to enforce the "not on the mouth" rule, for everyone's safety. (*The Conversation*)

Researchers are a step closer to having universal antivenom for snake bites



If you're bitten by a venomous snake, the medicine you need is antivenom.

Unfortunately, antivenoms are species specific, meaning you need to have the right antivenom for the snake that bit you. Most of the time, people have no idea what species of snake has bitten them. And for some snakes, antivenoms are simply not available.

New research provides a significant step forward in enabling the development of an antivenom that will neutralise the effects of venom from any venomous snake: a so-called "universal antivenom".

In a research paper, published in *Science Translational Medicine*, researchers describe the discovery and development of a laboratory-made antibody that can neutralise a neurotoxin (a toxin that acts on the nervous system) found in the venom of many types of snake around the world.

Venomous snakes kill as many as 138,000 people each year, with many more survivors suffering from life-changing injuries and mental trauma. Children and farmers make up the bulk of the victims.

The active ingredients in antivenoms are anti-toxin antibodies. They are made by injecting horses with small quantities of snake venom and harvesting the antibodies. This method of making antivenom has remained the same for over a century - and it has substantial drawbacks.

In addition to antivenoms being species specific, they are also not very potent, so you need lots of antivenom to neutralise the venom from a bite.

Also, because antivenoms are made in horses, you are highly likely to experience severe side-effects when administered, as your body's immune system will detect and react to the "foreign" horse antibodies circulating in your bloodstream.

Antibodies that are made in the laboratory using genetically modified cells are routinely used in humans to treat cancers and immune disorders. A long-held hope is that the technology used to produce these antibodies can be used to make antivenom and eventually replace traditional antivenoms, thereby solving many of the issues current antivenoms face.

The antibodies in lab-made antivenoms could be "humanised", a process that tricks your immune system into thinking foreign antibodies are your own antibodies. This might reduce the rate of severe side-effects that are commonly encountered with horse-derived antivenoms.

Paralysis and death avoided

One of the most important families of toxins in snake venoms are neurotoxins.

These toxins prevent nerve signals from travelling from your brain to your muscles, paralysing them. This includes paralysing the muscles that inflate and deflate your lungs, so prey and human victims quickly stop breathing and die.

These neurotoxins are in the venoms of some of the world's most deadly snakes, including the African black mamba, the Asian monocled cobra and king cobra, and the deadly kraits of the Indian subcontinent.

In the research, the researchers describe the discovery and development of a lab-made humanised antibody that can neutralise key venom neurotoxins from diverse snakes from diverse regions.

The lab-made antibody is called 95Mat5 and was discovered after examining 50 billion unique antibodies to find ones capable of not only recognising the neurotoxin in the venoms of many species but also able to neutralise its deadly effects.

When injected into mice that had received lethal doses of venom, 95Mat5 was able to prevent paralysis and death in all the venoms tested.

These results are particularly exciting as they show that generating lab-made antibodies that can broadly neutralise the effects of venoms from many species is feasible, making the development of a universal antivenom a realistic prospect.

However, 95Mat5 is a single antibody that only works against neurotoxins. As we said earlier, to make a universal antivenom you will require a handful of antibodies. This is because snake venoms don't just consist of neurotoxins.

Some snake venoms have haemotoxins, which make you bleed, and some have cytotoxins, which destroy skin and bone. To create a universal antivenom, capable of treating any bite from any snake, researchers still need to identify additional antibodies that can broadly and potentially neutralise the other toxin types, in the same manner as 95Mat5.

Researchers hope that once identified, these antibodies can be mixed with 95Mat5 to make an antivenom that is capable of neutralising the venom of any snake, no matter what toxin types it possesses.

The requirement for antibodies for other venom toxins and also the need to ensure any new lab-made antivenom for effectiveness and safety in human trials means it will still take many years for a universal antivenom to become available to snakebite victims.

Other hurdles need to be overcome. These new antivenoms will probably need to be stored in a fridge to prevent loss of effectiveness, so it will need to be shown that they can be distributed in often warm regions of the world that don't have reliable electricity for refrigeration.

Lab-made antibodies are some of the most expensive drugs on the planet. While the researchers are hopeful, it remains to be seen if lab-made antivenoms will be affordable for most snakebite victims, who are usually some of the poorest people in the world. (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, MARCH 10, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Sun semi-sextile Mars on your solar return chart ensuring a wonderful year ahead. Your financial position will remain stable and strong. And will get favorable business proposals. You can also enter into collaboration or partnership. You will be taking big projects and also completing them. You will remain busy during the whole year and will be undertaking lot of business related trips. And will be meeting lot of people and develop wide contacts. They will prove to be beneficial. You can be involved in a hot and happening affair with a person known to you. It could be case of love at first sight. You can enter into marriage ties. Family atmosphere will be wonderful. Auspicious function will keep taking place. Peace and harmony will prevail. Family members will respect each other and there will be warm feelings.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) This week brings understanding and harmony in personal and professional relations. You gain money and influence through business ventures and partnership. You connect with old friends and business associates. Being open and receptive, you attract interesting opportunities and people. You are happy as there is balance and harmony at home and synergy in the work area. You start a new business project while adding zest to an old one. Don't allow personal feelings to influence professional decisions.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This week brings cordial relations with family and loved ones. Changes in personal relationships and attitudes happen by themselves, with natural ease, rather than pursuing them. Social, romantic, intellectual, and financial opportunities arise now. For you, an empowering conversation about the past or about support can occur now. An opportunity or investment to make quick gains is on the cards. Creative occupations bring pleasure. Energy is high and things happen swiftly. Be ready to make quick decisions at work and act spontaneously in personal situations.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This is the time to explore and develop a sense of inner security. This is a time for re-organization and heightened awareness of your roots, issues of intimacy and vulnerability, and it's an excellent time to be in touch with your feelings and needs. Focusing on your support system and the manner in which you support others is also probable. This is a good time to make long-range plans for the future or to do any type of re-organizing or even re-modelling of the home and other family-related activities.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You are dynamic and assertive while making new beginnings at work. However, you are soft and loving in personal relationships to maintain a balance. You make important changes in personal and professional situations by integrating contrasting elements or aspects. You are courageous and diplomatic when you need to be. You are ready to face professional competition or rivalry. Victory is on the cards after a short period of strife. Walking can be a therapeutic pastime and can add to your fitness routine.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You are original and ambitious instilling a personal style in whatever you do. You socialize with important people in power of government. This phase challenges you to take responsibilities for who you are and live your truth. It's time to put your best foot forward, but be sure to do so with grace and consideration for others, or you may just make a display that you regret later. Give yourself the knack of responding to whatever comes, as it comes in life. Health needs to be replenished with a planned diet and fitness schedules.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) You may be tempted to spend extra money on things that will make your life more comfortable and pleasant. You retain a professional position of power and influence despite all the changes

that happen at work. Success in material aspects is on cards. You are noble when approached for involvement in a worthy cause. Your personal relationships go through a dreamy and transitory stage since you wait for promise and commitment. It's fine to make a compromise in an ongoing conflict and understand another person's point of view.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) Finances and budgets need to be kept in mind as you complete projects and start new ventures. You would improve personal and professional relations with patience, love and care it would be better to avoid discussions, criticism and arguments. You would achieve professional success with your own power, wisdom and resources. You may require solitude in order to get mental work done during this time. Your memory is sharper than usual, and your thoughts often turn to personal matters, family, and loved ones.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) Your 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. Your personal affairs may take time to resolve, be patient and persistent. Love, romance, party fun, celebration and family reunions can keep you busy and happy this week. Health needs to be nurtured and cannot be ignored.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You would bring a combination of wisdom and knowledge in personal and professional life. A personal involvement has the qualities of love, balance and freedom that you desire. It is time to heal old friendships with tender, love, care and move into new relationships with sensitivity. New ideas and concepts floated by you at your work place will be appreciated. Arguments can be detrimental to production in business and harmony in family. Go out in the open and commune with nature it will help you reflect and be a stress buster too.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) The planetary configuration indicates learning important lessons from life could be the beginning of spiritual growth and understanding. You are blessed with divine wisdom and inspired to take up a professional challenge. Spiritual pursuits and meditation can be rewarding. You grow and transform as you pass through a touching emotional experience. This is a period during which you can enjoy increased powers of concentration. Stars indicate an especially busy and hectic time on the domestic front.

Aquarius: (January 19 - February 18) Success in business and love in personal relationship transforms your life and attitudes. There are chances of new associations as new opportunities and changes may come. You have to find better creative and progressive options. It would be better to participate in social and family celebrations to lighten up and relax. This can also produce an event that requires you to take charge and show your responsible side and organizational skills. You feel fresh and re-energized after a long walk or light exercises.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This period brings more efficiency and creativity in your work. Your family would be more supportive as this is the best time to bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships. Travel, promotion, or publishing could also figure in your career and benefit you. A professional collaboration comes together when you have given up all the hopes of it. Creative and professional plans are set to actualize and it is best to work towards them persistently. Your business plans have a magical quality of perfection and completion.

7 tips to keep your nails healthy, strong

Healthy nails are a reflection of overall health and well-being. They can make your hands look neat, or they can make them look unhygienic and unhealthy. If you want to have healthy nails, there are a few things you can do to take care of them.

Eat a healthy diet: Maintaining a balanced diet is essential not only for your overall physical well-being but also for nurturing healthy nails. Add natural food sources that are abundant in vitamins, minerals, and proteins to foster the growth of stronger and more resilient nails.

Stay hydrated: Drinking sufficient water facilitates the retention of moisture in your nails, acting as a barrier against breakage and peeling.

Protect with Gloves: Frequent exposure to too much heat and harsh chemicals can make our nails weak. To prevent this, wear light gloves when doing tasks like washing dishes or cleaning, as they involve using soaps and sprays. Wearing gloves will protect your nails from the harmful effects of these substances. Also, try not to keep your hands soaked in water for a very long period.

Keep your nails trimmed: Opting for shorter nails is generally preferred over longer ones. Short nails are simpler to take care of and are less prone to accumulating dirt. They are less likely to break and offer a neat appearance.

Say No to Artificial Nails: Though getting artificial nails might seem stylish, it's not without downsides. They can weaken your real nails because of the way they're attached and the glue used. Plus, they can trap a lot of dirt underneath, which could lead to bacterial infections.

Care for Your Cuticles: It's important to be mindful of your cuticles. Avoid pushing them back too much, especially during frequent manicures, as this can harm them and create openings for infections to enter the nail bed.

Moisturize your nails: Applying regular moisturisation is recommended, as it creates a protective layer that enhances the resilience and strength of your nails. (*IANSlife*)

"Wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit."

—Edward Abbey

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVI No. 209 SHILLONG, MONDAY, MARCH 11, 2024

Shocker from EC

THE Shakespearean line in Hamlet, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," refers to a scenario that has turned from bad to worse. At a time when the nation is at the doorsteps of Parliamentary elections, the abrupt resignation of one of the Election Commissioners, Arun Goel, came as a rude shock. Differences with the Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar are cited. There could be more to it than meets the eye. The Modi government cannot wash its hands of this serious predicament. For one, the government drew criticism a few months ago as it changed the process for appointing ECs and ended the role of the President in the selection process. This can give better scope for political interference in EC's functioning even as this once-reputed entity is labeled as an independent authority. This is ominous. As of now, two of the three EC posts are vacant. With the exit of Goel, Kumar would be the sole authority to take matters forward. Scope for manipulations, if any, has increased manifold.

A manipulation, by itself, does not necessarily mean facilitation of rigging or manipulation of electronic voting machines. There have been such allegations too, all of which have not been substantiated. A surprise was home minister Amit Shah correctly predicted the number of seats the BJP would get, days before the day of counting and declaration of results in 2019. Fact is, systems are going for a toss. Just like the UPA, the NDA erred on multiple fronts. Modi's inaction on several fronts is legion. Building highways or strengthening the border infrastructure for defence and other purposes, or an impressive hike in exports or some social welfare steps by themselves do not exonerate a government from the blame of not keeping the nation in good health across all fronts.

Healthy sustenance of institutions and systems is a matter of first priority for a nation's progress. Here, it is more of the 'growth' of certain segments of the society, which built the financial muscle for themselves through foul means, be it the business sharks who looted banks or the corrupt bureaucrats and politicians who increasingly have a finger in every dirty pie. There exists a free-for-all directly under Modi's nose. The rest are the ordinary folks who mostly lead a hand-to-mouth existence. Investigating agencies like the CBI and ED are believed to be largely ineffective under Modi, fanning corruption in epic proportions. "Seizing" a few crores from Sharad Pawar's grand-nephew by the ED in Maharashtra and similar acts elsewhere are just a drama to enthuse the public. Modi as PM for two terms did little to strengthen the institutions. He mostly played to the gallery.

Daloiship and the Traditional Institution in Jaintia Hills

By HH Mohrmen

What are the traditional institutions and how are they established in the Jaintia hills? Why does the traditional institution of Daloiship prevail only in the Jaintia hills and not in the Khasi and Ri Bhoi regions of the state? Is the office of the Daloiship part of the traditional institutions? In this article, we are basically dealing with the Raid, the Elaka, and the office of the Daloi.

The lawbei and the Raid Story intertwined
The story of any village or town in the Jaintia hills always starts with the story of the first clan that came to settle in the area. The first settlers could be just one clan led by one or many lawbei/Sein jeit or there could be many lawbei/Sein jeit who came to live in the place for the first time.

All traditional villages or even those which have developed into towns would have these stories of their first settlers and then how the place was later on populated. The stories of these first clan(s) are also followed by the story of how the traditional institutions in the villages were instituted. The first clan then subsequently the other clans followed and as the population of the villages grew, they started organizing themselves into a Raid. The Raid could be a single village or a conglomerate of villages. The size of the Raid varies from one Raid to another; Raid Jowai, Raid Chyrmang, and Raid Ialong are a few examples.

Different Traditional Institutions under the Raid
The question that follows is what are the different institutions under the Raid? The Raids were instituted in such a way that it is headed by the male Lyngdoh, and the female Lyngdoh also has a role to play, particularly in the religious ceremonies. It is here that the importance of the first clan is emphasized, as the Lyngdoh clan should always be from the clans of the first settlers. This also answers the question that confused many who believe that "Lyngdoh/Langdoh/Lyndoh" is a clan name. It is not; it is the position in the traditional institutions. In fact, if we try to translate it, it loosely translates to "Priest/Priestly," and in one Raid, it could be one clan, while in another Raid, it could be another which can occupy the office. Many clans are entitled to the office of the Lyngdoh in one Raid, but they are always from the same clan or they should be related.

Role and Responsibility of the Lyngdoh
In fact, not only the position of Lyngdoh, but almost all the important traditional

offices are allotted to the first clan. Traditionally, the most important office in the Raid is the office of the Lyngdoh/Langdoh/Lyndoh. He is not only the chief priest who officiates in all the public ceremonies of the traditional religion, but he is also the custodian of the religion and culture of the area. Religious ceremonies in the family/clan are performed by the maternal uncle. In most of the Raid, there is also a Priestess, and they should both belong to the same clan that is the first clan.

The offices which are of less significance were allotted to the clan which came to settle in the village later. This is how the Raids were instituted at least in the Jaintia hills region. Therefore, to understand the Raid, one

ki Basa', the nature gods that dwell in and around the region. Each Raid has its own Ryngkew Basa and also their guardian angels which clearly demarcate the boundaries of the village or the raid. The Ryngkew Basa are not boundaries as such, but they are guardian angels who protect the villages. In Jowai, there are the Soo duar soo luti or the four passages or the corridors, and in Nongtalang, there are the Phlong gateways (khyrdop) shloh shngai Eastern and the Phlong Sepshngai (western). The concept of Ryngkaw Para. The Sohkhka and Nongtalang episode.

The different traditional institutions in the Raid
The head of the Raid is the Lyngdoh/Langdoh, and the other traditional institutions

"The Daloi is elected by only the male members of society. It is said that earlier it was done by counting of heads, but now that the JHADC conducts the election. The Daloi is elected by voting and they use paper ballots. The JHADC now uses the Election Office's electoral roll to conduct the election of the Daloi by removing the female voters from the list."

also needs to understand the first clans that came to settle in the area.

Oral Tradition
Before we proceed any further, it is necessary to mention that there is a difference between oral narrative and oral tradition. The oral traditions are not just narratives, but there are traditions, that are, connected with the story. In the Jowai Raid, one will not be able to understand the function of the Raid and the other aspects of culture that connect with it unless one understands the story of ka Bon, ka Wet, ka Teñ, and ka Doh who are believed to be half-human and half-divine (chiteñ I bru chiteñ I blai). They are the first people who came to live in the area and as per tradition, they are the only clan which can assume all the traditional offices in the Raid. They can contest the election of the Daloi and can be appointed by the Raid for even the lowest post in the Raid as per tradition. As we can see, the story of the first clan is closely intertwined with the tradition in the Raid.

Understanding the Raid
Most of the time, Raids comprise one or two villages at the most, and they are differentiated by the 'Ryngkew

are the Pator, the Sangot, ki Wasan, ki Chutia, ki Dhulia, and others. Each Raid has a specific number of institutions; some have fourteen, yet some have fifteen depending on the Raid. All the traditional offices have their respective roles to play either in the function of the Raid or the community festivals.

There are also cases when the Raid ran short of clans to hold certain traditional offices, but the offices needed to be in operation, so they needed another clan to be appointed in the office. In such cases, they would request a clan from another Raid to come settle in the raid and assume the office. My search for our roots led me to discover the truth of how we became part of Raid Pamchadong. The case of the Mymren/Mohrmen

Daloi and Eleka
The Daloi is the head of the Dorbar Elaka, and in most Elakas, he is also the head of the traditional Niamtre religion. The Daloi, therefore, has a dual role to play; he is the head of the Elaka as well as the Chief Priest of the Traditional religion.

But the question is what is Elaka? Elaka is obviously a foreign-word borrowed from Hindi which means area.

What exactly is Elaka? Elaka is an area which comprises a few villages and the size of the Elaka varies. Some Elaka comprise hundreds of villages and some comprise two or even one village.

Who can become the Daloi?
Daloiship is based on clan, and only members of certain clans are eligible to contest the Election. Only males can become a Daloi, and he has to be from the clan prescribed by tradition. The clans are different from one Elaka to another. In one Elaka, the clans which can contest the election are the Kynjin, the Pakynteñ or any kur from Soo kphoh Khadar wymai clan and the Rymbai and Lato clan, but in another Elaka, the Lamin can contest the election to become Daloi. The prescribed clans can be two or many depending on the tradition in the Elaka. In most cases, it is the clans which first settled in the area that are entitled to contest, but if there are other clans prescribed by tradition to contest the office, then there must be some story to it, and the case in point is the story of Ka Piah Rah.

In some Elaka, the other criteria for a person to be able to contest the election are that the candidate has to be a person who still follows traditional religion in the Raid under the Elaka. The reason is that the Daloi performs a dual role to perform which includes the role of chief Priest of the Elaka too. But currently, there are Elakas where even a person who does not belong to the traditional religion can become the Daloi.

How is the Daloi Elected?
The Daloi is elected by only the male members of society. It is said that earlier it was done by counting of heads, but now that the JHADC conducts the election. The Daloi is elected by voting and they use paper ballots. The JHADC now uses the Election Office's electoral roll to conduct the election of the Daloi by removing the female voters from the list.

The Daloi is elected for a lifetime as he remains in the office as long as he is alive. The Daloi does not receive any remuneration, but he is compensated for his services by accessing the Rek Daloi. Rek is a paddy field allotted as per tradition for the Daloi to use to compensate him for the time and services he provides to the people and the Elaka.

Now that the Daloi is the agent of the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council, he also gets remuneration as a fee for the recommendation of applications for land registration.

SBI's vulgar ploy to use secrecy to fight transparency. Bank must be proceeded against for subverting democracy

By K Raveendran

It is the height of irony that a scheme touted as a beacon of transparency in political funding now shrouds itself in secrecy. The electoral bond scheme, which the Bharatiya Janata Party claimed was a tool to bring clarity to political funding, stands accused of obfuscation. At the heart of this paradox lies the State Bank of India (SBI), mandated by legislation to issue the electoral bonds and maintain their records.

While issuing a landmark verdict that struck down the electoral bond scheme of the Modi government, the Supreme Court asked the SBI to furnish details of the contributions made under the scheme to the Election Commission of India by

Court demanding contempt proceedings against the SBI for refusing to comply with the court's directive. The petition is coming up along with the SBI's own plea seeking extension of time. The scales of justice must weigh the bank's actions—the defiance, the delay, the complicity as the court's verdict resonates beyond borders. The stakes are high and the court's stand will be watched with keen interest by democratic forces across the big bad world.

The ADR in its plea states that SBI has wilfully and deliberately flouted the court's directives and through its action has not only denied citizens their right to information but also intentionally



March 31. Not surprisingly, the government-run bank has sought a gratuitous extension till June 30.

In its judgment, the apex court ordered the SBI to furnish details of contributions made under the electoral bond scheme to the Election Commission of India (ECI) by March 31. This was no mere suggestion, it was a command—an imperative to lift the curtain and expose the choreography of political funding. But the SBI, perhaps swayed by hidden hands, chose defiance. It is seeking an extension, and pushing the deadline to June 30.

The clock ticks, and the truth remains veiled. The reluctance is obvious, but the answer lies in the shadows. The ruling party has dipped its fingers into

undermined the authority of the court. "The defiant approach of the SBI towards citizens' right to know about huge sums of money received by parties through electoral bonds and corporates in a non-transparent and unaccountable manner is reprehensible and betrays its clear motive to stifle citizens' voice and right to audit actions of the political class, and therefore it should be held as a serious breach of contempt," the contempt petition stated.

The ADR asserts that the SBI's request for more time is not even accompanied by a status report on the progress made so far and points out that the bank has the record of the unique numbers. It allotted the bonds and the KYC details of the bond pur-

"The Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR) has approached the Supreme Court demanding contempt proceedings against the SBI for refusing to comply with the court's directive. The petition is coming up along with the SBI's own plea seeking extension of time. The scales of justice must weigh the bank's actions—the defiance, the delay, the complicity as the court's verdict resonates beyond borders. The stakes are high and the court's stand will be watched with keen interest by democratic forces across the big bad world."

the bond jar and the proceeds have found their way into partisan pockets. The quid pro quo arrangement—the unsponsored pact between donors and recipients—threatens to emerge from the wings. The court, in its wisdom, warned of this danger. The SBI's refusal to comply with the court's order is a calculated move—a choreographed evasion to shield the ruling party from embarrassment until the elections get over.

The SBI stand thus amounts to subversion of democracy and the bank's management, acting as a tool in the hands of the government, must be proceeded against with all the weight of the law of the land. World over, far less obvious interventions have led to prosecution of the entities responsible. The SBI's conduct is by far more reprehensible. It is more than mere refusal—it is subversion and it undermines the very essence of democratic accountability.

The Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR) has approached the Supreme

chasers. It further argues that bonds are completely traceable, 'which is evident from the fact that SBI maintains a secret number-based record of donors who buy bonds and the political parties they donate to'.

"As per experts on the said software, since each electoral bond has a unique number, a simple query on the database can generate a report in a particular format which does not require any manual verification," the contempt petition stated. The ADR also highlighted that sealed envelopes are merely physical instruments like a cheque, and the actual transaction of the cheque being deposited is in the database, which can be easily extracted by generating a software query.

There is no doubt that the SBI request for more time is a premeditated move to save the ruling party from the embarrassment that might be caused by the disclosures and the negative implications of such disclosures among the voters. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Why are MBOSE books not regularly supplied?

Editor,
With reference to the letter titled "Shortage of MBOSE textbooks troubling parents and booksellers" (ST Feb 27, 2024) by Salil Gewali, I, as the proprietor of Hima Book Stall, am also deeply disturbed by uncooperative behavior of Delhi-based publishers. Textbooks from certain publishers, which are prescribed by MBOSE from 2024, have not been supplied as expected, thereby causing great problems for both booksellers and schools across the state.

One publishing company demanded from us full payment in advance before dispatching the books. Despite sending full payment on February 16 the company only supplied a few books totaling approximately Rs 30,000 (thirty thousand rupees only). As of now, they have not supplied major subject books of MBOSE such as Social Science for Class-9 and Mathematics for Class-10, approximately totaling Rs 103,000 which is

with them till date. Despite sending numerous reminders, we received no response from this company until March 8. Such irresponsible behavior from publishers is concerning. We fear that even if the company dispatches the books now from Delhi, they will not reach until about twenty days later thereby severely affecting the academic calendar of Meghalaya. Transporting books from Delhi to Shillong is a biggest challenge for all booksellers in Meghalaya. This fact has been highlighted by Salil Gewali also. We wonder why the Government needs to prescribe the books from those publishers who are not trustworthy.

Furthermore, another two companies also have not supplied even a single copy of the books on Environment for Classes 4 and 5 to most of the booksellers who have to redistribute the same books to schools in remote areas. We also fail to understand why the company -- "Rachna Sagar" printed only 3,200 copies of the book on Environment titled, "Together with Environment for Class-5." Will this small quantity meet the requirements of the books for the entire state, especially

considering that many private schools also follow MBOSE approved books for their students?

The surmounting problem that we as booksellers are facing will ultimately affect students and schools in Meghalaya. The logistical problems and lack of cooperation from publishers are serious concerns for our state. The government must find better options to address the book crisis in the state. Considering the yearly crisis of books as cited above, it is very important that the government promotes local Meghalaya-based publishers to reduce the state's dependency on Delhi.

Yours etc.,
Marbudshan Nongkhaw
Proprietor Hima book stall
Shillong-2

Common platform for candidates

Editor,
The four hundred- and ninety-five-words editorial "Common platform for election campaign" (ST March 9, 2024) made interesting reading. The editorial rightly advocated for a neutral plat-

form where Lok Sabha election candidates can present their goals and party stance to the public and emphasizes the need for a two-way dialogue, where the public can ask questions and receive satisfactory answers from the candidates. The candidates should discuss their planned tasks in the Lok Sabha rather than launch personal attacks. The editorial also criticizes VPP's walkout over the use of Hindi in the Assembly as a superficial display of regionalism and rightly stressed the practical necessity of Hindi for business and education outside Meghalaya. Also it rightly underscored the need for decorum and issue - focused discussions at these common platforms. I remember of such a platform in Raliang, Jaintia Hills in 1999 which was organised by the Dorbar Shnong where the two Hill State stalwarts, (Late)Paty Ripple Kyndiah, INC and (Late) Stanlington D. Khongwir of the UDP debated what they would do in Lok Sabha. Ultimately the former scored 145020 votes and the latter 107197 votes. However, it was a lively and sober debate on goals and party stance.

Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Integrity of food/water testing laboratories

Editor,
On March 3, 2024, two mobile food testing laboratories were flagged off in Shillong, presumably as part of a central project (since the same was also launched in Assam). This is very commendable, and it is hoped that it will go a long way towards safeguarding the health interests of the public.

But one thing comes to my mind - why does the government launch these new programmes that only supplement the existing government services, without strengthening the existing infrastructure? Take the case of the State Food Testing Laboratory in Pasture Hills, Shillong. This laboratory is unable to provide the Test Report of water samples submitted even after a month and a half! I wonder whether the problem is that there are not enough laboratory technicians to cater to the volume of samples submitted for testing. If so, why is this obstacle not being first tackled

by the government instead of launching new laboratories where additional lab techs have to be appointed? Or is it that priority is given to samples of commercial establishments over those of private households? Only the Directorate of Health Services (MI) can answer these questions.

However, a more serious concern of mine is the integrity of the water sample submitted. The conditions set by the laboratory are that (a) the sample bottle provided must be used in seven days, and (b) the sample water collected has to be submitted for testing within 24 hours. Now if the sample is lying untested for six weeks, then how does the lab maintain the integrity of the sample? Can the reports then be relied upon as being accurate?

These are concerns that the DHS (MI) has to address, so that there are no misgivings in the minds of the public.

Yours etc.,
Eugene D. Thomas,
Shillong-6.

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

"Being broke is a temporary situation.
Being poor is a state of mind."

— Mike Todd

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXXV No. 211 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, MARCH 12, 2024

Another saga of insecurity?

THE blast very close to the Harijan Colony/Punjabi Lane marks another attempt at pushing the issue of resettlement of the residents of the area – which has been hanging fire since May 2018. The High Level Committee formed to resolve this conundrum appears to have hit a roadblock since the residents have made unreasonable demands for large plots of land when they have been told to shift to an alternative place. The point of contention here is that the Harijan Colony was meant to house only those workers of the Shillong Municipal Board. Legally one working person is allotted one house. A person who has retired should find accommodation elsewhere since there is no agreement at the time of appointment of these workers or at any time in the recent past that a retired person should continue to reside in the quarters provided by the government. This arrangement applies to all government officials living in staff quarters. So why was this not sorted out earlier before things arrived at this point of conflict?

Secondly, the adult children of the person employed by the Municipality cannot continue to live in the same quarters even after they have married and given birth to children? All adult members of the family of the municipal worker should have moved out and found residence elsewhere. Again since no attention was paid to this aspect the homes in the area have been expanded to look like little cubicles with no breathing space. To add to this are the commercial spaces within the residential area which have come up with no legal sanctions. Some members of the family of the Municipal employee must have set up shop as a means of livelihood. This also raises the larger issue of zoning which has not been enforced in Meghalaya. Zoning ensures that residential areas are designated as such and cannot overnight develop into commercial areas with shops springing up as happens in this State.

All that apart the Harijan Colony has been guarded by the CRPF for a long time and movement along that route towards Iewduh was restricted so how was this security breached and how could a person plant an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) without anyone noticing the movement of the suspect? The patterns are similar to the blasts at Laitumkhrak market and elsewhere, hence suspicion falls on the familiar agent provocateurs. Now that police have arrested the two suspects the law should be allowed to take its course and the police should come under no pressure to kowtow to the demands of sundry pressure groups on the arrests made.

Significance of the Monolith Festival

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

Meghalaya is rich in culture. Perhaps this is one aspect that has not been talked much in terms of the need to conserve and promote such cultures. The state government has come up with cultural performance centers. These are locations where the youth can showcase their culture-based talents and abilities. But, what actually is missing is the revival of awareness of one's own culture and its significance. It is about finding a relationship with one's own past even though the majority in Khasi community today are converted Christians going back three/four generations. There is a saying that a person without culture has no identity and hence is considered dead. It can be said that in terms of cultural awareness the Khasi community is in decline and fast approaching demise. It is in such a context that the Monolith Festival holds much significance. It is not only a place for the coming together of people, rather, a chance to see, feel and experience what one's culture is all about.

Invoking culture There are various forms of festivals. Some are purely commercial with the goal to entertain while also providing a platform for select artists; some are specific and niche in nature like the wine festival, jackfruit festival, etc. Now, if there is one festival which perfectly fits the inherent meaning and conceptualizing of a festival it is the Monolith Festival. A festival in its true form imbibes culture, traditions and indigenous practices so that visitors can learn and relate it towards their social status and well-being. Similarly, there is Behdeinkhlam in Jaintia Hills, Wangala in Garo Hills, etc. Coming back to the Monolith Festival, it was not surprising that the vast majority of the audience (which includes this writer) at Ka Lympung (amphitheatre) were mere spectators who mostly went 'oh just to see that such types of songs and dances also exist.' Many in the audience fared poorly in terms of awareness about the cultural richness of the Khasi community. If there were an on-the-spot Google Form to

test awareness, maybe 90% of the audience would have failed. What the Monolith Festival has done is that it has invoked the sense of awareness and love towards one's own culture amongst the many visitors with the desire to learn more and do more. This is the signature success of the Monolith Festival which encompasses its significance.

Immersing in culture The best part about the performances at the amphitheatre were the explanations and the narrations provided on the songs/dance, etc. It was a class on understanding culture and it was priceless. Moving ahead, it would be good if booklets providing information on the performances of the day could be provided to the visitors. It is all a part of involving the audience in cultural immersion. Now, if there is one musical instrument that gets the feet, hands, heart and soul going it is (drum). The drum is connected to the DNA of a Khasi. This holds true for other tribes as well since the drum forms an integral part of cultural proceedings. Further, the museum formed as one of the main attractions in the series of events which highlighted history, tradition and skills of the people. The most interesting one was the River Kynshi Expedition makeshift bamboo raft (Ka Bur) that was on display. The expedition on Meghalaya's longest river started on December 26, 1986 at a place near Manai village and concluded on January 15, 1987 at Mawpyllun village near the Indo-Bangladesh border. The raft was used to cross rivers and navigate short-distance riverine trips. In future, perhaps a small

theatre can be set-up so that the rich cultural history of Meghalaya as a whole could be showcased.

Main highlights Food is always one of the central attractions of any cultural festival. The array of food and drink that the visitors could sample was phenomenal. The performance stage at the food court also provided an opportunity for the young artists to display their skills and talents. But, the real highlights were three. Firstly, the workshop for students that was set-up at the Khasi Heritage Village premises. It was heartwarming to witness the young trying their skills in various types of activities like sketching, drawing, clay modelling, poetry reading, drama/music workshop, etc. Perhaps the most interesting one was the 'pynud latom' (trying to spin the spinning top). Many struggled with it and it was fun watching the boys and girls giving it a shot. Secondly, the variety of indigenous games offered around the food court. The Khasi community is rich in its own forms of indigenous games ranging from maw point, maw kynting, stick walking, localized zip-lining, etc. These are the types of games the current generation know little about.

Lastly, the presence of the Syiem and the Myntis in the respective huts which were constructed inside the Khasi Heritage Village was commendable. These huts showcased the nature of construction in their respective chieftainships while also selling their localized products, was indeed very informative. The opportunity to directly interact with them on the scale of their chieftainships, the livelihoods of the villagers, food, attire, etc., was enriching.

Looking ahead

In the 2016 edition of Monolith Festival there was talk of making it an annual event. That did not materialize. Now, the same talk is taking shape. Hopefully this time it will come to fruition. If funding is a constraint then the organizers can think of corporate sponsorship. These days many national and international tourism and travel firms would jump at any opportunity to figure themselves in any event of mass gathering. Further, the degree of involvement by the school children was limited. Most of the schools who attended were from the vicinity of Mawphlang. Saturday will not be conducive for school children as it would invariably be the last day. That way, Thursday and Friday can be used to invite a host of schools from Shillong and other towns to witness what culture is all about. Another point is the preservation of the Khasi Heritage Village. The KHADC in collaboration with the local administration of Mawphlang can look for ways to maintain the heritage village. As of today, when tourists come to Mawphlang their main goal is to visit the Law Kyntang (sacred grove). If the Khasi Heritage Village is also operational then this becomes an added attraction on offer to the tourists. The guides can then have more opportunities for livelihood. This can also provide an opportunity for local entrepreneurs to set-up their enterprises in the vicinity and sell higher returns food and beverages products as against only tea and chips as is happening currently.

In the final analysis the Monolith Festival has more substance when compared to other festivals. If others can be promoted then there can be no reason why Monolith should not. In fact, such cultural festivals should be encouraged by the GHADC and JHADC as well. To top it all, maybe once in every four years Meghalaya can have one grand cultural festival encompassing all the tribes of the state. Food for thought!

(The writer teaches at NEHU; email: blyngdoh@gmail.com)

What the postcards from Jamnagar tell us

By Jagdish Rattanani

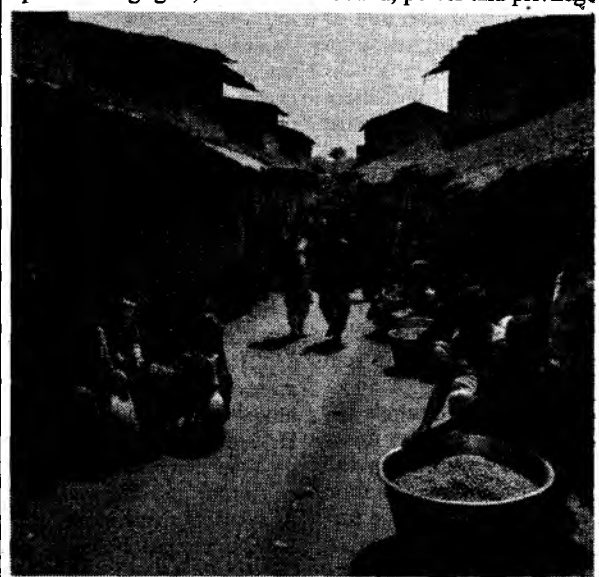
It was only last year that Parliament discussed a private member's bill to limit "wasteful expenditure" at weddings and special occasions. Congress MP Jasbir Singh Gill wrote in the objects and reasons statement of his bill: "... (wedding) has become a status symbol and a symbol of show-off... It is high time for our country to stand up against this unmeaningful and wasteful expenditure..." Similar private member bills, none of which were expected to pass but left some observations on record, were introduced by other MPs in 2016 and 2017.

How quaint that enterprise at thrift in our weddings sounds just now, as the nation emerges from the celebrations in the run-up to the wedding, or what is being called the "pre-wedding" gala, for Anant

to live decent lives.

The postcards from Jamnagar frame some other stories that have emerged as a theme in the new India. These are stories of unrivalled pomp and power, of material riches beyond compare, of an elite space where forces work differently from the way they work elsewhere on the planet. The overblown celebrations and flood of PR-led news shows on the pre-wedding indicate that the story-telling itself was a part of the spectacle.

Yet, it may be a mistake to overstate the example and over-focus on one event of one family, propelled just by the size and the scale of the extravaganza. The story only serves to draw attention to a new normal in which elites abound, power and privileged



Ambani, son of the Reliance group Chairman Mukesh Ambani. The Ambanis preferred Jamnagar to their 27-storey mansion Antilia in Mumbai for these festivities, launching at the same time Anant Ambani as a sensitive, animal-loving businessman who has set up a private elephant sanctuary near the Jamnagar refineries of Reliance, which has its headquarters in Mumbai. It was here that the group founder and Anant's grandfather Dhirubhai Ambani first made his mark.

Those days, the picture postcard of Mumbai used to be slums framed against skyscrapers, the everyday story of in-your-face inequality – two sides that nevertheless saw each other and routinely crossed paths. The idea of success was the rich man on the 21st floor (Antilia had not come up then), coinage of the late editor and satirist Behram Contractor who wrote as "Busybee", with incisive pointers to the highs and the lows of what was Bombay. Life was about moving up the high-rise, literally and metaphorically. Bombay's folklore was made up of the few who managed that dramatic rise, among them Dhirubhai Ambani.

In the changed India of the 21st century, that one picture postcard is split in two pictures that no longer encounter each other. One is pictured in the pre-wedding Ambani razzmatazz at a reported bill of about Rs. 1,000 crore, with Jamnagar turned into an international airport just for the event as global flights brought in special guests to feast and have fun. It also showcased the power and reach of an Indian magnate whose invitation brought some of the world's biggest business icons flying down in private jets. The second picture is the reality next door, of a nation growing fast but still with almost 60% of its people living on free food grains to "mitigate any financial hardship", as the government put it, a subsidy billed at Rs. 11.8 lakh crores for five years. The two universes are sharply delineated in a privatised, liberalised India on the march to global stardom.

The Bombay postcard, ubiquitous as it was, defined and at the same time shamed the city that is India's financial centre. The frame was also a trigger for popular struggles, some that challenged the then powerful mill-owners and others that went right up to the Supreme Court in favour of the rights of slum dwellers

are flaunted, golden gates separate the outside from the inside. Versions of the same theme play out at different levels of scale.

In the Mumbai of today, for example, high rises of 70 floors and up built by powerbrokers and the politically connected are fenced-in by boom gates and other barriers, separating slums outside from the lit-up swimming pools inside. At the entrance are of course hired hands from the slums, turned out in starched security uniforms to manage the gate.

What is inescapable is not just the growing inequality, not just the resigned acceptance of that inequality, but a celebration of that growing gap without much exploration of what it means for our society, our politics and our economy. This state of affairs is not entirely because of the Ambanis though the top one per cent do contribute significantly to the skew while the 99 percent, kept busy elsewhere, may even celebrate these stories.

How should India address this shift? It is well known that inequality has risen. Worse, the entrenched interests that liberalisation sought to disempower are present and more powerful in more ways and areas than ever, one of them being the business-political nexus, furthered by the trends toward highly concentrated and non-transparent political donations. Inequality experts Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty wrote that India has seen the highest increase in the top one percent income share concentration in the last three decades. The World Economic Report 2022 by Piketty et al notes that India is now among the most unequal countries in the world, caused by policy changes.

Fixing inequality was never easy, and has often required shock treatment, like the 94% top income tax rate in the US forced by World War II. Inequality is linked to issues of governance, stability, erosion of trust in institutions and carries grave implications for the legitimacy of the democratic political order. But fixing inequality is impossible without the first step, which is a recognition that this is not a desirable state of affairs and cannot lead to stable or sustainable growth for the nation and its people.

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

Letters to the Editor

A major calamity averted!

Editor, It is heartening that Prime Minister Narendra Modi played a crucial role in averting a potential nuclear crisis during the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022. According to US intelligence assessments, Russia planned a "shock-and-awe" barrage of missile and air strikes on the Ukrainian capital, modelled to some degree on the shock-and-awe campaign that had prefaced the US invasion of Iraq, nearly nineteen years earlier. As tensions escalated, the United States began preparing rigorously for a potential nuclear strike by Russia against Kyiv, which would have been the first nuclear attack since the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki nearly eighty years ago. Our Prime Minister's diplomatic outreach, along with efforts from other global leaders, contributed significantly to defuse the crisis.

Over decades, the US had built the most comprehensive and capable intelligence-gathering apparatus in history, but its products required reading with a critical eye. The Biden administration was particularly concerned that Russia might use tactical and battlefield nuclear weapons. To discourage such an attack, the US sought the help of non-allies, including India, emphasizing the gravity of the situation. PM Modi's resolute stance and public statements demonstrated the international community's concern and highlighted the potential cost

of such an action. During this period, Prime Minister Modi condemned civilian killings and called for peaceful resolution to the conflict. His intervention, alongside that of other countries, helped prevent a catastrophic nuclear disaster. The collective diplomatic endeavours played a pivotal role in ensuring that the crisis did not escalate into a devastating nuclear war. Ultimately, the world witnessed the importance of diplomatic efforts and cooperation in averting a potentially catastrophic event. Therefore, preparedness and sober assessment is the way forward to avoid conflict. Never negotiate for peace; establish it.

Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Unacceptable act of Inderlok Delhi police officer

Editor, Delhi police sub inspector of Inderlok police station Manoj Kumar Tomar who was seen kicking people offering Friday namaz on a road in North Delhi's Inderlok area has been suspended with immediate effect. The enquiry into the incident has been initiated so that the environment is not vitiated due to the unacceptable act of the police officer. Protests by local residents started, followed by condemnation from political leaders and widespread outrage on social media after the video of the incident went viral where Tomar was seen stepping on the prayer mat used by the

devotees and shouting at the men to leave the area.

Those who prayed on the road had to do so because the mosque next to the road was filled to capacity. To avoid missing the congregational prayers, the men ended up performing namaz on the road. In another video in circulation, the cop was also seen showing the men who tried to talk to him. By late evening the officer was suspended which was an appropriate step keeping in view the situation prevailing in the area.

In recent times the country is witnessing a growing trend of intolerance not just amongst people of different religious identities, but also of different political ideologies. Similar incidents were seen in Haryana and Uttarakhand. The poison of hatred and divide has seeped into campuses, housing societies and the worst outrage is witnessed online, where people are trolled for the food they eat, the clothes they wear, or the stand they take on particular issues. The Issue of Manipur is before us and there is severe tension among the different communities on the basis of religion and sects. Over 9 months have passed with no permanent peace visible.

On February 20 last, a video of a Sikh Indian Police Service (IPS) officer posted in West Bengal's North 24 Parganas district went viral on social media, when the Leader of Opposition in the West Bengal Assembly reportedly labelled the police officer a "Khalistani" during the party's protest against the Sandeshkhali incident. and today there is rally to show the solidarity with the victims and court had also

intervened in the matter but still there is no solution.

Those in governance must exercise caution while fulfilling their duties keeping in mind the future of the country. Short term individual or organisational benefits cannot be at the cost of the future of the nation. As Leo Tolstoy said, "If you want to destroy a country, make its citizens fight among themselves in the name of religion. The country will perish on its own." The crux is to remain vigilant to keep the democratic set up strong. Nothing should be done which downgrades the foundation of democracy in the country.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Raihan,
Via email

Arrest and jail as punishment

Editor, Former Delhi University Professor G. N. Saibaba was acquitted by the Bombay High Court on March 5 after he endured eight and a half years of imprisonment. The 58-year old academic and poet became ninety per cent disabled after he had permanent post-polio paralysis at an early age. After his release, he said, "I am not able to understand because I still feel that I am there in the notorious anda cell (a high-security egg-shaped barrack for dangerous convicts)... I am not able to adjust to the surroundings. I only looked at the walls, closed walls, for all the seven-eight years." The prosecution against G. N. Saibaba failed but it robbed him of more than eight years of his life.

I remember a Bengali

movie 'Sabar Uparey' (Beyond All). In that film, actor Chabbi Biswas played the character of Prasanta Chatterjee who was sentenced to life imprisonment for the charge of murdering a woman. Uttam Kumar played the character of his son, Shankar. He reopened the case after twelve years and successfully pleaded in favour of his father to make him free of the false charge and also brought to light whodunit. But the film reached the climax after Prasanta was acquitted by the judge. Prasanta burst into tears in the courtroom saying, "Give me my twelve years back!"

The recent report of Saibaba's media conference after his release is no less moving. As per the report, he and his wife A. S. Vasantha struggled to contain their emotions as he recounted his hunger strikes for medicines, his physical immobility and the pain of being denied to see his mother before her death.

Academic G. S. Saibaba who was arrested on May 9, 2014 under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 said, "My mother passed away while I was in prison. She carried me to school as I was disabled but she wanted me to get a good education. When she died, I was not allowed to see her. I was denied parole and even permission to attend the funeral. Post-funeral performing rites, I was denied."

A few days ago, the apex court had refused to interfere with the arrest of NewsClick founder and editor Prabir Purkayastha and the HR head of NewsClick Amit Chakraborty on the grounds that the offences which were

alleged, fall within the ambit of the UAPA.

Umar Khalid was also arrested under the UAPA on September 14, 2020. His bail plea has repeatedly been adjourned and he has still been waiting for justice. Earlier Stan Swamy, an 84-year-old Parkinson's disease patient was arrested under the UAPA. He had to wait in jail for a month to get a straw to drink liquid and died in jail while waiting for justice.

The data that out of 8371 persons arrested under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act between 2015 and 2020, only 2.8 per cent were convicted, raises serious questions about whether this law should be pursued in an independent democratic country. Moreover, our judiciary is overburdened with court cases. As a result, more often than not justice is delayed. Given the cases under the UAPA need extreme caution and attention, justice is further delayed in such cases.

A democracy cannot survive without dissent and free speech. It needs to be reviewed whether the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act tends to erase lines of demarcation between political dissent and criminal activity and whether it poses a challenge to dissent and democracy. It is imperative to draw clear lines of demarcation between dissent and unlawful activities.

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

"What enables us to achieve our greatness contains the seeds of our destruction."

— Jim Valvano

The Shillong Times

Vol No. LXV No. 212 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13, 2024

CAA as poll plank

IT is clear by now that the Modi government would fight the coming general elections on the plank of CAA – the citizenship amendment act – that was passed in both houses of Parliament in 2019 but its implementation held back amid protests from Muslim outfits and the eruption of the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, there's no clarity as to why the BJP-led NDA government pussy-footed over this matter in the past five years and announced its implementation weeks before the parliament polls. A safe assumption is that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP need a campaign plank for the BJP. Last time, they had one, namely the surgical strikes. That the Modi government brought about a "lot of progress," will in itself not suffice to sway the voter mood. The claims of "India Shining" during the 2004 polls, after the AB Vajpayee term at the Centre did not cut much ice with the voters. The electorate brought the Congress to power. The BJP failed to win votes in Karnataka in the recent assembly polls despite the massive implementation of NH and other projects there. The BJP is sure now that the Congress and the Left and also Muslim organisations would raise a hue and cry right at the doorsteps of the parliament polls. The battle lines can thus be drawn, and the BJP hopes to smile its way through such a cacophony.

The CAA is an amendment to the 64-year-old Citizenship law, which prevents illegal immigrants from becoming Indian citizens. The amendment brought about in 2019 aimed at granting citizenship rights to various religious groups other than Muslims who came in from neighbouring nations till December 31, 2014. The beneficiaries would be Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians. Other than the Parsis, the others came mostly from Pakistan, Bangladesh or Afghanistan. Alongside, the provisions of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) etc., would make sure that Muslims who came in and settled down here from these countries are deported. The matter is already before the Supreme Court through a stock over 200 petitions from the Congress, the Left, Muslim groups etc., that say religious discrimination against Muslims is against the secular nature of the Indian Constitution that granted equal rights to all. The government counters this with the argument that illegal migrants from other countries are not citizens and cannot demand Constitutional protection. More cases are bound to be filed in the SC in the coming days and no immediate implementation of CAA or deportation is likely. There's no easy escape for the government from these legal tangles. However, the present ploy is bound to help the BJP in the Parliament elections.

Opposing uranium mining: Is it a demand for Permanent Moratorium?

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

A few days ago, the news report about the purported letter issued by the North East Sunshine Trust (NEST) urging the Union Minister In Charge of Department of Atomic Energy to resume uranium mining in Meghalaya. Although, the founder-trustee and Chairperson of the Trust had later clarified that no petition was made and that the draft letter was leaked to the public by unknown persons.

However, this writer has nothing to say on the rights of parties, like the NEST or individuals to petition the Government or express support for mining. If any interest groups or individuals who wish to support mining of uranium in Meghalaya must be able to prove beyond reasonable doubt that there will be no health hazards in mining, and no alienation of indigenous lands and displacement will take place. At the same time, the resistance movement which has been there for the past three decades will continue to rebut and respond to the clandestine efforts of governmental and other agencies.

As the issue of Uranium mining in the State has re-emerged and as citizens who are associated with the resistance movement, I wish to place the following before the public:

1. The State of Meghalaya accounts for 16% of Uranium deposits in the Country. It is estimated that Meghalaya alone has about thirteen (13000) thousands of tons of Uranium deposits. The same is largely concentrated in hamlets, like Domiasiat, Kylleng-Pyndeng Sohlong, Mawthabab etc. in the Khasi Hills Autonomous District. By 1996 after the exploratory and intensive drilling were done, the Government of India made the confirmation of Uranium deposits in Meghalaya. And subsequently the Uranium Mining Corporation of India Limited (UCLIL) is tasked with the mining project via open pit mining method.

2. The debates on Uranium Mining in Meghalaya are not a matter which concern citizens or interest groups within State only. It is beyond and the matter has been discussed in both domestic and international platforms. The US Government, especially has shown keen interest about the mining of Uranium in

States across India, including Meghalaya.

3. It is not surprising, if the Government of India or Bharat (be it any Government which is led by BJP or INC or any other party for that matter) pushes harder for mining of Uranium now and in the near future. Perhaps, it is only a matter of time that the Government of India will use its might to suppress the resistance and forcefully extract uranium from the State. What will happen to us? Will we be able to resist?

4. On 10th October 2008, India signed the Nuclear Deal with the US. The Nuclear agreement provides for transfer of nuclear material, nuclear trade, equipment, components and related technologies and cooperation etc. It is noted that the US government is collecting data and stored information pertaining to mining, public debates and resistance movements which are emerging in India.

5. In December 2006, Jullian Assange and the WikiLeaks published its first report on sundry issues and the affairs of Sovereign Governments of the World via its cable. In the WikiLeaks cable Dated 12th August 2005, under the caption India-US Nuclear Deal: Shaping Public Opinion, it is found that information about the public and parliamentary debates on Uranium Mining in India vis a vis the resistance in Meghalaya had been meticulously compiled and stored by the US agency. It is stated that, "DAE is still pursuing the issue of Uranium mining... at Domiasiat with the Meghalaya Government... and that mining at Domiasiat in Meghalaya have not begun due to electoral sensitivities and NGO agitation."

6. Not too long, a particular MP from the State (I will not name here) had publicly expressed his pleasure and the economic prospect of uranium mining to the State. In his words, "Now that uranium is found the people of Hyniewtrep will become richer and the State will progress."

7. We cannot deny the fact that past Governments of the State and the Autonomous District Council were keen to proceed with the commercial mining despite strong oppositions from

the people and civil society groups led by the Khasi Students' Union.

8. Public opinions on the issue of uranium are divided. The pro mining groups had been relentless to convince people to cede their land for mining related development projects, which include connectivity, road expansion, building of schools and hospitals etc. Development is the key word and is the only reason which the pro mining groups are banking, and they seem not to care about other aspects, like health, alienation land and the threat of displacement of local populace.

9. In 2010, the Khasi-Jaintia Presbyterian Synod Sepngi, which has more than two lakh membership, decided to observe the first Sunday of June as the Environment Sunday and to hold special prayers for the whole creation against depletion. In the following years, seminars on environment were held in Churches across the region. Prior to this, the Ministers' Retreat and consultation on the Holistic Ministry was hosted by a local Church (I will not name the Church) in West Khasi Hills, whereby during the discourse on environment and societal responsibility of the Church, the issue of uranium mining was brought up. There was a division of opinions in which some of the delegates expressed the need for mining for the development and progress of the people and the State.

10. In September 2008, Bah Ardent Basaiawmoit, traveled to Jadu Guda to gain firsthand knowledge about uranium mining and its effects on health and well-being of local residents. Upon his return, he shared his findings in the media and displayed photographs of people from Jadu Guda who were born with deformities. Later, he also raised this issue in the State Assembly. However, some individuals criticized his visit, claiming that the pictures of deformed people were not authentic and depicted beggars found at various railway stations across India. This highlights the lack of understanding and the low level of public opinion on the matter.

11. The debates on uranium in the State will not die.

Who knows, a time may come when local Hyniewtrep nuclear scientists or physicists will emerge and will tell us that mining is necessary and that no health hazards entail. Perhaps there are coal barons who may be thinking they can mine it like coal or limestone and may want to mine it by themselves? So, shall we give in and believe in our own kith and kin?

12. In fact, there are people whose stand on this issue is shallow and will shift position the moment the popular resistance becomes weak. Similarly, there are sociopolitical groups and leaders with vested interests who may want to please and act according to dictation from Delhi. They will attempt to persuade the people and the State to comply with India's nuclear arms race.

13. Although uranium and other nuclear products can be used for generating nuclear energy and it propels economic growth. But mining comes with a heavy price of health hazards, ecological damage, displacements and deaths.

14. So far, none of the MP candidates who want to represent us in Indian Parliament, have made his or her stand clear on the issue. The mining of uranium is placing the Hyniewtrep community in grave danger, but its 36 MLAs who are talking big about preserving the Hyniewtrep land and its people, they are yet to move a resolution demanding for a permanent moratorium.

15. In 2028, the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) will complete its fiftieth year of existence. More than thirty (30) years of its activism has been spent on opposing and mobilizing the resistance against uranium mining. I strongly believe that the KSU will never change its stand. If it does it will commit an unpardonable act against the community, it claims to protect.

16. We will never forget those unsung heroes whose contribution towards the resistance is immense. Among others, Kong Spilly, Bah Hopingstone Lyngdoh and Rev P.B.M Basaiawmoit were the pioneers and faces of the resistance.

17. We have been saying NO TO URANIUM and we demand for permanent moratorium on uranium mining in Meghalaya. Long live the Resistance.

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Marriages with DARE Ingredients..!

Was invited to a wedding where I had to raise the toast, and as you know raising the toast doesn't end with just glasses being raised and 'cheers' being said, even though the emcee did a great job, by whispering that I needed to say 'cheers' at the end of my speech, and not, 'dare' as he felt I was going to do, but 'cheers' I said, and to a couple who did a dare that required a standing ovation!

A couple, who in today's atmosphere of hate, dared break the communal divide and decided that their love for each other was greater than one being from one religious community and the other from another. Love can do such things. Love can smoothen the roughness of distrust, can open the eyes of suspicion and can bring about rejoicing.

And it was lucky me, given this opportunity to raise a toast, which everyone in my country should be raising their glasses to, "To Love!" But I had to bring in DARE: A different DARE!

"Stretch the word DARE I said right across the entrance of this hotel, and let the word light itself in your minds.

husband. What's that? You ask, well once in a while, when going with a friend to visit someone I am warned before I reach, "he is a hen-pecked husband!"

"Oh!" I whisper, and go with quite some apprehensions of a wife pecking away at every statement her husband makes, and he sitting forlorn and dejected in a corner, pleading with silent desolate eyes for us to rescue him from his terrible ordeal.

Most often, I am quite disappointed: What I see is a very happy husband and a very happy wife too.

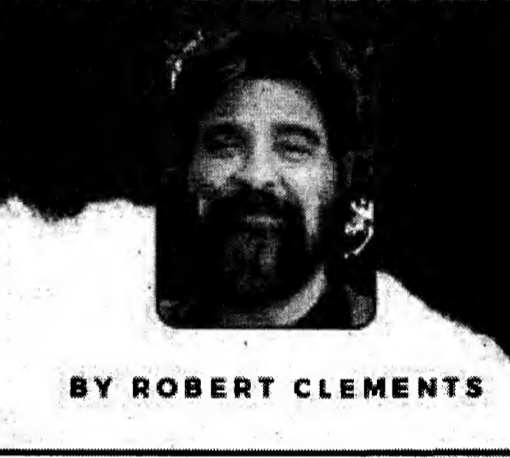
"I don't see any henpecking!" I whisper, when they both have disappeared to make some tea.

"Just watch, he'll bring the tea!" chuckles my friend, and like a prophet who's been proved right, he grins as the husband comes to the room, delicately balancing the tray with the cups of tea in it.

But how wrong he is.

We've had the same cook for nigh on twenty-five years, and for years I've watched her walking from home to home, cooking lunches and dinners and even a breakfast or two, and with the money she earned, sent her two daughters

BOB'S BANTER



BY ROBERT CLEMENTS

The first ingredient, is from the letter D is for being DARE in your marriage. Keep the silliness going, the funny things you say to each other, the fun and laughter. Be Daft with each other. Be stupid. Don't let the bonds of marriage take away the laughter of love.

The second ingredient is the next letter A, I said, is

through school and college, and today one of them, has a doctor title prefixed to her name.

I always wondered what her husband did, and heard he stayed at home and looked after the house. "Very convenient!" I used to smirk.

The other day, while I was having lunch, and she was in a mood to chat, she told me

"Let the other know that each of you is vulnerable, and needs the other's aid. You don't have to show your strength through your own muscle, show your strength through showing your partner, you need his or hers. ASK."

to ASK! Ask each other for help. Let the other know that each of you is vulnerable, and needs the other's aid. You don't have to show your strength through your own muscle, show your strength through showing your partner, you need his or hers. ASK.

R, I said, the third letter of DARE is to show RESTRAINT. Yes, show restraint in your fights, and oh yes, there are gonna be fights, but fight FAIR. Make rules, and even as I say it, I remember Neil Diamond singing, "Angry words spoken in haste, such a waste of two lives!" Yes, restrain yourself from hurtful words in a fight.

And the last letter of DARE, is E, which is to EMPOWER each other. AS you build each other up, the marriage grows stronger, and I told the gathering of my closest friend, a writer, who empowered his wife to also become one, and finally they also brought out a book of poems together. That is building each other up.

And let God come into your lives and let Him empower you. I raised my glass as the emcee whispered 'cheers,' and I did the same, though the word that nearly came out was DARE!

Not just the young couple, but into all your married lives, may DARE make it's presence!

But as I move away from the last evening and the toast I raised, there's another dare in marriage that I'd like to mention and that is the dare of being called a 'hen pecked'

how it would have never been possible for her children to have grown up with so much ambition and focus, without her husband who with love and care, motivated them and also her.

They just switched roles, and since a cook was needed in the area she lived, she took the job route and he the role of homemaker. And how well it's worked.

Similarly, one finds these switched roles in other areas in a husband-wife relationship. The wife, being good at detail, has a husband who happily allows her to run the finances. "Look at him!" says the world, "He asks his wife for money!" In a world where equality between genders is now the norm, shifting roles is going to happen more often, and it is time we realize that the strength of a man needn't be in what we see but much in what is not seen, where, equality in a relationship can be measured only by the couple's happiness in their relationship with each other.

Finally, all said and done, the taste of the pudding is in the eating, and if the children turn out to be fine, and the family happy, then it's you and me who need an eye-pecking before we talk of henpecking!

A different column today, right? Ingredients that make a happy marriage, including being henpecked..!

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

Letters to the Editor

Selective CAA protests

Editor,
The notice for the implementation of CAA is a welcome step by the Government of India which will ensure justice to several people settled in India and who were persecuted in neighbouring countries based on their religion. However, as usual in Meghalaya several organizations are against the CAA. What I understand is their protest is due to the reason that people who will be granted citizenship are migrated Hindus settled in Meghalaya. Can the various organisations please answer if they will also protest granting of citizenship under CAA to Khasi/Jaintia/Garo Christians migrated from Bangladesh and settled in Meghalaya? The answer is NO, as they are their own people following the same religion. So, it ultimately comes to someone's identity and religion and the Hindus are seen as outsiders and it does not matter if they are persecuted as India does not belong to them.

Where has this state come to? Only ethnicity and religion is paramount in this state. Non-tribals are hated and are seen as outsiders, though it is because of non-tribals in India that people in Meghalaya can eat food three times a day and enjoy many other benefits. People here are reluctant to change their mindset and are dreaming of making this state like no other.

Yours etc.,
Donald Swer
Shillong

IED attack: Intelligence in the backseat?

Editor,
National security issues are myriad from cyber warfare, space warfare to the threat of a dirty bomb but the Improvised Explosive Device (IED) has always been a preferred weapon of choice for high profile terror organizations such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army, Al Qaeda in Iraq, and Al-Shabaab. These IEDs, which can be crafted using home-made or military grade explosives, are cheap and simple to manufacture. In Meghalaya, small to medium intensity explosions have always indicated the lack of vigilant intelligence among security services, whether it be HUMINT or SIGINT. Are we at war with domestic enemies not foreign anymore? Porous borders and the crisis of unemployment adds to the problem setting a fuse for the disadvantaged in spreading terror and mayhem. The State is currently overburdened with the drug crisis and attacks like these may give way to a virulent form of narco-terrorism. What is needed is a fusion of different government agencies such as police and army to create a counter-IED public awareness campaign, regulate and monitor the flow of precursors like fertilizers

along borders. In 'Painting the Sand' - One Man's fight against the Taliban Bomb Makers of Helmand by Kim Hughes the writer recounts that the search and defusing of explosives is a battle of wits.

Yours etc.,
Christopher Gathphoh,
Shillong-10

Beyond the mother tongue

Editor,
India, with its rich cultural diversity, has 22 Scheduled Languages and 19,500 other active languages, each with its own unique cultural value. This multilingual culture is central to India's education system and resonates in classrooms where students navigate learning and studying, often in two different languages. Embracing multilingualism in education fosters inclusivity, offering profound learning experiences for all.

Scholar David Graddol expands the essence of multilingualism beyond language learning. He sees it as a cognitive asset, empowering individuals to thrive in a globally interconnected world and highlights its role in enhancing cognitive flexibility, creativity, and problem-solving, emphasising how multilingualism cultivates critical skills. Research consistently illustrates its cognitive benefits, showing that proficient multilinguals have better memory, attention, multi-

tasking abilities, and skills such as critical thinking and decision-making.

Due to its perceived economic value, the demand for English language is expanding in India. Future of English: Global Perspectives, a recent research publication, stresses that while English will continue to be a global lingua franca; in India, the focus will rightly be on local languages as a medium of instruction, especially at primary level, and English will be taught as a subject. The introduction of English, taught as a subject alongside the child's mother tongue, can enable children to learn and grasp the language better.

This is also reflected in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which acknowledges the importance of local languages and their role in providing a more holistic and effective learning experience, especially in the early years. The NEP has placed multilingualism at the heart of its vision for inclusive education by advocating for a multilingual curriculum that incorporates mother tongue instruction, English, and other foreign languages.

This is a direct response to the growing recognition of the importance of language in education. Language is not merely a means of communication; it is a tool for thought and a lens through which we perceive and understand the world around us. By promoting multilingualism, the NEP seeks to empower students to develop

a deeper understanding of diverse cultures, foster a stronger appreciation of their linguistic heritage, and acquire the skills necessary to thrive in an increasingly globalised world.

While its benefits are profound, the implementation of a multilingual approach in Indian classrooms is not without its challenges. The sheer diversity of languages spoken across the country, coupled with the varying levels of proficiency among students, poses a significant hurdle. Furthermore, balancing the use of languages in classrooms and ensuring standardisation of teaching across linguistic variations present challenges that demand innovative solutions.

To effectively implement a multilingual approach in Indian classrooms, several strategies can be adopted:

Research: There is little evidence in terms of longitudinal research available that can inform robust strategies to implement multilingual practices in a highly multilingual country like India. There is a significant opportunity for sector experts, educators, linguists to collaborate with government and policymakers to enable such research. This can also contribute to the development of effective policies that support multilingual education initiatives.

Teaching material: The creation of quality resources such as textbooks, supplementary material and digital resources tailored to the specific linguistic needs is crucial to support effective

instruction.

Teacher training: Training programmes — whether pre- or in-service — should emphasise multilingual pedagogy and equip teachers with the necessary skills such as developing proficiency in multiple languages including English, understanding the principles of multilingual instruction, and employing effective teaching strategies.

Assessment: Developing standardised assessment tools that evaluate students' proficiency across multiple languages to ensure fairness and equity is important.

Community engagement: Involving parents and the wider community in supporting multilingual education initiatives can foster a supportive learning environment and promote linguistic diversity.

Embracing multilingualism is not merely an educational endeavour; it is a commitment to inclusivity and diversity. By empowering students with the linguistic tools to navigate their multilingual world, India's education system can foster a generation of individuals who are not only academically proficient but also culturally enriched and globally competent.

Yours etc.,
Vijay Garg,
Via email

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

"Wealth is a tool of freedom, but the pursuit of wealth is the way to slavery."

— Frank Herbert

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 214 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MARCH 14, 2024

Building permissions go haywire

THE issue of building permissions was avidly discussed in the ongoing KHADC session and with good intent perhaps. The KHADC has been implementing the building-by-laws for areas beyond the Shillong Agglomeration since 2023. Prior to that these areas got their building permissions from the Office of the Syiem of Myllem after the Rangbah Shnongs routed the applications for permission through their respective offices along with a copy of the building plan. The Office of the Syiem did not have technical manpower to verify the drawings etc., and permission was granted with the usual clauses that the person building the house should keep a distance of 6 feet from the neighbour's boundary. Today an inspection of all localities beyond Shillong Agglomeration would reveal that no one respects the directives of the Syiem's office. Most people literally build on their neighbour's fence and encroach into the public roads. Besides that, houses are built right on the banks of rivers thereby turning the river into a readymade drain. This is characteristic of all the houses and commercial establishments along the Wah Umkhrah and its tributaries.

Questions were raised by members representing the rural areas of Khasi Hills as to whether those building homes there would also need to get building permission. Is it not time for Meghalaya to have uniform laws and regulations across the state? Why should only residents of Shillong and the district headquarters have to abide by building laws while those residing in the rural hamlets "go as you please," and build their homes such that they have no space for septic tanks to be constructed within their boundary walls. So they strive to ensure that the drain and the rivers become the carriers of human faecal matter. This actually is a matter of grave concern because without buildings by-laws in place everything is turning into a concrete jungle with the roof of one house jutting out into the compound of the next door neighbour. In fact, Shillong and its suburbs today defy all the building bye-laws anyone can think of. Does the Government or the KHADC have the legal teeth to bulldoze the homes of all those who defied the building norms? In that case about 99% or more of homes have to be demolished because for decades it has been a case of free for all. This is a country where rules are made to be broken and Meghalaya is no exception.

Will the KHADC now strictly implement the building bye-laws which also means regular inspection at the time of construction and giving a clean chit for occupation only after the final inspection? If it does so it will be a positive step in the right direction. Better late than never.

Letters to the Editor

Transparency in electoral funding

Editor,
Apropos of the news "SBI submits electoral bonds details to EC as per SC order" (ST March 13, 2024), it is encouraging that the State Bank has at last on Tuesday transmitted Electoral Bonds data to the Election Commission by the stipulated time of 5.30 PM in adherence to the direction of the Supreme Court. The Election Commission of India now assumes the responsibility of uploading all relevant details on its official website by 5 PM on March 15, 2024, in line with the explicit instructions of the Supreme Court. As one of the electors among over 900 million electors in the country I look forward eagerly to March 15, 2024 to have a look at the Electoral Bond data. It is important for "We the people of India" to know who donated how much and to whom. Transparency and accountability are the key to a vibrant democracy.

There are alternatives to Electoral Bonds for small contributions, political parties can encourage donations through electronic transfer. This method ensures transparency and traceability, as transactions leave a digital trail. Donors can directly transfer funds to party accounts, making the process more accountable. Another

viable alternative is contributing to Electoral Trusts. The trust acts as intermediaries between donors and political parties. While the donor's identity remains confidential, the trust ensures compliance with legal requirements. Although not ideal, cash payments remain an option. However, parties must declare cash donations exceeding Rs 20,000 in their annual contribution reports. This requirement is mandated by Section 29(C) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951. Exploring public funding mechanisms can reduce reliance on private donations. Government can allocate funds to political parties based on their performance or vote share. Public financing ensures financial stability without compromising transparency. These alternatives aim to balance between funding needs and transparency, promoting a healthier democratic process in India.

A study, "Towards Public Financing of elections and political parties in India: Lessons from Global experiences" by Niranjana Sahoo examines different public funding models and their effectiveness. It delves into the context of such reforms, identifies variations in implementation, and offers feasible options for India. The paper emphasizes the need to reduce dependence on illicit money, equalize political opportunities, and enhance transparency and accountability in democratic processes. While India can-

Is the VPP the Christian version of BJP?

By Albert Thyrniang

In an NPP meeting in Mawlai, a former MLA who joined the party prior to last year's Assembly elections alleged that the VPP leaders often quote from the Bible (Word of God) during political meetings. This, according to him, violates the constitutional provisions that prohibit using of religion for political ends. Strangely during the very platform the gentleman quotes a verse from the letter to the Corinthians reminding the VPP of Paul's exhortation, "Don't misuse the Word of God for personal benefits as this is against God's will."

It is true that the VPP's political speeches in different parts of Khasi-Jaintia Hills are loaded with biblical references. The prime 'accused' is the chief, Ardent Miller Basaiawmoit who has found a new lease of life in the VPP. He has been a crowd puller. People flock to listen to him explaining the origin and the principles of his party. During these 'party expansionist' drives bringing in religion to politics is obvious. The Bible is quoted quite liberally. The boss and the co-founders make no bones of their conviction that the VPP came into being because of God's will. That the party is formed and shaped according to God's design. Responding to the NPP's charge the VPP's president and star campaigner said that he would rather lose rather than denying God's role in the political arena.

This is involving religion and God in politics. This is mixing of religion and politics. This is clearly against the Constitution. One is surprised that the Election Commission of India has not taken note of it. Last year when Dasakhiathha Lamare distributed money in Nongkrem before the elections the complaint was that action should be taken against him because the intention was to 'buy' votes through the model code of conduct was not yet in place. Similarly, the VPP should not be permitted to preach God and the Bible during election campaigns though the dates for the Lok Sabha polls have not been announced. What the VPP leaders do is illegal even out of election seasons. There is no timeframe for model code of conduct for illegal actions.

The VPP is anti-BJP because, like many others, it alleges the saffron party is misusing religion for electoral purposes. It is exploiting religion to win elections. It

is a pro-Hindu and pro-Hindutva party. It brings religion into politics. It mixes politics and religion. The ruling party is imposing the majority ideology on everyone else. It has excelled in the art of securing the support of the majority community who are above 80 percent in the country. The VPP is doing or is attempting to do exactly the same. It is bringing the 'Christian God' and the Christian Scripture into its politics. In one such instance 'Bah' Ardent asked pardon from the non-Christians in the audience for quoting the Bible. This is disrespect of the non-Christians. It is an imposition of the Christian belief on others. The VPP too is 'appealing' for votes in the name of religion. Certainly the strategy of the VPP is to gain the support of the Christians who form almost 80 percent of the population in the state. So the VPP is identical to the BJP. If the BJP is a pro-Hindu party, the VPP is a pro-Christian party. In other words the VPP is a Christian version of the BJP.

What about other parties in the state? Are they any different? The NPP worker from Mawlai, besides bizarrely arguing from the Bible to admonish the VPP, also acknowledged that NPP political meetings do begin with a prayer. Thus the NPP is not innocent. The ex-legislator and MDC also forgot the disgusting NPP's invitation of a prelate and a pastor to shower the chosen ministers and elected representatives prior and post the swearing in ceremony in the chief minister's residence and Secretariat, respectively, last year. For promoting Christianity the NPP got cheers even from theologians. With that we lost all credibility to criticize the BJP. We had no choice but to silently watch the inauguration of the new Parliament building adorned with Hindu priests and sadhus. The chief minister was there all smiles at the inauguration ceremony of the temple of democracy dominated by Hindu rites because he himself performed the 'Christianization act'. The NPP's alliance with the BJP is well known. But even the 'Voice of the People' is in the same page with the BJP. It is voiceless against the BJP's agenda to 'safronize' the nation because in Meghalaya the target is to 'Christianize' politics.

A few days back the chief

minister, the deputy chief minister, the MP, state ministers were seen singing enthusiastically at the Church assembly in Sohra (Cherrapunji) region. These political big wigs were all invited by religious leaders to the convention. Politicians love to publicly display their faith. Men and women in power were there because they make sizeable contributions. There is no public announcement of the amounts but in tea stalls and gossip spots people say, "this that political leader has donated so much for the 'jingsaseng' (church gathering). In private conversations the amounts are revealed and comparisons are made. The bigger the position the bigger the amount!

Politicians make contributions and attend gigantic religious services to impress the voters. They get the goodwill of church leaders. Church leaders are pleased and probably vote for the biggest benefactors. They will have good words to speak to the congregation. This is nothing short of a bribe and a quid pro quo. If we are taken up with our leaders participating in Church functions why do we have a problem with Modi and other politicians making a show of temple visits? The intention is the same - to garner votes. Why blame the VPP leaders for their biblical expertise when others exploit devotion for political mileage. The leaders of the VPP, if they are true to themselves, should not be seen in religious meetings for they don't make any donation.

Huge public funds are also spent for church assemblies. Prior to the Sohra synod, the local MLA was seen inspecting the venue. He talked of how promptly the road was built and how quickly water brought and how the works for the pilgrimage were duly expedited out of the public exchequer. Politicians will facilitate such services. They are willing to move the entire government machinery for they have their gains. But should religious leaders avail such benefits? Is it not a misuse of authority? For a two or three day's program church leaders make sure that the whole government set up is at their service. The road is laid. Water is brought. Other facilities are in place.

How many villages in Meghalaya have no proper road and drinking water? Have church leaders moved government departments so

that villagers are approachable and water is made available? Have they talked to the chief minister and other ministers about the deprivation of poor people? Have they expressed concern at the backwardness of certain sections in the state? Why show enthusiasm only to get things done for church gatherings? Why the eagerness to have good roads and clean water only at venues of annual mega events? Why the lukewarm attitude at the rural inhabitants who have only rough and bumpy roads and have to physically fetch water from long distances? Why open one's eyes only at the requirements of a make shift venue while blind to the suffering of the citizens for generations? Before the media Church leaders, along with politicians, inspect to see that the road to venue of a religious function is well made, the pipes are well laid, the taps are functioning and the tanks are well built. But have they opened their mouths when roads are in pathetic condition, when tanks are without water, when pipes and taps are broken in villages? By the way the VPP and Mawryngkneng MLA was also seen inspecting a venue of a church assembly in his constituency.

In the beginning one was fascinated by the founding principles of the VPP. When the party was formed in November 2021 with clean politics as its core ideology a sense of hope was in the air. At last someone has publicly declared to fight corruption, bribery and nepotism. One was willing to give the VPP the benefit of a doubt. It is early days for the party. They have pledged not to distribute cash during elections, not to dole out money for medicines, books, admissions, picnics and religious functions. Hope they persevere and succeed and change the way elections are fought and politics is practiced in the state.

However, the element of religious extremism is unacceptable. Trumpeting that they (politicians) are guided by the Bible is unbecoming. Publicly attributing God for political decisions and actions is wrong. Doing so implies one cannot make mistakes. There is no such guarantee. If blunders are made should they also be ascribed to God? We brand the BJP as 'seng shongshit niam' (communal). But what about us? Are we not hypocrites?

The Precariat and the case for a Wealth Tax

By Avner Pariat

The concept of the "precariat" refers to a social class characterized by instability, insecurity, and uncertainty in terms of employment and income. Coined by British economist Guy Standing in the early 2000s, the term combines "precarious" and "proletariat" to describe a group of people who lack job security, stable income, and access to traditional benefits such as healthcare and pensions. The "precariat" represents a shift in the nature of work and employment relationships. Based on this well-rounded definition, I think it would be safe to say that most of the population of Meghalaya under 40 would qualify to be called "precariat".

The prevalence of non-standard forms of employment, such as temporary work, part-time jobs, and gig work dominates the lives of our citizens. These include the jobs of security guards, drivers, manual labourers and the euphemistically called "casual" workers. These types of employment offer no job security, minimal benefits, and stagnant low wages. As a result, members of the "precariat" are constantly at risk of financial insecurity, unable to plan for the future or invest in their long-term well-being. I see this desperation every day when I am on the campaign trail. I see it in the eyes of the constituents, I see it in my own eyes when I look into the mirror. I cannot see how the 10-billion-dollar dream will flow into the hands of those who need it most.

One of the defining features of the past few decades has been a systematic obliteration of the social welfare state. As economist S Mahendra Dev reminds us, "the biggest inequality in India has been the slow progress

wealthy contractor class. This is the same class that stands to make numerous swimming pools of money if MDA-II realises its 10-billion-dollar economy. Imposing a Wealth Tax on them might be difficult since they control the government and the ADCs but we must start the fight for it now! These people have directly benefited from the creation and expansion of the "precariat". They have made enormous sums of money while contributing very little to the overall betterment of those whom they exploit.

Take the example of the rat-hole miner who risks injury and death while his overlord sits smugly in a Laotumkhrah bar, drunk talking to politicians on his phone. Don't tell that man is a "job creator". Or take the example of the car salesperson who has to live from "commissions", while his boss plays politics in the Secretariat. Don't tell me he is a "job creator". Under this wonderful guise, as "job creator", various acts of exploitation go on daily. This is why we need a stronger Department of Labour. In addition, a Wealth Tax can fill the revenue deficit we feel so acutely in terms of Social Spending. The money is there in the state. We just have to know where it is and how to get it!

Addressing the challenges faced by the "precariat" will require a multi-faceted approach. This includes implementing policies that provide greater job security, such as strengthening labour protections and promoting collective bargaining through unions. Additionally, there is a need for policies that ensure access to social protections and welfare benefits for all workers, regardless of their employment status. Tradi-



in social indicators and human development in spite of high economic growth. It is known that India's progress in the social sector has been much slower compared to its GDP growth." (EPW, January 31 2020) This is as true for Meghalaya as it has been for the rest of the country. In addition, being almost 70% dependent on the Centre as Conrad Sangma mentioned in this year's Budget Session (Shillong Times, February 21) renders Meghalaya in an undesirable situation because if Delhi cuts money, we feel it most acutely. This is why without a doubt the present states of the Social Welfare and Labour departments must be understood and taken up with great public scrutiny. Neither department finds a mention as a specific overhead when it comes to budget allocations made this year. These two VERY IMPORTANT departments are apparently not considered as important by the government.

So, what is to be done then because we know that this is how things stand, the administration will ask. What is to be done when the Centre itself is not sending us enough money? How will we budget for these things if there is a dearth of funds coming in from the respective ministries? The answer is simple and straightforward. We can start by imposing a Wealth Tax on those who are the biggest beneficiaries of the government. As I have outlined in a previous article, one way towards a more equitable egalitarian re-distribution of wealth would be to support and uphold the rights of Labour and not just the

tional social safety nets, such as unemployment insurance and healthcare, are often inadequate or unavailable to those in precarious employment situations. This leaves the "precariat" vulnerable to economic shocks and unable to cope with unexpected expenses or periods of unemployment. A sense of social and political alienation comes upon them at such times. Many feel marginalized and excluded, with limited opportunities for social mobility and political representation. This alienation can lead to feelings of resentment and disillusionment, fuelling various forms of bigotry. Instead of seeing a lying politician as an immoral individual, the politician's ethnicity comes to the fore and becomes a target for hatred. Instead of seeing a corrupt official as one of many corrupt officials, people start to generalise his personal corruption as being the corruption of "his people".

This is why if a Garo or Khasi politician steals, his entire ethnic group has to bear the brunt of the accusation. That is why it is imperative for any Progressive government to take the plight of the "precariat" with serious consideration. We cannot afford another Manipur, we have come too far to lose all this now. Ultimately, every government must decide: will they continue to aid in the bloating of the wealthy or will they think about the masses who have no hope right now of a better tomorrow? One road will lead to temporary shallow success while the other will lead to a permanent enduring legacy.

in political financing.
Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

CAA is atonement of historical injustices

Editor,
Framing of rules to pave the way for implementation of the Citizens Amendment Act (CAA) will remain in the annals of history of our country as one of the key decisions taken by any Government after the partition of India. The partition of India on religious grounds was purely a political decision which made lakhs of people 'displaced' in their own country because they had been wrongly termed as 'refugees'. Post 1947, the population of religious minorities in West Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) both of which became Islamic theocratic country, had been brutally persecuted leaving them with no other option but to migrate to different parts of their own country, which being a Hindu majority country embraced democracy and plurality as their polity over theocracy.

The condition of religious minorities in Afghanistan, a Taliban ruled Islamic country is also known to everyone. The minority population, particularly followers of Islamic faith in India, post

partition, has steadily grown in numbers and there is no report of any migration of Muslims to the neighbouring Islamic countries for fear of life or threat of conversion from the majority community. Had there been any such real threat, there would have been large scale migration of Indian Muslims to neighbouring Islamic countries. It is a hard truth that all over the globe, majority Muslim nations almost uniformly persecute religious minorities and practice state sponsored hostility towards minority or non-approved religious groups. Even in the only Muslim majority state in India (now a Union Territory), the Kashmiri Pandits had to face persecution from the majority Muslim population barely two decades ago and became "refugees" in their own country. By legislating CAA, the Government of India has at least made an effort to atone the historical injustices meted out to our fellow countrymen for no fault of their own. The opposition to CAA in few pockets of our country particularly in the north east, that too by communities enjoying special protection and privilege under the Constitution of India is truly baffling.

Yours etc.,
N K Kehar
Shillong-3

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

"Opinion is the medium between knowledge and ignorance."
— Plato

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 215 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, MARCH 15, 2024

EC facing odds

THERE'S egg on the face of the Modi government for the way the Election Commission was left handicapped right at the moment it entered the last lap of holding elections to Parliament and some state assemblies. The circulation of names of two retired Civil Service officials on various unofficial platforms was hurriedly dismissed as 'fake' a day before the actual selections were done by a panel led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday. This only added to the overall confusion that plagued the EC in this critical hour. The three-member panel was reduced to a solo show by the CEC after one retired and another tendered his resignation over as-yet-unexplained reasons. The government involved in the selection of new members should have been prepared for such eventualities at least in the case of a retirement, so that a replacement could have been effected without any loss of time. Clearly, the deficit in governance vis-à-vis the Modi dispensation is all too evident. This is inexcusable for the prime reason that the time for issue of notification for the 2024 general elections was already at hand. It was to be issued this week, but the nation is in waiting mode.

While the appointments were finally made on Thursday, new issues arose. As per a complaint from the opposition representative Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, the government furnished him with a list of over 200 persons last night, from which a consensus was proposed for filling the two posts; and "six names were brought before the selection committee 10 minutes before the meet." As Chowdhury noted, it was impossible for a selection committee member to pick the right names in a matter of a few hours. Worse, the three-member selection panel was overloaded in favour of the government -- with the PM and home minister sitting on it alongside the opposition leader. Had the Chief Justice of India too been there, a more balanced decision about each selection could have emerged. But the government averted that scenario by recently excluding him from the selection panel.

It is important that the people do not lose faith in the well-established systems. The EC as an independent Constitutional authority should be able to function in a fair manner, as had been the case when those like TN Seshan headed it. Now, the other extreme can be to appoint 'yes' men or puppets and manipulate the system. The fairness of the election process is a matter of top priority for a democracy to thrive in a dignified form. India enjoyed such a reputation and the scenario should only turn for the better. Manipulating EC is tantamount to manipulating the poll process.

Education for Democracy: We have many light years to travel that route

By Patricia Mukhim

Those of us who grew up and were schooled in the 60's and 70's know just how constricting the education system was. It was top down; it left no space for raising any questions on any issue outside of the school books. The system was quick to punish (write 100 times why you were late to school; why you were talking in class) and we felt like guilty little sinners for God knows what. Naturally we grew up timid. Upbringing in the family was itself claustrophobic. There were too many 'don'ts' prescribed and no 'do's'. These don'ts were delivered with a straight and unrelenting face by our elders and we just gulped down these with a lot of emotional turmoil raging inside us.

Sometimes I wonder how we survived this strict upbringing without rebelling. Or maybe we did by falling in and out of love sometimes with complete strangers who we thought would love us and give us that which we starved for as adolescents. Its not as if our parents didn't love us. They did and I am sure they only wanted the best for us but they didn't know how to express their love visibly or in a more positive spirit. Many of us realised too late in the day that our parents made huge sacrifices to put us through school by the "beg, borrow or steal," dictum. If they were daily labourers or held lowly paid jobs they wanted us to get out of that rut and have a better life. That's the reason perhaps they were extra strict with us lest we falter as fragile adolescents whose hormones raged like crazy and destroyed our futures.

As parents and grandparents ourselves we now know better that family conversations that are not stilted but easy-going and where the younger ones felt safe to speak their minds is a much better way to bring up the current batch of youngsters because doing anything else would result in their telling us straight to our faces what they thought of us and our outdated parenting ideas.

If family was a constricting space the school too was equally oppressive. We couldn't laugh and nor could we consult our friends for anything. Talking in class was like a major transgression. That continued even to the time of our children. I hope that children talking to each other in class (not while the teacher is explaining stuff) to just consult one another and clarify things is not considered taboo today. It should not be.

Our education system imbibed largely from the

British who ruled over two centuries was predetermined to mould us into unquestioning humans because rulers are afraid of citizens who ask pertinent questions. We never learnt resistance in these hills and that is why we don't have robust civil society movements on and for the right causes. Of course we are all experts at finding fault with governments (State and Central) over their many glaring lapses but when it comes to calling out those lapses we shy away because we don't realise our own worth as voters.

Young people graduate into voters at age 18 without often understanding what they are voting for and why. We are not a society that seriously dis-

day when all the aquifers and catchments have been destroyed people would realise that their silence has cost them heavily.

The question that arises here is how has one person been able to own so much community land? It's because the wealthy in Meghalaya have the license to do whatever they want. The wealthy happen to be in government ruling over us. The wealthy have bought the silence of quite a number of Rangbah Shnong who have just given them the license to mine anything they want and cut down as many trees as they want. Our system is such that the government

camp along the river and its banks rue that the relentless quarrying is a disaster in the making but have no method of reaching their protests to the Government or the District Council. Now that the KHADC has conducted a successful Festival perhaps it's time for those running the Council and the MDC/s of the area in which Sohbar and Nongiri fall to go and inspect these quarries that are using the JCB 24x7 to bring down the hills. If they don't do this they will be complicit in all the environmental disasters that await Meghalaya.

Naturally the boulders are all going to Bangladesh which is a rapacious country



as far as boulders sand and gravel are concerned. These are crucial lessons to be taught to students. Schools in Sohbar area should take their students on an excursion trip to get the feedback from students as to what they think of this gouging out of the earth -- our mother which we call "Ka Mei Ramew" and perhaps even teach students to mobilise public opinion against such glaring destruction of the environment for the wealth gathering project of a few. Sometimes I wonder why the National Green Tribunal does not see these destructive projects and do something about stopping them in their tracks.

To conclude, let me quote from Daniel Goleman's book - 'Focus: the hidden driver of excellence.' Goleman says, 'We must ask ourselves: in the service of what exactly are we using whatever talents we may have. If our focus serves only our personal ends -- self interest, immediate reward and our own small group -- then in the long run all of us as a species are doomed.' Goleman continues, 'The largest lens for our focus encompasses global systems; considers the needs of everyone, including the powerless and poor; and peers far ahead in time. No matter what we are doing or what decisions we are making, the Dalai Lama suggests these self queries for checking our motivation:

Is it just for me or for others?
For the benefit of the few or the many?
For now, or for the future?



environment is crumbling because one person who has somehow managed to buy off an entire forest has cut down all the trees and then has either started mining limestone or coal or is extracting boulders and sand and defaced the entire landscape. We look at all this devastation and say nothing. When we ask villagers why they don't protest when someone is potentially destroying their future and that of their children and grandchildren they meekly say, "What can we small people do when the person owns that whole stretch of forest and when the Rangbah Shnong has given permission for him/her to do mining/quarrying?" Are we really living in a democracy where we are supposed to be empowered with the right to protest against such assaults on our environment by one or two people? In Meghalaya the tribals never tire of speaking about culture and tradition ad nauseum. All that is expressed in song and dance and now in paintings, arts and crafts. But did anyone draw the attention of the visitors to the Monolith Festival about the ravage caused by blatant quarrying anywhere and everywhere? Anyone who has visited Pynursla in recent times would have seen the frightening pace at which stone quarrying is happening. But people have taken that in their stride. One

with all its rules and laws such as the Forest Protection Acts amended from time to time, genuflects before these wealthy barons. The District Councils which are supposedly the custodians of all tribal land and resources have either become complicit in this rape of the environment or are indifferent. Most times they pass the buck at the syiems or the sordars/wahadadars etc. This is abuse of the Sixth Schedule provisions which is to protect the weak from the licentiousness of the wealthy.

Let me cite one example. The Wahrew Bridge at Sohbar which is India's longest steel arch which is 6.125 kms long and spans over 163.35 metres over the river Tharia was inaugurated by the MDA Government in 2021 at a cost of Rs 49.39 crores. Constructed by P&R Infra Project Ltd Chandigarh the bridge connects the border villages with the Land Customs Station at Bholaganj. The funds for this project came from the Non-Lapsable Pool of Central Resources. The Wahrew bridge attracts many tourists but of late massive quarrying has started along Nongiri just overlooking Sohbar and quite near the Tharia River. Over time the quarrying will result in land-slips and the debris collecting at the river thereby reducing its depth and size. The people of Sohbar especially the few engaged in promoting tourism through boatings, treks and

Beyond AI: Are we doomed to dangers of autonomous weapons systems? How much independence should machines have in our future wars?

By Girish Linganna

The transformation of warfare, as well as other aspects of society, by Artificial Intelligence is inevitable. However, it is important to strive for an evolutionary rather than apocalyptic or catastrophic outcome. Advancements in technology have consistently changed the way wars are fought. From chariots and saddle technology to gunpowder and nukes. Now, drones, as illustrated by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict.

In the 19th-century Battle of Koeniggratz, the Prussians trounced the Austrians with advanced breech-loading guns which enabled quick reloading even when the shooter remained prone on the ground. The Austrians were saddled with slower-reloading, muzzle-loading rifles, which they fired standing up. The technological edge was a crucial factor in Prussian success and ultimately influenced German unification under Berlin's leadership, not Vienna's.

If artificial intelligence were considered on par with that level of technology, either the US or China, competing for dominance, might aim to achieve temporary military superiority. As a military tool, Artificial Intelligence is more comparable to innovations like the telegraph, internet, or electricity rather than breech-loading rifles. In other words, it is not just a weapon but a foundational technology that will progressively change various aspects, including military operations.

This transformation is already underway, as American satellites and surveillance drones are generating vast amounts of data that surpass human capabilities to analyze quickly. This immense volume of information is beyond the capacity of human analysts to provide timely and valuable insights to the Ukrainians regarding Russian troop movements. In a similar manner, AI takes on this task, assisting soldiers much like doctors who rely on AI to navigate through large volumes of X-ray data, as reported by Andreas Kluth from Bloomberg.

The next phase involves integrating AI into various types of robotic devices that will serve as automated wingmen companions for fighter pilots. While a human pilot will continue to operate the aircraft, they will be accompanied by a swarm of drones equipped with sensors and AI to identify and, with the pilot's authorization, eliminate enemy air defenses or ground troops. The robots or bots, will not mind if they are destroyed in the process. This way, AI could not only reduce casualties and expenses but also allow humans to focus on the overall mission.

The important point to note is that these robots are required to obtain permission from humans before engaging in any lethal actions. It is believed that algorithms may not possess the necessary contextual understanding to accurately determine, for instance, whether individuals in civilian attire are likely civilians or combatants. This is highlighted by the fact that even humans sometimes struggle to differentiate between the two categories. Kluth from Bloomberg believes that AI should not decide if the number of human casualties in a mission is justified by the strategic objective.

The main question at hand is not solely about AI itself. Paul Scharre from the Center for a New American Security, a respected author on the topic, suggests that the key issue revolves around the level of independence we allow our machines to have. Will the algorithm support soldiers, officers, and leaders, or will it take over their roles entirely? This information was shared by Bloomberg.

Before the emergence of AI, a similar issue existed during the Cold War era. Moscow developed "dead-hand" systems like Perimeter, which is an automated protocol to initiate nuclear

attacks if the human leadership in the Kremlin is incapacitated due to an assault. The main goal is to make the enemy believe that a successful initial attack would result in Mutual Assured Destruction. However, there is concern about the potential consequences if there is a malfunction or accidental launch of the upgraded Perimeter system by the Russians.

The issue revolves around the extent to which machines make decisions independently. Whether it is with nuclear weapons or other "lethal autonomous weapons systems" (LAWS), such as killer robots, the consequences are incredibly significant and potentially life-threatening.

There is a possibility that an algorithm can make effective decisions that reduce casualties, which is why certain air-defense systems currently utilize AI, as it is quicker and more proficient than humans. However, there is a risk of the algorithm malfunctioning or even being intentionally programmed to increase suffering. Would you be comfortable with the idea of Russian President Vladimir Putin or Hamas using killer robots?

In its 2022 Nuclear Posture Review, the US stated that it will always have a person involved in making decisions to launch nuclear weapons, ensuring human oversight and control in the process. Russia and China have not made a similar commitment, unlike the US, which last year released a statement on the responsible military use of Artificial Intelligence and Autonomy. Supported by 52 countries and ongoing, the declaration advocates for various protective measures on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS).

However, the declaration does not urge for the prohibition of LAWS. This is an opportunity for the US to play a more helpful role in international law. The UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, aiming to limit harmful methods of killing like landmines, has been making efforts to completely ban autonomous killer robots. However, the US is one of the countries that is against a ban. It should instead back a ban and encourage China, followed by other countries, to do the same.

Even if there is a global rejection of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS), Artificial Intelligence (AI) will continue to pose new risks. AI can speed up military decision-making to a point where humans may not have sufficient time to assess a situation, potentially leading to fatal errors or relying solely on algorithms under high pressure. This phenomenon is known as automation bias, which occurs when individuals rely on automated systems, like a car's GPS, to the extent that it may lead them into dangerous situations, such as driving into a pond or off a cliff.

The risk has consistently risen with advancements in military technology, dating back to when humans first attached stone tips to spears. However, throughout history, we have largely succeeded in handling these emerging dangers. As long as humans, and not machines, continue to make the ultimate and most critical decisions, there is a chance for us to adapt and progress alongside Artificial Intelligence, rather than facing destruction because of it.

(IPA Service)
(The author is a Defence, Aerospace & Political Analyst based in Bengaluru.)



Letters to the Editor

Secularism must be preserved at all costs

Editor,
The special article "Is the VPP the Christian version of BJP" (ST March 14, 2024) raises many important points. Mixing religion and politics can lead to division within society. And more so in Meghalaya which is in the words of the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru is "a microscopic society" which today constitutes a mere 0.23% of the total population of the country. Different religious groups may clash over policies, values and rights. When religious beliefs become political mandates, it can lead to discrimination against minority groups or those with different beliefs.

Dogmatic religious views may hinder scientific advancement, social reforms, and progressive policies. Throughout history, religious-political alliances have fu-

elled wars, persecution and violence. When religious institutions gain political power, secularism (the separation of religious institutions and state) weakens. Examples: Countries where religious leaders hold political power (theocracies) often face challenges in balancing religious and civic interests. In democratic systems, religious voting blocs can sway elections based on specific religious issues. Religious lobbying can impact legislation on topics like abortion, LGBTQ+rights, and education. The impact of mixing religion and politics depends on context, historical factors and the balance between individual rights and collective well-being. Albert Einstein made an interesting and rational statement 14 months before he died in February 1954 that rings in the ears and memory of educated and discerning citizens and that statement is, 'If God created the world, his primary concern was certainly not to make its understanding easy for us.'

Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Man-animal conflict at its peak

Editor,
Kokila Mahato was asleep in her two-storey mud house in Dhekupura village, 11km from Jhargram town in West Bengal on December 29, last year, when an elephant barged into the house. According to her elder son, Prafulla Mahato, the elephant first broke a window and looked for something inside with its trunk. After failing to take anything out through the window, it broke down the door and took out his mother at about 3 a.m. There was no time to rescue her as she was trampled within two minutes.

A villager said an elephant had rammed into the same house the previous year and grabbed two bags of paddy. A forester with working experience in the elephant zone of Jungle Mahal said that the same elephant could have raided the house again, remembering it as a source of food. Nilanjana Das Chatterjee who has done research

on human - animal conflict said, "The government must ensure a proper elephant habitat and natural sources of food." On the same day, Tara Tamang (55) was grazing cows in the Nagarkata area of Jalpaiguri in West Bengal when a wild elephant came out of the Dayna forest and chased her. She failed to outrun the animal and was killed.

In November last year, Budheswar Adhikary (65), Ananda Pramanik (61), Rekha Rani Roy (68) and Jayanti Sarkar (48) were killed by elephants when they were working in the fields in Cooch Behar, West Bengal. Last month, elephant attacks caused three deaths in three weeks in Kerala's Wayanad.

If the victims were elephants instead of being poor human beings, their deaths would have evoked much more public sympathy all-over the country. Avni, a man-eater tigress, is said to have killed 13 humans at the Pandharkawanda-Relagaan forest of Yavatmal district in Maharashtra during the period from 2016 to 2018. Avni could not be caught

alive despite serious efforts and had to be killed in November 2018. After its death it got much more public sympathy than what each of its victims got after their deaths. Even a contempt petition was filed in court against Maharashtra officials for rewarding people who had killed Avni.

A couple of years ago, Norwegian authorities faced criticism for their move to kill a walrus. But what the Director General of Norwegian Directorate of Fisheries, Frank Bakke-Jensen said in response needs to be followed in India. He said, "We have great regard for animal welfare, but human life and safety must take precedence." This shows their higher regard for human life. It is definitely one of the reasons why Norway remains either at the first or second position in the Human Development Index year after year.

Animals get access to those poor people who have to work in the open air to produce food so that all of us can eat, who have to graze cows so that all of us can drink milk. It is really

perplexing that their deaths evoke little public sympathy. The struggle of the villagers who have been trying to survive amid frequent attacks of elephants and other wild animals does not find a place in popular movies and in popular discourse.

I cannot stand animal slaughter. It makes me sick. But I love animals as much as I hate a callous attitude towards poor villagers. There is no quarrel between the love for our poor workers and the love for animals. However, the latter cannot justify the absence of the former. Authorities should see to it that elephants have enough natural sources of food in their habitat round the year. There should be effective fencing so that no elephant or other wild animal can break it to enter a village.

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

"Art is the elimination of the unnecessary."

— Pablo Picasso

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 216 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, MARCH 16, 2024

Rediscovering the 'Tribal'

IN terms of claiming special rights and status, the tribal people of Meghalaya never fail to assert their unique identity, culture, tradition et al. Chief among these claims is the common ancestry, lineage, a common vision and above all common ownership of resources. A tribe as understood by social anthropologists is a social division in a traditional society consisting of families linked by social, economic, religious, or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect. A tribe possesses certain qualities and characteristics that make it a unique cultural, social, and political entity. In a tribal society the self is subsumed by the collective and the collective good is what drives the tribal ethos. Is this a true representation of the tribe today? Apart from some primitive tribes in Orissa, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh Tamil Nadu etc., the hill tribes of North East India can hardly be called primitive or backward. In fact, some among the tribes are better placed than most non-tribes in wealth ranking and ownership of private property. Should such privileged tribals be exempted from payment of income tax or wealth tax?

Tribes also refer to themselves as indigenous people or the first settlers in any country or region of a country. The Khasi-Pnar people claim ancestry from the Austro-Asiatic Mon Khmer race while the Garo, Rabha, Koch, Hajong etc., are of Tibeto-Burman descent. While the clan and community ownership of land and other resources appears to be much more robust among the tribes of Tibeto-Burman descent the same is not the case with the Khasi, Pnar, Bhoi, War etc., where land which was earlier a community-owned entity is now rapidly being converted into private property. Today the situation is such that the custodians of community and clan lands are the ones negotiating with individuals who have the buying power. These custodians make deals and are ready to part off with community land and forests that include catchments. The private owners of such forests then clear off all the trees and begin their mining or quarrying enterprise often without any permission from any authority.

Such individuals believe that once they have bought the land from the Syiems/Myntris/Rangbah Shnong etc., they have full rights to use the land for whatever purpose they choose. Today while governments both state and central clamour about climate change and spell out their mission on how to save the environment from further devastation, such announcements are not matched by action. Forests are denuded rampantly and no one really cares. Villagers believe they are powerless to speak on such issues and remain silent because the new land owners are not part of their village but have come from the city. The truth is that the tribal worldview today has changed irreversibly and so has the tribal. For how long can this tribal entity claim uniqueness when it has adapted all the characteristics of the non-tribe and all but lost its unique identity. Times to take stock of things! Much has changed and so has the tribe. Only costumes, language, dance and song are not the legal tender to being tribal.

Can persons with disabilities become successful entrepreneurs

By Marina Marwein

The opening lines of Charles Dickens, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times" from the "Tale of Two Cities," seems like an apt description of what is happening in India for the welfare of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), particularly in the 8 states of North East India.

In 1995, the Government of India had passed a landmark act, 'The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995' - a significant step for ensuring equal opportunities for people with disabilities and their full participation in nation building. In 2016, this Act was replaced by another called, 'The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act' fulfilling the obligations to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), based on an evolving and dynamic concept extending the original 7 disabilities to 21 types mostly medical.

But passing laws alone is not enough. Despite much talk, the public have remained apathetic and people with disabilities remain marginalized. They still lack access to education, healthcare, employment, housing, and systems of social protection and remain susceptible to stigma, discrimination and even violence. Training programs of relevance or facilities of access like ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms are yet to see the light of day. The disabled are still left high and dry.

A situational analysis carried out in 2014 by Mobility India revealed several key challenges where many schemes for inclusive learning and equipping the disabled and rehabilitation remained on paper while well publicised meetings and seminars were reportedly successfully organized for the leaders and experts. In her famous book, "Pride and Prejudice", Jane Austen dramatically portrays the conflicts of two warring parties, neither willing to give up their cherished selfishness and self-centeredness. This is the ground scenario regarding the support for the disabled in India and in the North East where the public are indifferent towards any effort at helping the disabled and thereby, unintentionally contribute to the resultant stigma and prejudices.

In 2023, the UN headlines screamed that India has surpassed China as the most populated nation in the world, with an estimated population of 1.427 billion. Cause for celebration? It simply means we will have more unemployment, more

sicknesses, more poverty, illiteracy, and disabilities. Census 2011 and recently held 76th round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) estimates the prevalence of disability at 2.2% in India. Multiply this by the population and we will know how many millions have a disability that requires significant attention and help. The best statistical estimates mention the number of disabled as of date as nearly 3 crores which is a daunting figure. Most are looked down upon by society and denied training, support, and guidance to make them useful citizens who can contribute significantly and 'build a fairer and healthier world.' But a journey of 1000 miles starts with a single step, which if it had been diligently implemented over the past two decades since the Act was passed might have paid much dividends. Unfortunately that never happened!

Considering just the North Eastern region of India with 8 states which had an enumerated population of 44 million in 2011 census, the total disabled @ 15% will be 6 million disabled, and if only significant disability of 2.2% was considered, we will have to care for at least 800,000 people. These numbers would have surely gone up by now. Taking Meghalaya state alone, the significant number of disabled as per 2011 census was 64,000 which would have grown to at least 80,000 in 2024. In this depressing darkness, do we see any light at the end of the tunnel?

That said, within the spectacular Khasi and Garo Hills of Meghalaya, an organization called the Bethany Society a non-profit, secular, registered, charitable society established in 1981 stands out for its work with and for people with disabilities. Through Roilang Livelihood Academy, the society has pioneered efficient training to empower persons with disabilities giving them skills thereby enabling them to have start-ups for successful entrepreneurs. Over the last three and a half decades, this organization has helped over 10,000 persons with disabilities. I was privileged to spend a year in Bethany Society in an environment of observing and interacting with trainees and teachers. I had ventured to publish a small, practical training manual with 10 chapters to motivate and help any reader and well-wisher to volunteer and help in training persons with disability to become successful entrepreneurs. After the first 2 chap-

ters on introduction and definitions, one chapter each describes a particular disability, such as visual, auditory, locomotor, intellectual and mental, the challenges and solutions, assistive devices, and modification of training environment and listing the possible trades the graduates can follow to become successful entrepreneurs. Some guidelines are also given for teaching a few soft skills such as accountancy, management, social psychology, and communications in order that the graduate is well equipped to be a good business person.

In today's economic scenario with inflation skyrocketing, the products produced by persons with disabilities could be relevant, affordable, and timely. They include disposable domestic items, horticulture products, vegetables and fruits (to name a few). There are unlimited opportunities to follow trades that will be most helpful to the public. The manual also spells out the qualifications needed for teachers and suggests a methodology for evaluating the training program. It ends with a chapter on future developments. A selected reading list and names of few agencies working with Persons with Disabilities are provided.

This manual encourages individuals and organizations to take up the challenge of training persons with disabilities and one need not address all disabilities but focus on one or two conditions, which will be great progress. The Bethany Society encourages community based inclusive approach and the CLAN (Community Level Accessibility Network) and CLEAN (Community Led Environmental Action Network) are living examples of successful training. The Bethany Society motto is "Inclusion as a value" which means "No one is left behind". This writer was impressed by their sincerity, dedication, skills, and commitment, and hope many more would follow the leadership role of Bethany Society.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) states that the word 'disabilities' is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions where an impairment is a problem in body function or structure. An activity limitation is a difficulty encountered in executing a task or action. A participation restriction is a problem experienced in involvement in life situations. It is well to remember Impairment+Barriers=Dis-

ability and Impairment + Access=Empowerment

Primarily, persons with disabilities want one thing from us - to make it possible for them to contribute with self-respect. The law promises them equality of opportunity and accessibility. But it is sad that our practices deny them what the law promises.

Secondly, persons with disabilities have special abilities and proven capabilities as seen from performances in fields of sports and arts. Each year, the Government of India celebrates International Day of Persons with Disabilities, on December 3, as established by the United Nations in 1992, to recognize outstanding achievements by the disabled. It is inspiring to see how persons with disabilities have overcome various odds to excel and achieve. Significantly more can be helped than what is portrayed, and we need to work on this challenge.

The trends in current research endeavours globally and within India, on use of improved technology and latest medical knowledge sounds promising and exciting for the future of training persons with disabilities. These developments would also promote inclusive learning as a reality for persons with disabilities to have equitable work opportunities, dignity, and status in any setting.

I end this article on an optimistic note applying the sentiments of the famous words of Martin Luther King Jr, 'I have a dream.' He expressed a wish for the disadvantaged persons in the US to the situation in India for the disabled. As a society we have a critical role to provide the stimulus and means for educationists, community organisations and motivated individuals to take the initiative in supporting disabled persons become self-reliant and enabling them to earn their own livelihoods through an entrepreneurial spirit and strategy. I hope readers will be inspired by this article and take up training persons with disabilities to become successful entrepreneurs.

Let us echo this wish and dream of a day when 'no one will be left behind'. People with disability will work hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder to make India a "developed" country and not permanently a "developing" country. Let us take the wakeup call seriously and show the world what we can achieve through our dedication and commitment.

(The writer is Faculty, School of Economics, Commerce & Management, Martin Luther Christian University, Shillong)

International Women's Day and atrocities against women

By Uma Purkayastha

Patricia Mukhim's article 'International Women's Day: A ritual that's lost its moorings?' is most appropriate. She is very right in pointing to the useless celebration of International Women's Day in our country, where women are faced with multiple problems without any remedy in sight.

International Women's Day is celebrated across the world to pay special respects to women for their extraordinary contributions to society. The main purpose of celebrating the day is to extend solidarity to women who are victims of inequality and injustice. Meghalaya too celebrates the day every year in a befitting manner; but beyond the one day observance women are a forgotten entity.

In a matrilineal society atrocities on women such as teenage pregnancies; plight of the abandoned mothers etc., are rising by the day despite the existing laws that prohibit child marriage. Crimes like child infanticide, accusations of witchcraft, gang-rape, trafficking, sexual harassment etc., are common today. This was rarely heard of even 30 years ago.

Women abandoned by their husbands/partners include even educated women but few take such cases to a court of law hence the culprits get scot-free and continue to victimize other women.

Patricia Mukhim rightly pointed out that "Poverty drives women to sex trade". From my personal experience, whenever I passed by the Transport office towards Jail Road, I would come across a middle aged woman, wearing a torn sari with a new born baby in her lap, begging for help. Her disheveled clothes, particularly in the winter days, would melt my heart, and with motherly feelings towards the baby, I would help her as much as I could. I would carry my children's used, warm dresses to help her child! But to my utter surprise, the very next year, I discovered she was pregnant again! The baby did not even complete the first year. Who is responsible for her plight? Definitely her poverty; but what is the remedy? Had the woman any other means to survive other than surrender to the misdemeanours of the man. What are women's organisations doing for such women?

The needy, young unemployed girls with requisite qualifications, but with no jobs are frustrated and prefer the unfair way of earnings to meet their personal needs. I vividly recall a sad incident which I faced 24 years ago but left an indelible mark in my heart! It was March 8, 2000 - International Women's Day. I was busy in my school office room when a teenage girl came to me for a job. She looked very smart and could speak English fluently! I asked about her qualifications but she kept mum for some time, then hesitantly uttered 'I studied up to class VIII Ma'am' and suddenly started sobbing! I was puzzled! Did I hurt her!

I consoled her and wanted to know why she was crying. She narrated her tragic story. She was a student of class VIII of a recognised school of the city (she was unwilling to divulge the name of her famous school), and would come to school by bus from a distant corner of the city, with other friends. One day, while returning from school, unfortunately she missed the bus by a whisker as she was noting down Hindi lessons from the blackboard. The next bus would take a minimum 20 minutes to reach. She did not wait but started walking swiftly so that she could reach home by dusk. She knew her mother would be very worried when other girls would arrive before her! She took a short-cut to reach home faster. When she was almost reaching her locality she was attacked by a group of goons upon her nose and mouth to mute her and then she had lost her senses! That was all

she could recollect. When she regained her senses, she heard her mother wailing, "It is better if she had died."

The young girl said the culprits left her unconscious, damaged body in a road-side dustbin, which was discovered by her pet-dog, while everybody was searching for her. She was brought home, but no report was sent to the police or the local headman, to avoid public criticism and slur! She was not taken to the doctor either. Neighbours, particularly the women started visiting her, not with sympathy but disdain as if she willfully committed a crime! Though she recovered, she dropped out of school. Again she sobbed, saying she was a good student, a sportsperson and singer; but she lost everything! She blamed her fate and asked me, "Will you please tell me Ma'am, is it my crime? If street dogs bite an innocent passerby, is it the person's crime? How could I fight the well-equipped ferocious culprits?" I was silent. It touched me to the core as if my own daughter was crying!

The girl said her mother, a vegetable vendor, had now expired and she lived alone without any income. Hence she needed a job very badly to maintain herself. She also told me that she did not want to stay in the same village where she was born and brought up! She hated her neighbours and her society!

Unfortunately, I could not provide her a job in the school because there was no vacancy; but that very day along with the girl, I met some of the institutional heads. But no one was willing to help as that would harm the image of their institution.

But unexpectedly I met an old friend who had just started a children's school and I sought her assistance. She asked the girl, what job she preferred? The girl smartly replied that she could do any job - cleaning, sweeping, nursing, even teaching rhymes, counting etc. Moreover she was ready to be a full-time domestic help in lieu of a safe shelter and food. My friend was touched by her response and immediately appointed her as one of her domestic staff. I was highly relieved!

This is just one example of our educated social life! Are we advancing? We could not overcome our prejudiced mentality despite our qualifications and sophistication. The so-called educationists and school authorities did not even consider that a similar fate could befall their own daughters. That was a very sad and disappointing experience of my life!

Women continue to face insecurity, mental harassment, rape, exploitation and extortion cruelty. The safety and chastity of even minor girls are at stake today! Sometimes the protectors themselves become the predator. What can be more pathetic than that; and where is the solace?

The aim of Women's Day is not only about women's empowerment or acknowledgement of women achievers. The primary aim should be the protection, safety and security of women so that all women can move freely and safely. It is high time for women to raise their voices against atrocities and violence against them and strongly demand for proper enforcement of existing laws. Stop granting bail to culprits to prevent repetition of heinous crimes against women. The weak and debilitating justice delivery system should be addressed. Rapid and stringent action by the Government against atrocities on women should be given top priority. If distressed women are experiencing the same darkness of victimisation, what is the purpose of celebrating Women's Day?

Celebration of Women's Day will be meaningful only when our girls, our women and our innocent baby girls are able to move freely and safely. Will this day ever dawn?

Letters to the Editor

What happens now?

Editor,
So the banned HNLC has finally decided to join the bandwagon of so called NGOs (seng bhalang) not that there is much of a difference of one from the other (The so called Sleeping Cell members of the HNLC caught at Umsning with IED explosive ingredients all belong to the HNYF, whose President/Chairman/leader or what have you was the HNLC spokesperson for the recently collapsed Peace Talks). So where is the surprise? Anyway the militant outfit like the other NGOs of our state have decided to issue an ultimatum to the Government and this time it is a 'one month notice' for relocating the residents of Harijan Colony or else be prepared for IED blasts all over the place. To emphasize their point the HNLC has now owned up responsibility for the recent IED explosion at Jaw Mawlong.

HNLC terror acts are making the headlines nowadays. Now this is surprising for an outfit that just six months ago the police claim to have dwindled to a 20 or so membership. How has the HNLC suddenly revived itself to once again raise its ugly head to this threatening level? I clearly remember a discussion at a 'iing iap brieve' (bereaved family) about the police encounter

with Cheristerfield Thangkiew and of the Government's enthusiasm for holding peace talks with this underground outfit. Come to think of it now, it does appear that the politician's agenda for Peace Talks and the agenda of the HNLC for the same are as different as Heaven and Hell. The politician's agenda, for MDA members like AL Hek, Conrad Sangma, Lakhmen Rymbui was the cheap popularity of their ability to bring the undergrounds above ground. Period! Doubtful if there was any vision beyond this point. So the Central Government from Delhi sent in some dumbo of an official whom no one has ever heard of. Our State Government did no better and they simply deputed another retired official. So much for state Government's preparedness for the HNLC Peace Talks.

The HNLC agenda was much more sophisticated and well planned. They knew they were on the verge of collapse. Funds from extortions and threats were drying up; new membership to the organization dwindling and their so-called safe haven in Bangladesh not so secure as before. So they pretended an interest in Peace Talks; sought safe passage to come and participate in the Peace Talks to which they simply paid lip service. They used this period of safe passage to creep out of their Bangladesh hideouts, recruit new members; give more training to their members

(bomb making and other terror tactics); identify new victims and causes for their extortion activities and when they satisfied themselves of these goals they conveniently called off the Peace Talks. In a nutshell they simply sought time and space to regroup and our blind politicians willingly provided them with one. A dying terror group arose once again from its grave. They walked away after regrouping and rearming themselves while the State Government leaving our glory seeking politicians holding the drooping bouquet of wilted hope.

The end result of this foolish impromptu foray into the unknown by our big talking, less thinking politicians was egg on their faces. So what do they do next? Talks for relocating the residents of Harijan Colony were about to fructify. In the meanwhile the State Government also attempted to give fresh oxygen to a dying militant terror outfit. Now if the relocating does take place who do you think will walk away with the credit? Who gets the vote for popularity? Will Shillong once again be forced to shut down by 5 in the evening due to some juvenile delinquents? Where will the investors for the 10 billion dollar economy come from? Let me end by leaving the reader with these morbid thoughts and questions.

Yours etc.,
Bitor Lamare,
Via email

Combating smoking in public spaces

Editor,

I am writing to highlight a pressing issue affecting our vibrant markets, specifically Police Bazar and Polo, namely the rampant prevalence of public smoking. The pervasive presence of cigarette smoke not only detracts from the overall experience of these areas but also poses significant health risks to our community. Of particular concern is the distressing sight of students openly engaging in smoking behaviour.

A visit to markets like Police Bazar and Polo, intended for leisure and commerce, often involves navigating through a haze of smoke. This not only proves bothersome but also presents tangible health hazards, especially for non-smokers inadvertently inhaling second hand smoke.

The sight of students smoking in these public spaces is deeply troubling. As stewards of our future, their well-being is paramount, and their exposure to such harmful habits not only jeopardizes their health but also sets a detrimental example for their impressionable peers.

Immediate action is imperative to address this issue. Strengthening the enforcement of existing regulations prohibiting public smok-

ing is crucial. Additionally, comprehensive educational initiatives must be implemented to underscore the adverse health effects of smoking and the importance of maintaining clean, smoke-free public areas.

Together, we can rejuvenate the vibrancy and safety of our markets. Let us not allow the scourge of smoking to tarnish the vitality and allure of our city.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter. I remain optimistic that collaborative efforts will pave the way for a healthier and more pleasant urban environment for all.

Yours etc.,
Pankaj Kumar
Assistant Teacher
RBA Hindi Secondary School

Simultaneous Elections: Challenges and Costs

Editor,
This refers to the report, "One nation, one election: Committee recommends two-step approach to simultaneous elections" (ST, March 14, 2024). 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.

To meet the challenge the committee headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind has recommended on Thursday that if a mid-term general election has to be held, the new Lok Sabha's tenure, "will be only for the unexpired term of the immediately preceding full term of the House of the People and the expiration of this period shall operate as a dissolution of the House."

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 may require a general election for a very short period of time instead of the usual five-year full term in case of a mid-term poll as per the recommendation of the Committee. Moreover, premature deaths of some elected state assemblies in order to club them under the umbrella of one election would add more cost to it.

Apart from enhancing the cost, concurrent polls can damage the federal fabric of our country. Such a one-size-fits-all approach is incompatible with the principles of our diverse, parliamentary democracy.

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 superfood you deserve!

Millets, a diverse group of small-seeded, hardy grains, have been an integral part of India's agricultural landscape and dietary traditions for thousands of years. Because of their resilience and suitability for India's varied agro-climatic conditions, millets require little in the way of inputs and water to thrive. India is the highest producer and consumer of millets worldwide. Its leadership in mainstreaming millet production and consumption opens practical solutions to addressing global hunger and malnutrition.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had declared 2023 as the Year of Millets as did the United Nations. The hardy grains have been at the front of the Indian government's food push throughout this year. It was also the highlight during the G20 Summit. A special menu featuring Millets dishes was served to the delegates who attended the G20 Summit in Delhi. Recently, the government has announced that it plans to increase the procurement of millets threefold to 2 million tonnes in this financial year.

Here are 5 reasons why you should add millet into your daily diet:

Nutritional Significance

Millets are an excellent source of protein and dietary fibre, and they are high in important minerals including iron, calcium, and phosphorus. They are also a great option for people with dietary restrictions and gluten sensitivity as they are a healthier substitute for commonly used cereals like wheat flour and all-purpose flour.

Environmental Impact

In comparison to other high-input crops, millets have a reduced carbon footprint, which implies they demand less irrigation and synthetic fertilizer, making them a good choice for farmers in de-

veloping countries, where poverty and environmental degradation are major factors.

Promotes Sustainability

Beyond their nutritional value, millets contribute significantly to sustainable agriculture that enhances soil health and biodiversity. In addition to enhancing agricultural land's long-



term productivity, this serves to conserve the environment. Due to their low water requirement, their ability to thrive in semi-arid conditions makes them ideal for regions facing water scarcity, contributing to water conservation in agriculture and promoting food security.

Climate Resilience

As millets require little water, they are very tolerant of a wide range of environmental conditions, including drought and high temperatures. Because of their durability, they are less vulnerable to changes in the climate, which helps to maintain stable agricultural production even under adverse conditions. They are ideal for farmers with little land or water resources because of their short growth cycle.

Traditional, Cultural Importance

Millets have long been an inte-



gral part of diets in many cultures. They serve as the foundation for various traditional recipes and cuisines deeply rooted in cultural practices and celebrations, symbolizing fertility, abundance, and success.

While millets have varied cultural significance across various regions, they are perpetually significant in many communities, customs, and practices, adding to their diverse cultural tapestry.

With the global recognition of the significance of nutritious and sustainable food supplies, millets

have garnered renewed interest. They are regarded as an essential part of India's farming and food future.

The Indian government has taken several excellent initiatives to encourage the cultivation and consumption of millet.

Garnering these schemes, India has seen 80 plus new startups in the millet sector in the past year, highlighting the government's commitment to using them as a catalyst for better nutrition, ecological balance, and economic growth. (IANSlife)

HOLI DELIGHTS

As we draw closer to another year of Holi festivities, let's scramble our dishes and show off our culinary skills once again. To make this festival of love, colour, and spring even more memorable, IANSlife brings you some delectable treats from experts to help you celebrate.

Thandai Custard |
By Kush Kall, Head Chef, SAGA, Gurugram

Ingredients for the base:

- 2 cups Parle G
- 5 tbsp melted butter
- For the custard mix:
- 4tbsp custard powder
- 3 cup milk
- 4 tbsp sugar
- 3 tsp Thandai powder
- 1 tsp Gulkand
- 3 tsp Chopped dates

Method:

Crush down the cookies add melted butter to the crushed biscuits and make sure all the crumbs are well coated with butter.

In a mason jar, layer the cookie mix at the bottom, pat the mixture with a spoon, and refrigerate the jars for 10-15 minutes.

In a small bowl combine custard powder and ¼ cup milk. In a saucepan over medium heat add 1 and ¼ cup milk, Thandai powder, Gulkand, and sugar. Bring this to a slight boil and then pour in the custard mixture into the saucepan. Keep whisking till the mixture comes to a boil and becomes thick. Let the custard cool down at room temperature & cover it with a lid.

Once cooled, pour it into the prepared jars and layered with chopped dates.

Thandai Cupcake |
By Shroya Kumari, Pastry Chef, Kush Mush, Gurugram

Ingredients for cupcake:

- 2/3 cup Condensed Milk
- 1/4 cup Castor Sugar
- 1/3 cup Unsalted Butter melted
- 1/3 cup Milk
- 1.5 tsp Thandai Powder



- 1 cup All-Purpose Flour
- ½ tsp Baking Powder
- ½ tsp Baking Soda

For frosting:

- Heavy Whipping Cream - ½ cup
- Thandai Powder - 1 tsp

Method:

Preheat oven to 170°C.

In a large bowl, whisk condensed milk and castor sugar. Add melted butter to the mixture and whisk well for a minute.

In a small bowl, mix milk with Thandai powder until there are no lumps. Add milk to the condensed milk mixture.

Sieve all the dry ingredients, all-purpose flour, baking powder, and baking soda. Whisk the dry ingredients with the wet ingredients.

Pipe the batter into a cupcake mould and bake at 170°C for 15 to 18 minutes.

Meanwhile, whisk cold heavy whipping cream with Thandai powder until soft peaks refrigerate it.

After the cupcakes have been cooled take the whipping cream in a piping bag and pipe it on top of the cupcakes. Finish it with sliced pistachios and enjoy! (IANSlife)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, MARCH 17, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

You can expect some mixed results as Moon square Sun on your solar return chart. You will make adequate efforts, you should however be careful that your efforts are not in the wrong direction hence you should avoid wasteful activities. The temptation to take the easy way out will be strong but rely on your sound judgment. You will be using your mental energy so make sure you get some exercise for a well-balanced lifestyle. Travel will be good. Romance will bloom and family life will be congenial. There would be enhanced rapport in your family. Finances would be stable and old investments yield good returns.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You would express yourself with charm and grace, whether it's through what you express verbally or write. This is a cycle of completion and transition. It is a time when we need to let go of things that no longer serve their purpose, and hold on to things that have a future. You would express your sympathetic and compassionate side. The ideas you plant now, will benefit you later. Others might find you less sociable, as you are busier than ever and you focus on your activities and your needs. Still, you are outgoing and your initiative is stronger than ever. You would stand alone, take action and start fresh.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) There is perfection and beauty in emotional relationships as you come from a deep and spiritual space within to relate in a new way with your loved one. You display great skill in sports or physical activity that wins you appreciation and brings an opportunity to travel. Beware of a covetous and suspicious person around you who could cause misunderstanding in your personal relationships. Avoid being lazy and laid back as temporary gain or success in business needs to be followed up with hard work and dedication.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You would improve your professional and personal relations, as you express yourself in a gracious and exalted manner. There could be a change in ideas or plans, increase and decrease in finances and fluctuation in business. You can be led away by enthusiasm unless careful inner balance is maintained. Marriage, business partnership and collaboration are strengthened through understanding and commitment. You are just fair and generous in family and professional situations. Your sense of humor takes you smoothly out of difficult situations.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You are likely to get business and work opportunities from overseas and engage in multiple activities. You may be tempted to spend lavishly on things that make your life more comfortable and pleasant. It is a good time to organize your workplace and make it more efficient and equipped with good infrastructure. You may need to adjust your plan of action. Errors in judgment made now are likely due to impulsiveness and the overlooking of crucial details. You could have so many new ideas that you don't have time to implement.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Realistic levels of optimism and confidence are with you, and you are able to attract fortunate circumstances into your life. Problems are easier to resolve. Your social life will likely increase and bring you in contact with more influential, powerful and helpful people. Matters related to universities, higher education, organized religion, publishing, legal affairs, and foreign interests proceed smoothly. You would be able to see the world around you in practical terms. This is an excellent time to seek advanced training and further your education. Remember to be thankful and humble.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) This is a significant time for romantic relationships as you move ahead together. It's a great time to exert your personal influence, as you come across as especially cooperative in your professional

and personal life. You desire to learn and improve your practical skills. New responsibilities are likely to present themselves and you would take them more seriously. You would be able to structure your life and your ambitions. You are now able to discipline yourself. Take this opportunity to structure your life and your goals, and work diligently towards them. Walking and communing with nature can be therapeutic pastimes.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) Socializing, romance, and stability are enhanced and in focus. Love, friendship, and relationships are emphasized. You are creative and you succeed in areas that allow you to make something beautiful, attractive, or entertaining. Any artistic or musical talent you have is more prominent. This helps you to stay on track and to meet your responsibilities. Your concern for your future is stronger than usual, and you may find that projects you start, or investments you make, will benefit you for years to come.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You may be recognized or rewarded in some way for the efforts you put forth. Because you project a more responsible and credible you, people in authority tend to be more inclined to appreciate you and recognize your work. Practical matters come into strong focus and demand attention. You would achieve success at work and complete projects through interplay of ideas and correlation of subjects since communication is your ability.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You would have positive feelings towards religion and religious people during this phase. You have a passionate nature, although you display self-discipline with people around you. Work and relationships go through a transformation. You may be thrown by certain developments in the family and feel compelled to take a strong stand or things can go out of hand. Complications in financial matters can be expected this week. Avoid confrontations. It's also a good time to break bad habits and start a healthy living routine.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) This phase brings confidence, pleasure, involvement, and grace in personal and professional relations. This enhances excellent work opportunities for people in a creative line, marketing, media, show business, consultancy and related fields. Romantic affair and pleasure-seeking activities come into focus. Stick to your regular exercise routine and regular pattern of nutritious diet. Your confidence attracts opportunities and some of you may be promoted or your career could take a new direction.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You would face new circumstances, changes and unfamiliar situations. A positive approach and well-spoken words would benefit and gain favors from people in authority and power. Your inner hopes and desires come to the fore even as you tackle your job with a realistic and practical purpose of mind. More loving and appreciative relationships with your children may also figure at this time. This is an especially spiritual time for you—a time when you renew your energy and consider the things that are important to you.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This phase highlights friendship, romance and love in personal relations. Your thoughts turn to children, pleasures and worship during this time. The fine arts are inviting and involving as you channel your creative energy into it. A new person or opportunity leads to renewed interest in creative fields. Fresh attitudes and a new perspective are needed. You give and receive affection and love from friends and relatives. This is a good time to build your skills, get organized and attend to your health and well-being. Children do you proud.

Nearly half of India wakes up feeling tired, says report

On the morning of this year's World Sleep Day, Wakefit.co, one of India's largest D2C sleep and home solutions providers, urges people to go #BackToSleep. Why? Turns out the revelations unearthed in the 7th edition of its Great Indian Sleep Scorecard (GISS) 2024 point to alarming indications of deteriorating sleep quality across the country.

The report revealed that in 2024, 58% of Indians went to bed after 11 pm. Concurrently, the report also indicated that close to half of India woke up feeling tired in the mornings. Moreover, 88% of people wake up multiple times during the night, while 1 in 4 Indians believe they have insomnia given their inability to sleep well. Prevalence of digital exposure as well as rising stress levels seem to enhance India's sleep woes, Social media and OTT emerged as the top reasons for 54% of Indians staying up beyond the ideal bedtime, and a whopping 88% reported using their phones just before bedtime. Additionally, over 30% of people stay up worrying about their future late at night. Interestingly, while 31% of India believe that a better mattress and consistent sleep routine will help improve the quality of sleep, another 38% believe that avoiding digital devices will do the trick.

As the largest sleep study with close to 2.5 Lakh Indians' responses garnered across 7 years and 10,000+ responses this year, the GISS study unveils significant insights into the sleep patterns of Indians. The report also delves into crucial observations and trends across various age groups, genders, and demographic segments.

The key findings and observations from the survey are elucidated below.

Midnights in metros: The GISS report paints a vivid picture of the nocturnal landscape across urban India, revealing sleep habits and trends as diverse as the cities them-

selves. The report revealed that half of Gurugram's population and around 46% in Mumbai, Delhi, and Kolkata stay up beyond the ideal bedtime, with 61% in Gurugram waking up feeling tired. Social media keeps 43% of Hyderabad, Chennai, and Bengaluru residents up late. Work pressures cause late nights for 33% in Chennai, Gurugram, and Hyderabad, the highest in India among all other cities. Delhi leads in workday sleepiness at 60%, with others averaging 55%. Chennai uniquely reports a 72% higher trend of sleeping outside conventional beds. While 33% of Chennai, Delhi, and Kolkata believe in the power of a better mattress to improve the quality of sleep, 36% of Bengaluru and Mumbai felt a consistent sleep routine will do so.

Women worrying more, sleeping less: In 2024, the report revealed that 9% more women have been sleeping well past the ideal bedtime when compared to men. This could be one of the reasons contributing to a significant 20% higher morning tiredness among women vs. men. Further compounding the issue is a 50% higher incidence of women waking up more than 3 times at night when compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, the concerns that keep them awake are notable, with a 20% higher incidence of women staying up late, worrying over future uncertainties than men. These insights not only reflect the complexity of sleep experiences among women but also hint at the broader implications of lifestyle, stress, and perhaps societal roles on their sleep health.

Gen Z and millennials ditch gadgets, Gen X love their mattresses: The GISS report revealed intriguing age-related sleep patterns across different age groups. A notable 48% of individuals aged 18 to 30 went to bed post 11 pm, highlighting a trend towards later bedtimes in this age group. Gen X

isn't immune to the lures of late-night screen time either, with 42% admitting to doom scrolling into the wee hours. The concerns of under-18-year-olds are palpable, as 43% of them reported being burdened by anxieties about the future. Solutions to these sleep challenges vary by age, with 37% of 18-30 year-olds believing that keeping digital devices at bay before sleep will enhance sleep quality, while 33% of those above the age of 45 lean towards the comfort of a better mattress. The impact of these disrupted sleep patterns is felt the next day, with a staggering 65% of Gen Z and millennials reporting sleepiness during work hours, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to address these diverse sleep challenges.

Commenting on The Great Indian Sleep Scorecard 2024, Chaitanya Ramalingegowda, Director and Co-founder of Wakefit.co, said, "In an era where the boundaries between day and night are increasingly blurring, the findings from the latest Great Indian Sleep Scorecard 2024 serve as a critical reflection of our collective sleep health. This year's findings revealed a notable point where 42% of Gen X have reported doom scrolling late at night. As we navigate through the digital age, the challenge before us is not merely to address the symptoms of sleep deprivation but to redefine our relationship with technology, work, and well-being."

He added, "At Wakefit.co, we believe in the power of researched educational content, packaged in bite-sized, digestible formats. The Great Indian Sleep Scorecard, with seven editions and close to 2.5 Lakh respondents, has been a flagship research report, helping us in our endeavor to create awareness about sleep health. We aim to build a future where sleep is not sidelined but celebrated as the third pillar of health, in addition to nutrition and exercise." (IANSlife)

"You're blessed if you have the strength to work."

Mahalia Jackson

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVI No. 216 SHILLONG, MONDAY, MARCH 18, 2024

Curtains up for polls

AS the bells toll for the parliament polls, the nation is kept on animated suspension for the coming two and a half months until the final results are declared on June 4. Cited by the Election Commission as the largest electoral exercise in the world, some 97 lakh people are involved in the polling. Its fairness is promised by the CEC while India holds a reputation of holding the elections at multiple levels of governance systems in a systematic manner. Even the elections in the US had ended in confusion when George Bush Junior won the presidency through a court intervention and controversial order. The multiplicity of parties here ensures that one side or the other would be able to form a government after every poll, either alone or in alliance with others. This time too, there will hopefully be no confusion once the last results are declared on June 4.

If the ruling BJP introduced a surprise by declaring the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act and sought to divide the society vertically to its advantage, more important issues might overtake CAA in the coming days. The electoral bonds issue, for one. The details revealed so far following orders from the Supreme Court -- which scrapped the system belatedly -- shows the BJP government manipulated the system in a way that the ruling party took undue advantage. The veil of secrecy that surrounded the system for several years was lifted after the recent SC intervention. Clearly in a quid pro quo in relation to financial support the companies extended to the ruling party -- the BJP, which got the largest share thus far -- can be assumed. This is tantamount to huge corruption. This is more so because several of these companies had questionable track records. The Modi government cannot claim innocence about such blatant manipulations.

The INDIA bloc held a grand show in Mumbai on Sunday upon culmination of Rahul Gandhi's two-months-long Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra that passed through 15 states in its second edition. The occasion also marks the launch of the opposition alliance's election campaign as candidates' lists have been released for several states up for polls, including the four that will also have assembly polls -- Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. The results this time are anybody's guess and it would be foolish to rely on the opinion poll results released much before the real tempo for the campaign started building up. The unity of the opposition in some states makes the present electoral fight more worthy of a close watch.

Politics and the Bible

By HH Mohrmen

In the campaign to the election for the Lok Sabha there were allegations with regards to the use or maybe the misuse of verses from the Bible in the election platform. This is a very interesting development as it opens up a debate on what do we mean by politics? And what is exactly the role of religion in the society at large? Since the debate is from one particular scripture, we will only take this particular book for reference and discuss what it really means for the believers.

The new political party which campaigns to usher in clean politics and good governance started by calling to fight against corruption and injustice in the state. The new party is putting religion as the vanguard or making it a driving force on what they are doing and since most of the leaders are Christians hence the use of verses from the Bible to justify their stand. On other hand the opponent of the VPP allege that they misuse the scriptures for their own political gain, but let us start by trying to understand the Bible.

Whose Bible is it anyway?

The Bible is believed to be a gift from God, but what one fails to realize is that unlike the Koran, the Bible was not given to human in one go. The Christian Bible has its own history and to understand it, one also has to understand the Hebrew Bible. All branches of Christianity use the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament with their own interpretation of the book which is different from that of the Jews. In Judaism the Hebrew Bible is the only text used as instruction on how to live a morally upright life, and it is also a record of God's covenant with the Jews as the chosen people. The first part of the Bible which the Christians call the Old Testament is taken from the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible known as TANAKH. The abbreviation stands for the different books in the Hebrew scripture which is the Torah, the Nevim, and the Ketuvim. It is a collection of ancient scriptures of the Jews written in Hebrew and also in Aramaic, which they continue to use till today. In fact reading scriptures during service is one of the traditions Christians borrowed from

Judaism.

However different Christian Churches include different numbers of books from the Hebrew Bible in their canon of the Old Testament. The difference can be in the order and the names of the books from the Hebrew Bible used by the different branches of Christianity in their Bible. For instance the canon of the Bible used by the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches comprises of 49 books, the Bible in the Catholic canon comprises of 46 Books and the Bible in the Protestant canon comprises of 39 books only.

One thing that all the Christian Churches have in common are the 39 books of the Hebrew Bible; these books are found in all the Old Testaments of different Christian Churches' canons. There may be some differences in the text, but these books match with the 24 books of the TANAKH in the Hebrew Bible. The additional numbers of books in some Bibles is because several texts were split into separate books in the Christian Bibles.

The books that are part of the Christian Old Testament but not part of the canon in the Hebrew Bible are sometimes called the deuterocanonical books which the Catholic and the Orthodox churches include in their Old Testament. Most Protestant do not include the deuterocanonical books in their Old Testament, yet some branches of Anglicans and Lutherans place the Book in a separate section which they called apocrypha.

The second part of the Christians Bible is the New Testament which are the Christian scriptures written in Koine Greek. The New Testament is all about the life and teachings of Jesus and, also about the early Christians. It is believed to be the fulfillment of prophesy which is the coming of the messiah which is prophesied in the Old Testament. The two books, the Old Testament which is based on the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament or the Christian Scriptures developed in the early Christian period, together are considered as the Sacred Scripture by the Christians.

It is obvious the Bible used by the churches vary and we have not even discussed the different versions that are available. The important point to note is when we ask questions about the Bible it is also pertinent to ask which Bible we are talking about.

Religion and Politics

Not only that there is vestry or pulpit politics in every church, but church leaders are now openly hobnobbing with the powers that are. During the last election it was alleged that church elders campaigned for their candidate in their respective constituencies. In some cases it was reported that they also indulged in the distributing gifts and cash to the needy members of the church on behalf of the candidate.

Many churches and faith groups also took advantage of the election to seek financial support for their projects like schools, hospitals etc., and there were reports of churches accepting donations from politicians for construction of new church buildings in the run up to the elections. Last year at least two churches after receiving donations from politicians for constructing new church buildings, announced that publicly. In other words the church is indirectly endorsing the candidate. Obviously the church cannot avoid politics, but it can at least choose to do it in the just right way. Taking a leaf from the good book, it can exhort its member that whenever they engage in politics, they should try to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

Can anyone avoid politics?

It was Pericles who said, "Just because you do not take an interest in politics, it doesn't mean politics won't take an interest in you." Even if you are not interested in politics, politics is interested in you, but unfortunately politics has earned a bad name for itself.

It is often called a dirty game, but is it so? Politics is what we make it to be. It becomes dirty when played by dirty people who uses unfair means to attain power. It is dirty when the sole aim of being in politics is for selfish interests and to amass wealth for oneself. It is dirty when there is injustice and there is prejudice in the system especially against those who are not part of the ruling dispensation. Politics is dirty when favouritism is prevalent and those in power get undue advantage.

Clean Politics Campaign

There is a saying, "It is easier said than done." It is indeed easy for any political dispensation to call for cleaning the system and to rid corruption from the state. It is much easier when one is in the opposition with none or very little responsibility of governing. They say the test of the pudding is in the eating, so we will know how the new political party will perform only when they are at the helm of power.

People will have to wait till the VPP attains power to see whether they are going to be a party with a difference or just an old wine in a new bottle. Or as the saying goes, 'power corrupts' and maybe they will one day succumb to the pressure, but everyone agrees that at least the intention is good. It is heartening to hear a call for truth, justice, honesty rather than the usual 'ngi pynbeij man ka san snem, ni ngop ruh man ka san snem' (we fool them every five years and they succumb every five years too), as stated by a leading politician of the state. Unlike the usual 'ngin iatreilang bad ki ksuid ruh lada don kam' (we are ready to work with the devil if the situation warrants), it is refreshing to hear the call to fight against the evil of corruption instead of condoning it. Unlike the usual fooling around with the crowd, there is respect for the public in the campaign. They use the Bible because it is the scripture they are familiar with, and it is the book of their faith. It is their spiritual guide or the moral compass which gives them a sense of direction in the way they live their lives. So isn't that what the good book is meant to be?

In conclusion it is pertinent to ask, is it wrong to use the holy book in the campaign to rid off corruption and bad governance? Is the holy book not a tool to fight against injustice? Of what use are the scriptures if not to fight for good and noble causes? What use is it, if not to lead a person on the right path?

The Bitter Truth: Protecting Our Youth from the Sugary Trap

By Napoleon S Mawphniang

Throughout history, conflicts have erupted over territory, resources, and ideological dominance. However, an ongoing battle persists, waged not with physical weapons, but with the seductive power of sweetness itself. This is the fight against the sugary temptations that jeopardize the health of our younger generation - a struggle demanding resolute action from Meghalaya's government.

At the core of this issue lies a fundamental question: Are we willing to sacrifice our children's physical and mental well-being for corporate profits? For too long, we've turned a blind eye to the pervasive presence of sugary drinks, sweets, and artificial sweeteners peddled near schools and colleges - the very institutions meant to nurture young minds.

The statistics are alarming. Nearly one in five children in Meghalaya is overweight or obese, directly linked to overconsumption of sugary substances. But the repercussions extend far beyond the visible, seeping into cognitive function, emotional well-being, and long-term health risks. Are we truly prepared to witness a generation plagued by diabetes, heart disease, and chronic ailments, all for momentary sugary indulgence?

Imagine schools as bastions of nutritional awareness, where wholesome alternatives replace sugary temptations. A future worth striving for, but the path is

Yet, our choices are often influenced by forces more potent than individual willpower. In the realm of sugary indulgence, we are unwitting participants in a grand spectacle orchestrated by marketing and manipulation masters. The insidious tactics - alluring advertisements beckoning primal cravings, strategic product placement infiltrating every corner, carefully crafted narratives weaving sugar into our cultural tapestry.

Perhaps a paradigm shift is needed, a revolution where we reclaim agency and empower children to become discerning consumers, immune to the sugar industry's siren song. Imagine schools as bastions of critical thought, equipping young minds to deconstruct marketing tactics and unravel truths behind alluring facades. Curricula embracing media literacy, empowering students to dissect hidden messages in advertisements, product placements, and curated narratives - the key to unlocking a generation of savvy consumers impervious to the sugary snare.

Beyond educational institutions, the battlegrounds span society's fabric - supermarket aisles, shopping malls, digital landscapes permeating our existence. Navigating this temptation minefield demands a multifaceted approach, where regulatory measures complement grassroots movements empowering communities to reclaim dietary control.

The presence of artificial sweeteners, chemical impostors promising sweetness without consequence, must also be addressed. Are we prepared to entrust our children's health to substances with uncertain long-term effects? Imagine a world where the reverence is for nature's bounty - the unadulterated sweetness of fruits, honey, and the plant kingdom's wonders.

fraught with challenges - not least the powerful sugar industry lobby that has long held sway over our dietary habits. How do we overcome their carefully crafted marketing ploys designed to prey on young minds?

Perhaps a holistic approach is needed, combining regulatory measures with educational initiatives. Restricting sugary product sales near schools creates an environment for healthier choices. But empowering youth with knowledge to navigate nutritional misinformation is crucial. Imagine classrooms fostering critical thinking, instilling appreciation for true nourishment our bodies crave.

We must confront socioeconomic factors influencing choices. How do we ensure access to healthier alternatives isn't a privilege reserved for the affluent, but a universal right? Collaborative efforts between government, institutions, and communities could incentivize production and distribution of nutrient-dense, affordable options - a paradigm shift where well-being eclipses profit.

The presence of artificial sweeteners, chemical impostors promising sweetness without consequence, must also be addressed. Are we prepared to entrust our children's health to substances with uncertain long-term effects? Imagine a world where the reverence is for nature's bounty - the unadulterated sweetness of fruits, honey, and the plant kingdom's wonders.

Our actions reverberate far beyond Meghalaya's boundaries. Empowering a child with nutritional wisdom sows the seeds of a ripple effect that can reshape society. Imagine adults of tomorrow, once today's students, carrying the torch of mindful nourishment, transforming communities, workplaces, and homes into sanctuaries of wholesome living. A legacy worth fighting for, ignited by protecting our youth from the sugary snare.

Neighborhood watch groups, vigilant sentinels monitoring sugary product influx, fostering collective responsibility and empowerment - catalysts for change, communities banding together to create healthful living oases amidst sugary excess.

Our actions reverberate through history, shaping destinies of unborn generations. Empowering a child to resist sugar's siren song sows the seeds of a ripple effect reshaping global society. Imagine tomorrow's adults, once today's students, carrying the torch of mindful nourishment, transforming workplaces, homes, and communities into wholesome living sanctuaries. A legacy worth fighting for, ignited by protecting our youth from the sugary snare - a future where obesity, diabetes, and chronic ailments are echoes of a bygone era when we sacrificed well-being for sugary indulgence.

Meghalaya's government bears the responsibility of being the vanguard, catalyst for a healthier future. Will we rise, casting aside complacency's shackles, embracing true stewardship? Or succumb to sweetness' siren song, sacrificing our youth's vitality for short-term gratification and corporate greed? Our choice echoes through time, shaping destinies - state, nation, world. In this war against sugary vices, there are no bystanders - only warriors for a sweeter, healthier tomorrow, armed with courage to confront bitter truth and wisdom to forge a path where children thrive, unburdened by sugary addiction's shackles.

Our legacy will be defined not by battles fought, but by lives touched, minds shaped, generations empowered to embrace wholesome living's essence. Let us architect this revolution, torchbearers echoing through ages, etching names among those who dared dream of a sweeter, healthier world. (The writer is Advocate & Trade Unionist)

Letters to the Editor

On electoral bonds

Editor, According to the two sets of data on Electoral Bonds posted by the Election Commission of India on its website there is no way to establish who donated to which party. Santiago Martin also known as the "Lottery King," is a prominent figure in India. His company Future Gaming and Hotels, emerged as the top buyer of electoral bonds according to the data posted by the Election Commission of India. Between 2019 and 2024 his firm purchased electoral bonds worth ₹1368 crore. Let us examine who Mr Martin is and what are the implications of Santiago Martin's electoral bond purchases and is there any legal action being taken against him.

Background and business ventures

Martin began his journey as a labourer in Myanmar and later ventured into the lottery business in Coimbatore, India. His company Future Gaming and Hotels, capitalized on the popularity of two-digit lotteries, building substantial wealth. The Company operated under subsidiaries like Martin Karnataka in South India and Martin Sikkim Lottery in the Himalayan State of Sikkim in the North Eastern Region. The company claims a workforce of over 1000 employees across 13 states where lotteries are legal.

Legal Troubles

Martin has faced multiple legal challenges. In 2008 he was accused of an alleged fraud of over Rs 4,500 crore against the Government of Sikkim. In 2011, he underwent searches by Tamil

Nadu and Karnataka Police forces during a crackdown on illegal lottery businesses. In 2013, Kerala Police raided his premises as part of an investigation into illegal lottery operations. In 2015, the Income Tax Department conducted raids across various states, alleging tax evasion and financial irregularities. In May 2023, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) attached ₹ 457 crore under Prevention of Money Laundering Act, linked to an alleged loss of over ₹900 crore to the Government of Sikkim.

Diverse Business Holdings Beyond lotteries, Martin's business interests extend to, Martin Homeopathy Medical College and Hospital near Coimbatore. SS Music, a television music channel. M and C Property Development. Martin Nanthavanam Apartments and Leema Real Estate Private Limited.

Implications of Santiago Martin's electoral bond purchases

The implications of Santiago Martin's electoral bond purchases are significant and multifaceted. Martin's substantial electoral bond acquisitions raise questions about transparency in political funding. The use of electoral bonds allows for anonymous donation, which undermines accountability and public trust in the democratic process. The sheer magnitude of Martin's bond purchases suggests a significant interest in influencing political outcomes. Such large contributions can potentially sway policy decisions and party affiliations. Martin's involvement has drawn attention from regulatory bodies, including the Election Commission of India and the Enforcement Directorate. Ongoing investigations into electoral bonds and their im-

pact on political funding may reveal further details. Public perceives electoral bonds as a mechanism that favours wealthy donors and corporations. Martin's involvement reinforces concerns about the influence of money in politics. The Supreme Court's recent ruling on electoral bonds declared them "unconstitutional" and ordered the disclosure of donors and recipients. Martin's bond purchases fall within this context, and the court's decision may have implications for his actions. His case adds fuel to the ongoing debate about electoral reforms. Calls for greater transparency, stricter regulations, and reforms in political funding mechanisms are likely to intensify. Santiago's electoral bond purchases highlight broader issues related to campaign financing, transparency, and the need for robust regulatory frameworks.

Legal action being taken The "Lottery King" and top buyer of electoral bonds, is currently facing legal scrutiny and investigations. In September 2019, the Union Home Ministry issued a warning to states about the alleged 'frauds' and 'irregularities' linked to Martin's companies, particularly his flagship entity, Future Gaming and Hotel Services Private Limited. The warning specifically mentioned states like West Bengal, Maharashtra and Punjab, where he was allegedly operating. Despite the warning, Future Gaming and Hotels started purchasing a series of electoral bonds in October 2019, totalling ₹190 crore in just that month alone. Overall, between 2019 and 2024, Future Gaming and hotels purchased electoral bonds worth a staggering ₹1368 crore. The Enforcement Directorate has been probing Martin's financial activities. In May 2023, the

ED froze assets worth around ₹ 457 crore under the anti-money laundering law. This investigation is related to an alleged loss of over ₹900 crore to the Sikkim government due to fraudulent sale of the state lottery in Kerala. Future Gaming and Hotels was the master distributor of Sikkim lotteries. Having donated ₹1368 crore his actions are being closely monitored by both the Enforcement Directorate and the Income Tax Department. State Bank of India (SBI) filed a compliance affidavit with the Supreme Court, revealing that a total of 22,217 bonds were purchased between April 1, 2019, and February 15, 2024. Out of these, 22,030 electoral bonds were redeemed. Around 1300 companies purchased electoral bonds worth ₹12,017 crore in five years. Future Gaming is the only company to exceed the ₹1,000 crore mark. BJP's share from these EBs was 54.64%, INC 9.34, AITC 9.10, BRS 7.60, BJD 6.44, DMK 5.13, YSR Congress 3.18, TDP 1.22, SHS 0.84, NCP 0.78 and Others 1.72% respectively.

Yours etc., V.K.Lyngdoh Via email

Hypocrisy & religious fanaticism

Editor, Apropos of Albert Thyrniang's article "Is VPP the Christian version of BJP," the writer has hit the 'bulls-eye' on the propagandist methods of mixing political ideology with religion. However this is witnessed across all political parties and to single out the VPP is uncalled for. A political analysis shows that

the outcome of such meetings where God is called to be a 'witness' and the Holy Scriptures are quoted are what I would term as a "soul catching experiment." However what is depressing is the inability of politicians from going the extra mile to provide what the poorest of the poor need for survival. Even the church gatherings and religious congregations that politicians patronise are just to earn goodwill and votes.

With so many politicians competing with one another to win the favour of religious groups it is ironic that even religious leaders fall over each other to win favours with politicians for funds.

This is where the religious elites have failed the common man on the street and to address the growing poverty all around. Also the Church has failed miserably by failing to admonish and counsel the politicians to be better leaders. The church has failed its people, especially the poorest!

Yours etc., Dominic S.Wankhar, Via email

Teenagers need our support

Editor, I write out of concern about the current situation of teenagers in our society. In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of issues affecting the mental and emotional well-being of our youth. Today's teenagers are facing a great deal of stress and pressure. They are exposed to ongoing academic demands, social pressures, and family expectations but often lack the necessary skills to manage these challenges. With

the rise in social media use, smartphones, and other digital communication platforms, the challenges that teenagers encounter have increased.

The pressure to perform well academically and get into top colleges is taking a significant toll on teenagers' mental health. Many teens are struggling with anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues as a result of this pressure. They also face the risk of social isolation due to online bullying, cybercrime, or misinformation.

In addition, teenagers nowadays face a plethora of physical health-related issues. A sedentary lifestyle, unhealthy eating habits, and lack of exercise have led to an increase in obesity rates, heart-related problems, and diabetes among adolescents.

We must address these issues and devise effective strategies to support our teenagers. Parents, teachers, and healthcare professionals must work together to raise awareness about these issues and provide the right support systems such as counselling, support groups, peer support networks, and community initiatives that encourage healthy engagement habits and relationships with peers and family members.

It is high time that we take these problems seriously and commit ourselves to supporting our youth towards a better future. Together, let us take action and support this next generation for happier and healthier lives.

Yours etc., Debaraj Chakraborty, Via email

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

"Iron rusts from disuse: water loses its purity from stagnation... even so does inaction sap the vigor of the mind."

— Leonardo da Vinci

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 219 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, MARCH 19, 2024

Councillor's dangerous proposition

THE United Democratic Party (UDP) which is an ally of the MDA government is in the Opposition in the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council. Opposition leader, Titos Chyne who was a former MLA raised a point in the ongoing session that the Council should write to the State Government to exempt Meghalaya from the Mining and Minerals Development Regulation Act (MMDR) Act with latest amendments in November 2023. The MMDR Act does not speak about quarrying but is more concerned with mining leases especially of minerals designated as 'critical.' In Meghalaya the kind of quarrying that's happening along the Rngain -Pynursla - Dawki stretch can be described as "horrific." The boulders and sand are parcelled off in hundreds of trucks daily to Bangladesh. Studies worldwide have shown that there are several serious environmental impacts related to quarrying activities especially on and near the river. They include vibrations, land degradation, land subsidence and landslides, water pollution, occupational noise pollution, and air pollution. This in turn leads to health-related problems and loss of biodiversity. Quarrying operations can adversely alter pre-existing ecosystems, and change hydro-geological and hydrological regimes. This adverse influence of stone and sand quarrying induces damage in property, depletion of groundwater, loss of fertile topsoil, degradation of forests, deterioration in aquatic biodiversity and public health.

On the other hand, haphazard quarrying of sand from riverbeds causes a rapid change in bed configuration in response to the changes in flow. Quarrying basically destroys landscape. This can lead to downstream movement, scouring, or accumulation of sediment while provoking shoreline erosion. When riverbeds are composed of sand, this on-going pattern of erosion and deposition causes meanders to progress slowly downstream with time. It is rather strange therefore that neither the State Forest Department nor the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) have not conducted any studies to determine the environmental and ecological impacts of such unregulated quarrying in Meghalaya. While stone and sand quarrying may be required to meet the local and national needs there should be a limit on boulders being exported at the cost of serious ecological consequences.

The Councillor who raised the issue of allowing arbitrary quarrying argues that it is a livelihood and that stopping such activities would render many people to become unemployed. That is the most illogical and uneducated comment. Can livelihoods be created at the cost of environmental devastation? If so called political leaders argue that way and don't have the capacity to think of innovative ways to create livelihoods for people, then Meghalaya is in serious danger of its ecology being destroyed by such short-sighted politicians. Climate change is a reality that's already staring at the state. Changes in climate patterns have been witnessed but politicians will still look for shortcuts to retain their vote banks. Should people remain silent in such circumstances? Can there be a trade-off between the environment and livelihoods?

Letters to the Editor

North Eastern Region must find its niche

Editor,
Two months ago we had a training in Guwahati on our Annual Survey of Industries. I remember that most of what was being said in the training program just flew over my head; what got me pondering instead was the sad state of affairs of the industrial sector in our state and in the other five north eastern states. The governments in the six north-eastern states have had to formulate industrial policies mostly in the form of carrots to attract investments from outside the region and this to a small degree has managed to bring in the much needed investment into the industrial sectors of the six north-eastern states; what prompted the government of the respected states to formulate such kind of an industrial policy is because the initiatives on industrial activities

are hard to come by from the indigenous population of the respective states.

The only bright spot in the entire NER region is obviously Assam. Even though Agriculture is still the dominant sector even in Assam, yet over the years industrialization has started gaining pace and what's heartening to see is the growing active participation of the local population in the industrialization process. Take the tea industry for example; Assam produces almost 50 percent of the nation's total tea and nearly 20 percent of Assam's entire population are employed directly or indirectly in the tea industry; what is more impressive is that Assam tea has a global demand and a global reputation and this makes it the heartbeat of the secondary sector in Assam. The other North Eastern States need to find their niche; with AI and the rapid pace of automation, large scale manufacturing and the service sector will definitely take a hit. The bright side is that the MSME

Kudos to Albert Thyrning for his thought-provoking article "Is the VPP the Christian Version of the BJP?" (March 14, 2024). Indeed, it's time for thinking people in our community, "Christian" and "non-Christian" alike, to seriously start a conversation on what being "Christian" is really about. Especially in the face of disturbing and divisive ideological and religious extremism in our social and political discourse.

If one were to take a more serious look at the indigenous Jewish Jesus narrative from our own indigenous perspective, one would, indeed, get the general idea that if "God" were to live among humans, we would be witnessing love in action in its purest form. Instead of the polarising and hateful politically motivated religious rhetoric we're hearing these days. The kind of extremist religious rhetoric that parrots western imperial Christian fundamentalism with its insane penchant for holier-than-thou Bible-thumping and proof-texting tactics to silence its critics and political rivals.

Because that kind of "Christianity" champions western white supremacy—with its simplistic one-dimensional literalist-inerrantist reading of ancient Jewish narratives—the kind of politically weaponised top-down "authoritative" reading that justifies genocide, culturicide and displacement of indigenous peoples wherever it has managed to spread its hegemonic tentacles (https://www.worldhistory.org/Doctrine_of_Discovery and https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inlinepdfs/04093_FPS.pdf).

Whereas, the thing that moves readers the most about the indigenous Jewish Jesus narrative is the embodiment of love in action in a life courageously and exemplarily lived by a certain Rabbi Yeshua. Indeed, it's a narrative that puts God and humanity at the centre.

When the Jewish Rabbi Hillel the Elder (50 BCE - 10 CE) was asked what the greatest commandment was, he responded with "that which is hateful to you, do not unto another: This is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary — [and now] go study."

Yeshua (anglicised "Jesus" from Greek "Iêsous") comes from that golden rule tradition too. "Do unto others what you would them do unto you..." Furthermore, "Love God, yes. But love your neighbour as yourself too." And when asked who a neighbour was, he famously responded with the story about a compassionate man who belonged to a community that was the object of racial discrimination among the racist "pure". Jews of

their reliability depends on several factors. The purpose of Opinion Polls is to gauge public views and preferences on various topics, including politics, social issues, and consumer behaviour. They provide insights into the thinking and experiences of a larger population based on a smaller sample. High-quality opinion polls follow rigorous methodologies which matter such as Random Sampling where pollsters select a representative sample from the population interest. They have a 'Structured Questionnaire' where consistent questions are asked to all respondents.

Yours etc.,
Gary Marbaniang,
Via email

Veracity of Opinion Polls

Editor,
The editorial "Curtains up for polls" (ST March 18, 2024) made interesting reading. The editorial has raised a pertinent issue that, "more important issues might overtake CAA in the coming days. The electoral bond issue, for one." The editorial may be partially correct in pointing out that, "it would be foolish to rely on the opinion poll released much before the real tempo of the campaign started building up." But it cannot be denied that, "Opinion Polls" play a crucial role in understanding public sentiments, but

What does being Christian mean

By Yona M. Nonglang

the day!
And how does Jewish tradition speak of the Creator, the universal life force? "G-d" is simply beyond human language and comprehension to describe—our human problem not God's. Because there's just no human mind that can fathom and no human vocabulary adequate enough to sufficiently speak about such divine mystery—so inadequate that only figurative language could be used by those who spoke about the mystery. Hence the metaphor/analogy "light" (shining glory) when ancient Jewish storytellers mentioned YHVH. How did they come up with such powerful imagery? Were they eye-witnesses to some striking rare appearance of some spectacular celestial body (like the Hale-Bopp comet of 1997, perhaps) that inspired their awe-inspiring imagination of the divine?

The Jewish Jesus narratives also talks of Jesus as "the son of G-D," a "light bearer." The very term he also used for his fellow Jews who flocked around him. Is "you are the light" the equivalent of today's universally used "you're a child of God?"
At a time when Palestine lived in a perpetual state of fear, insecurity, exploitation and deprivation because of the ruthlessness of Rome's colonial occupation of their land, the storytellers among Jews imagined what it would be like if G-D were to live among his people. G-D, indeed, would send his "child" who would grow up to comfort his people. Yes, the kind of divine embodiment who would be the superlative manifestation of all that was truly human and humane—a visible embodiment of love, compassion and self-sacrifice in the midst of self-interest, cruelty, exploitation, suffering and hopelessness.

Indeed, in the empire's predatory capitalist system of "plenty" for the exploitative wealthy elite ruling class and "scarcity" for the exploited, "disinherited" and "wretched of the earth,"** God's embodiment of love and compassion would feed the hungry poor, provide free health care for the underprivileged sick (lame, blind, paralytic, comatose, etc), provide respite to the psychologically traumatised (woman with persistent menstrual issue), and restore the sanity of the mentally unstable (demon possessed). He would also help the poor celebrate life in all its joy and beauty (turn water into wine at weddings). He would also be a storyteller of hope and emotional healing to his care-laden audience with his soul-enriching metaphor-packed

stories that would inspire the moral imagination and moral conscience of every generation even to this day.
He would refuse to submit himself to the rigidity of self-righteous institutionalised religion that spiritually majored in minors (filter a gnat but swallow a camel), with its judgmental, discriminatory and intrusive habit of "sin" categorisation, where "morality" was no longer about how kindly and compassionately people treated one another, among other things, but about being ridiculously reduced to that unhealthy focus on people's private life and the endless gossiping and public shaming of those considered "fallen short."
"Lady, where are your accusers?" "Go and 'sin' no more..." Imagine the knowing look of understanding he gave her as he spoke the words.

Indeed, in a toxic misogynistic chauvinist world where women were made public examples while men escaped scot-free even when "caught in adultery," if God were to be among his people, he would be a champion of women's rights. By that logic, he would also be a champion of the rights of the rest of the discriminated categories of "sinners" too, wouldn't he?

Neither would he condone divisive politically motivated hateful rhetorics of any kind. Instead, he would be a courageous bridge builder across all sorts of petty divisions and he would erase any existing ugly supremacist discriminatory labels of "othering." He would reach out to the "dogs" or "ksew pohjai" (victims of animalistic dehumanisation), socialise with "Samaritans" or "khar iap" (victims of pejorative, racist epithets) and so on. He would therefore be accused of being a friend of sinners/outcasts, and therefore labeled a "hell-bound liberal!"

And because what happened there was much like what's happening to Palestinians now, if God were to be among his people, he would do exactly what Jesus did. He would be among the suffering Palestinians, magically heal their heartbreak, their physical and psychological trauma, reset their broken bones, restore their shattered limbs, provide life-giving water to their parched tongues and comfort their dejected souls by telling them stories of hope that would make them feel as if God is indeed among them in spite of their living-hell situation at the hands of another ruthless colonising force.

Above all, he would tell those European Zionists among Jews to "put

their swords back in their sheaths." Yes, those Israeli supremacists who have no qualms about proof-texting controversial ancient Jewish texts with hegemonic language of domination and ruthlessness to justify their violent settler-colonialism on Palestinian land, thereby completely ignoring the language of the golden rule of Judaism altogether.

"Get rid of the war machines," he would be admonishing them. "This is not our way! And you, Mr. PM, Amalek? Really? You know there were bloodthirsty extremists then just as there are bloodthirsty extremists now, who dare put words in God's mouth in order to win political arguments and silence critics."

"Hmph, G-D said!" How dare they, and how dare you! So you, Mr. PM, you'd better find a better way to peacefully coexist with your neighbours. And stop the nonsense about who gave 'the land' to you because of that myth from donkey's years ago. You know, and I know too, that we Jews don't read the Book the way those folks who stole our identity do!"

"Look at how they stole my identity and put words in my mouth too. Look at how they've whitewashed me to the point that I can no longer recognise myself! They've turned an Arab Jew like me into some blond, blue-eyed so-and-so who's now on the side of the ruthless white supremacists of this world! My, the unspeakably terrible things they do in my name too! Can you imagine me taking sides with the very people who have been crushing indigenous people everywhere for centuries, including us, right here, right now?"

He wouldn't be party to lip service religion either, with all its super-spiritual pious-sounding platitudes. "Don't tell the starving Palestinian refugees you'll be 'praying' for them. Send them food, for heaven's sake!" (I was hungry, you gave me food. I was naked, you clothed me!). "Here's the thing about the golden rule of our religion—it's about manifesting love in action. Love God, love neighbour."

Indeed, our state too would be a kinder and less polarised, less hateful, less violent and less corrupt place if only we would respect the language of the golden rule—the universality of which we the children of Hynhiew Trep, along with all other indigenous people, also acknowledge. Because we believe in the same golden rule of tipbriew tipble, shong suk shong sain, kamai ia ka hok kamai ia ka akor, too.

Citations: Howard Thurman: "Jesus and the Disinherited," Franz Fanon: "The Wretched of the Earth."

Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

predicted the outcomes of several recent elections. The latter Centre for the Study of Developing Societies is a well-respected research institute. They have been conducting surveys and exit polls in India since the 1960s. Their data collection and analysis are considered reliable and insightful. But we should remember that while these pollsters have a good track record, it is essential to consider multiple sources and methodologies when interpreting election predictions. If I am asked to choose between an 'Opinion Poll' and 'Exit Poll', I would prefer the latter because the former gauge pre-election opinions while Exit Polls assess actual voting patterns after citizens have cast their ballots.

Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

Scarcity pricing will not solve water crisis

By Ajit Ranade

A factory using a water intensive chemical process in Gujarat had a problem. It was the onset of summer. The assured industrial supply of water was not forthcoming. Despite efficient use and recycling there was an acute water shortage, which threatened to shut down the factory. The manager had to resort to tanker water, buying at the rate of 5000 litres for about 1500 rupees. He was willing to bid even higher. He needed perhaps hundreds of trucks per day. This was good news for farmers in the neighborhood, most of whom had borewells on their farms. Their own wells supplied water for the crops they were growing. But selling water to the factory was more lucrative. This was a win win situation, with the factory continuing its profitable production and farmers getting more money from selling water.

This is however not a win from a social point of view. Firstly, just because someone

ment can cause GDP losses to be as high as 7 to 12 percent in countries like India and China.

A country is called water stressed if it has less than 1700 cubic meters of usable water per person. India is much below 1000. By comparison the United States has more than 8000 per person. India had more than 3000 back in 1951. So clearly a rising population is a cause of water stress. To add to the population pressure is the continuing quality deterioration of existing sources of water supply. This results from inadequate water treatment, or even phenomena like arsenic poisoning. In a written reply in Parliament, the Union Minister for Jal Shakti said that arsenic was detected in groundwater in 230 districts, fluoride in 469 districts, covering most States across the country. Groundwater contamination is a serious phenomenon which makes the problem of water scarcity more acute. Adding to this is the mindless over-extraction



is willing to pay a higher price, it does not mean that groundwater can be depleted indiscriminately. Private benefits are much smaller than the social loss of water tables. Secondly, diverting water from food crops to produce industrial chemical products might make private sense, but is socially not optimal. In that sense the farmers' private ownership of borewells do not give them unlimited rights to overexploit ground water. Highly subsidised electricity makes pumping out water artificially cheaper in any case.

The above is a true story played out in thousands of different forms. If rich country consumers want to bid a higher price for India's basmati rice, can we increase our exports of rice indiscriminately? Normally all export restrictions on farm output should be relaxed, if it helps increase the farmers' incomes. But in this case, it amounts to export of water, of which there is acute shortage in India. Last year India exported 22 million tonnes of rice which earned about 90,000 crore in foreign exchange. But it also amounted to an export of at least 88 trillion litres of water. The scarcity cost of that water for our country is much more than what was earned in foreign exchange.

The same is true for sugar exports. The argument of selling water intensive crops to the highest bidder for their dollars, is similar to industry buying water from private borewells which are meant for farming.

It is not just on World Water Day, which falls on March 22 that we need to ponder on water scarcity. India has only 2 percent of the world's fresh water supply but 17 percent of the population. The present predicament of people in Bengaluru, skipping work to stand in long queues for a bucket of water is a sobering reminder. A few years ago we had water trains running to Latur district in Maharashtra, making over 100 ferries of half a million litres each. Water shortages have even led to shutdowns of thermal power plants, since there wasn't enough water for the cooling. These power outages between 2017 and 2021 were estimated to be 8.2 terawatt hours of energy, or equivalent to power supply to 1.5 million households. The World Resources Institute says that bad water manage-

of groundwater from private wells, as exemplified in water sold for industrial use because it is lucrative. The over-extraction is aggravated by cheap or free electricity (which ironically also suffers from power outage due to lack of water for cooling thermal power plants).

Tackling water scarcity must be one of our highest national priorities, requiring action at policy level, across levels of government, from civil society and collectively at the level of each household. It should cover the following aspects. Firstly water conservation, including practice of rainwater harvesting. Secondly improving efficiency of usage, and moving away from water guzzling crops, or at least changing the method. Thirdly, encouraging reuse and recycling. Almost ninety percent of water use, except drinking, cooking and bathing, can use recycled water. Pune city has started several recycling plants, and citizens can summon a tanker of recycled water for free using an app. Fourthly we need a comprehensive policy and regulation for water governance. Do we allow unlimited groundwater extraction on private land? Fifth, is the introduction of technology to meter usage, detect, reduce and stop leakages, or using satellite imagery to map water bodies. This also includes rehabilitation of reservoirs and tanks, as has been done in States like Tamil Nadu by civil society. Sixth is raising public awareness. Here the most promising way, whether to reduce usage of plastic, or burning of firecrackers, or conservation of water, is through the minds of young school students. An extensive campaign on raising water stress consciousness among children starting even at the kindergarten level will have the maximum impact in the long run. A recent Tata commercial showing kids singing nursery rhymes (Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water, but there was no water) was an example of a very effective advocacy campaign for water stress awareness. On this World Water Day let us reiterate our commitment to conserving our most precious resource.

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

"Do not let yourself be tainted with a barren skepticism."

— Louis Pasteur

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LV No. 220 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20, 2024

Nyay in Mumbai

THE INDIA alliance demonstrated the chinks in their armour when Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra concluded at the Shivaji Park in Mumbai. Several prominent opposition figures were "missing" at the mega rally, which, by extension, was also conceived as the launch pad for their collective electoral offensive against the ruling NDA. This was a critical juncture as the Election Commission has just announced the schedule for the parliament elections that will throw up a verdict in the next ten weeks. The count-down for the verdict has begun. This was the time the opposition unity should have been demonstrated in full force before the nation. It did not happen that way. Most of the opposition figures present at the rally, along with Yatra captain Rahul Gandhi who himself wore a jaded look, were 'powerless' old-timers – the likes of Farooq Abdullah or Sharad Pawar. Prominent absentees from the opposition were Akhilesh Yadav from the key battleground state of Uttar Pradesh, the charismatic Arvind Kejriwal who was tied with the ED summons, and the Left leaders. A permanent fixture at the INDIA meetings from its start, the Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar, is now in the rival camp. This was partly compensated by the presence of RJD leader and Bihar's deputy chief minister Tejashwi Yadav.

In fact, the opposition unity is far from a reality even at this late hour. The neutralist Naveen Patnaik in Odisha has sided with the BJP, as did Nitish Kumar. Chandrababu Naidu took his Telugu Desam back to the NDA and West Bengal's Mamata Banerjee is not being accommodative with the rest of the national opposition. The presence of Tamil Nadu chief minister MK Stalin at the rally came as some relief to the opposition alliance. Uddhav Thackeray's participation was only to be expected. Mayawati was not seen around just as the Left leadership stayed away. The BRS of Telangana and YSRC of Andhra Pradesh, both battling the BJP in their states, too are conspicuous by their absence at the INDIA platforms.

The mega rally held in Mumbai at the conclusion of the Nyay Yatra was inspiring to the Congress leadership. Yet, the absence of several fraternal opposition figures came as a dampener. Here was a golden opportunity for the Opposition to show its collective might. It, however, failed to click. The immediate inference could be that the BJP can have a cakewalk for the third time in succession and the Modi bandwagon will smile its way back to power. But, the mood of the nation would be known only after the manifestoes are released and the campaign starts.

Khasi Student's Union: Past, Present and Future

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

In four years, the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) will commemorate the fiftieth (50th) year of its existence. Founded with the primary goal of addressing students' concerns such as scholarships, improvised libraries and hostels, KSU has evolved significantly over the years. This transformation has led to the Union taking on various forms and roles in the larger socio-political space.

As KSU reaches this milestone, it is important to begin reflecting on its past activities and look forward to its future in serving the students and community. It is indeed time for introspection and critical appraisal. This exercise will allow the students' body to evaluate, especially on the leadership and organogram, the involvement of students (both male and female) in movements throughout the past decades and to critically look at the issues raised. Are some of the issues which were raised still relevant? Or are there new and hard pressing issues which confront the present and which will impact the future? It is also crucial for the Union to allow/acknowledge objective and critical readings of its activities and socio-political movements, by non-members and even by those outside the community. Such exercise will make the Union gain clarity of thought and values as it strives forward as sons and daughters of the soil.

As we look forward to the commemoration in 2028(?) and despite the limited resources, it is important to reflect on the contributions of the founder President of the KSU, Bah Panbor Tariang. I invite students, researchers and other individuals to contribute their stories and experiences related to KSU. This includes critical analysis of the roles and actions of past and current leaders. By engaging in this collaborative effort, I believe we can enhance the significance of the commemoration.

The Twentieth Day of March 1978:

The Khasi Students' Union (KSU) was not born in a vacuum. There was a context to the emergence of the KSU and as early as 1908, the Khasi students' community came together and collectively challenged the British Government's policy which impeded the growth of Khasi students. Later in 1955, they became well organized and constituted the Khasi Student Association (KSA). From 1960

to 1977, various student organizations emerged. These included the Hills Students Union (HSU), the Khasi Jaintia Students' Union (KJSU) and the Shillong Students Union (SSU).

It was on March 20, 1978, that the Khasi students comprising mainly university students of North Eastern Hill University and twelve colleges in Shillong, organized themselves into the Khasi Students' Union and elected amongst themselves the following leaders, namely, (i) Mr Panbor Tariang as President (ii) Ms Bluecylian Jyrwa & Mr Aibuit S Rynjah as Vice-Presidents respectively (iii) Mr Geoffrey Basan as General Secretary (iv) Ms Bertha Dkhar, Ms Velerina Basafawmoit, Mr S. Marshall Nongkynrih and Mr Langstong Slong as Joint Secretaries and (v) Ms Miranda Hynhiewta as Treasurer.

Recognizing the need to address various concerns affecting the student's community, the KSU submitted its first ever memorandum to the Government highlighting issues such as, free studentship, scholarship, book bank provisions and improvements of library and hostel facilities. The students were deeply concerned about the government's inaction in organizing excursions and exposure trips, which they believed were crucial for overall growth and development of students (Khasi Students' Union Memorandum Dated 21st March 1978).

Panbor Tariang the Resident and President:

Panbor Tariang, who was a resident of Riatsamthiah, Shillong, was pursuing his master's degree in science (MSc) at North Eastern Hills University, when he was elected President of KSU on 20th March 1978. In my conversations with several people, they narrated fascinating stories about Panbor Tariang as a student and youth of the locality. His leadership qualities are manifested in his role as a member of the larger community, and he was the leading face of the youth in Riatsamthiah. He was active in grass roots governance via the Dorbar Shnong and the Presbyterian Church in Riatsamthiah. He developed his leadership qualities through his involvement with the community and he acquired knowledge from elders whom he befriended. His inquisitive character and attentiveness to the teachings/guidance of commu-

nity leaders and elders have shaped and moulded him into a sound and intellectually able leader.

Allan Lyndem, who had known Panbor Tariang from close quarters, shared his thoughts on the latter's vast knowledge and ability to provide factual and accurate information about world events. At a time when sources of information were limited to Amrita Bazar Patrika and Assam Tribune, Panbor was a valuable source for his community and students who yearned to learn and gather knowledge. He discussed Panbor's knowledge on significant events such as the Bangladesh War, Bordoloi Football Trophy Tournament, Northeast Re-Organization Act, Vietnam War, Yom Kippur War and the 1975 Emergency.

Allan, also recounted an incident where Panbor wanted to gather more information from his uncle, Morgan Lyndem, about the student-led Black Flag Protest in Shillong on 27th June 1952, against the United Khasi & Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council. Morgan (who was elected as the Ward Commissioner of Shillong Municipality from Mawkhar in 1966) known for his unique way of responding to queries, used a riddle and metaphor to describe the event as the Independence Day Cup, with Khasis qualifying for the final on 21st July 1949 and winning the tournament. However, the organizers did not recognize the Khasi people as the winners. Three years elapsed but instead of honouring the Khasi people with the trophy and placing them in the First Schedule position, the organizers brazenly relegated the Khasi people to the Sixth Schedule position. Panbor instinctively comprehended the hidden meaning behind Morgan's analogy, which then led to the protest. This story highlights Panbor Tariang's wisdom, understanding and ability to connect the dots in complex situations, as well as the importance of preserving history and fighting for the rights of community.

During the years 1974 to 1976, Panbor held the position of President of the Shillong Students Union (SSU). Under his guidance the SSU collaborated with the Shillong City Bus Syndicate to provide identity cards to students who lived far away from their schools. This initiative allowed these

students to utilize the city bus service at a reduced cost. Additionally, under Panbor's leadership the SSU vehemently opposed the creation of the Meghalaya Board of School Education in Tura.

Negotiation is the Way:

During Panbor Tariang's Presidency, the Khasi Students' Union laid the foundational principle of talks and negotiations. In 1978, significant events took place under his leadership. In March 1978, Panbor led a delegation to submit the memorandum to the Chief Minister and in August the same year, another memorandum was submitted to address various issues.

When the Government failed to address these concerns, students resorted to an indefinite strike of schools and colleges starting from September 12, 1978. The Government issued the Press Statement on the same day, acknowledging the students' agitation and their demands. Following this, the KSU leaders participated in the negotiations called by the Deputy Commissioner of East Khasi Hills District. Initially the KSU was unaware of the Government's actions and developments, but they agreed to engage in talks. During the negotiations it was resolved. "The meeting of the Executive Members of the Khasi Students' Union held in the Office Chamber of the Deputy Commissioner on the 13th September 1978 at 12.00 Noon in the presence of Mr T.W Pakyntein, IAS, Deputy Commissioner... considered the press note issued by the Chief Secretary to the Government of Meghalaya on the 12th September 1978, which contained a resume of action taken by the State Government on the memorandum submitted by the Khasi Students' Union to the Chief Minister on the 28th August 1978... In consideration of the redress, Government had made of the demands... of which the Khasi Students' Union had no knowledge so far, the Executive Members present unanimously decided to call off the indefinite strike with immediate effect..."

To conclude, Panbor Tariang was a respected and influential figure in his community, known for his friendly nature, leadership and intellectual calibre, and commitment to the cause. His legacy continues to be remembered and cherished by the members of the KSU and the community, especially those who had the privilege of knowing him.

Hello politicians: Actions speak louder than words

By Riwanki Suchiang

The General Election to the Lok Sabha is just around the corner. Candidates are busy with their campaigns trying to draw the attention of voters. Basically in their speech they would promise a lot of things mainly from their party manifesto and party ideologies. But most commonly, election campaigns are about fault-finding and finger pointing at other parties and candidates.

What disturbs me as a voter is why candidates have to campaign at all. I want to ask the readers of this newspaper and all voters one question. Are we not in the twenty-first century, where everyone knows what is right and wrong? Do we really believe that a campaign will whitewash all the candidate's faults and failings?

Do politicians think that we the public are ignorant about the political parties in Meghalaya and their ideologies? The BJP has been ruling this country since 2014 and we know what the party has been doing and is aspiring to do. We can't forget the Congress Party either. It has shown us by its actions all through its tenure by its work for this country.

The NPP is a very young party but we have seen enough of them through their performance in our State. The VPP is the youngest political party in our State but of course some of the members were in other political parties earlier so we have seen how they work. About the TMC, we have heard and read about their performance in West Bengal which is not very different from other parties. The UDP has always been in alliance with other parties, and once even led the Government in Meghalaya through coalition. Hence we know all these political parties and what they stand for and they don't need to preach so much about their ideologies. We need to judge their performance instead.

Have the candidates who are contesting from the above political parties in this MP election done something for humanity? Don't we already know of them before they decided to contest this election? Have they contributed anything to society through their noble, honourable, upright, virtuous works? Were they or can they be in the

future like Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, Malala Yousefzai, all of whom had done marvelous work through their service to the country through their ministry? If any of these candidates have contributed something for the society, through their humanitarian service using the right and honourable methods, I am sure that work itself will campaign for them. During the election campaign they don't need to run around begging votes from the people thereby wasting their time and money. Allow us the voters to decide peacefully who we shall vote for. Politicians should not come and confuse us with empty words during the election campaign and forget us once they win the elections.

Actions speak louder than words and we have not seen sufficient actions from them to prove their worthiness to be elected. We are still facing poverty and unemployment; our literacy rate is low; we are the third poorest state in India; many of our youth are drug addicts and alcoholics; people with HIV/AIDS are increasing in number. Our state is one of the most corrupt states

in India. Our city and towns are very congested and we have no proper road network system. The resources from our state are not value-added and properly transported. Our forests, are being cleared for quarrying; our hills are being cut-down unscientifically; our rivers are being polluted through man-made disasters.

Politicians, why do you forget that we live in a beautiful land which is rich in biodiversity and natural resources which have been misused. Our land is full of tourist spots which have been attracting millions of tourists every year and some of the tourists are not taken care of. You politicians forget the natural talents and gifts our young people have in sports, music and arts. You have shown us indirectly that you don't really love our land. You only do everything for your own benefits while we the common people of Meghalaya are still struggling in so many ways. Do political parties really care about our State? Politicians ask yourselves these questions before you start campaigning again.



Letters to the Editor

Factually incorrect statement by Independent candidate

Editor, The news item "From empowerment to rights of tribals, LS candidate spells out plans for Shillong seat" (ST 19 March, 2024) made interesting reading but there is a flaw in the news which reads, "Citing GG Swell who won four times as an Independent candidate...". To set the historical record straight, Professor (Late) George Gilbert Swell never won four times as an Independent Member of Parliament, Lok Sabha from 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency. The first time Professor Swell contested as an Independent was in 1977 from 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency and he came third polling 38,841 votes while the winner was (Late) Hoping Stone Lyngdoh of the HSPDP who secured 55,732 votes and defeated (Late) Peter Garnette Marbaniang of the INC by a margin of 4765 votes. The second time Professor Swell contested from 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency was in 1984 from the Indian National Congress securing 1,42,638 votes defeating Dr.

(Late) B Pakem who contested as an Independent candidate, by a margin of 50,826 votes. In 1989 Prof. Swell contested as an Independent candidate and was defeated by a margin of 13,285 votes by Peter Garnette Marbaniang of the Indian National Congress. In 1991 Professor Swell contested as an Independent candidate and was again defeated by Peter Garnette Marbaniang of the INC by a margin of 19,390 votes. In 1996 Professor Swell contested as an Independent candidate and defeated INC candidate, Donwa Dethwelson Lapang by a margin of 79,302 votes where Lapang secured 1,32,903 votes. The last time Professor Swell contested from the 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency was in 1998 from the United Democratic Party (UDP). He was defeated by Mr PR Kyndiah of the Indian National Congress by a margin of 6012 votes. Professor Swell polled 1,73,851 votes and PR Kyndiah polled 1,79,863 votes.

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

True meaning of religion

Editor, I am writing to express my sincere gratitude for the wonderful article,

"What does being Christian mean?" (TST, Mar 19, 2024) by Yona M. Nonglang.

It was ethical, poetic, and learned -- at the same time, impassioned and expressive.

Any sincere Christian should appreciate this kind of an appeal to a return to Truth. As Gandhi and others (including St. Augustine) have said, Truth is God. Such articles should also be written about Hinduism and other religions overtaken and distorted by extremists.

The destroyers of religion are not just outsiders. Far more insidious are those who destroy religion from within -- by losing their anchor in the living Truth, which is the God of our experience and consciousness.

Yours etc., Deepa Majumdar, Via email

Need to further amend CAA vide Ordinance

Editor, I am writing this letter after careful consideration of the subject matter, despite initial hesitation arising from the prevalence of prior discussions on this topic. It is prudent to exercise caution

when broaching potentially controversial topics within this esteemed column of the newspaper.

The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019, introduced by the Government of India (GOI) with the intention of granting citizenship to stateless individuals fleeing religious persecution in their countries of origin, is a commendable initiative. However, the drafting of this legislation has unfortunately led to significant criticism, primarily due to perceived bias against certain communities.

The decision to explicitly mention specific religious groups such as Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians within the amending Act has inadvertently invited substantial backlash. This amplification of the term "persecuted religious minorities" has been interpreted as being prejudiced against a religion and has attracted widespread criticism, both domestically and internationally.

Regrettably, what was intended as a clarification of the term "religious minorities" has been misconstrued, tarnishing the reputation of the GOI as being officially non-secular for the first time. Despite efforts by the Ministry of External Affairs to mitigate the fallout from this poorly drafted legislation, it remains challenging to suppress international

condemnation.

It is worth noting that without this clause, there would have been limited opportunity for opposition parties to contest the ruling administration. In light of the significant national and international backlash, the central government may consider issuing a Presidential ordinance to remove the contentious clause from the CAA-2019.

Such an action would help to restore the spirit of the Citizenship Amendment Act and demonstrate a willingness to prioritize the interests of the nation over the image of any particular political party. Sometimes, gracefully acknowledging shortcomings is preferable to maintaining a stance of arrogance.

Yours etc., Krishna Chettri Shillong -2

Effect of Anant Ambani's pre-wedding celebration

Editor, The pre-marriage celebration of the wealthiest man's son, Anant Ambani, left everyone's jaws dropping. With every moment of the event covered around the clock by the electronic media, it was a windfall

for them. Many saw this extensive coverage as nothing less than blessings upon the commoners, so everyone enjoyed it. Thanks to the wealth of Mukesh Ambani, Indians were able to witness things they would not have otherwise been able to experience. Money talks, money broadcasts, and money thus makes one go crazy. Besides top tycoons like Bill Gates, Ivanka Trump, and Mark Zuckerberg, pop sensation Rihanna was invited all the way from America to liven up the occasion. Indeed, a great attraction for the event! Selected Bollywood celebrities also graced the event, adding to everyone's joy with their performances on stage. So, all performers were lavishly paid, with Rihanna herself said to have demanded a staggering 73 crore. Of course, this sheer level of extravagance and opulence is sure to set a benchmark in the world of wastefulness for the future. But it is none of our business to be judgmental.

However, while the magnificence of these celebrations may be out of reach for 99.9% of the population, they serve as a reminder of the exceptional lifestyles led by the super-wealthy and the fascination they command. It's as if marriage has become less about the wishes for "eternal love" and more about who can "outshine" all others with their flamboyant display of wealth

and excess. Ambani's event has also given "legitimacy to extravagance," silencing those who disagree.

True, the mega event is over and all guests have returned, but its "impact," in the form of new ideas, innovation, and, for some inspiration, is sure to stay. They will affect society in multiple ways. What big shots do will usually be copied by others. So, no wonder, now such shows of opulence and extravagant entertainment will be gradually emulated by other rich people, just as children blindly copy their parents.

While many may not be able to afford the likes of Rihanna, invitations to grace pre-wedding celebrations with top actors and actresses from Tinsel Town are likely to become commonplace soon. With time, its effect will permeate all through society. Even the lower middle-class people will find ways to splurge on such unwarranted matrimonial festivities. However, individuals and families who can't afford it, or who don't want to, might run the risk of being looked down upon, facing social stigma.

I wonder who can guarantee that, with the passage of time, such show-off practices will not become equivalent to the "scourge of dowry"? Despite being "outlawed," the dowry practice continues to hold sway over the majority of Indian

society. Just as the dowry culture has punctured the hearts of countless sacred marriages with domestic violence, holy matrimony will be quite likely to be polluted by over displays of wealth and glamour laced with titillation. Also, this trend, if left unchecked, could be one of the prime causes of social degeneration. It is likely that marital relationships will then be measured only in terms of money spent on flashy arrangements and frivolous entertainment, with traditional rituals and values being just shrugged aside. Should we really want the whisper of mutual understanding, sacrifice, and love to be drowned out by the cacophony of frivolity and flaunting one's riches?

Finally, I wish Ambani had chosen to spend 50% of the money lavished on the pre-wedding celebration on feeding the hungry mouths instead, given the country's abysmal hunger index. God's blessings would have surely multiplied fiftyfold compared to what the Ambani families received from high-profile guests.

Yours truly, Salil Gwali, Shillong

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

"Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

— John Dalberg-Acton

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXX No. 221 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MARCH 21, 2024

CAA Conundrum

THIS time the opening of the Ram temple does not seem to have elicited the right amount of hype and hoopla for the BJP as the Pulwama incident did on February 14, 2019 just before the Lok Sabha polls. Hence the much-hyped Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the rules for which were notified on March 11 last, seems like the vote-catching strategy. However, it does not appear to be easy for a persecuted Hindu in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan to become an Indian citizen via the CAA. The process it appears is difficult for those from the six categories of religions namely Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Buddhists and Jains who have migrated to India illegally on the basis of religious persecution in their respective countries to claim citizenship in India.

The CAA rules announced on March 11 last seem complicated for many who had arrived in India before December 2014. They have to access an online system for application, which will be processed before granting citizenship under the Act. Those eligible include individuals of Indian origin, spouses of Indian citizens, minor children of Indian citizens, individuals with registered Indian citizen parents, and Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) Cardholders, among others. It is the documentation required for citizenship by naturalisation that seems problematic. They have to submit Form VIII A, accompanied by an affidavit verifying the accuracy of the provided information and attesting to the applicant's character by an Indian citizen. Additionally, applicants must declare their proficiency in one of the languages specified in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India.

Under Section 6B of the Citizenship Act, 1955, applicants must follow a specific application process, including electronic submission of the application to the Empowered Committee through the designated District Level Committee. Upon submission, applicants will receive an acknowledgement in Form IX. This will be followed by document verification by the District Level Committee. Every application made by the applicant under sub-rule (1) shall have a declaration to the effect that the citizenship of his country shall stand renounced irrevocably in the event of his/her application being approved and that he/she shall not raise any claim on it in future.

The designated officer administers the oath of allegiance to the applicant, and the application, along with necessary documents, are forwarded to the Empowered Committee for further processing. In case the applicant fails to appear in person for the oath-taking, the District Level Committee may forward the application to the Empowered Committee to be considered for refusal. Upon successful completion of the application, citizens will be provided digital certificates. Some who have been in India for a long time are unhappy that the CAA does not offer unconditional citizenship, as was the demand. Instead, applicants are required to produce documents from both India and Bangladesh. Some migrants also fear that if they apply for citizenship under CAA they will not enjoy welfare rights that are by law offered only to Indian citizens. Meanwhile about 200 petitions are pending before the Supreme Court seeking that CAA be annulled as it is unconstitutional and violates Article 14 of the Constitution. The apex court on March 19 sought answers from the central government by April 9, on the objections raised by petitioners against the CAA. Until then the petitioners have sought a stay on the CAA

One salutes Ardent Miller Basaiawmait for publicly saying that some 'Tymmen basan' (church elders) were reported to have distributed liquor during elections. To impress the church the UDP's MP candidate chided the VPP leader for the reverse role of schooling the church's teachers. In Mawkyrwat, Hamletson Dohling of the NPP too flayed Basaiawmait for maligning the church elders. This author hails from Mawkyrwat constituency. In the last Assembly elections, people on the ground, including villages surrounding Mawkyrwat, informed that 'Tymmen basan' and 'Rangbah balang' (village church leaders) did distribute liquor to targeted individuals and cash to families. It is for the VPP boss to declare where the reports originated.

The money came from candidates of political parties. The local leaders, usually ordinary folks, might have done it on their own. They might have not been directed by the higher-ups. However, priests and pastors too received favours from politicians prior to elections. They are christened 'schemes' for schools, hospitals or even for church buildings. With the exception of church buildings, there is nothing wrong in this. However, what is wrong is when the grant comes right before elections with the clear intention of wooing church members.

In January 2018 the BJP, with an eye to the then Assembly and the general elections the following year, earmarked a 70 crore package for beautification of church complexes in Meghalaya. Church leaders finally rejected the temptation on the pretext that the offer was a poll strategy. Then why do they accept financial assistance from candidates of other political parties? Why interpret aid as 'cash for vote' only when the BJP delivers it? Apart from schemes, priests and pastors pocket hard cash too from candidates when elections are round the corner.

We turn to political donations for grand church functions. It is an undisputed fact that politicians make contributions to various church assemblies (jingiaseng). We have just witnessed the Synod in Ri Bhoi district where, among other attendees, the NPP candidate felt a special connection with the Almighty. Anything for politics! Then there is the East Khasi Hills, the South East zone, the West Khasi Hills, the Jaintia Hills Synod and others. Each denomination has its own annual events in all sectors. Then the processions at the diocese and parish level! To add to the list are ordinations. In Garo Hills are various 'Sobhas'. For most of these mammoth gatherings politicians are the major source of funds. The chief minister, MPs, ministers, MLAs and MDCs are

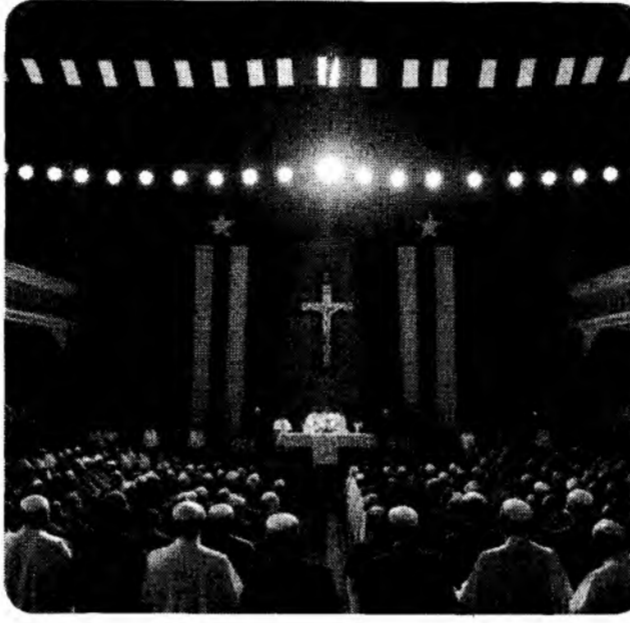
Churches as platforms for corruption

By Albert Thyrniang

contributors. According to a senior citizen's calculation a chief minister and an MP spend at least Rs 50 lakh, a minister 30 lakh, an MLA 20 lakh and a MDC 10 lakh each annually for religious donations. In total the donations from politicians for each annual assembly could run into crores. Further the sum total diverted for religious functions annually could send shock waves. It could be a scam. Much of it goes to food

of the Bible. No religious leaders would dare to do so. They are commented on for braving to campaign for clean politics while clergymen mock them saying, 'it is easier said than done.' The VPP is admired for striving for ideal governance. The peak may never be reached but half the climb is better than rock bottom. VPP's founders are respected for taking on corruption while church leaders enjoy the

job reservation Christian prayers, replete with closing of eyes, raising hands, singing Christians hymns were seen besides the 'biblical' speeches. Are we okay if Hindu groups sit in dharna at the epicentre of Shillong with choral bhajans chanting 'Jai Shri Ram'? Will we not be alarmed if organisations meet close to the seat of power and shout 'Allahu Akbar'? If we can hum the 'O Lord My God, How Great Thou Art' at a political venue why can others not sing their hymns?



and temporary structures. Wasteful expenditure this! The money does not come from the pockets of politicians. They are stolen from MP/MLA/MDC schemes. Contractor-politicians may do a shoddy work to spare money for church donations. Legislators may demand a share from the contractors for the 'noble' cause. Politicians know they have to contribute to churches to stand a chance of winning. They have to acquire the money from corrupt practices. It is thus a planned malpractice.

The money is looted from the public. It is extracted from infrastructural projects. No wonder roads develop potholes after a year of completion; water tanks have no water; pipes and taps lay broken in villages because a portion of the sanction has gone to the church. Churches benefit from stolen money. The donations are always given in cash, never by cheque. So the money is black. A chunk of money meant for the public is siphoned off for churches. Part of the coinage comes from illicit coal business. So churches are not only complicit in but are causes of corruption. Donation is for mutual benefits. Politicians hope to get votes and are sure religious leaders would not criticise them even if they don't perform. Religious officials are mighty happy that 'God's glory' is accomplished. Fresh candidates hope to make up the investment if they win. The moot point is that Churches have a hand in this theft.

In a sense the VPP leaders are hailed for the public declaration that they are worthy

dubious generosity of politicians. It is therefore natural for churchmen and women to keep mum on misgovernance. The VPP's founders are appreciated for speaking against poverty while religious leaders, as shown above, further impoverish the poor.

Politicians may use the Bible as a tool to take on corruption, fight injustice and install a clean government, etc. But what if others insist their instrument is the Bhagavad Gita or the Guru Granth Sahib or Quran or any other scripture? What if someone holds the Gita or the Granth Sahib at political rallies appealing for votes? What if a Muslim says he is directed by the Quran to ask the electorate to engage in politics? What if there was a demand for Sharia law? What if others called for Manu-smriti? The country will be full of bigots. That's why the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) is rejected. If the use of other holy books in politics is wrong why should the Bible be right and vice versa? The wise founding fathers gave this multi religious country a secular constitution. So mixing politics and religion is illegal. Taking advantage of religion or the Bible or Quran or Gita or Ram or Hanuman is unconstitutional. The VPP, for misusing the Bible, the NPP for organising prayers in public places have violated the constitution. Right now, the Hindutva right wing is exploiting religion to win elections. It is for us to resist them by being true secularists or fall prey to their trap.

During the VPP's protest outside the Secretariat on

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Lent and the Angels...! And as the world below goes through their forty days of Lent, in my imagination, two heavenly angels, one senior and the other many years junior are sent on a tour of earth.

"Why look so despondent little angel?" asked the senior angel, looking at the face of the young celestial being.

"Look at that man," said the little angel.

"Yes, he's given up his alcohol for Lent," said her senior, "He does that every year!"

"But see where he looks," said the little angel, "His eyes are fixed on a bottle of whisky, which I know he's planning to open on Easter, and get drunk on!"

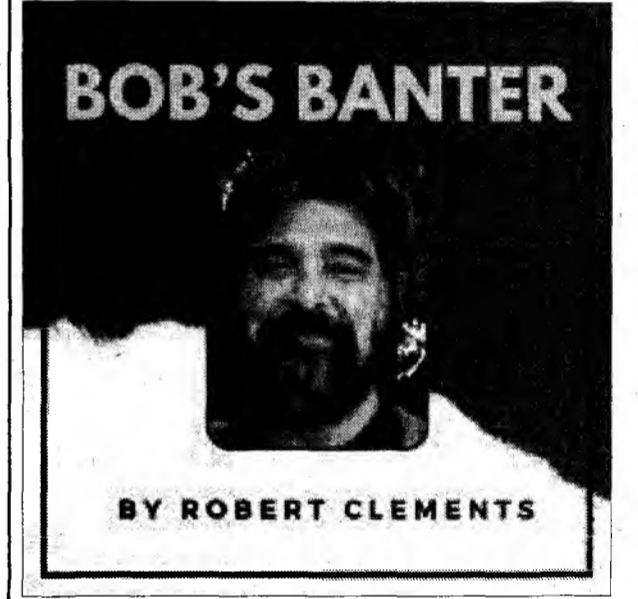
The senior angel looked at the little angel and sighed, "It makes you sad, doesn't it?" "Oh yes it does," said the little angel, "Instead of concentrating during this non-drinking time of his, on what God did on the cross for him, he is thinking how great a sacrifice he himself is making keeping away from the bottle for forty days! The rascal actually thinks that by giving up his drinks for a month, God's work has been

day: The doorbell rang, a watchman stood outside my door. It was two in the morning. "Drunk girl on the staircase sir!" he said. I called out to my daughter to come with me. We walked to the building near the gate. She was sprawled on the first floor landing, my daughter went to her and slowly shook her, "Come, get up," she whispered. "We'll help you up the stairs!" The girl moaned and brought out on the floor.

I rang the doorbells of the two residents of the floor. One was a mother of a girl who had just got married, I was sure her motherly feelings would come to our help, I thought. "Take her away from here!" shouted her husband, "We don't want such filth here! Call the police!"

"Call the police for a small slip up of having one too many?" I asked flabbergasted.

With great difficulty we lifted her up and with my daughter pushing and me half carrying her we lumbered up the stairs watched through the half closed door by husband and wife. I opened the door with a key I had found in her purse, cleaned out a chair and placed her on it.



paid back in full! Doesn't he realise that no amount of abstinence from drinks or food or cigarettes, that no amount of fasting can compensate for what God did for him?" asked the little angel.

The senior angel looked at

We closed the door and moved out. The next day she called, "I am so embarrassed," she said, "I am so sorry! It has never happened to me before!"

I chuckled on the phone and said, "It happens to the

The man staring at his unopened bottle during Lent, heard the whirring of wings near him, and wondered at the sound. Suddenly it seemed his eyes were opened and he looked with angelic vision, at what the real meaning of Lent was, "Lord," he cried, "You died that I might spend eternity with you!"

the junior angel, sighed and asked, "What would you have him do instead?"

"I would certainly want him to rejoice on Easter," said the little angel, "and a drink or two may not hurt, but now I would want him to spend his time meditating on the greatest sacrifice of all time, picturing in his mind each scene of that terrible, humiliating act of a Man on a cross, with whose death, gives him a guaranteed entry into heaven!"

The man staring at his unopened bottle during Lent, heard the whirring of wings near him, and wondered at the sound. Suddenly it seemed his eyes were opened and he looked with angelic vision, at what the real meaning of

best of us!" Yes it happens to the best of us; we think we are beyond mistakes, and we make a terrible one. We think we can do no wrong and we do something terribly wrong. From what I gathered somebody at the party had deliberately mixed her drinks and she not being used to such had passed out but to her neighbours she was a cheap girl.

It is so easy to pass judgement on someone else, isn't it? As I think back on the episode I wonder what made me lift her up and take her to her room, what made my daughter also gently help? "Dad," she said later, "It could have been me in that same situation!"

Yes, it could have been me too. It could be you, and when we see somebody fall, whether on the staircase or in life itself, we need to help, because it could very well be us the next time. My thoughts go to the parable of the Good Samaritan: Why did the man stop and help? Did he see himself lying on the road? Are those the 'neighbours' we are supposed to look for and help? Are we like those neighbours on the staircase, passing judgement? Somewhere up in heaven, I feel God smiling, not at me, but at the drunk girl!

"We just don't know why they've got drunk, or the bottle has got hold of them," says the little angel. "But this Lent, lift those who have fallen down..."

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

Letters to the Editor

Election: A Festival of democracy

Editor, There is a saying that goes like this, "The only things we regret in life are the chances we didn't take." From this coming month, the general election to the Lower House of Indian Parliament that is The Lok Sabha will take place in all the states and union territories of India in various phases as prescribed by the Election Commission of India (ECI). In Meghalaya, where currently we have two parliamentary seats namely Tura and Shillong Parliamentary Constituencies where the National Peoples' Party (NPP) is represented by Agatha K. Sangma and Indian National Congress Party by Vincent H. Pala respectively.

parliamentary constituencies will be held on April 19, 2024. We have observed that the parties that have set up their candidates have geared up for campaign to various parts of the state to appeal to the citizens for their votes. This year the election, with regards to Shillong Parliamentary seat, is different from the past general elections with the emergence of the Voice of the Peoples' Party (VPP). Voters seem to be inclined toward this newly emerged political party. Earlier the tug of war was mainly between the regional and national parties but this year the tug of war is no longer between but among the four potential political parties namely INC, NPP, UDP and VPP. People are still figuring out who to cast their votes for who can meet their needs and expectations.

Several key issues that the indigenous people of the state are facing are the issue of infiltration where

from time to time even legislators and pressure groups are demanding from the central government for the implementation of Inner Line Permit (ILP). Another burning issue is the demand for the inclusion of the Khasi Language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, development issues for various central schemes, to name a few have been the key points in election campaigns. With the BJP as the leading political party of the NDA government which had held the reins of power in the central government for a decade now, the key issue is to fight against the indirect oppressive power toward the minority communities and religions especially in the North east region and the other controversial bills and acts they introduced.

As we all know, election are often described as the "festival of democracy". Why? Because it provides the citizens with the opportunity to participate in

the democratic process by choosing the representative and shaping the direction of the community. The election campaign is still underway and people are still in a dilemma as to which political party or candidate to vote for. Let us cherish this festival of democracy by not forgetting the fact that it take place only once in every five years. Let us remind ourselves that our votes play a very important role not only in choosing the right and good candidate but it is also a blessing for the coming generation.

Let us take this opportunity, use it wisely, and take a decision that will really bring positive change in our state, society and the community because our vote demands responsibility from the MPs. To conclude, I would appeal to all the voters of our beloved state, to cast our votes such that we elect our representative after thinking carefully and arriving at the right decision especially by thinking for the future of

the children of our state. We need to make sure that we decide wisely so that we will not feel regret our decisions in future. With 13, 96,054 voters this year, let us be the best examples for the next generation and who them that we are agents of change by taking a positive steps to shape the community through this festival.

Yours etc.,
Nangkyntiew S. Warjri,
Via email

On use of the term Non-Christian

Editor, With reference to the term 'Non Christian', I am not happy with the use of the term by the believers and followers of Christianity. They had been using the term for a long time to refer to the believers and followers of other religions. The term

had been used in gatherings, workplaces, writings, etc. The use of the term appears as if there are no other religions on earth or that the other religions are not good or that Christianity is the only good religion.

The use of the term hurts me a lot. I am not against Christianity, I am not against the believers and followers of Christianity, I am against the term Non-Christian. So, I would like to request the believers and followers of Christianity not to use the term Non-Christian but instead to use the terms "the believers of other religions or the followers of other religions".

Yours etc.,
Wallambiing Rani,
A believer and follower of
Ka Niam Khasi,
Upper Shillong

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

"The duty of youth is to challenge corruption."

— Kurt Cobain

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 220 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, MARCH 22, 2024

India shining?

THE more India grows, the more its underlings suffer. This is precisely what a just-released report by the World Inequality Lab has stated too. It says India has become more unequal in terms of wealth possession compared to the time of the British Raj. The top one percent control 40 per cent of the national wealth – against the 15 per cent during the Raj. Inequality declined till the early 1980s, while it has skyrocketed since the turn of the century; and the scenario further worsened in the last 10 years. Even top capitalist - the United States does not have such a concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. "The Billionaire Raj is more unequal than the British Raj."

Indira Gandhi won a national election by raising the slogan of Garibi Hatao in the early 1970s. Yet, nearly 40 years later, when hunger still remained India's main worry, the Sonia Gandhi-led UPA brought in the national food security law and the system of subsidized ration to the BPL families. India could afford it because the nation's wealthy coffers could sustain such a splurge. In electoral terms, however, this did not help the Congress or the UPA. They were driven out of power amid a grand saffron offensive with Narendra Modi as its mascot in 2014. In the past 10 years, Modi introduced more welfare schemes. Yet, the plight of India's poor remains more or less the same as it was half a century ago. Wages of low-paid workers are not going up in ways that would match the changes in the cost of living index. Most private sector institutions are not in a mood to raise the wages of their employees. The organised workforce, including the government employees, manage to get regular salary increases. They form only a small percentage of the workforce. The rich, overall, are thriving. Today, as the Lab report notes, the wealth of the top 10 per cent of the population rose from 30 per cent to 60 per cent of the national wealth. The rest, the 90 per cent of the population, bear the brunt of the economic woes.

All these are crystal clear even without a global inequity tracking agency's certificate. Around us, the rich are becoming richer and the poor poorer. The poor camouflage their distress by, say, owning a scooter or refurbishing their homes. The poverty in this country is due to the absence of effective governance. Men with feet of clay, the loudmouths, the semi-literates, run the show. The loot brigade, be it business sharks, politicians in power or the bureaucrats, form the cream of the society and enjoy their life. India is shining for such people only!

Letters to the Editor

On being Christian

Editor,
Yona M Nonglang's article "What does being Christian mean?" (Shillong Times, March 19th) was a courageous, feisty and sparkling piece of writing. It was a relief to see the profound simplicity of what Christ taught expressed with such compelling clarity especially in a world desperately in need of compassion and integrity.

The article made me recall the words of my grandfather's best friend Bah Jismot Chyne, whom we affectionately called 'Parad Ji' (Grandfather Ji). Challenged by pharisaical elements in the church for not offering a prayer before he sipped his afternoon tea, he replied in his usual gentle and even tones: "My life is a gift from God, so does that mean I should offer a prayer to Him each time I take a breath?" His critics were silenced.

"My mouth shall speak of wisdom; and the meditation of my heart shall be of understanding." (Psalm 49: Verse 3, italics mine)

Yours etc.,
Janet Hujon,
Via email

CAA exempted from Meghalaya?

Editor,
The CAA passed by brute

force by our Parliament on December 11, 2019 has finally been notified on March 11, 2024. A disingenuous strategy on the verge of the crucial parliamentary elections. Nonetheless, the indigenous citizens of Meghalaya have reasons to heave a sigh of relief when Chief Minister Conrad Sangma assuredly asserted that our State is virtually exempted from the CAA's purview but for a microscopic pocket of 0.01% that is, 99.99% areas of Meghalaya are out of CAA's bounds. However, this self-assertive statement of the Chief Minister may not stand the test of time if the analogy of Aadhaar enrollment in Meghalaya is anything to go by. It may be reiterated that when Aadhaar was initiated by the NDA government at the Centre it was officially confirmed that Meghalaya, Assam and erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir were exempted from the domain of controversial nances of Aadhaar vide Notification No. 37/2017 F No. 370133/6/2017-TPL dated 11.5.2017 issued by the Ministry of Finance signed by An Gautam, Under Secretary to the Government of India. But in sharp contrast to this Ministry of Finance circulation, in Meghalaya, the banking institutions et al situated here have made Aadhaar biometric authentication stringently mandatory in every sphere of life.

Of late, college students have to willy-nilly register themselves under Aadhaar networks else their right to claim scholarships will out-

When environment is linked to vote bank politics

By Patricia Mukhim

Not many pay attention to what is discussed in the District Council sessions; only journalists do because they have to report the meaty part of the discussions. Titoswell Chyne, the MDC from Sohra, pointed out that quarrying cannot be stopped arbitrarily because it affects livelihoods. The problem with such assertions by politicians is that they get away with their audacious statements without relying on data and statistics. A similar tone echoed when the Supreme Court banned timber felling for ten years from 1996-2006. There was an outcry that people reliant on lumbering were starving. Of course, no one could produce a single documented proof of the person/persons who were indeed starving. We are well aware that the owners of forests are not the poor and lowly. The owners are the tribal elite who are now in a hurry to get rich while the forests last.

In so many decades, I have yet to hear a single MLA or MDC arguing on behalf of the environment. Others who wax eloquent about culture and speak of, "Ka Mei Ramew," do so only in their songs. In fact, it has become a Khasi trademark to sing about every problem under the sun and leave it at that. The environment today needs advocates who will step out of their comfort zones and take up cudgels on its behalf.

Every visitor to this state who travels to Dawki via Pynursla is appalled at the massive quarrying that has not just defaced the earth and gobbled up the forests but which might create a scenario where a whole hill will come down and flatten up the whole space. Think of the pace at which this is happening in every part of Meghalaya. Forests are reservoirs of water but one wonders what the State Forest Department is doing other than sitting on its haunches. In fact, the Forest Department seems to oversee deforestation and granting mining/quarrying rights to all manner of people. The Department appears to be working at the behest of politicians and not following the various sections of the Forest Conservation Act.

March 21 is observed as World Forestry Day and the theme this year is, "Forests and Innovation: New Solutions for a Better World."

Alas! Very little is heard about the observance of this day in Meghalaya. Even World Environment Day is observed as a symbolic gesture of planting trees that don't survive the winters. Everywhere one travels in the Khasi-Jaintia hills, large scale deforestation stares us in the face. But who cares? In this state there isn't a single pressure group to advocate for forest protection and end the horror of reckless, unregulated quarrying. Why? Why is this subject not sexy enough to be taken up in the way that the Inner Line Permit is? Very often we express great concern about influx and all that rhetoric which is not based on statistics. The non-tribal is the best bogeyman for us. Just raise the issue of the non-tribal as the perpetual exploiter of our economy and create a fear psychosis and you have very sexy politics and many takers. People here don't reason and don't have the guts to call the bluff of the so-called pressure groups that survive by extorting the very people they tell others are exploiting this state and its economy. Can there be greater hypocrisy than this?

If we claim to be tribal and indigenous as we proudly love to do, don't we also know that forests are carbon sinks that absorb greenhouse gases and thereby harbour an incredible amount of biodiversity. We are at a juncture where climate change is not just imminent but is staring at us. All of us are guilty of remaining silent in the face of the galling greed to cut down trees to free the land for quarrying and mining. We are all aware that the loss of forest cover is irredeemable because trees take time to grow to a reasonable height and become carbon sinks.

The death of a senior Forest Officer by suicide has created some consternation amongst his fraternity. They have sought for CBI enquiry. What was the pressure that this officer was under which forced him to end his life? Or did he really end his life? Some of the narratives of those present at the crime scene do not add up. The CCTV was not on. The officer was allegedly ready to leave for Delhi and had asked his driver to come early. What is surprising

is that there is no pressure from his community here in Shillong or his place of residence – Manipur to push for a thorough investigation into the case. The officer leaves behind his wife and a young daughter studying in Class 4.

Quite a few in the lower rung of the Forest Department too are feeling the pressure from politicians who acquiesce to mining and other lobbies to declare forests as non-forest lands. Is the Forest Department concerned enough to seek a CBI enquiry? What baggage do the higher officials of the State Forest Department carry with them? Are they committed to their task of saving the forests and other resources of a state they will be leaving soon after their retirement? Do they lead by example in taking hard decisions even if they have to veto their political bosses? I suppose that is asking for too much. But isn't that what a moral fibre is all about?

A person heading the Department needs to lead by example and have a vision. But as far as the State Forest Department is concerned, it's a case of wilful blindness. This is living a lie and the worst sort of lie. Its subtle. It avails itself of easy rationalization. Wilful blindness is the refusal to know something that could be known. It is the refusal to admit that the knocking sound means someone at the door. It is refusal to acknowledge the 800-pound gorilla in the room, the elephant under the carpet, the skeleton in the closet.

Most people in government struggle with this dilemma. We tend to generalise that all government employees are corrupt. Not all of them are and they are the few that blow the whistle on corruption. Sample this situation which many officials face on a daily basis. Someone power-hungry makes a new rule at the workplace. It's unnecessary. It's counterproductive. It's an irritant. It removes some of the pleasure and meaning from their work. But they tell themselves it's all right. It's not worth complaining about. Then it happens again. They have already trained themselves to allow such things, by failing to react the

first time. They're a little less courageous. Meanwhile their opponent, unopposed, is a little bit stronger. The institution is a little more corrupt. The process of bureaucratic stagnation and oppression is underway and they have contributed by pretending that it was OK. Why not complain? Why not take a stand? If one or two persons do, others equally afraid to speak up may come to their defence. And if not, maybe its time for a revolution. Maybe they should find a job somewhere else where their soul is in less danger of corruption. But to give in to corruption because it's the easy way out is to sell our souls and we are doing it with our eyes open.

This goes for the short-sighted District Council MDCs too whose task it is to conserve our natural resources; not to exploit them on the plea of creating livelihoods? The way they rationalise and argue on behalf of the quarry owners is because these are the same people who fund elections. How many families are benefitting from the ruthless quarrying? Do the District Councils have any statistics to back up their claims? This is no longer a world where oral claims can win the day. And why do the District Councils not talk about the state of our rivers in Meghalaya? Why are their lips sealed on these non-sexy issues? Why is their attention always focussed on exploiting nature? This bluff must be called out sooner than later. We cannot wait till the forests have disappeared.

Recently this paper did a story of how limestone is about to be mined by corporates in a big way in Assam's Dima Hasao district adjoining East Jaintia Hills which has the potential to destroy Krem Liatprah, one of the longest caves in South Asia and other heritage caves in the district. We pursued the matter with Jaintia Hills District Council but till date nothing has been done to safeguard this future damnation.

Looks like it's a free for all as far as the environment is concerned until a day arrives when we will not have water to drink as is happening in other states of India. Beware who we elect as MDCs, MLAs and MPs and who we appoint to positions of responsibility in our state!

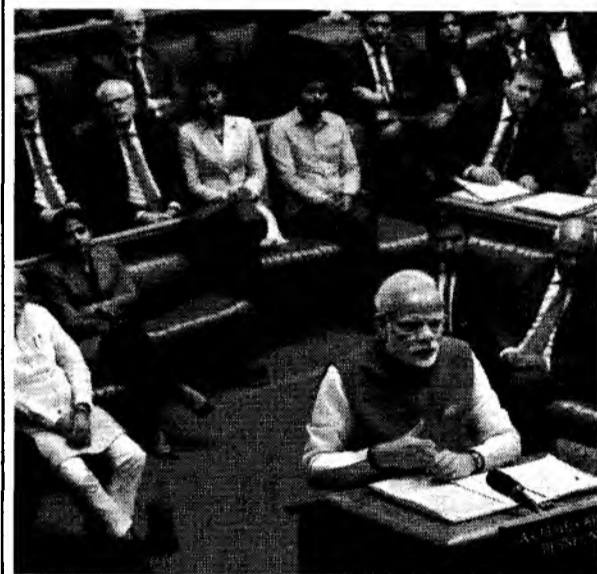
What India is missing from Narendra Modi?

By Dr Nsunghemo Ezung

In two months from now, Narendra Modi will be achieving the unique feat of becoming the first non-congressman to serve as India's Prime Minister for two consecutive full terms, and he is also hoping that at the end of the 18th general election, he will become the first since Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, to become prime minister for a record third consecutive term. But what the people belonging to the world's largest democracy were missing for the last ten years was an open and free press interaction/conference from the current prime minister. This press interaction is one of the most sacred duties

seeking the support of the people at the time of election and keeping them in the dark about the work of the elected representatives and government until the next election. People, who are the real custodians of power in a democracy, need to be informed and people have the right to hold the leaders they have elected to account. And one best possible means to deliver this privilege to the people is through the model of the UK's PMQs Session and the Prime Minister's regular press conference.

Indian democracy too is not a stranger to this phenomenon of accountability. The tradition of accountability to



that the leader of a government in democracy owes to the citizens, and the last time it happened was in January 2014 when the then outgoing prime minister Manmohan Singh hosted a press event in New Delhi that had lasted for more than an hour where he answered 62 questions coming from different journalists.

Taking questions from the press is a pre-requisite responsibility of elected leaders in a democracy. This represents accountability by the leaders to the citizens who had elected them and whom they represent. Accountability and transparency, among others, are two very important features of the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy; the very model which was adopted by the founding fathers of modern India to be a system of governance for the country. Following this Westminster model, the Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) formed an integral part of any business session in the House of Commons in the United Kingdom (UK). These PMQs are held every Wednesday when the House is in session where its prime minister, on behalf of the government, is constitutionally obligated to take questions from the Members of Parliament (MPs) who have the freedom to demand an answer from the prime minister on a range of issues of concerns for the nation and the world. The prime minister in turn has the responsibility to give the right answer to the members, who are posing their questions on behalf of the people they represent. No one else from the government is supposed to take the question on behalf of the prime minister/government unless the latter is on official leave of absence. It means that the prime minister as the head of the government is even responsible and answerable for the performance and actions of his/her cabinet members and the entire ruling dispensation. The UK's PMQs Session and the performance of the prime minister in the session is one important platform from which the credibility of the head of government is determined and held to account, and it also gives an opportunity to the citizens to assess the ability of the prime minister to lead the government and the country.

The PMQs Session represents the best of British parliamentary democracy. The vibrancy of British democracy as reflected in the PMQs is further aided by the regular press interactions and conferences of the prime minister thereby taking the responsibility of accountability and transparency beyond the parliament. This practice signifies that the purpose of democracy is not only about

the citizens by the elected representatives has been the hallmark of Indian democracy since its inception. BJP's first prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee is fondly remembered for never being hesitant to take questions from the media and hosting press interactions regularly during his time as a head of government.

This tradition was sadly set aside since Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, and one is no longer certain when this glorious tradition of democracy will revive again in India. Prime Minister Modi has been shielding himself from accountability as he persistently refuses to hold open and free-for-all press interactions during the last 10 years of his rule. Instead, what India has been witnessing in the last decade was just plenty of dramatic monologues, containing many series of rhetoric, coming from the prime minister in front of either a cheering crowd or a silent audience.

In a democracy, no entertaining questions from the media and journalists are equivalent to being non-tolerance towards political dissenters or political opponents. It is not expected that a head of government of the world's largest democracy kept the media at bay for such a long period of time. This amounts to undermining the freedom of the press which is a serious threat to democracy. Can India as a democratic country demand that Narendra Modi host at least one open press conference before the start of the ensuing general election?

The past decade of BJP rule had gone with the citizens of India failing to avail the privilege of seeing their prime minister held to account in the public domain. Can the ruling party now assure the citizens that if elected for the third consecutive term, apart from all other many poll promises, the country will see a new era of democracy where a press conference by the prime minister will become a regular feature and that the tradition of free interactions between the prime minister and fourth pillar of democracy will be revived? Democracy is not only about conducting elections at regular intervals; if that is the case, citizens in a democratic country will become just a tool to be used by politicians for deriving political powers with the citizens getting nothing in return. Elections in democracy should reflect the will of the people, and the government of the day should ensure that the promise of democracy to the citizens should be delivered. The exercise of democracy in India can never be complete as long as the head of government refuses to answer open and unscripted questions both from the people's representatives and the press.

rightly be rejected, thus placing the student community at crossroads! I thought that KSU, the champion for the welfare of the students could have risen to the occasions to alleviate the grievances of their counterparts at such a critical juncture!

In the light foregoing contentions, many commonsensical citizens have articulated that exonerating of CCA in Meghalaya can arguably be taken with a pinch of salt given the fact that this so-called exclusion will suffer the same fate like the exemption of Meghalaya from Aadhaar.

Finally when all is said and done, will the Government of Meghalaya, banking establishments and other institutions that have been going on an overdrive in compelling Aadhaar biometrics counteract if the Notification of the Ministry of Finance's 2017 notification is mere skulduggery of vested interests to create deep misgivings in the people's mindset?

Yours etc.,
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Shillong-2

Kudos to Umroi airport

Editor,
Through many tough years of not having a fully functional airport, I am proud to see our airport undergoing metamorphosis so that we are now able to have a comfortable flight from our own airport. Once upon a time it

seemed a boredom to travel all the way to Guwahati for a flight which is tiresome and takes a toll of one's precious time.

I remember vividly when the new terminal at Shillong Airport was inaugurated way back in 2011 and how I fondly remember flying from Umroi in that small ATR 42 managed by then Air India. It was so quiet and funny to mention too; it looked grotesque and scary, being an alienated airport or ghost airport, whereby just 10 to 15 passengers would avail air travel from Umroi.

At the time there was no refuelling station; hence, the small ATR 42 turboprop can carry only half of its capacity of passengers due to fuel constraints in our airport.

I wondered if the future of Shillong airport would remain grim and never imagined that other airlines would join the queue for operations from Umroi. I remember the boarding passes, which were written by hand, not the usual boarding passes with printed fonts. I witnessed the infancy stage of air travel from our airport at that point in time.

Sometimes the sudden cancellation of a flight would frustrate me, but those were memories that bring smiles when pondering now. I am writing this letter mainly to thank the AAI (Airport Authority of India), DGCA, and UDAN scheme for making this distant dream come true, which we can all witness.

However, being a frequent flyer and an aviation enthusiast, I would like to point out

the inadequate knowledge of people from our state in deeming our airport unsafe and that flights that are operating from Shillong airport are risky. I cannot comprehend how such innuendos are floating around and the ignorance of our people pertaining to operations from our airport.

Our airport had seen the best of technological advances to ensure a safe flight for all passengers. The sheer ignorance and this desire to travel all the way to LGBI Airport in Guwahati as it is ostensibly safer seems like a joke to me.

These people spread fabricated stories which are untrue, and mind you, Shillong Airport has not endured any accidents or incidents nor disasters since its inception. We thank God for that!

Last year, when the weather was so bad and it was raining heavily during the monsoons, I was worried that my flight would be cancelled or delayed, but surprisingly, it was smooth as butter; the flight was on time although there was some turbulence. Overall, it was a very good flying experience. Hence, I have come to realize that our airport is at par with almost all major airports in the country. From reading several research papers, the issues of delays, cancellations, etc., usually happen due to the late arrival of aircrafts from other cities or HUBS. Hence, one should not jump to the conclusion that the facilities at Shillong airport are not up to standards of operations.

We have been blessed to have the ILS Type C installed, which easily guides the pilot to land safely even in very poor weather conditions. Yes, delays and cancellations occur due to unavoidable circumstances, but the rate of delays or cancellations of flights from our airport has reduced drastically.

What is imperative now is that the long-pending issue of increasing the runway strength and length would be completed sooner than later. I urge the officials to look at this to ensure wide-bodied aircraft to commence operations and give us more connections to the rest of the important metros and other cities in the country as well. I am one proud citizen to see how much our beloved airport has transformed over these years and that passenger traffic has increased considerably, and I'm looking forward to more connections and a better flying experience in the future.

Kudos to team AAI Shillong, the DGCA (Directorate General of Civil Aviation), and the Transport Department, who have taken great steps to enhance better and smoother air connectivity from our lone Shillong (Umroi Airport).

Yours etc.,
Chanmiki Laloo,
Aviation Enthusiast
Shillong-2

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

"When you reach the end of your rope,
tie a knot in it and hang on."

— Franklin D. Roosevelt

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 221 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, MARCH 23, 2024

Religion & Politics Debate

THE debate over whether its right to use religion as a basis for political campaign has been troubling a section of voters who feel that religion is purely personal and should not be used to woo voters. Since 2014 religion has unabashedly been used to win votes. The BJP's election plank has been to restore Hindu pride which ostensibly has been crushed by repeated Muslim invasions in the 16th century and thereafter resulting in the destruction of Hindu temples or of mosques being constructed atop the razed structures. The Indian Constitution which emerged after very robust debates did not, in the beginning, include the word 'secular' in defining the country. The word 'secular' was added to the preamble only in 1975.

On November 15, 1948, there were heated debates in the Constituent Assembly on the nature of the Constitution. Some members proposed that the word 'secular' be added to the preamble. But after a heated discourse, while the majority of members agreed on the Indian state adhering to secular principles, the word 'secular' was dropped from the preamble. It was only included about three decades later, when the Indira Gandhi led government passed the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution in 1975 perhaps to pander to the minority vote bank. While the connection between secularism and effective functioning of democracy is well established in Europe, it becomes problematic for a country like India with contesting religious ideologies. In fact, the Vice President of the Constitution Drafting Committee, HC Mookherjee had raised the point that if India is to establish a purely secular state then it follows that there can be no special recognition of minorities based on religion.

Articles 25-28 of the Indian Constitution allowing "Freedom of religion" or the freedom to promote and propagate the religion of one's choice therefore appears to contradict the idea of secularism - the ideals of which were embedded in the constitutional philosophy. But doubts have remained about whether the spirit of secularism was possible in a country like India. Since 2014 when the BJP came to power the cry of "Hindu Khatre mein hain" (Hindus are in danger) has gained ground. It was a counter to the Congress's Muslim appeasement policy. The restoration of the Ram mandir at Ayodhya where a mosque had earlier been built, was one step towards restoration of Hindu pride. Perhaps more is to follow to avenge a historical past including reliance on ancient Hindu texts as against modern scientific knowledge. In Meghalaya, the religious fervour has taken a new turn when the VPP candidate fighting the Lok Sabha election begins his election speech by proclaiming himself a Christian and referring to the Bible. Opponents argue that this action defies the secular nature of the Indian Constitution and that if people take umbrage at the BJP's use of religion as a political ploy and its attempt at equating Hinduism with nationalism then the VPP is following exactly in those footsteps and endangering the idea of secularism which allows Christianity, a minority religion to flourish. This debate is likely to heighten as the Lok Sabha election campaign progresses.

Letters to the Editor

Tackling India's rising inequalities

Editor,
The editorial "India shining?" (ST March 22, 2024) made interesting reading and one cannot disagree with the editorial that "poverty in the country is due to absence of effective governance." "Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The rise of the Billionaire Raj" by the World Inequality Lab Co-authored by economists Nitin Kumar Bharti, Lucas Chancel, Thomas Piketty, and Anmol Somanchi, sheds light on critical aspects of India's economic landscape. The main takeaways from the report are:

1. The growth in average incomes between 1960 and 2022 in India grew at a rate of 2.6% (after adjustment for inflation). Notably, the period from 1990 to 2022 witnessed faster growth, with average incomes increasing by 3.6% per annum. The years 2002-2010 and 2010-2015 witnessed the highest growth rates at 4.3% and 4.9% per annum, respectively.
2. During 1990 to 2022 India experienced a rise in

national wealth. The number of very high net worth individuals (those with net wealth exceeding \$1 billion) increased significantly: from 1 in 1991 to 52 in 2011 and 162 in 2022.

3. The Economic reforms in 1991 led to a substantial increase in the share of the adult population filing income tax returns. By 2011 over 5% of adults were filing income tax returns, and this trend continued with around 9% filing returns during 2017-2020.

4. In 2022-23, 22.6% of India's national income was captured by just the top 1% of the population. This is the highest level recorded since 1922. The top 1% also held 40.1% of the country's wealth in the same period, reaching its highest level since 1961 when wealth data collection began. These levels of inequality surpass even those observed during the inter-war colonial period.

5. Policy recommendation: The report recommends several policy measures to address inequality in India. (1) Restructuring the tax code to account for both income and wealth. (2) Broad-based public investments in health, education, and nutrition.

Why the CAA is still a danger for everyone in the North East

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

The upcoming elections are going to be crucial especially for Meghalaya and the North East, as they are happening against the backdrop of the CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act), for which now rules have been formulated. Although almost all of Meghalaya (barring a small percentage) has been exempted from CAA, the fact that 8.5 lakh Hindus have been left out of the NRC conducted in Assam and Chief Minister, Himanta Sharma, has declared that up to 3 to 6 lakh can apply for citizenship is still a big threat for the indigenous communities of the region. In fact, the future road map of how giving citizenship to such a large number of people will affect indigenous communities is already playing out in Karbi Anglong.

Last month, the Karbi Students Association and the Autonomous State Demand Committee Youth Front protested against the illegal encroachment of reserved grazing land in Karbi Anglong. This happened in the context of Rachnatmak Nonia Sanyukta Sangh, an organization of the Hindi-speaking Nonia community, submitting a memorandum to President Draupadi Murmu demanding, among other things, the legalization of settlers on the encroached lands in West Karbi Anglong. During the protests, the Hindi-speaking mob attacked the Karbi volunteers, leading to the injury of 11 people. The police promptly arrested 17 people involved in the violence. The attack on the Karbis evoked a backlash, and Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) Chief Executive Member (CEM) Tuliram Ronghang announced that they would evict the illegal encroachers within 30 days. The Assam government has stated that it will not interfere with the order. But the whole issue is exactly what fuels the fear of indigenous communities. For them, it's not about religious identity, which is the foundation of CAA and which the BJP wanted to exploit; it's about the alienation of their land, like it has happened in Tripura and other places in the North East.

Indeed, alienation of land was a big concern during the Constituent Assembly debate of 1949. Since then, there has always been an attempt to assimilate the indigenous community with those from the mainstream, which, in other words, means alienating them from their land and culture. One should look at the arguments made by Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri, a former Member of Parliament from Guwahati, in the Constituent Assembly debate in favour of assimilation, stressing the inability to own property in tribal areas. He was challenged by Rev. J J M. Nichols Roy, a

Khasi, and Mr. Jaipal Singh, a Munda (both belonging to the Austroasiatic language family), who dismantled his arguments and put forth their case, demanding special laws for protecting the rights of the indigenous people. Ultimately, Rev J J M. Nichols Roy and Mr. Jaipal Singh prevailed, and the Constitution introduced the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. However, as Virginius Xaxa, a noted indigenous scholar, has discussed in his book chapter 'Governing the Environment in the Fifth and Sixth Schedule Areas', the Sixth Schedule represents self-determined governance and development, while the Fifth Schedule is marked by its absence. As a result, dispossession and displacement have been negligible in the Sixth Schedule areas. But Fifth Schedule areas have experienced loss of control over land and forests due to the extension of laws adverse to the interests of indigenous peoples, and the absence of self-governance has resulted in poor development. This is where CAA becomes very important.

With 3 to 6 lakh being eligible for citizenship, they will eventually spill over into indigenous areas, like it has happened in Karbi Anglong. In time, they will ask for the delisting of those areas under the Sixth Schedule so that they can lay claim to the land. This is already happening. Slowly but steadily, a lot of areas will be delisted, with indigenous communities becoming a minority in their own territory. In the future, a new exemption will be instituted and a new date given for granting citizenship. Identification of illegal immigrants and their deportation was supposed to take place on the 1971 cutoff date; now it has been extended to 2014. Perhaps in the future, the new date will be 2030. In the meantime, both migrants from the mainland and the new citizens will continuously push on to indigenous territories. This strategy has become apparent from the statement of Chief Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma, who stated that the definition of Assamese has undergone change over the years and must include people such as Hindi speakers and the tea tribes. In fact, he claimed that, excluding them and the indigenous tribal communities in the state, the Assamese population will be only 28-30 percent in Assam. At the moment, the non-indigenous population cannot own land in Sixth Schedule areas, but once they control the state administration through electoral politics, they could starve those areas of funds and pressure them to delist areas, opening them for occupation by the

non-indigenous population. As the pressure increases on indigenous communities like the Karbis, it will spill over into Meghalaya as well. But CAA is not the only strategy to deprive indigenous peoples of their land.

Recently, an organization calling itself the Karbi Traditional Faith Association (KTFA) threatened to demolish the statue of Jesus Christ and other Christian imagery from the premises of a school in Ri Bhoi. The irony is that the village where this took place on the Meghalaya side also happened to belong to the Karbi community. This is in line with the demand made by Janajati Surakha Mancha (JSM), a BJP-backed Hindu body of tribal people active across India, seeking delisting of the tribals from Scheduled Tribes (ST) status who have converted to Christianity in Tripura. This is reminiscent of the British 'divide and rule policy' which, in this case, is about fomenting hostility within the indigenous communities and weakening them.

If one goes to history, they will find that some Native American groups aligned themselves at one time or another with the European powers against other Native American groups, hoping they would benefit at the expense of their kin. The result was that more than 90% of the Native American population in the Americas was wiped out by European colonialism. Those who remained were deprived of their rights and had to endure humiliation where their children were taken away from them to drive out the 'native/indigenous' from them. Are these indigenous groups, who are now fighting against their own brethren, not aware of what awaits them in the end?

Religion is a personal affair, but what makes an indigenous person part of the community is the kinship that they share with each other. This was illustrated in a story told to me by Tarun Bhartiya, a national and international award-winning film maker from Shillong, where one of the earlier Khasi converts pulled a gun on the missionary, threatening him in case he was pressured to give up his kur, the matrilineal clan. Personally, I believe such Christians are more Khasi than those traditional faith practitioners who want to break the community, or those who are ashamed of their matrilineal culture. You can change your religion, but you cannot change your kur, i.e., matrilineal clan, and this is what links the community. Forget that, and what happened to indigenous peoples elsewhere will be repeated here as well.

But one adverse impact of

the CAA will, ironically, also fall on the non-indigenous population that has been residing in indigenous lands for many generations. In Meghalaya, this also includes the Harijans, who have been at the receiving end of vitriolic hate despite the undeniable fact that they have helped build Shillong and are part of the city and the state as much as any indigenous person. The settlement of the decades-long issue will have to happen, but it must be done with recognition of their contribution, and a sincere attempt must be made to accommodate them in a respectful manner. This also includes the many non-indigenous populations, like the Nepali, Bengali, Punjabi, Marwari, and Sindhi, who have also made the state their home and have contributed immensely to the state. The justified paranoia in which indigenous peoples will be forced to live because of the new migration or new migrants who will be pushed into indigenous territories because of CAA or other measures will only create a situation of fear and resentment. This will perpetuate the second-class treatments the local non-indigenous population has been facing for decades.

The threat to the indigenous peoples of the North East is a fact, but the unjust treatment of non-indigenous people who have settled for generations is also not justified. This is similar to what the Dalits, Muslims, and the indigenous people known as Adivasi have to go through in the mainland, which has intensified in recent years, especially against the Muslims. It is for this reason that the argument against CAA is not only led by indigenous groups but also well-meaning non-indigenous groups from all over the country.

In today's age, no community, whether indigenous or non-indigenous, can live as an island or be oblivious to what is happening elsewhere. For this reason, there is need to build solidarity because indigenous and non-indigenous people will only be safe when both groups are allowed to live with dignity and respect. However, at the moment, there are those who want to create animosity between the Khasi and the Garo, between the Khasi and the Karbi, and maintain the perpetual animosity between the Khasi and the local non-indigenous population. In this atmosphere of mutual hate and suspicion, only those who don't belong to the region will benefit in the long run. In fact, that is exactly what the CAA seems to be intended for.

(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)

Will Kejriwal's arrest impact Lok Sabha elections?

By Sushil Kutty

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Friday took back from the Supreme Court his appeal against his arrest by the Enforcement Directorate. The top court was poised to hear the plea when Kejriwal's lawyer Abhishek Manu Singhvi declared the decision, which Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta said was used by Kejriwal's counsel to "mislead the court".

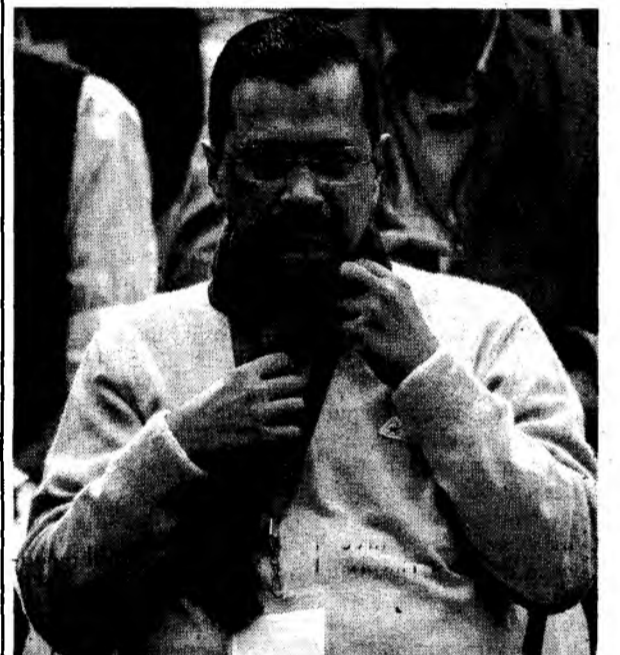
"I had told the ED that till the matter is disposed of by this Court, do not produce him for remand," Mehta said. Earlier, Singhvi had said that the plea was being withdrawn "since it was clashing with the remand." This drama apart, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's arrest could not have come at a more critical juncture for the Aam Aadmi Party. Though a matter of importance, who is Delhi Chief Minister is the least of Kejriwal's worries.

The BJP says it is a "purely legal matter", whereas the AAP insists it's a "purely political ploy" to stymie the AAP's challenge to the BJP in the Delhi parliamentary seats,

Aadmi Party and both the AAP as well as the BJP are very competitive, though this time around, the results might not be as cool for the BJP as they used to be. The Congress-AAP alliance will be the game-changer even if recent history has favoured the BJP.

Again, with the Congress in the frame, there will be a substantial Muslim vote, likely to vote for the AAP, too. Ever since the Karnataka assembly elections, the Muslim electorate is baked in to vote for the Congress come rain or shine. AAP's messages on schools and health clinics will resonate with its vote-banks and the BJP is allegedly doing everything it can to deny the Opposition a level playing field.

After Kejriwal's arrest, chances are the dynamics of the race will suit Kejriwal's party though Kejriwal's absence will be felt as no party can rest on its laurels alone. Also, Modi's BJP will be moving fast to position itself to take advantage of the changed situation. The BJP,



buoyed by AAP's alliance with the Congress. It should be pointed out that the BJP is not sure if it will be able to retain the 7 Lok Sabha seats of Delhi that it had won in 2014 and 2019.

What if Delhi turns out to be a gold mine for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, instead of a prized catch after the Arvind Kejriwal arrest? Delhi voters might give Kejriwal their sympathy as well as their votes. The AAP is banking on this silver lining to the dark cloud at this time of crisis. On paper, it is possible that the Delhi electorate will hit back at the BJP with vindictive force.

Of course, there is concern that AAP might crumble under pressure. There's the leadership vacuum. Kejriwal, like so many others, left no equal to replace him at the head of the party. Yogendra Yadav, Kiran Bedi, Prashant Bhushan, and Kumar Vishwas - the list is long. AAP will suffer unless Kejriwal finds his own replacement - a loyal coterie or foisting his wife on Delhi. AAP minister Atishi Marlena and Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann will have to take a decision.

With general elections round the corner, Kejriwal couldn't have found a worse time to get arrested. The summons game that Kejriwal was playing with the Enforcement Directorate came with consequences. The spectre of Narendra Modi is now haunting the AAP even as the BJP is talking of the political and economic transformation of Delhi, which Arvind Kejriwal's arrest, it says, will facilitate.

Like somebody wrote, "voters of the state are basically a jump ball right now", meaning a large chunk consists of "undecided voters" after Kejriwal's arrest. The refurbished Delhi liquor policy is the cause of all the trouble, a "person familiar with the situation" said. That being said, at this point in time, it is hard to imagine who is edging out whom?

On paper, Modi holds the upper hand. But it wouldn't be 7/7 in Delhi for the BJP on June 4. Not when the Congress is standing firm with the beleaguered Aam

being stronger, will be on a surer footing, unless the Aam Aadmi Party figures out what to do and how to counter and succeed.

At some point, Kejriwal miscalculated. Now, AAP has been painted into a corner with the colours of corruption, the symptom of a general malaise of impropriety that is plaguing the polity. Arvind Kejriwal remaining Chief Minister and ruling Delhi from Tihar is a foolish proposal. The Modi government will jump at the chance to rid Delhi of the AAP government.

AAP should identify a new Chief Minister and continue to rule Delhi. Kejriwal running Delhi from Tihar is fraught with risks of central intervention. This is also an opportunity for AAP to build a broader leadership base. The undisputed leader should go for the time being. The Bharatiya Janata Party is cozily placed as its Delhi dream has come true. The party's strategy to indict the Delhi government in scams has worked.

The actions taken on the excise policy and the "Delhi Jal Board" scams went according to plan. For very political reasons, Kejriwal was always a "person of interest" for the Modi government, in both the "DJB scam" and the "Excise Policy" scam. The Delhi Chief Minister has been issued summons in the "DJB scam", too. The Bharatiya Janata Party's plan is to portray Kejriwal "as the face of corruption" and with Kejriwal's arrest the BJP is halfway done.

Simultaneously, the BJP has gone to town terming Kejriwal's arrest "a purely legal matter". AAP on the other hand is terming it purely political. With Delhi's control and governance at stake, both AAP and alliance partner Congress are optimistic that the INDI-Alliance will do great in the Delhi Lok Sabha elections. "AAP has been fighting the BJP for the protection of the Constitution... we hope the Supreme Court will protect the democracy of India." AAP minister Atishi Marlena said. Marlena has a lot on her plate. It is her time to lead from the front. (IPA Service)

of assets or wealth further exacerbates disparities.

(d) Beyond caste, gender or family background, other factors play a role: Home sanitation, school facilities, and access to basic infrastructure (electricity, water and healthcare). Crime rate, political stability and environmental risk also contribute.

Why does it matter? Rising inequality has far reaching consequences: There is slower poverty reduction which undermines economic growth sustainability thereby compounding gender inequalities. This in turn impacts health, education, and life chances. The World Economic Forum recognizes "severe income disparity" as a top global risk. Addressing inequality requires policy choices, rejecting market fundamentalism, and changing systems to create a more equitable society.

Addressing inequality requires a combination of evidence-based policies and systemic change. Some policy solutions that can help reduce economic disparities and promote greater equity:

(a) Increase Minimum Wage: Research shows that raising the minimum wage for the lowest-paid workers

has several positive effects: It can lift nearly 4.6 million people out of poverty and approximately \$2 billion can be added to a nation's overall real income. Contrary to concerns, increasing the minimum wage does not hurt employment or hinder economic growth.

(b) Expand the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC): The EITC has proven effective in supporting families. It lifts roughly 4.7 million children above the poverty line annually. Expanding EITC can provide more economic support for the working poor, especially single parents entering the workforce.

(c) Build assets for working families: Policies that encourage higher savings rates and reduce the cost of building assets can enhance economic security for struggling families. Consider implementing a program that automatically enrol workers in retirement plans. Provide a savings credit or federal match for retirement savings accounts, particularly benefitting lower-income households.

(d) Redistribution and opportunity ladders: Ensuring a fair distribution of resources through progressive taxation and social safety nets. Widely available opportu-

nities for education, skill development and upward mobility. Consider policies that address wealth concentration by imposing taxes on inheritances.

(e) Addressing social norms and discrimination: A comprehensive policy framework should tackle prejudice, stereotypes, and cultural norms that reinforce discrimination. Focusing on closing gaps in education, health and nutrition is crucial.

(f) International cooperation: Reducing both within-country and between-country inequality requires global efforts. Promote fair trade, equitable systems, and support marginalized groups.

Remember that public policy plays a vital role in shaping economic outcomes. By implementing evidence-based policies, we can work toward a more equitable society where everyone has a chance to thrive.

Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

Comprehensive wellness benefits of hot water bath

The practice of bathing in warm water has a rich and storied past, extending far beyond its utilitarian function. Woven into the cultural fabric of diverse societies throughout history, from the Roman bathhouses to the onsen traditions of Japan.

It has served as a cornerstone of both personal hygiene and holistic well-being. However, the allure of warm water bathing transcends mere cultural tradition. In an era characterised by relentless technological advancement and pervasive stress, the ability to carve out moments of self-care is paramount.

Hot water bathing presents itself as a readily available and powerful tool for promoting holistic wellness. Recent scientific research has shed light on a compelling array of health benefits associated with this seemingly simple practice.

Vikram Raman, Vice President, Marketing and E-Commerce of Ariston Thermo India said: "Stepping into a warm bath triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals. This, in turn, activates the parasympathetic nervous system, responsible for the body's "rest and digest" response. According to a study published in *EatingWell*, regular hot water immersion may increase a brain chemical called brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which is associated with mood regulation and cognitive function. At the same time, hot water immersion may also reduce the stress hormone cortisol, which can have negative effects on mental and physical health. Therefore, hot water immersion can significantly reduce stress hormone levels, leading to feelings of calmness and relaxation."

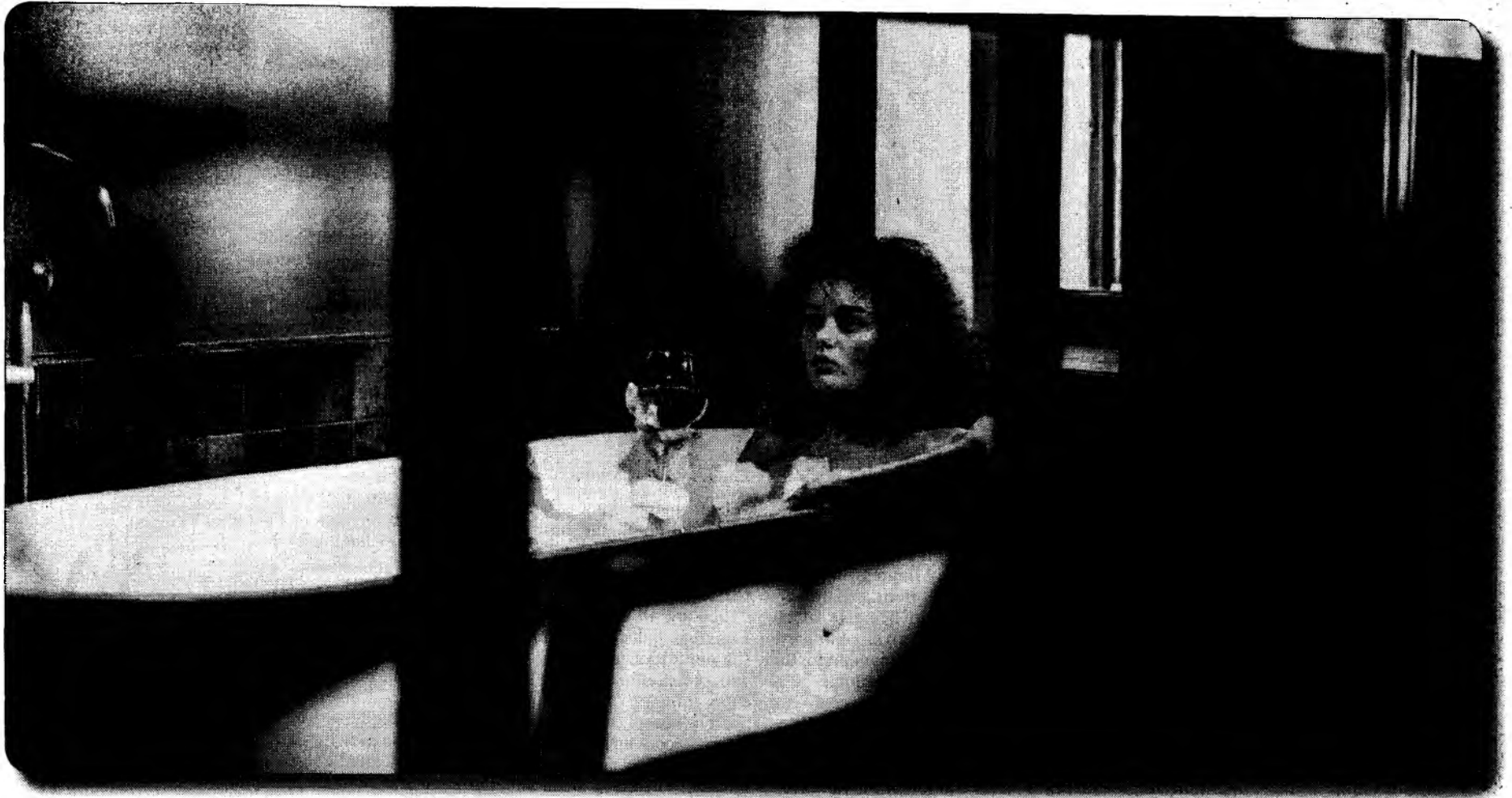
The warmth from a bath can also work wonders for promoting better sleep. Raman asserts that studies have shown, a warm bath taken 1-2 hours before bedtime can help regulate body temperature.

He said: "As your body cools down afterwards, it mimics the natural sleep-onset process, leading to deeper and more restful sleep. A study published in *Sleep Medicine Reviews* found that taking a warm bath or shower 1-2 hours before bedtime, at a temperature of 40-43 degrees celsius can improve sleep quality by changing the body's core temperature and circadian rhythm.

The study revealed that people who took warm baths before bed experienced significant improvements in sleep quality, falling asleep faster and waking up less frequently throughout the night. This improved sleep, in turn, can contribute to better cognitive function, mood regulation, and overall health."

The warmth and buoyancy of a hot bath can significantly ease muscle tension and stiffness.

A study conducted by Arthritis Foundation suggests that warm water immersion can be an effective pain management tool, particularly for individuals suffering from chronic pain conditions like arthritis and fibromyalgia.



"Patients suffering from such conditions who participated in warm water exercise programs two or three times a week could move around better and have as much as 40 per cent less pain. The warmth helps to increase blood flow to the affected areas, promoting relaxation and reducing muscle spasms. Moreover, the buoyancy can take pressure off sore joints, providing much-needed relief," says Raman.

While more research is needed, some studies suggest that regular hot water bathing may offer potential cardiovascular benefits.

A study published by Harvard Health revealed that people who took a daily warm or hot bath had a 28 per cent lower risk of cardiovascular disease and a 26 per cent lower risk of stroke.

Researchers hypothesise that the warmth may cause vasodilation, or the widening of blood vessels, which could potentially improve blood flow and reduce strain on the heart.

Aside from the aforementioned benefits, hot water baths offer a range of other potential benefits, Raman

highlights:

Improved circulation: The warmth can increase blood flow, promoting overall circulation and delivering essential nutrients to the body's tissues. This can contribute to improved skin health, faster healing, and even better cognitive function.

Boosted immune system: Some studies suggest that warm baths may help stimulate the immune system, possibly by increasing white blood cell activity, although more research is needed to confirm this.

Relief from skin conditions: Soaking in warm water with added ingredients like oatmeal or Epsom salts can help soothe dry, itchy skin and alleviate symptoms of eczema and psoriasis. The warm water helps to open pores and remove irritants, while the added ingredients can provide additional moisturizing and soothing properties.

While hot water bathing offers numerous benefits, Raman stresses on the importance to exercise caution:

Maintain a safe temperature: Avoid excessively hot

water, which can cause burns. The ideal bath temperature is generally between 98°F (36.7 degrees celsius) and 104 degrees F (40 degrees celsius).

Limit bath duration: Prolonged immersion in hot water can dehydrate the skin and lead to dizziness. It's recommended to limit bath time to 15-20 minutes.

Consult your doctor: Individuals with certain medical conditions, like heart disease or uncontrolled high blood pressure, should consult their doctor before taking hot baths.

Incorporating regular hot water baths into your self-care routine can be a simple yet powerful way to improve your overall well-being.

From stress relief and better sleep to muscle relaxation and potential cardiovascular benefits, the warm embrace of a hot bath offers a natural and accessible path to holistic wellness.

So, the next time you're feeling stressed, achy, or simply in need of some self-care, consider drawing a warm bath and unlocking the multitude of wellness wonders it holds. (LANSlife)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, MARCH 24, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon is forming an angle of 150 degrees with Mercury on your solar return chart which will bring you mixed results. You will have confidence in your abilities and will try to achieve something big. But you need to understand ground realities too. The atmosphere at your work place may not be favorable. You will be tested to the fullest and made to work hard. And your plans will get struck. Your enemies will have an upper edge for the time being. Even your peers and superiors might suspect your intention. You will be overambitious and this will be the cause of trouble. You need to take everyone along with you. You will enter into partnership or joint venture but will face problems. Peace and harmony will prevail at home. You will have to work hard to earn money. Money inflow will be continuous. Your romantic life will be normal. A short term affair with a person known to you is indicated. You will undertake short business trips which will prove beneficial. Your health will remain normal. Auspicious functions will keep taking place at home.

This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You would be fun loving, energetic and willing to explore new ideas. You may feel frustrated in relationships as there is a lack of communication and it is hard for you to verbalize your true feelings and express them. 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. Health needs to be replenished with a planned diet and physical fitness schedules.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You might particularly enjoy discussions about your early life, or the past. In fact, it's a great time to open up conversations with loved ones, as you are more rational when it comes to personal matters now. Your mind often wanders to domestic concerns, and issues surrounding your home, family, and personal past. Domestic relationships and the home environment tend to be harmonious and peaceful. It's a fabulous time for joining a gym or stepping up exercise and health routines.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This phase brings harmonious relations with friends, colleagues and loved ones. There would be love, grace, beauty, happiness and pleasure in personal relations success and good fortune at work bring new opportunities for further progress. You will be able to make best use of your talents, work experience and would insert your creativity into your work and projects in hand. You would be more determined and hard-working at this time.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You would have to restructure and reorganize activities at work and analyze the situations at home. Your daily routines and business dealings need to be restructured for better gains and productivity. You tend to be a perfectionist while completing business projects and campaigns. It is best to accept challenges that life offers you and keep going through ups and downs taking it all in your stride. There will be a fluctuation in energy levels before a balance is achieved

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You would be compassionate and generous with family, friends and relatives and gain respect from them. You are ambitious and ready to achieve professional goals and targets at any cost. You would maintain balance, strength and completion in personal and business partnership. Restructuring business schedules and dealings would be productive. If health is affected, fevers or minor infections are more likely.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) News and visitors from far off places are likely to arrive. You are loving and caring in personal relationships. You look at the world in terms of value and worth now, and what you have is foremost

on your mind. Money issues pop up now—the discovery of a way to increase your income, an unexpected gift or reward, or a brief and tiny financial crisis that motivates you to find new ways to make money are possible. You are blessed with good mood and health.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) Your personal charm and attractiveness would have a positive effect on your relationships. People see you as a loving and lovable person, and as someone who is aware of their needs and feelings, which can benefit you at this time. Others are willing to help and cooperate with your goals and ambitions. It would be better to make long term investments and speculations for financial gains. Group activities can be a therapeutic pastime. Newly wed will take time to understand each other.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You encounter people who are very considerate and understanding. You would also form relationships with people based on a deep level of mutual appreciation and understanding for each other. A sudden job opportunity, or some form of assistance with regards to career, home, or property matters, could be part of the picture. This can also produce an event that requires you to take charge and show your responsible side. Health needs to be addressed with a diet plan as well as some physical exercise. You will be putting lot of efforts in your work. And will also get great results. Your family ties too will improve.

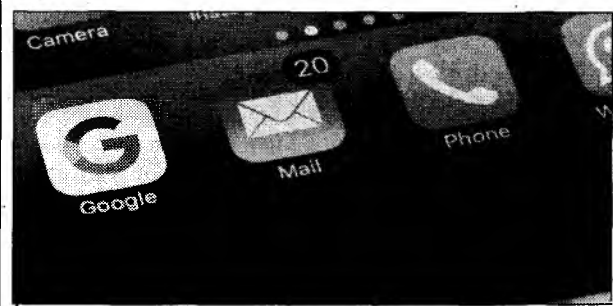
Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) Personal relations are precious and need to be treated with tender love and care. You feel fresh and re-energized. A blast of personal energy comes your way, and showing your leadership skills works for you now. You are at your most convincing, as others accept you at face value. Now you need a little attention, and career matters come to a head. This is also a strong period for finances and close partnerships. A pleasant surprise may be in store.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) 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 are made of. Perhaps this is not a time to make a presentation or to come on too strong to the world. You are feeling reflective rather than expressive. At this time, you instinctively know how to place yourself in the best light in order to make a good impression on others.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You will be creative, adventurous and unconventional at work and this brings appreciation from senior colleagues. Your partnerships are highlighted right now, and it's time to compromise. Insecurities in your partnerships are brought to light now, and the best way to handle this is to understand that you need others instead of competing for the limelight. Concentrate on truly listening to those close to you, and on playing a supportive role. Keep stress at bay.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You're at your best when you are showing the world your practical, competent, and responsible side. A wonderful professional opportunity takes you towards success at this time. A personal meeting will lead to romance, love and long lasting relationship. There are chances of new associations and beginnings as changes may occur. Your efforts to reach out to new people will be accepted and welcomed as you get success in foreign matters too. Physical energy and good health enable you cooperate with busy schedule and work commitments.

Do you have 7,513 unread emails in your inbox? Research suggests that's unwise



How do you manage your emails? Are you an "inbox zero" kind of person, or do you just leave thousands of them unread? A new study, published in the journal *Information Research*, suggests that leaving all your emails in the inbox is likely to leave you dissatisfied with your personal records management.

In an exploratory survey, participants were asked how they dealt with their personal records such as bills, online subscriptions and similar items. Many of these arrive by email.

It was found that most respondents left their electronic records in their email. Only half saved items such as bills and other documents to other locations, like their computer or the cloud. But having a disorganised inbox also led to problems, including missing bills and losing track of important correspondence.

The risk of losing track of your emails

Receiving bills, insurance renewals and other household documents by email saves time and money, and reduces unnecessary paper use.

However, there are risks involved if you don't stay on top of your electronic records. Respondents in the research reported issues such as lapsed vehicle registration, failing to cancel unwanted subscriptions, and overlooking tax deductions because it was too much trouble finding the receipts.

This suggests late fines and other email oversights could be costing people hundreds of dollars each year.

In addition to the financial costs, research suggests that not sorting and managing electronic records makes it more difficult to put together the information needed at tax time, or for other high-stakes situations, such as loan applications.

What was the find?

Over 300 diverse respondents were surveyed on their personal electronic records management. Most of them were from Australia, but responses were also received from other countries, such as the United Kingdom, United States, Switzerland, Portugal and elsewhere.

Two-thirds of the respondents used their email to manage personal records, such as bills, receipts, subscriptions and more. Of those, it was found that once respondents had dealt with their email, about half of

them would sort the emails into folders, while the other half would leave everything in the inbox.

While most sorted their workplace email into folders, they were much less likely to sort their personal email in the same way.

The results also showed that only half (52%) of respondents who left all their email in the inbox were satisfied with their records management, compared to 71% of respondents who sorted their email into folders.

Of the respondents who saved their paperwork in the cloud (Google Drive, iCloud, Dropbox and similar), 83% reported being satisfied with their home records management.

The study was exploratory, so further research will be needed to see if our findings apply more universally. However, the statistical analysis did reveal practices associated with more satisfactory outcomes, and ones that might be better to avoid.

What can go wrong with an inbox-only approach?

Based on the responses, three main problems were identified with leaving all your email in the inbox.

First, users can lose track of the tasks that need to be done. For example, a bill that needs to be paid could slip down the line unnoticed, drowned by other emails.

Second, relying on search to re-find emails means you need to know exactly what you're looking for. For example, at tax time searching for charity donation receipts depends on remembering what to search for, as well as the exact wording in the email containing the receipt.

Third, many bills and statements are not sent as attachments to emails, but rather as hyperlinks. If you change your bank or another service provider, those hyperlinks may not be accessible at a later date. Not being able to access missing payslips from a former employer can also cause issues, as shown by the Robodebt scandal or the recent case of the Australian Tax Office reviving old debts.

4 tips for better records management

When respondents were asked to nominate a preferred location for keeping their personal records, they tended to choose a more organised format than their current behaviour. Ideally, only 8% of the respondents would leave everything in their email inbox, unsorted.

The findings suggest a set of practices that can help you get on top of your electronic records and prevent stress or financial losses: -sort your email into category folders, or save records in folders in the cloud or on a computer -download documents that are not attached to emails or sent to you - such as utility bills and all your payslips -put important renewals in your calendar as reminders, and -delete junk mail and unsubscribe, so that your inbox can be turned into a to-do list. (The Conversation)

"The world of reality has its limits; the world of imagination is boundless."

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVI No. 223 SHILLONG, MONDAY, MARCH 25, 2024

Selective amnesia

THE functioning of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister is noted also in relation to his penchant for selective amnesia, which often creates situations of selectively targeting errant individuals and firms. The latest is the arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in connection with the Delhi Liquor Scam case. Those who err must face the consequences; and Kejriwal cannot be an exception. Whether the CM is guilty of the charges levelled against him, or not, is to be proven in a court of law. The principal charge against him and others is that the Delhi government tweaked its liquor policy to favour some spirit firms with the aim of corruption and bribetaking. It would be a commentary of our times that a politician who won power repeatedly on the anti-corruption planks should end up in a situation like this. This is also a commentary on the way politics is being practised here. Fighting elections to parliament and assemblies requires huge sums for every party. The way forward to improve the scenario is to effect reforms in the way elections are held. A half-hearted approach to reforms is fraught.

The alleged act of taking gratification from one or more agencies on a quid pro quo basis in the context of formulation of a governmental policy is corruption. Fact of the matter, however, is that all the parties running governments are doing this. The people (voters) seldom get to know of these. Quid pro quo is evident also in the way the BJP accepted funds via electoral bonds from a large number of firms that were facing investigations from ED/CBI. Stuningly, none of these investigations has been taken to their logical conclusions. Quid pro quo in governmental functioning and the play of vested interests are evident across the board. Having earned an expertise in such dealings, it is understandable how easily the Modi establishment caught Kejriwal and company on the wrong foot.

The Modi government has unleashed its investigating agencies against almost every opposition leader but very few of these politicians have been framed and fewer numbers of them have been arrested. Sharks like Sharad Pawar, Kamal Nath etc., have not been proceeded against with any seriousness. It's also shameful that Modi has not been able to punish those who were behind the 2G Spectrum, the CWG and coal scams, despite the past 10 years of investigations under his guidance. For a leader with any sense of integrity, acting in the best interests of the nation should be a matter of prime importance. Under such conditions, there is no scope for selective amnesia.

NEP and Culture in Meghalaya

By HH Mohrmen

One of the different approaches in NEP 2020 is that the policy lays very strong emphasis on using local language and culture while also providing learners with a global perspective. The attempt is to provide students with wings while also helping them understand their roots, or where they come from. It is not known if the government has done anything in this connection, but as a person interested in culture, here are my two cents opinion on the topic.

The tribal communities of Meghalaya, which constitute the major part of the state's population, are at a crossroads in their journey to progress and development. They are being pulled in two directions. On one hand, they have their tribal culture and traditions, which are like roots forming their identity, and on the other hand, the influence of modern or Western culture, which cannot be avoided. One glaring example of that change is the family system, which has shifted from joint families to nuclear families across different communities.

Indigenous Values

Traditional values common to all tribal communities in the state include living a morally upright life, fostering a caring and sharing community, and maintaining a close relationship with nature. This value system is intricately woven into people's way of life and embodies the three cardinal principles of 'ka tip brieu tip blei', which literally translates to 'know man, know god.' 'Ka tip kur tip kha,' and 'ka kamai ia ka hok,' meaning live righteously, and respect one's relations on both the father's and mother's side of the family. The general purpose of tribal life also stands on the principle of 'ka bhalang uba bun balang' or 'ka bhalang ka imlang,' which translates to 'common good or well-being of all.'

The tribes also consider nature or the earth their mother (mei ramew), and it is the dwelling place of 'ki ryngkaw ki basa' or the deities of nature. Preserving sacred forests is one evident manifestation of this connection, but the lives of the people are, in fact, intricately linked with nature. They consider rivers and mountains their gods; hence, the relationship is much more profound than mere respect for nature. As the saying goes, 'they live in nature and nature lives in them.'

Unfortunately, despite society having this rich culture and traditions, the same has never been considered part of the curriculum to teach children. Perhaps this is the reason why people are not only losing their culture but, sadly, also becoming disconnected from their roots.

Loss of Culture is Loss of Identity

The reason is, to this day, the school syllabi in the state focuses only on learning reading, writing, and arithmetic and has no space for learning indigenous values. If one looks at the current state of affairs in the community, we are in this situation because we have not only lost our connection with nature but, more importantly, with our values. We are becoming a selfish lot, working to amass wealth for oneself and fooling people for selfish interests. If our children and youths go astray, the elders need to ask themselves if we have become good role models for them. The fact of the matter is that we have distanced ourselves from our own value systems. These value systems are, in fact, the guiding principles or moral compass of how one is supposed to live one's life, but they have been neglected and ignored. Hence, there is an immediate need to inculcate these indigenous values among the younger generation.

Living a Morally Upright Life

The Khasi people place a high priority on 'kamai ia ka hok,' meaning to live a righteous life or to attain righteousness. When interacting with other people and other society members, this principle should be upheld. One is required to act righteously when dealing with anybody and to only seek what is right in one's life. One is also expected to live as per the moral and ethics as enshrined in the tribal culture.

In tribal culture, everyone in the community is required to live a morally upright lifestyle. One of the basic moral tenets of the Hynfrew Trep Society, which is made up of the Khasi, the Pnar, the War, the Bhol, the Lynggam, and others, is the phrase 'ka tip brieu tip blei,' which literally translates as 'know man, know god.' However, 'tip-brieu' or 'uba im tip-brieu' can also refer to someone who is courteous, polite, or well-mannered. Living ac-

ording to the 'ka tip hok, tip sot' principle, which means to know and do only what is right and true, is another ideal in the society. Living 'with propriety and honor, referred to as 'ban im don akor, don burom,' in Khasi, is the ideal of a perfect life in the society.

The Hynfrew Trep People hold the spoken word in the highest regard. Once a commitment has been made, one is required to 'ban bat ia ka nia ka jutang,' or hold sacred the words that one has uttered. The expression, 'ka jingkoror ka shikyntien ka hok' (literally, 'the honour of the single word of truth'), which similarly refers to maintaining the honour of the spoken word, is another illustration that conveys the value of the spoken word. The expression 'u thylliej ksiar thylliej rupa,' which symbolizes the tongue that helps a person speak words that are as precious as silver and gold, also serves as an example of keeping one's word or upholding one's commitments. Spoken words are valued equally to gold and silver in tribal customs and practices.

The Hynfrew Trep Society places great importance on the clan; it is the foundation of each member's life and heavily influences how they interact with the community. A tribal is recognized by the clan to which he/she belongs, and this recognition extends beyond the surname they use after their name. In most cases when people introduce themselves, they will start with, 'phi naka jait aiu?' meaning 'to which clan do you belong?' Hence in tribal societies, relationships extend beyond the family to include the clan as well. 'Ka tip kur tip kha,' which translates to 'respect one's relations on both the father's and mother's side,' defines the value that has to do with how one maintains relationships.

Caring and Giving Society

People care for each other in the society of the indigenous people of Meghalaya. The ultimate goal of every human life is to strive for the happiness of the mass in the spirit of 'one for all and all for one.' The general tenet of indigenous way of life shared by all is, 'ka bhalang uba bun balang' or 'ka bhalang ka imlang' which translates to 'common good or well-being of all.' The best example of this is how people interact

with one another in society. It permeates every aspect of a person's life when one interacts with society. It is also ironic that this human tendency manifests itself when there is bereavement in the society. When someone dies, the entire community stands to share their sorrow and minimize the hardship the family has to go through. The visit is also intended to comfort and console the family during their difficult time. The pursuit of the common good or the welfare of all is the community's ultimate goal and it manifest in the other aspect of the society too.

Deep-rooted relationship with Mother Nature

The indigenous people of Meghalaya also refer to nature or the Earth as their mother (mei ramew/Bei ramaw), the giver, the nurturer, and one who takes care of all creations. The 'ki ryngkaw ki basa' or nature deities that reside in the natural world are what make nature a sacred site. They have a strong connection to nature and consider rivers and mountains as gods and deities. They create tales about their lives and incorporate rivers, hills, mountains, animals, and even local natural phenomena in these stories. Most rivers, mountains, and other natural phenomena have stories of their own, if not worshipped as deities.

They also accept animals and other things as equal beings, and man is not the lord over all beings. In most of the tribal folktales, animals are not treated as lesser but equal to humans. In Hynfrew Trep society, celestial bodies are seen as being on par with terrestrial beings, and tales of the interactions between humans, animals, and celestial beings are found in abundance.

These are some of the living principles that people hold in high respect, and every tribe member is expected to uphold moral principles and ethical standards in daily life. Tribal culture places a high value on character, and 'ban im ka jingim badon burom,' which means leading an honorable life, is the definition of the ideal life.

There are other indigenous tenets of life, but these are major principles that are common among all the tribes of Meghalaya. They may have different ways of expressing the values, but these values are practiced by the Khasi or the Hynfrew Trep people. The question is how the Government is going to incorporate these elements in the syllabus.

Religion and Politics debate

By VK Lyngdoh

The editorial "Religion & Politics debate" (ST 23rd March 2024) is timely and appropriate. Karl Marx, the 19th-Century philosopher and founder of Marxism, had a distinct view on the relationship between religion and politics. He famously referred to religion as "the soul of soulless conditions" or "the opium of the people." According to him religion exists in a world of exploitation and serves as both an expression of distress and a protest against real suffering. In other words, religion persists due to oppressive social conditions. When these conditions change, religion will become unnecessary.

Marx saw religion as a form of protest by the working classes against their economic hardships and alienation. It reflects the suffering of the oppressed and acts as a heart in a heartless world and a soul in a soulless condition. In his critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1843), Marx stated, "Man makes religion, religion does not make man." He argued that religion is a product of human society, shaped by material conditions and social structures. Marxist-Leninists view modern religions as "organs of bourgeois reaction," used for the "exploitation and stupefaction of the working class." Marxist governments in the 20th century, such as the Soviet Union and China, implemented state atheism. Marx's perspective on religion and politics emphasizes its connection to social conditions, protest and struggle against oppression. His idea continues to shape discussions on secularism and the role of religion in society.

As far as India is concerned, it is factually correct that the word 'secular' was inscribed into the constitution of India through the 42nd Amendment in 1975. However, the motivation behind this inclusion is multifaceted and has been debated over the years. While some argue that it was a genuine commitment to secularism, others contend that it was influenced by political considerations, including appealing to the minority vote bank. The context of the Emergency period and the political dynamics of that time played a role in shaping this constitutional change. Regardless of the intent, the term 'secular' remains a fundamental aspect of India's constitutional identity, emphasizing the country's commitment to equal treatment of all citizens, irrespective of their religious affiliations. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has stressed that 'secularism' lies in the principle of 'Sabka saath, sabka vikas' (Development for all). According to him the party does not discriminate based on religion, caste or community.

In India, the intersection of religion and politics significantly influences electoral dynamics. During elections, political parties often tailor their messaging to appeal to specific religious communities. The choice of candidates, campaign promises, and rhetoric may vary based on religious affiliations. In the 17th Lok Sabha Parliamentary election 2019, voting patterns varied significantly by religious groups. Hindus, nearly half voted for the Bharatiya Janata Party while Congress was the top choice among Muslims, Christians and Sikhs. Congress received 30% of the Muslim votes while the BJP received 19% of their votes. 33% of Sikhs favoured the Congress and 19% for the BJP. The BJP secured 29% of the Buddhist votes and Congress received 24% of their votes. Hindus often perceive their religious and national identities as closely intertwined.

Speaking Hindi and being Hindu are seen as essential markers of Indian identity. This connection influences political choices and voting behaviour. Among Hindus, voting preference varies across regions. In the south, only 19% of Hindus voted for the BJP, compared to around two-thirds in the northern and central parts of India who supported the ruling party. Regional cultural context and historical factors play a role in shaping these variations. Political parties mobilize religious sentiments to consolidate their power base. They organise rallies, religious events, and temple visits to connect with voters. Religious leaders endorse candidates and influence their followers' voting decisions.

Appeals to nationalism often intersect with religious narratives. Leaders emphasize the protection of religious and cultural heritage. Hindutva, a Hindu nationalist ideology unlike Sanatana Dharma, has been influential in Indian politics. The Supreme Court ruled that politicians cannot seek votes based on caste, creed or religion. This landmark decision aims to prevent the misuse of religious sentiments during elections. However, religion remains a potent force in Indian politics, shaping electoral strategies, voter behaviour and national identity. Balancing secularism and religious diversity remains an ongoing challenge for the world's largest democracy.

Religion and politics, two powerful forces that shape societies, have a complex relationship. Let us explore different perspectives. Religious rhetoric played a significant role in the United States of America. In 2016, evangelical voters contributed to Donald Trump's victory, with over 55 percent of weekly churchgoers supporting him. Joe Biden, on the other hand, drew fellow Catholics to his camp. End-times rhetoric has also been prominent. Leaders have rallied adherents through apocalyptic language, emphasizing the stakes of political decisions. Combining religion and politics can lead to consequences that harm societal harmony. These two realms are fundamentally different and should not be intertwined. Merging politics and religion blurs the lines of what is acceptable and what is not. Religion, which appeals to our better angels, can lose its moral clarity when entangled with political agendas. Some individuals find it beneficial to balance their religious convictions with their political views. For example, Senator Mitt Romney cited prayer as a major factor in his decision to vote for the impeachment of President Donald Trump.

In conclusion, whether it is prudent to mix religion and politics remains a matter of perspective. While some argue for separation, others find value in integrating their beliefs. As we approach the general election to the 18th Lok Sabha 2024, these dynamics will continue to shape the political landscape in our country. In his iconic Gettysburg address, Abraham Lincoln uttered the now-famous quote: "Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the Earth." These words encapsulate the essence of democracy and serve as a reminder of the fundamental principles on which nations are built: the power and authority lie with the citizens. Essentially this quote emphasizes the importance of a government system that is accountable to its people, represents their interests, and works for their benefit.

Letters to the Editor

Supporting teenagers: Role of school counselors

Editor,
I am writing in response to the letter by Debaraj Chakraborty, (ST March 18, 2024), highlighting the need for support for teenagers. I wholeheartedly agree with the sentiments expressed and wish to underscore the critical role of school counselors in addressing the challenges faced by teenagers.

School counselors are uniquely suited to help teenagers navigate the complexities of adolescence - emotional, academic, and social. They provide a safe space for students to discuss their concerns and receive guidance.

Counselors play a crucial role in improving student well-being. They can identify and address mental health issues early on, assist students in setting goals, managing academic pressure, and making informed choices about their education. Additionally, they teach social skills, promote healthy habits, and work towards preventing bullying.

Including school counselors in education isn't merely adding an extra resource; it's an investment in our youth's

future. By equipping students with the tools to overcome challenges, we empower them to lead healthier and happier lives.

Therefore, I urge policymakers and school administrators to recognize the vital role of counselors and ensure all schools have these professionals. Together, we can create a supportive environment where teenagers can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Yours etc.,
Pankaj Kumar
Shillong

Khasi community & traditional faith practitioners

Editor,
The article, "Why the CAA is still a danger for everyone in the North East, by Bhogtoram Mawroh (ST March 23, 2024) in one of the paragraphs mentions, 'Personally, I believe such Christians are more Khasi than those traditional faith practitioners who want to break the community.' My understanding is that when the writer says "Christians," he is referring to the Khasi people practising the Christian faith and traditional faith practitioners to be the Khasi practising Niam Khasi and

to the Pnar people practising the Niamtre. He blamed the Niam Khasi and Niamtre practitioners for wanting to break the Khasi community. If so, he should please give examples. I do not agree with his views of blaming the Niam Khasi and Niamtre practitioners for dividing the community.

In fact, the Niam Khasi and Niamtre practitioners belong to the same community "The Khasi Community/The Hynfrew-Trep Community." We are brothers and sisters and we hold on to our culture (religious beliefs, religious practices, religious dances, lineage and kinship, traditional beliefs and traditional practices). So, I believe we are far more Khasi, and we love our community, and we love to do good for our community.

Yours etc.,
Wallambi Rani,
Upper Shillong

Rise of the Billionaire Raj

Editor,
On the alarming findings in the report, 'Income and Wealth Inequality in India 1992 - 2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj' which has recently been published by the Paris based World Inequality Lab, the editorial, "India shining?" (ST, March 22,

2024), has rightly said, "The loot brigade, be it business sharks, politicians in power or the bureaucrats, from the cream of the society enjoy their lives. India is shining for such people only!"

According to the report, inequality in India declined till the early 1980s. Thereafter, it started rising and skyrocketed since the turn of the century. However, the rise of top-end inequality has gained tremendous momentum during the last 10 years.

Now, the top 1 percent of Indians earn 22.6 per cent of the national income and their wealth share has risen to 40.1 per cent. The income share of the top 1 percent of Indians is among the very highest in the world, higher than even South Africa, Brazil and the United States of America. The report says that India is now more unequal than during the time of the British Raj headed by the colonialist forces.

While at one end, the number of underfed people in our country is one billion as per the UN estimation; at the other end India has more billionaires than many developed countries. According to the data from the World of Statistics, India is home to 169 billionaires - the third highest in the world after the USA (735) and China (495). India, where over a billion people could not afford a healthy diet, has

more billionaires than developed countries like Germany (126), Russia (105), Italy (64), Canada (63), UK (52), Australia (47) and Japan (40).

Manmohan Singh once said, "India happens to be a rich country inhabited by very poor people." It highlighted the contrast between our resources and poverty. The time has come to say that India happens to be a country of very poor people inhabited by many billionaires. It will highlight a glaring inequality which has been created after the 1980s and has further been widened in the last ten years.

The Inequality Lab has prescribed a restructuring of the tax policies for both income and wealth as well as a broad-based public investment in health, education and nutrition. It said that a "super-tax" of 2 per cent on the net wealth of the 167 wealthiest families in 2022-23 would yield 0.5 per cent of the national income in revenues and create valuable fiscal space to facilitate such investments.

Contrary to the prescription to levy more tax on the super rich, write-off of huge amounts of bank loans has been done for some rich businessmen without much ado, while subsidies to the poor are being ridiculed as freebies. Instead of broad-

based public investment in education and health sectors, privatisation of key sectors has become a fashionable choice for the policy makers. This has hijacked quality education and health from the common people.

India needs to rectify its economic policy to have equitable growth. Banks should sanction more micro-loans for farming, cottage and small enterprises that can mainly generate employment and less NPA-generating macro-credits. Moreover, the poor who are reeling from high inequality, rising inflation and nagging unemployment must not be further burdened with GST. GST should exist only on luxury and non-essential goods. But essential goods must have zero GST.

A lopsided growth cannot be durable in the long run. It is like building a trillion dollar house of cards. Moreover, inequality gives rise to human rights violations. Inequality and poverty not only cause stagnation in the market but also lower the quality of the workforce in skill and health.

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

"There is no darkness but ignorance."

— William Shakespeare

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 224 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, MARCH 26, 2024

BJP's pragmatic move

POLITICAL parties don't just fight elections to make a point. They fight to win and the BJP's national vice president and Meghalaya in-charge, M Chuba Ao is correct in stating that the BJP would not waste resources in states where it is unlikely to win and there are about 164 seats in the country where the party had been contesting but had not won in the past. This is a strategic step taken by a Party that is determined to win every seat it puts up candidates from. Besides, the NPP is an ally of the BJP and has proven to be a reliable ally at that. For the BJP, it's better that a seat or several seats go to allies rather than the Congress. This is the second term that the NPP has aligned with the BJP in the state. Chuba Ao has stated upfront that the two seats in Meghalaya – the Shillong and Tura parliamentary seats are among the weak seats. The highest number of votes that the BJP secured in the Shillong seat was 95,000 while the second highest was around 75,000 votes. Similarly in Tura, the BJP got only around 33,000 votes. The BJP leadership states that the vote share had not increased in the last Assembly elections. What Chuba Ao stated categorically and it is something that the state BJP leadership should be introspecting on is that if the BJP contests then the votes might split between the NPP and BJP and the Congress might just slip through. Without the BJP contesting the NPP votes would be consolidated. BJP supporters would also be told to support the NPP candidates in both seats.

Other than empty rhetoric Chuba Ao has spoken directly that the BJP's withdrawal from the electoral race in Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram is mainly to keep the Congress in check. There is no place for political one-upmanship in elections. Strategic action and realistic calculations matter for a party that is determined to rule the country for the third term irrespective of the grubby electoral bond scheme, the abuse of security agencies like the CBI and ED to go after political rivals and several other unsavoury tactics. The BJP National Vice President seems to know the tribal mind better than most when he said that there may be resentment among party workers for a few days for not setting up candidates for the two Lok Sabha seats but they will soon get over it. Spoken like a real leader!

The BJP in Meghalaya has suffered a leadership vacuum. A leader is known for his/her outstanding qualities and the ability to lead. In the past and even the present the BJP leadership in Meghalaya leaves a lot to be desired. It is not known as to what the criteria set by the BJP is to head its party in the states but in Meghalaya the BJP seems to have erred repeatedly in nominating/electing a state president when there are more capable people waiting in the wings! Or is it a case of choosing a leader that passes the trial by fire test. The BJP central leadership would know best!

Once upon a time, as indigenous people we were cultureless; the only culture we had centred on was on life, living life as guided by conscience. Anyone wearing a human form is considered divine irrespective of life-style led, personal beliefs, natural endowments. None has the authority to paint another as good, bad, holy, spiritual, "ba riwblei" religious, and so on. If one replies to one of the above as in, "Am I bad because you say I'm bad?" that's the time to reflect into one's own nature of existence. In the era we are living now it would have been, "Ki Khun Ka Blei"/"Ki Khon Ka Blai (the children of the Goddess Creator). This is no romanticizing the past; it's a reality every human soul is longing for, striving for; many have died for, burnt at the stakes for it. This is the goal of humanity, in mind, heart, and soul - towards freedom, towards discovering the real nature of our existence. The ancestors did strive for the "im suk-im tngen" (living life in contentment) - The good done, was done as a duty. To expect rewards for such acts from fellow humans, and higher beings is known as "ar sur", "ba sianti" "hypocrisy, slyness". They are breezy terms, but the underlying meaning penetrates into the last atom of the spiritual constitution.

The air has changed. Now, we have fallen from that grace it seems. One can't imagine that even before receiving treatment in a government hospital, CHC, school admission etc, one has to inform one's religion. So one realizes that being a "non-christian", is an insinuation that "one has to be a Christian. My wife and I are christened, yet as a free thinker, I'm caught in a dilemma to give the bio-data of my children as to where to fit them since they have no religion. I dare not opt for "Khasi" for I consider the Christians also as Khasis. Why do we have to carry this unnecessary burden of having to know what they are when just living life is our Divine right! We neither know we are alive except when about to drown. What a burden! When Christians are persecuted in the world, we unitedly raise our voices, or pray as if prayer is all that the earth needs; but wars, sufferings do seem to multiply. How can this be? The truth we know is that even if all the angels from heaven pray, nothing will change; the change lies in the subject, in us. For how long shall we keep on blaming the devil when the court of law has never entertained such stories? Don't we have the temerity to say that the

Evils of Religious Fundamentalism

By Iasaid Khongjee

problem is because of our insanity, and not with the gods? Who will cure us of this disease?

What lurks in the mind of a fanatic? The great philosopher, Swami Vivekananda once hinted at a fanatic as one who wants to straighten the world; but the world will never be straightened. This is the way of the world. We may all have been one, once upon a time, but fanatics never give up their way, for they think that their way is the only way. In this kind of environment there is no discussion, debate, on critical issues that matter. The ones with divergent views are either silenced, or have to recant their statement like Galileo, but sans his "eppur si moe". Here in our State, God is the source of this evil. Either you wear a strait-jacket or face the cold. The situation generated by our insanity makes us volatile creatures; where the heart and mind are belligerent. We blatantly call our State a Christian State; the disease lies deep down somewhere. We created a fantasy where we surround ourselves with little ideas of the ever-loving God but who punishes us for the smallest of mistakes. We cannot think for one moment of being able to manage our lives without his grace, but the social, political values we practise show that something is horrendously wrong. It's indoctrination; if not, what is it?

In educational institutions, Assembly prayers are in "English, a foreign language which is not in one's blood." How come one can effectively communicate in a language which is not part of the being, other than to our inner being, such as in prayer? Is it not an externalization of the one who we call an immanent? Our ancestors call this immanent "Ka Hukum" (the universal law that governs the ontological function of existents in the cosmos from within, so as to sustain Nature according to the eternal design). Now the biggest challenge which we must be wary of is the word "Niam". The reason is that this word is fraught with fanaticism, for as of now it applies to us.

In our having been brainwashed we dogmatically brand others as pagans, heathens irrespective of the values they live by. There are saints, philanthropists, cosmopolitans in iconoclasts, atheists, and others, but to a religious fanatic, these are nothing more than the shadow of evil; demonization. I nearly drowned in this little puddle.

We can make a pilgrim-

age to all holy places but come back home with mere stories of the sights and the journey but with no mental, or spiritual transformation. We may know the life stories of saints, Jesus, Buddha et al but who desires to emulate them? Words are mere words. We still make the pilgrimage to 2000 years plus to the man who stood by the weak, the downtrodden, the ones considered as the pariah of society, but what change do we see? Instead, we choose to enslave ourselves to the little self-made beliefs; the lesser the education, the higher is the level of superstition. One would not be wrong to say that a potential Afghanistan is here; but for the fact that we don't carry guns.

Another is Traditional Fundamentalism - the Dorbar Shnong. In essence, the Dorbar of the Khasis is all about -ka synshar hok-bishar hok, (doing justice according to its position). (Ka jingfa ngam um by J Bachiarello in "Ki Dienjat Ki Longshuwa) speaks of this Divine justice. In some indigenous villages this still applies. This is the sanctity of the traditional indigenous village council (Dorbar). That's why people, before speaking, say a prayer "Ia kaba dei to ia bat, ia kaba lait, ia bret" (if my statement is right, hold it, let the wrong be discarded). Why this? In those days, one who dogmatically stands by a belief which is not in tune with the general good, however convincing it may sound to him, must forgo it before the Council. Metaphysical consequence is a reward for obstinacy and it's the most feared thing. This means that everyone who represents the people of the village or cluster of villages through his words, must primarily mortgage his life in his statement. In case one asks the speaker - "Do you say that what you said is true, and is binding on this Dorbar as truth?" This question entails that one must think a thousand times. In this, is the progressiveness involved in the tradition where Justice, as a Divine entity, is above every mortal human. Do Justice to who one represents! Now the question arises: what if the Dorbars (made up of women also) can do the required justice? The males who still worship tradition, must think a thousand times! We can't reduce a progressive tradition to a mere tradition. If males can deliver the goods, that's their duty; if they can't, they must find ways and means to see that the commons participate in the goodwill. Asking women to do the digging

of the graves, just because they want to be on par with men in the Dorbar, is sheer stupidity. The sole aim of our Khasi tradition is about the common good, through the divine justice system. This common good is the only law understood by the cosmic law of tradition. Our Divine healers breathe the refreshing air of the efficacy of Tradition from the same Law. Take this knowledge away from us and all our traditions are mere symbolism.

As indigenous people, we never had a religion as an institution. Life was taken as a desire of the essence of the universe that it manifests according to the design. Thus, we only had clan-based religions where we employed the god/spirits to preserve life in those critical times of existence. Some of these gods are of human origin such as the spirits of ancestors; others are at how they understand the innate potentials of how to employ the gods who have the authority to preserve life, such as "ki Ryngkew-Basa"/Ryngkaw-Wasa.

The above derives its validity from what ancestry says- "Na U Nongthaw ym don eiei shuh kaba dang duna; kaba sah ia u brieve ka long sa tang ban ia im palei para bynriew" (There's nothing wanting from the Creator, what's left of man is only to live in peace and harmony among fellow humans and co-existents). This implies that we, by design, are born perfect children of bliss as long as we practise the fundamental duties in consonance with our social, spiritual duties while living this physical existence. It sounds rather iconoclastic, but that is the culture of the Khasis. Take this away from us as a culture, and we are no different from the "God-fear mongering tribe".

The test left for us now is - whether we want ourselves to be seen as a people who prime on a "way of life according to ancestral philosophy", or as a people who would mentally spiritually negate what we have participated since the beginning of creation (from Ka Dorbar Blei/the Divine Council). When will we say, "I am responsible for all the wrongs taking place in my inner being and in the world! Yes, we can. We are now electrified with the touch of education. We can transcend to a truth higher than what we used to have been living by.

(Iasaid Khongjee teaches at St John Bosco Boys Higher Secondary School, Sohra. The views expressed in the article are those of the author, and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any person, organization or particular institution)

Elections amid a darkness like never before

By Jagdish Rattanani

"When the world sleeps," Jawaharlal Nehru said, "India will awake to light and freedom". More than 75 years from that momentous occasion on Aug. 15, 1947, when we should be celebrating how that light and freedom nourished us and made us proud citizens of a nation that stands tall on the values we may cherish, India has slipped into a very different phase. It is painful and it may not be inappropriate to say at this stage that darkness descends as freedom is being robbed,

cal parties they will set up as their instruments to carry out their wishes and their politics. Who can say how the people of India and their parties will behave?"

The next day, November 26, 1949, Dr. Rajendra Prasad echoed those sentiments: "If the people who are elected are capable and men of character and integrity, they would be able to make the best even of a defective constitution. If they are lacking in these, the constitution cannot help

democracy is being crushed and India is sleepwalking into a collapse.

The collapse is not sudden; it has been coming for some time now in the face of a creeping capture of institutions, key individuals and agencies who have all in one way or another been forced to bow to one thinking, one party, one ideology. The hunt is on for more spaces to capture, powered by one large and well-fed propaganda machine manufactured by the one party that wishes every opposition out of sight and out of mind. This has all the all marks of an invasion.

The arrest of Arvind Kejriwal, the highest elected official of the Delhi government, it bears repeating, by an agency that has zero credibility and works more like the handmaidens of the government in power and is in all probability sold on the ruling party's political agenda, is only one telling example of just how much of pressure is being mounted to keep that one party in power and discredit all others. It is difficult to see how a fair election might be fought in 2024. The national mood was well summed up by the cartoon that showed all others in the race locked up, with just the incumbent in the field, and then the question, half in jest: "Who is winning?". At this stage, all bets are off and we are in icy waters. We may yet reach ashore safely but the risk of hypothermia is particularly high.

Nehru told us: "A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance." Today, that line might read: "A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step back from the new and sink into the dark ages, and when the soul of a nation, that at last found utterance, is once again suppressed. We know not how this soul, tortured, tormented, crushed, will hold out for a day when India may bloom again and regain the values and the spirit of the constitution, which however fine a document, eventually depends on the integrity of the people who are meant to safeguard it.

The dangers were always there, and were indeed articulated in so many words. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, speaking on 25Nov1949, one day before the Constituent Assembly passed the Constitution, sounded the warning loud and clear: "I feel, however good a Constitution may be, it is sure to turn out bad because those who are called to work it, happen to be a bad lot... The factors on which the working of (the) organs of the State are the people and the politi-

the country. Afterall, a constitution like a machine, is a lifeless thing. It acquires life because of the men who control it and operate it, and India needs nothing more than a set of honest men who will have the interest of the country before them... It requires men of strong character, men of vision, men who will not sacrifice the interests of the country... who will rise over prejudices."

Today, policy and its execution itself is about exercising prejudices. Some institutions are standing up, as in the case of the remarkable Supreme Court verdict by the five-judge constitution bench that struck down the electoral bonds scheme of 2018 and ordered that the details of who bought the bonds and who got the money be divulged. Yet, the desperation to stop this was so much that the largest nationalised bank of India, the State Bank of India, had the gall to file a junior officer's affidavit to ask the Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court to amend its order - asking for three months, no less, to release the data that was, as it turned out, readily available. It was naturally seen as a blatant attempt to keep the dirty secrets of the money trail and extortion of the ruling apparatus via the bonds from coming out before the elections. The affidavit was as good as false, because the data was eventually released to the deadline set by the SC. How does a bank lie to the SC in an affidavit on one of the most significant judgements of our time? How does the Income Tax initiate action and freeze funds of the Congress, one of the most significant political parties? How does a judge of the High Court take early retirement and immediately thereafter get a BJP ticket for the elections? How is it that a Governor has to be told by the Supreme Court to follow the Constitution and not stop an elected government from functioning?

The historian Arnold Toynbee who studied civilisational collapse told us that collapse comes not from invading forces, not from the outside but from a form of suicide. Societies in disintegration suffer from a "schism of the soul". We have an internal collapse. The biggest questions today are not how good the economy is, not who will win the elections, but questions on how does the nation stand up against forces that may well kill the spirit of India right from inside its most hallowed spaces and offices.

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

Letters to the Editor

What does being Khasi mean?

Editor,

It's always good to have someone respond to one's article because it gives one an opportunity to take the discussion forward. Wallambi Rani has alleged that in my previous article, "Why the CAA is Still a Danger for Everyone in the North East," I have accused traditional faith practitioners of breaking the community, i.e., the Khasi community, thus attempting to create animosity within the community. I would agree with him that, unless I had explained the sentence, "Personally, I believe such Christians are more Khasi than those traditional faith practitioners who want to break the community," in greater detail, that impression would not be unjustified. However, I am here to explain that I am not making a blanket statement about the traditional faith practitioners but only about those who believe that they are more Khasi than those who are not following the indigenous faith. That this kind of thinking

exists is in fact very evident from his own words, where he says, "So, I believe we are far more Khasi, and we love our community, and we love to do good for our community."

I have no doubts that Wallambi Rani has great love for his community and will always want its good. But I have an issue with the statement, "I believe we are far more Khasi," which suggests that there are others who are less Khasi. For me, when I said "more Khasi," it was with the intention of saying that religious affiliation is not the distinguishing mark of a person claiming to belong to the Khasi community. So, whether you are a Christian, Muslim (yes, there are Khasi Muslims), indigenous faith practitioner, or atheist (yes, there are Khasi atheists as well), if you follow the matrilineal customs and belong to a Kur, you are Khasi. Religion is not the criterion for identifying the community. Did Wallambi Rani also mean that all of the above are Khasi, and his use of the term "more Khasi" was a response to my use of the term? If that's the case, I am alright with it, but if he actually meant that those who don't follow

the indigenous faith are less Khasi, the observation I made in my article was about such people.

Perhaps in the future I will write a piece on the indigenous faith itself and discuss some of its practices and beliefs to understand how indigenous some of those actually are. The indigenous faith practiced today is most certainly different from what must have been practiced around 6,000 years ago, when our ancestors came from the East to this land and beyond. I believe our ancestors must have interacted with the inhabitants of the Late Harappan phase and could very well have been one of the groups residing within the boundaries of that ancient civilization. There is no strong evidence right now, but the dates and the presence of the Munda point to such a possibility. Is the indigenous faith practiced today in that original version? I doubt so, and some of the practices hint towards that. However, I am not going to make the case that, therefore, it should be discarded. Belief systems like any other component of the culture change with time, taking in new information and new ideas from

surrounding cultures. In the same way, people also change and adopt different faiths based on their personal tastes. In a few cases, some may decide that all faiths are nothing but a feeble attempt rife with inconsistencies to explain existence, and therefore they decide to leave it all. Faith or lack of faith is a personal choice. So, when and if we write the piece on indigenous faith, it will be to show that they cannot lay claim to being "more Khasi," or what we call Khasi paka. But maybe that is not what Wallambi Rani meant, and therefore it will not be necessary for me to write a counter response. Anyway, people can always do their own research, as all information on the subject is available in the public domain, and they can come to their own conclusions. Hence, I thank Wallambi Rani for the opportunity to clarify my statement.

Yours etc.,
Bhogtoram Mawroh,
Via email

Repressive use of the law

Editor,
Apropos of the editorial,

"Selective amnesia" (ST March 25, 2024) in today's India, democratically elected leaders and other leaders in different fields are being frequently taken into interrogational custody, without valid allegations against them being established first, before any judicial forum, through evidences and proofs. The logic behind doing so is that such leaders cannot be given any special treatment different from the ones meted out to ordinary citizens.

In this respect, the pertinent question is whether the deprivation of a citizen's personal liberty in the guise of interrogational custody, even before an iota of evidence is brought against him before any judicial forum, is in absolute contradiction of basic tenets of civilized behaviour in a progressive polity which India aspires to be? The question becomes more relevant in view of the facts that interrogation can be successfully conducted without taking a person into full custody; that powers to take persons in custody is often misused; that the rate of securing convictions with the system in vogue is abysmally low, and that this

practice of custodial interrogation during investigations is essentially a continuation of the suppressive techniques of the erstwhile British colonial regime here.

Last but not least, it can never be conclusively made clear that citizens are not being taken into custody with ulterior motives like political considerations or other self-interest objectives.

In recent times we have seen the criminal procedural laws being revisited, but the lawmakers totally ignored these very crucial aspects thereof. The only way for a suitable answer to emerge to these questions pertaining to the very essence of civilized existence in this country, seem to be through increasing levels of social consciousness through academic research and independent media interventions.

Yours etc.,
Subhasis Chakraborty,
Senior Advocate,
Shillong.

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

Poverty of aspirations

YOUTHS here are faced with a "poverty of aspirations," as a leading economist has bluntly put it. They have limited ambitions with the smartest among them spending much of their young life preparing for the civil services examinations to become an administrator while many end up as politicians. The youth should actually aim big and aspire to become innovators, entrepreneurs, like Elon Musk, Sachin Tendulkar, Mukesh Ambani or Binny Bansal (of Flipkart). This exhortation, a sad commentary on our times, comes from Sanjeev Sanyal, the leading economist and member of the prestigious Economic Advisory Council (EAC). As he notes, the youths today are rather fancying to be "local goon politicians" as in Bihar, or "pseudo-intellectuals and union leaders" as in West Bengal and Kerala or elsewhere.

The argument and reasons cited are well taken. What has worsened this scenario is the huge publicity that the print and visual media are giving to politicians – most of them semi-literates – while those who excel in fields of intellectual superiority like scientists, technocrats and even businessmen who rise sky-high from small beginnings, are ignored in terms of the daily load of "hero worship" or publicity. The Independence struggle brought up leaders who had a commitment to the society. The post-Independence era is rife with power-seekers and self-serving leaders. Those who engaged in street-fights won adulation and emerged as leaders, while those who had the brain power seldom survived in politics after the Nehruvian era. Today, the worse of the worst qualify to be leaders and people's representatives, either by way of flexing their muscles or by scheming their way up the political ladder. The nation suffers from a deficit of brain power to run its affairs. Even the upper house of Parliament, the Rajya Sabha, which was meant mainly to accommodate the best talents and brains, is progressively filled with those from the political ranks.

The craze among the brainy young folk to spend their valuable years in preparations to pass the civil services and become bureaucrats -- whose media-induced halo is next only to that of senior politicians -- is legion. They mug up "knowledge" to pass the examinations and enter fields that have nothing to do with the knowledge they supposedly acquired. The examination system itself is tuned to such a future for our youths. As a result, unlike in the old days, there is less of an obsession among the youth to try and excel in arts, sports or in technical fields. As Sanyal noted, had we not had this obsession to pass the civil service exams and the like, we would have had more Olympic Gold Medallists, innovators and entrepreneurs.

Passion week reflection: The way of the cross

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

"If anyone desires to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23)

With spring comes the passion and sufferings of Jesus Christ and the season is also associated with renewal and hope. During the season, Christians across nations remember the crucified Christ and reflect on lessons and sacrifices Jesus made for humanity. Against the backdrop of Zionist bombing on Gaza and the rise of aggressive Hindutva fascism let us ponder on the way of the cross and its teachings.

In the case of Gaza, millions of Palestinians are experiencing unbearable pain and irreplaceable loss due to abhorrent genocide. Similarly, in India we witness the aggression of religious fanatics and fascist elements. Thus, it is crucial to behold the core teachings of love and justice which Jesus had taught us. The way of the cross is to stand up and respond to injustices and oppression with courage and clarity of thought.

The way of the cross is not to pitch one religion against another or one group against the other, rather to learn and embrace each other's values, so that together we can build a more compassionate and peaceful world. However, recently the passage of the Healing (Prevention of Evil) Practices Act 2024 in the neighboring state of Assam, perhaps will make the life of minority Christians in the State difficult. It is not in the Christian tenet to perform magic and Christian churches never teach the believers the art of performing magic, rather Christianity engages with issues or problems (both spiritual and physical) and wrestles with them through intercessions and prayers. Prayers is the way of the cross and it provides solace, solidarity and comfort to the sick, destitute, slaves and exploited. But now to express such act seems to attract a penalty under the Anti Healing law.

Although the law has been sharply criticized by the Assam Christian Forum, the impending threat made by Hindu fanatic groups to Christian schools and the

harassment of the nun, is sending shock waves and fear amongst the minority groups. It is also likely to create discord, mistrust and reduce Christians to second class citizens. The targeted attacks against Christians and minorities in Assam should generate empathy and concern in Meghalaya. Although in Meghalaya, the majority Christians are living in comfort, the troubles and hardships faced by fellow Christians and minorities in neighboring Assam and elsewhere should be our burden too. Therefore, sharing the pain and burden of others is the way of the cross.

Even though one's tribal identity and ethos are far remote from the rest of the nation, the framers of the Constitution whose wisdom and commitment to constitutional values of justice, freedom and equality, were able to provide Constitutional guarantee and protect, especially linguistic and cultural minority groups, from being pushed to oblivion and to make India a home for every one irrespective of religion, race, color, sexual orientation, socio-economic class and political leanings. Nonetheless, there were dark alleys in the Constitution which the members of the Constituent Assembly managed to navigate through and to lay the foundational principles of liberty, equality and justice. Thus, for this sake this generation must reclaim these values and that's the way of the cross.

The debate surrounding the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in India is indeed complex and has generated concerns among various sections of society. It is crucial to approach this topic with empathy and understanding, acknowledging the apprehensions and fears of those who feel that the law is violative of human rights and disproportionately affects minority tribal and Muslim communities.

Moreover, the situation in Northeast India is undeniably complex, and the potential impact of the CAA on the demography of the region and its tribal communities

should be taken seriously. It is essential to consider the concerns of transborder communities, such as the Garos and Khasis in Bangladesh, in which a sizeable number of them are adherents of primal or traditional beliefs system (who are neither Hindus nor Christians), who may face persecution in a Muslim-majority country and struggle to relocate themselves with members of their own community in India. The CAA is discriminatory as it fails to guarantee the immigration of people outside the religions mentioned to India and only allows immigration on grounds of religion.

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has indeed raised concerns regarding its inclusiveness and adherence to human rights, particularly in the context of the Kuki-Zo community and the Rohingyas. By excluding these vulnerable groups from the amended citizenship law, the act appears to be in violation of the fundamental principles of fairness and compassion.

The Kuki-Zo community, like the Rohingyas, in Myanmar are facing persecution and displacement, and they should have access to safe havens and support systems. However, the CAA's exclusion of Myanmar as a country of origin for these refugees makes it challenging for them to seek refuge and connect with their kin in India. This situation not only goes against the values of the way of the cross but also contradicts the basic humanitarian principles of protecting and assisting those in need.

It is imperative to undo the CAA on the grounds that it discriminates and adversely impacts human rights and the well-being of displaced people. By adhering to the principles of empathy and understanding, we can work towards creating a new and robust immigration regime that prioritizes the protection and well-being of all vulnerable communities, regardless of their nationality or religious background. This approach aligns with the teachings of the way of the cross, which emphasizes the

importance of love, compassion and the inherent value of every human being.

Closer home the extensive usage and proof texting of the Christian Bible by the Voice of Peoples' Party (VPP) during electoral campaigns had raised eyebrows. The misuse of religious texts, such as the Bible, for political or economic gains or for behavioral control is indeed a concerning issue that can undermine the core values and principles these sacred texts represent. It is essential to recognize that throughout history the Bible had been misused by the oppressors/occupiers to justify their actions. The way of the cross serves as a reminder that Jesus stood with the marginalized and vulnerable, advocating for love, compassion, and justice.

To ensure that the call for clean politics and good governance is genuine, we must actively work towards dismantling hate and violence in all its forms and in our own backyard. This includes standing up for the vulnerable sections of society and promoting policies and initiatives that prioritize the well-being of not only one's own community, but others as well. By doing so, we can honour the teachings of the way of the cross and contribute to a more just and compassionate world.

Finally, what does the crucifixion of Jesus tell us today? In the words of Stanley J. Samartha, "The cross stands at the intersection where religion of politics and politics of religion meet each other to conspire against a lonely sentinel of truth and righteousness. In a chain of bribery (hate, targeted violence, discrimination) and corruption an honest person will either succumb to temptation or if he remains honest, he will be thrown out. Anyone who voluntarily defies the conspiracy of power structures... anyone who voluntarily, against all friendly advice, dares to expose the conspiracy of evil in high places ends up on the cross. The death of Jesus was not a spiritual suicide. It was a painful, physical death, a voluntary death on the way to the obedience to the will of God."

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Learning to Be Secular.!! A rather ugly episode happened that made me think deep into the subject of respecting other religions. A secular choir in Bombay, one of the oldest in India, suddenly had a piquant situation. They were invited to sing for a program which was in praise to a particular god. The committee immediately accepted with the exception of one lone member who said that his community, which formed the major part of the choir, but was represented in a minuscule way in the committee, could not sing.

"Why?" one of the committee members asked, "We sing in your churches don't we? We sing your hymns and classics?"

"Yes, that's because your religion doesn't forbid you to do so, mine does!"

"We are a secular choir, so we should sing anything!" they said.

"Secularism," he replied, "Doesn't mean that we all believe in the same thing. On the contrary secularism means understanding other religions and existing together knowing and following a common minimum program, where

But it's the passion week, and my eyes turn to the cross, on which is nailed a bloodied, dying man, a crown of sharp thorns pressed into his head. I look at Him, muttering words, words that some mumble when nearing death, and in my mind I rush to the cross, to hear what He mumbles. But I am too late, and the words have stopped. "What did He say?" I ask a Roman soldier nearby. "I don't know," he laughs.

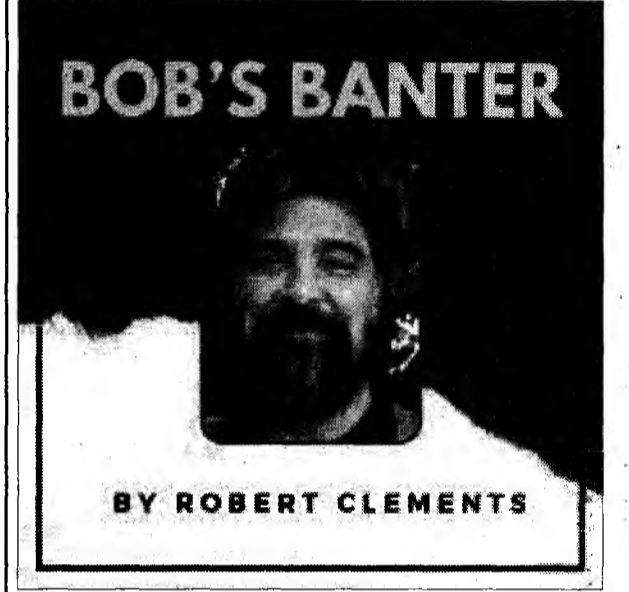
"What did He say?" I ask another, who is gambling for Christ's robe at the foot of the cross, "What did the Son of God say?" Another soldier looks up at me and there is confusion in His eyes, "He said, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do!'"

I look at the man on the cross, and tears well up in my eyes, and start streaming down, "He was explaining to His father to forgive you for what you are doing to Him?" I whisper.

"Why?" asks the bewildered soldier.

"Because He knows that you do so, without realising what you are doing!"

I move away from the



the beliefs of others are not trampled upon, and where the commonality is celebrated together!" We need to understand this in a multi religious society like our country.

I have two close friends, one a Muslim and the other

and come back two thousand years to the present, and start thinking of what I'd been writing about, what would Jesus have said?

"How could I have called him or her a hypocrite?" I ask myself, "Because each of

When we don't understand this method, and make judgements only based on what we do, or how we adjust, then begins the crumbling of relationships, crumbling of a choir, crumbling also of a country!

a Brahmin. We love each other's company and go out for a meal quite often. One doesn't eat meat, the other doesn't eat pork and I eat most anything. Now just because I can eat a vegetarian meal and a meal with pork, does that mean that I tell them that they also should eat what I eat, which means everything? No, we go to a restaurant, where none of us feel uncomfortable, and what benefits is our friendship.

When we don't understand this method, and make judgements only based on what we do, or how we adjust, then begins the crumbling of relationships, crumbling of a choir, crumbling also of a country!

But now I'm going to move even deeper. Even as we need to study the religions of others, we need to study that of our own. I was amazed to see a few people in that same choir who were practising the penances and sacrifices of Lent, showing their willingness to sing in praise of a god that was forbidden in their religion.

"It doesn't matter!" they said, looking painfully hurt, because they had fasted the full day, "I am secular!"

"No," I said in my mind, "You are a hypocrite, plain and simple!"

And just suppose they had heard me, I'm sure they would have asked, "How am I one? I am just doing this so that I am not labelled a bigot!"

"You will never be labelled a bigot for following what your religion teaches you to do," I would have said, "But when you can practise, your beliefs within the closed doors of your home, and practise another set of beliefs with a group so you will be accepted, then you are a hypocrite, aren't you?"

them who practise maybe the rituals of Lent and then break the commandments of God, do so because they have no idea what they are doing, and then my mind goes deeper, to those who are imposing their majority views on a minority, "What would Jesus have done?"

And I hear a voice whispering in my ear, "I was a minority Bob, on that Cross, and yet I forgave them. You need to forgive them for the same!"

"Then when will they ever learn, Lord, with the decisions they are imposing on us?" I ask angrily.

"When you forgive them, and that blind anger vanishes from your mind. When you forgive them, and understand why they think that way, then will come to you the language of love, that will win their hearts over!" whispers the Man on the cross.

A man died on the cross two thousand years ago, because He was a minority in his beliefs, but with His forgiveness, came a language of love that has made what He preached then, the beliefs of a world-wide majority today!

Even as we argue in futility using logical words which may fail, try to understand their inability to comprehend and forgive, and through that forgiveness, will develop the language of love, that sweeps all arguments aside like a tsunami. A language which is actually a living language of how you live your life, with love towards one another, not hatred and anger.

Then will people learn what it means to be secular! (The Author conducts an Online Writers and Speakers Course. For more details send a thumbs-up to him on WhatsApp 9892572883 or bobsbanter@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

Eager to know names of traditional faith practitioners

Editor, Bhogtaram Mawroh, in his letter to the editor, "What does being Khasi mean?" (ST March 26, 2024), did not give the exact clarification that was solicited vide my letter "Khasi community & traditional faith practitioners" (ST March 25, 2024). I had requested the writer to give "examples" of "those traditional faith practitioners who want to break the community." I am keen to know the "names" of those traditional faith practitioners who want to break the community (The Khasi community) or the "names" of groups/associations/organizations that the practitioners are associated with. It seems that Mawroh has the names, and hence he should share those with the readers to bring about clarity.

Yours etc., Wallambiing Rani, Upper Shillong

Burning the CAA documents unwarranted

Editor, Some incidents where copies of the CAA were publicly burnt are troubling. Some parts of the North East including our State of Meghalaya participated in this act. It is highly condemnable. Such action by few individuals and groups against a law which has been duly passed by the

Parliament of our country appears nothing short of a criminal act and due cognizance needs to be taken by the district administration and law enforcing authorities against the perpetrators. In a democracy, every citizen or any organization has the right to protest but the course of protest should also be democratic and within the ambit of law. The opponents of CAA are at liberty to approach the judiciary, scrap the law by voting out the Government that brought the legislation and adopt other democratic means of protest in order to annul the legislation. But burning copies of the law is nothing but complete disrespect and blatant violation of the Constitution of our country. In future, if any individual or organization publicly burns the copy of the Sixth Schedule of our Constitution terming it as biased towards some groups and discriminatory towards others and demands its scrapping, will the State machinery remain a mute spectator and not take any legal action against the protesters as they are now?

Yours etc., N K Kehar, Via email

Secularism an intrinsic facet of Indian democracy

Editor, In the article, "Religion and Politics debate" (ST, March 25, 2024), VK Lyngdoh rightly said, "the term 'secular' remains a fundamental aspect of India's constitutional identity". Unfortunately, some people have been trying to banish the word - 'secular' from our

Constitution by spreading half-truths. They argue that since this word was not there in the original Constitution, it should not be a part of it.

It is true that this word was incorporated by the 42nd Amendment Act in 1976. But in no way can it be suggested that secularism was not a part of our original Constitution. This is a false propaganda based on half-truths. Articles 25 to 30 bear testimony to the fact that secularism has been embedded in the original Constitution.

Yours etc., Sujit De, Kolkata

Kudos to MPSC!

Editor, I am writing to express my sincere appreciation for the outstanding transformation and work done by the Meghalaya Public Service Commission (MPSC) in conducting the examinations as well as facilitating the recruitment process in the state. I firmly believe that the Meghalaya Public Service Commission plays a crucial role in selecting competent individuals to serve the state, thereby contributing to the overall progress and development of Meghalaya.

As a user and candidate of the online recruitment portal, I have been thoroughly impressed by the efficiency, convenience and effectiveness of the service. It has really helped us in various forms, though the portal is being upgraded from time to time.

With access to previous years' question papers for different posts in the Official Website to the representation on the questions asked in the papers of a particular

examination (As per Letter no: MPSC/Ex-C/49/2023-24/7 dated the Shillong 4th March, 2024) this is commendable!

On behalf of all the applicants, candidates and as a resident of Meghalaya I extend our heartfelt gratitude to the entire team of the Meghalaya Public Service Commission for their dedication, innovation, unwavering support and commitment.

As a citizen, a candidate and a user, I believe that providing constructive feedback can contribute to further enhancing the portal as well as the nature of work. One important feedback is the uploading of a provisional answer key in the official website, right after the conduct of the examination. The availability of provisional answer keys can help candidates evaluate their performances and gauge their understanding of the materials. Hence they will be able to identify their strength and weakness and promote transparency in the examination by allowing the candidates to check the accuracy of their results and ensure fairness in scoring. Candidates can also learn from their mistakes and improve their knowledge and skills for future exams.

Further, in cases where candidates believe there may have been errors in the scoring of their exams, the provisional answer key serves as a reference point for initiating an appeal or review process, where candidates can compare their answers to the provisional answer keys and provide evidence to support the claims.

Overall, I am highly impressed with the quality of services provided by the Meghalaya Public Service Commission, and believe

that implementing these feedback points could further elevate the effectiveness and reliability. Thank you for your attention to the past feedback (Uploading of Previous year question paper, representation on the question papers, message enabled platform, filing representation online in the recruitment portal etc.), and I look forward to continued improvements and creating a GLITCH-FREE recruitment system.

Yours etc., C.L.Kynshi, Via email

Reckless Driving of motorcyclists in the city

Editor, I am writing to draw attention to a pressing issue that has been plaguing our city for far too long: the reckless driving behaviour exhibited by motorcyclists on our roads. As a concerned citizen and a frequent commuter, I have observed an alarming trend of disregard for traffic laws and basic safety protocols among these riders.

The streets of our city have become increasingly hazardous due to the reckless actions of certain motorcyclists. These individuals exhibit a blatant disregard for their own safety and that of others by engaging in dangerous behaviour such as overtaking from the wrong side, swerving through lanes, and speeding through congested areas and zebra crossings. Their actions not only pose a threat to their own lives but also jeopardize the safety of pedestrians and other road users.

What is particularly troubling is the lack of accountability displayed by these reckless riders. Instead of owning up to their actions, they often resort to victimizing themselves when faced with the repercussions of their behaviour. This culture of impunity only serves to embolden them further, exacerbating the dangers on our roads.

Furthermore, it is disheartening to note that the efforts of our traffic police in addressing this issue have been inadequate. Despite their presence on the roads, they appear to be too lenient in enforcing traffic laws and ensuring the safety of pedestrians. There is a palpable need for more stringent measures to be put in place to curb these dangerous behaviours and protect the lives of all road users.

In light of these concerns, I urge the authorities, including the High Court, to take decisive action in collaboration with the police to address this pressing issue. It is imperative that concrete steps are taken to enforce existing traffic laws more effectively and implement measures aimed at deterring reckless driving behaviour.

The safety of our citizens should be a top priority, and it is incumbent upon us to work together to ensure that our roads are safe for everyone. I trust that by bringing attention to this issue, we can work towards creating a safer and more responsible driving culture in our city.

Yours etc., A concerned citizen, Name withheld on request

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

"You're only as young as the last time you changed your mind."

—Timothy Leary

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVI No. 223 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, MARCH 28, 2024

Environment orphaned

CANDIDATES for the Lok Sabha election are silent on the environment. Granted that the environment is not a sexy issue as it would willy-nilly arrive at the illegal coal mining saga which no politician is brave enough to tackle. The standard argument has been that mining is a livelihood for the tribals. This much-touted statement is made with no evidence to back up the claims. Looking at news reports, these days there appears to be a greater concern by the youth about saving the environment and rivers in particular. Greentech Foundation has been trying to clean rivers from West Khasi Hills to the Wah Umkhrah. A video clip shown at an environment awareness campaign in Riwar College, Pynursla where a boat fitted with machinery to churn out and pick the garbage from the Umiam Lake created quite a stir among students watching it. They didn't realise that the serene looking lake, which is quite an attractive backdrop where tourists love to click pictures, carries loads of junk, particularly plastic waste inside it. The Umiam Lake has been known to be afflicted by severe siltation but nothing has been done so far as a remedial measure. It is unsure how the turbines generating hydel power are able to deal with the water that is loaded with silt and other rubbish. This is the reason perhaps why the MeECL has to rely heavily on power from external sources.

The North Shillong MLA has been clamouring that the residents of his constituency are suffering from severe water crises. But that is not the only area suffering from water shortage. Across Shillong city people are resigned to buying water from tankers. What no one asks is how the tankers are able to supply water by the thousands of litres daily and what is their source. There is a section of tribal elite that have made it their business to sell water. In connivance with the Rangbah Shnong an entire catchment is sold out to an individual, despite the fact that a primary distinguishing feature differentiating tribals from others is their collective ownership of natural resources such as forests, water sources, catchments areas and rivers. Today while rivers are still unclaimed by private individuals a time will come when that too might happen through rapid encroachment into rivers and narrowing them down to the size of large drains.

The District Councils have failed miserably in safeguarding these natural resources of the tribal polity which is the primary reason for their existence. Councils are not meant to create idle resources such as restaurants and resorts which they have invested in, in recent times. Clearly the District Councils have lost their way in this 21st century when they are most needed to battle the forces of commercialisation and commodification of lapd and natural resources. MP candidates especially from elite universities are expected to go beyond the rhetoric that marks elections and to go deeper into issues that are skirted by state politicians. Is this too much to expect?

Imperial Christianity (excerpts from a letter to a grandson)

By Yona M. Nonglang

I was your age when I realised there were two very different Jesus narratives in our world. Yes, there was the matrilineal indigenous Jewish narrative of Rabbi Yeshua who spoke truth to power and who taught and lived the compassionate way of life in the midst of ongoing culturicide and ecocide in the land of his birth by the predatory occupying Roman forces. Yes, the Jesus who was at loggerheads with the cynical religious leaders of his day, who were ingratiating themselves with the powers that be from Rome in the same way present-day Christian fundamentalists, and state-sponsored church leaders cosy up to royalties, presidents and prime ministers in the imperialist "Christian" world.

Yes, unhappy with, and stung by the truth Yeshua spoke, and also threatened by the growing popularity of his compassionate teachings and anti-capitalist communitarian way of life, both capitalist imperial power and morally corrupt religious elite colluded in permanently silencing their "common enemy" by lynching him from that infamous tree.

But even though the colluding parties thought they had succeeded in permanently silencing this indigenous voice of truth and compassion through that very public execution and the locking away of his body in a sealed and heavily guarded tomb, his story, ironically, has its own way of surviving and reverberating through the centuries. What can be more inspiring than that?

Thus, this narrative of moral defiance, triumph and goodness in the face of cruel exploitation resonated far and wide with the oppressed people of the day in that part of the world. So much so, that, communities that modelled on its traditional caring and sharing communitarian ideals organically grew in that region. Their "love your neighbour as yourself" and "do unto others what you would others do unto you" world, indeed, was in stark contrast to the "not of their world" zero-sum thinking of winner takes it all that was representative of the predatory and hegemonic imperialist idea of life.

The growth of their movement was so phenomenal that the empire took notice and saw the need to take action against its members through punitive measures of all kinds, including their torture and capital punishment as public entertainment to amuse morally desensitised citizens of the empire who had developed a sanguinary taste for blood-sport. Yet, in spite of that, the community defied the odds, sustained itself for more than three hundred years and remained a thorn on the empire's flesh by being a humanitarian force to reckon with.

Until imperial Rome under the wily Constantine decided to deal with the "Christian problem," a la the Trojan Horse way. Unlike his predecessors who tried, albeit

unsuccessfully, to quash the movement, with a deft stroke of Machiavellian policy, Constantine played the role of its benefactor instead. He lifted all sanctions against the movement, declared himself its member, conferred "divinity" status, albeit posthumously, on Rabbi Yeshua, institutionalised the movement into a state religion of the empire and used that new religion as his image softening catalyst that cemented his hold on the empire through "soft power."

I often wonder how the communitarian Rabbi would have responded to the idea of being crowned "saviour" of the mighty capitalist empire that had a hand in his public execution. But he wasn't there at that council where it happened, was he? (<https://www.ancient-origins.net/history-important-events/council-nicaea-0010969>). Because he was long gone by then. And because of that, the emperor and his team of loyal "bishops" who were handsomely rewarded for their subservience to the throne, succeeded in subverting the Jesus narrative of the non-proselyting Jews into a coercive religious conversion tool for the empire's world domination agenda. How disingenuous was that?

Was the "divinity" conferred on the Rabbi unanimous? Apparently it wasn't. The leaders who opposed that move were branded "heretics," banished from office and rendered persona non grata. Such was the authoritarian ruthlessness of the new religion of the empire in its bid to forge "consensus."

And so it's been, that under machinations of both "Catholic" and successive breakaway "Protestant" European empires through the centuries, the indigenous Jewish Jesus was supplanted by an international "saviour" with imperial powers to eliminate other cultures across continents. Zealous carriers of the "gospel" of this imperial "saviour" used a hegemonic language that condemned perceived rival cultures as evil, demonic, uncivilised, and, deserving of annihilation.

One only has to also read through The Doctrine of Discovery, 1493 https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/04093_FPS.pdf & <https://indigenoustudies.org/decolonization/doctrine-discovery/> to familiarise oneself with the hegemonic expansionist tactics of that empire and the ones that followed it. So expansionist, that during British colonial days, the imperialist religion that subverted the Jewish Jesus narrative came as far as our Khasi Hills too.

And it wasn't long before my grandparents and their generation were condemned to imperial hell if they didn't abandon their long-held indigenous understanding of the divine and the golden rule that came along with

that understanding. And with that condemnation also came the divisive diktat to the "converts" of the imperial religion to steer clear of our traditional sacred rituals and customary festivities because they were deemed "demonic" and "uncivilised" while the imperial religion was promoted as "civilising."

Even to this day, such condescending colonialist language still exists. I was in the same room with a group of people when a pastor, who seemed sure of the superiority of his imperialist "Christian" culture, condemned our matrilineal system as "unbiblical." It made me doubt if the gentleman had ever made his own in-depth study of Jewish history of matriliney.

"Kill the Indian, save the person," is a well-known victimising imperialist saying familiar to the indigenous people of the Americas. As the original inhabitants of their Turtle Island, did they not experience genocides at the hands of the "Christian" European occupiers who looked down at them as savages and treated their revered land as mere resource to be exploited and commercialised? Were those who survived the genocides not exiled to the refugee camp "reservations" and their children forcibly taken away from them and kept in the so-called residential schools where they were stripped of their "Indianness" by their high-handed "Christian" school masters who were tasked with the duty of "saving" "Indian" "souls" in the name of the empire's "Jesus"? (<https://un-aligned.org/human-rights/residential-schools-in-canada-and-the-us/>).

So the question we need to ask ourselves is if the empire's "Jesus" really saves, or, is "Jesus saves" just a "soft power" empty cultural marketing slogan of the white supremacist empire? So that the empire can further its cultural subjugation of the world it seeks to dominate by selling its most potent opium that renders its consumers impotent to reason and reasoning ability? Just look at the different levels of delusion among the Jesus saves people. How many are aware enough to question the futility of white supremacy "spiritual pursuit"?

Indeed, imperial Christianity's absurd understanding of the divine has been manifesting itself in many troubling forms. From mindless followers of self-enriching millionaire celebrity healers/preachers who hunger not for righteousness, but for power, money, and emotional wild rides (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/televangelism>), to angst-ridden political culture warriors who rage against soft targets of their culture wars (<https://youtu.be/cnG-B198-0>).

And, indeed, some, literally lost on their bloodthirsty dispensationalist doomsday cult spiritual path of fixed certainties where the road map to their heavenly realm

is already paved all the way through bloody "Armageddon" (<https://youtu.be/NahT-jAsDThs>). While some, of course, smug and snug as bugs in the rugs of their spiritual ivory tower echo chambers of ivory tower pretentiousness as they pontificate and regurgitate what's fed to them by the self-proclaimed "intellectuals" of the fundamentalist variety (<https://crossexamined.org/christian-apologetics>). Which, of course, begs the question of whether militant imperial religious fundamentalism and "intellectual" can ever compatibly cohabit in the same mindscape, no matter how impressive the paper qualifications are. Because, as you know, at the end of the day, they still pray at the altar of the same "saviour" of the empire, anyway.

Also, have you ever come across the politically motivated hegemonic doctrine of Dominionism that is gaining more and more popularity among adherents of imperial Christianity? (<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/quiet-rise-Christian-dominionism>). Truly disturbing, isn't it?

But it's a habit of "Christian emperors," to create a hegemonic god who is the mirror image of themselves? (<https://youtu.be/QS03EBbNB-4>) That neurotic, toxic male chauvinist who wants to conquer the world through divide and rule while he inflicts the same delusion on those who render loyalty to him?

Isn't he the reason behind all the confrontational belligerence against "unbelievers," the "just" wars against "undemocratic" "enemy" countries for the sake of grabbing their wealth, the biblical justification for environmental destruction in the name of "development" that enriches a few and deprive millions of their land, and the moral corruption evident around us, all the holier-than-thou "Christian" claims notwithstanding? It, therefore, goes without saying that imperial Christianity is as vacuous as its "Jesus saves!" slogan in spite of its relentless demands from its adherents for self-sacrifice in matters of time, devotion and money?

If the most often asked question is how can "Christian" nations be so violent to countries they want to lord over, so disrespectful to the human rights of "non-whites" (<https://youtu.be/tcw9W2iy4pY>), so unrestrained in their proliferation of deadly weapons even as they cynically pay lip service to "world peace," so indifferent to the plight of the poor and the downtrodden, so resistant to the idea of man-made climate crises (<https://youtu.be/614mtpocA48>), perhaps, it's time, to let imperial Christianity own up to its lack of effective moral imagination and moral conscience? Again, let's go back to Yeats' poem,

Turning and turning in the widening gyre/The falcon cannot hear the falconer/Things fall apart, the center cannot hold/ Mere anarchy is let loose upon the world/ The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is drowned.

know he will be disappointed and might accuse me of trying to bring disrepute to the practitioners of traditional faith. He is entitled to that, but I have made my case, and there's nothing more I have to say.

It's for the readers to make up their minds on the matter. If they are not convinced by my arguments, they can accuse me of being the "one" trying to divide the community. There might be others who might be able to discern the more sinister design that is being prepared for taking away the rights of the indigenous peoples. Either way, I stand by my statement, but I also welcome those who disagree. Do I agree with the latter? Absolutely not, and I hope they also realize it because I am going to call it out again in the future as well.

Yours etc.,
Bhogtoram Mawroh,
Via email

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

Arvind Kejriwal gives a taste of governing behind bars

Delhi CM in custody more dangerous than free outside

By Sushil Kutty

It's a no holds barred battle between the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the BJP. And, says AAP, Arvind Kejriwal behind bars is more dangerous than when he was free and ducking summons. The AAP decided Sunday that a 'Main Bhi Kejriwal' campaign will be organized. Two, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal will not resign. This when the Delhi Chief Minister was being grilled in the "ED lock-up". The resourceful AAP has found a conduit to get through to Kejriwal in the ED-lock-up.

Kejriwal was arrested in the Delhi excise policy case and his arrest is considered a major success for the Modi government on the eve of the 2024 general elections. The AAP is fighting back. The meeting decided that "ministers, MLAs and the party will continue to take Kejriwal's orders from jail" was taken Sunday. Question: Can the Modi government stop Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal from functioning as a Chief Minister from within the Tihar Jail?

There is no rule that says that he cannot, unless the Modi government does something drastic and perhaps even illegal. Meanwhile, as Kejriwal fights his case and passes his orders from behind bars, the AAP will kick-start the 'Main Bhi

and are being obeyed.

The second order related to mohalla clinics and was sent to minister in-charge of health Saurabh Bharadwaj. The first one, regarding water supply found its way to Atishi Marlena, minister in-charge for Delhi's water supply, who was moved to tears by the contents of the letter.

"Arvind Kejriwal ji has sent me a letter and a direction. On reading it, I was in tears. I kept thinking who is this man, who is in prison, but is still thinking about Delhi residents' water and sewage problems... Only Arvind Kejriwal can do this because he considers himself a family member of Delhi's 2 crore people," she said. "I want to tell the BJP, you can arrest Arvind Kejriwal and put him in jail, but you cannot imprison his love and sense of duty for Delhi's people. Even today, after being arrested, Arvind Kejriwal ji is thinking about the people of Delhi".

From what is being heard, Kejriwal's orders are reaching the Delhi chief secretary and other officers. Meaning Kejriwal has time to spare in ED custody to govern Delhi and the ED does not mind. One thing is sure. There is no legal prohibition. And ED regulations are lax. Prison regulations



Kejriwal' throughout Delhi. Delhi is the prize, the seven parliamentary seats of Delhi, which the BJP won in 2014 and 2019 but is nervous about this time. The AAP-Congress alliance is a worry that Delhi might not contribute to the BJP's "370", aka "Modi's Ruse". The BJP's list of Delhi candidates tells the story.

And the AAP-Congress seat-sharing deal also brings the INDI-Alliance into play. Auto-rickshaws are in the game carrying "Mai Bhi Kejriwal" stickers on them.

March 31 an INDIA Bloc rally would be held. The "maha rally" at Delhi's Ramlila Maidan will see AAP leaders rubbing shoulders with Congress leaders, something not seen ever since the birth of AAP. The order to hold the March 31 "maha rally" came direct from Kejriwal. The Congress has no objections. Ten people from each booth will reach the Ramlila Maidan. There are about 14,000 booths, which makes it a total of 1.5 lakh crowd at the rally, all those present with a black ribbon, protesting "BJP's conspiracy to arrest Kejriwal and then break AAP".

The AAP fight-back is all about "Kejriwal in jail is more dangerous than when he was outside jail". No more pleading, says AAP, "there will be war." Earlier, we would get orders from Civil Lines, now we will get orders from jail, and we will follow them. Earlier, Kejriwal was busy with governance, and he had made their life difficult. Now, he will have pen and paper with him all the time, just think what will happen to them," said an AAP leader.

That being said, the BJP is not done with Kejriwal with just his arrest. The saffron party is calling on Arvind Kejriwal to resign with word spreading that no Chief Minister can rule from within a jail. But Kejriwal is issuing orders from Enforcement Directorate custody. Apparently, Kejriwal has a conduit to the outside world and his orders are getting through

will be even more so. Only conviction can bar Kejriwal from being Chief Minister or legislator.

The Delhi government intends approaching the court for permission to take files to jail and hold Cabinet meetings inside jail. The whole AAP campaign is now to tell voters of Delhi that "we will not let the work for the people of Delhi stop even if the government has to work from jail." A move will be made to set up a "Chief Minister's Office" in jail.

"It is not written anywhere that a government cannot function from jail," AAP leader and Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann said. For twice in three days, Kejriwal orders got through to his cabinet colleagues with instructions that matter in administering Delhi affairs. Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has found a conduit, who?

Also, the messages convey that the "people's chief minister" is positively worried about Delhi's ailing citizens and there are tens of thousands of them, mostly poor folks, those living in slum-like settlements and for whom the Mohalla clinics are the only health-lines to surviving the harsh life of the national capital. Bharadwaj, who had never before cared to enquire about the health of Delhiites, is suddenly desperate about blood tests and dialysis. And Atishi Marlena cannot be more bothered about Delhi's water needs than ever before.

There was a gap of two days between Kejriwal's first and second orders. "Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal issued his second order from inside the Enforcement Directorate's lock-up." Obviously, the man is being grilled by the ED sleuths and he can do the ordering and the administering only in the gaps between the episodes of "grilling". The Delhi Chief Minister has friends in the oddest of places. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Religion/faith should not divide tribals

Editor,
Apropos Wallambi Rani's letter, "Eager to know names of traditional faith practitioners," (ST March 27, 2024), before responding to that, let me first inform the readers of the context of this discussion. I had written in my op-ed article, "Why the CAA is still a danger for everyone in the North East," referring to the actions of some traditional faith practitioners like the Karbi Traditional Faith Association (KTFA) and Janajati Surakha Mancha (JSM) who threaten to destroy Christian religious symbols and demand the derecognition of tribals who converted to Christianity. This, I see as an example of the continuation of the divide and rule policy, which in this case is about breaking up the indigenous community on the basis of religion. And this is not just some fringe groups who are making such demands; the

former Lok Sabha Speaker, Kariya Munda, also made a similar statement when he said, "those tribals who convert to Islam or Christianity must not get any benefits of reservation meant for the tribals."

When a large section of the indigenous community has adopted Christianity, taking away their Scheduled Tribe status will also deprive them of the protection that the territory they inhabit also has under the Constitution. So, it's not just about religion; it is much more than that. Has there been any similar demand from traditional faith practitioners or their organizations in Meghalaya? No, there has not been one. But the ill-treatment of traditional faith practitioners by the Christian majority does create conditions for resentment. I have friends who are traditional faith practitioners, and they have personally conveyed to me the ill-treatment that their community has faced over the years. This was evident when in 2017 the residents

of the Dorbar of Shnong Madan iingsyiem, Mylliem, tried to prevent the cremation of (late) Mr. Kulam Nongrum (President Sengbah ki Nongshad Nongkheih) in accordance with Niam Khasi faith in his village. Perhaps I did not state this earlier, but the bigotry of such Christians also tends to divide the community. So, conditions exist for making similar demands that Kariya Munda and the Janajati Surakha Mancha (JSM) have made. That will only widen the gulf between tribals but also break up the community.

In private conversation, there are already statements made just as Wallambi Rani did, that traditional faith practitioners are "more Khasi" (which he stated in his earlier letter), which by extension means that those who are non-traditional faith practitioners are less Khasi. In a situation where traditional faith practitioners are not dominant, this can be construed as a mechanism of self-defence, in a bid to assert their identity in a non-violent way. The problem is that such claims are being used at the

moment to make demands to take away the rights of a certain section of the indigenous community. Hence for me, it's akin to breaking the community.

There is a need for the majority of Christians to come out of their bigotry, as demonstrated in 2017, and the subtle ways in which they assert their superiority when they make statements suggesting that if you are not Christian, you don't have a religion. Such statements reveal the stupidity of such people, and I don't think anyone will deny that. Being Khasi is not synonymous with being Christian, since there are those who follow different faiths or don't want to follow any faith at all. In the same way, traditional faith practitioners cannot claim that they are "more Khasi" since faith is a personal choice. This is all the more pertinent in the context of what's happening elsewhere, where such claims are going to be used to deprive those who have converted to Christianity of their rights.

Now coming back to Rani's demand of naming

and shaming those who I have accused of breaking the community, I will not do that because such statements of being "more Khasi" have not been made in the public sphere nor have they been used to make demands to strip the indigenous Christians of their rights in Meghalaya. These are my private conversations and discussions with friends.

Let me inform the readers that there are also traditional faith practitioners who also don't agree with the statement in a similar vein where not all Christians are bigots, unless someone accuses me of bringing disrepute to the latter as well. However, I assure Wallambi Rani that if such statements of traditional faith practitioners being "more Khasi" than the non-traditional faith practitioners are made public and are being reported and recorded (I am not considering his statement because he has not explained if that is what he meant when he made the statement in his letter and I am assuming he did not mean that), I will call it out and inform him of the same through this forum. I

“Religion is the last refuge of human savagery.”
— Alfred North Whitehead
The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXV No. 227 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, MARCH 29, 2024

Defectors' paradise

POWER is a heady potion. The natural instinct for many is also to be on the right side of those in power. Not just politicians but worthies of other hues are also no exception. Many are abruptly changing their colour like a chameleon. They show a tendency to side with the party that has a rising graph. The latest to join the BJP is Savitri Jindal, the richest woman who quit the Congress party and followed her son Naveen Jindal to the saffron bandwagon. The family runs the nation's third largest private steel company. At a time when opinion polls predict a third term for the BJP, this is understandable. Notably, the family was among the main beneficiaries of the Congress party in terms of positions and other favours for many years. Naveen Jindal served as MP for 10 years while his mother and father had been given ministerial posts in Haryana, all thanks to the Congress. The son has been rewarded for his defection to the BJP with a Lok Sabha ticket from Kurukshetra, where he had been defeated by the BJP in the 2014 polls.

Having got the best of the deal from the Congress and boosted the family's steel and power business with tricolour support, the family now wants to be on the right side of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. News of the day is also that Bollywood actor Govinda is joining the Shiv Sena of chief minister Eknath Shinde by ditching the Congress party that had given him positions. While the flow is mostly to the BJP, across states, defections to the ruling Congress party in Telangana, mainly from the BRS that ran government for the past two terms in the state, are also massive. The once-all-powerful BRS is thus faced with a likely extinction. Similar defections are evident in West Bengal and there was talk of Kamal Nath expressing an interest in the BJP.

By unleashing the central investigation agencies on businessmen and politicians on the rival side, the BJP-NDA government is bent on winning the loyalty of the business class as a whole and also demolishing all other political establishments. The revelations about the electoral bonds are fresh proof that the ED and CBI are being used by the Modi government with ulterior motives. The RSS has come forward to suggest that this is a wrong tendency. But, having tasted blood, the BJP-led government is unlikely to stop in its wrong tracks. The Congress party's funds have been frozen in the run-up to the polls. Both the political and business atmospheres are being hugely vitiated by such obsessions on the part of the ruling establishment. This is tantamount to dictatorship in a new form.

Imperial Christianity (Part II)

By Yona M. Nonglang

Indeed, coming back to our own context, the passionate intensity of the "civilising" religionists succeeded in not only destroying our indigenous cultural innocence, they were also instrumental in alienating their "Christian" "converts" from their kith and kin and their customs and traditions. Hence the dilemma of generational victims of imperial Christianity—the binary choice between a culturally hegemonic not-of-their-world deity or the abandoning of one's own roots.

Then there's also the loss, of affection for, and connection to, land and nature, as all sense of respectful reverence for the environment is gone. Because, according to imperial Christianity, respecting mother earth is "demonic" "nature worship." And because "God" is giving them a new heaven and a new earth when they're done with ransacking this one, why care about so transitory a thing as planet earth?

Therefore, in the meantime, the most acquisitive among them are "mining" mother nature's abundant wealth meant for all her children to benefit from, in the same manner the avaricious forces of empire pillaged their colonies to enrich themselves. These same unconscionably rich folks are also the biggest donors to their imperial church coffers, for the purpose of spreading its imperial "gospel" to its ever-growing new frontiers.

So yes, the danger of our complete culturicide as an indigenous tribe and the ecocide of our land are a possibility even though colonial Britain left our hills more than a generation ago. Because our hearts and minds remain colonised through the imperial religion and education they left behind. We're still very much enthralled by all things "phareng," as it is. And our own self-contempt as a result of that colonial hangover is still at play.

One only has to take a look at the "reformer" "Christians" among us who have been eager to put an end to our age-old benign customs and traditions enshrined into our customary laws by our wise and far-sighted forebears who saw "tangjai" from the father and "shimjai" from the mother as the ways to ensure the survival of their descendants in perpetuity no matter the changing times and political circumstances.

But our lost and confused,

but overconfident, self-proclaimed "saviours of jaitbynriew" with disturbing biblical messianic complex, would rather copycat chauvinistic western patriarchy than respecting their roots. For years they've been threatening to overturn our cherished lineage legacy by discarding what our clear-sighted forebears put in place.

And it's these same "Christian" Khasi supremacists who sanctimoniously display their personal piety by bowing before their imperial "God" in prayer, and by citing, in public, their favourite passages from their imperial religion's plagiarised and doctored "infallible, authoritative Word of God," even as they wax eloquent about "transforming" Khasi society into some "biblical" patriarchal "Christian" utopia! How far into the Stone Age are they going to take us back, if we let them?

So it goes without saying, therefore that confused by a split sense of belonging (yes, I'm Khasi, but, my religion isn't) and alienated from our indigenous understanding of life, we therefore indulge in all sorts of self-sabotaging exercises that will one day completely undo even whatever still remains of our way of life.

"The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is drowned..."

The question worth asking is whether we needed our colonial oppressors to teach us anything useful about God and our collective way of life. Like the revered ancient myths, legends and folklores of other indigenous people groups, we the children of Hynhiew Trep, too, have always let our own Khanatang (our cosmogony, our imagination of the divine mystery, sense of collective purpose, ethos, etc.) guide us along the way.

But imperial Christian theology will sternly rebuke the very idea of narratives on the divine as "khanatang." Because it's in its hegemonic interest to approach Jewish ancient texts in its one-dimensional literalist and inerrantist way that induces mindless fanaticism and religious militancy in the reader's mind, you see.

But that's the whole point, isn't it? Creating mindless, brainwashed followers who can be controlled at will, who are incapable of asking

questions that are dangerous to the white supremacist cultural hegemony project? Easterners who think, walk and talk like their western white supremacist masters, eternally subservient to their cause?

"Equo ne credite, Teukri. Quidquid id est, timeo Danaon et dona ferentes..." wrote Virgil in Aeneid more than two thousand years ago. And it is worth repeating here, I believe. "Do not trust the horse, oh, people of Troy. Whatever it is, I fear the Greeks even when they come bearing gifts," are wise words best heeded even to this day.

Because, that's why the ones who brought this particular horse to our Hills have been persisting with the arrogant view that the white supremacist way of reading Jewish narratives is the only way. And that's also why, for centuries, white supremacist religionists succeeded in selling to the unsuspecting world their twisted theology, their creeds, even their violent apocalypse where their fetishised imperial "Jesus" will make his "triumphant" "second coming" to take charge of our planet as an avenging warrior. But with the help of the military might of the "Christian" nations that created him in the first place, of course (<https://youtu.be/IhT7oyDIBIk>).

It's rather apt that Yeats concludes his poem, "The Second Coming," with an ominous picture of another empire on its way to usurp the birthplace of the indigenous Jewish Jesus?

The darkness drops again; but now I know/ That twenty centuries of stony sleep/ Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle/ And what rough beast, its hour come round at last/ Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (<https://poets.org/poem/second-coming>).

Did you witness the funeral rituals of present-day "Christian" monarchs <https://youtu.be/dhFjwz3zF5Y>? Or watch their coronation ceremonies https://youtu.be/QS03EBNB_4? You should, if you want to understand the extent of the blatant corruption of Jewish sacred texts by "Christian" empires. At the end of the day, won't you agree that the religion of the empire is an all-consuming and all-demanding form of religiosity that lacks the moral imagination and moral

conscience to offer anything meaningful to its adherents, except for its strange form of individualised, delusional, other-worldly "personal" "salvation" that demands obsessive and irrational devotion to its deity? Is it not imperious, self-righteous, judgmental, alienating and divisive, an "us" versus "them" that is extrinsic to our indigenous communitarian spirit? And, sadly, because it has managed to embed itself as a subculture within our culture, it's also impossible for us to simply wish it away?

So what do we do to deal with the divisions and confusion it has caused? Would letting go of the duplicate Jesus of the empire a good way to start? Our own cultural roots, certainly, don't forbid us from appreciating the original indigenous Jewish Jesus narrative. Because, traditionally, we indigenous folks have no problem respecting and learning from other moral narratives that help in enriching our imagination of the divine.

And don't we owe a debt of gratitude to those among us who have been faithful custodians of our customs and traditions and our understanding of the sacred divine mystery that continues to call us to do better as children of Hynhiew Trep? In spite of imperial culturicide and our collective changing fortunes? Don't we also owe them our apology for our ignorance, arrogance and moral bankruptcy because we were too indoctrinated by the colonisers of our hearts and minds to be appreciative and respectful towards our own indigeneity?

Isn't it also time for churches to decolonise and distance themselves from the shallow insularity of divisive "evangelising" imperial Christian theology by simply scripting their own independent theological narratives that honour indigenous non-European contexts? And for churches to, instead, strive to create non-discriminatory, welcoming, caring and sharing communities, especially for the least (orphans and the destitute) and the most marginalised and discriminated against (so-called sinners and victims of empires' culture wars)? I know this generation is left to grapple with many questions but I also know there's hope for us to turn around as a people. With a little bit of introspection, humility and deep sense of responsibility, of course.

Irrational passions; the politics of othering & unwarranted killings

By Patricia Mukhim

In Meghalaya the mere use of the phrase, "jaitbynriew in danger from outsiders," is enough to send hot-headed vigilantes and people who believe they are the custodians of the welfare of Meghalaya on a tailspin. Some have accorded to themselves the place of pride of being saviours of the 'jaitbynriew' and by extension they have also appropriated the right to kill anyone who is a threat to the jaitbynriew. Hence the Ichamati incident!

Two people killed in the CAA protests! Why? What does the CAA have to do with Ichamati which is in a Sixth Schedule area? If Khasi/Jaintia tribals who are Christians or of the indigenous faith or are non-believers are being persecuted in Bangladesh and want to apply for Indian citizenship will we refuse to accommodate them in Meghalaya? If someone group is protesting against the CAA why did they have to kill people? Was there a previous grouse? Will the killers get away with yet another murder? This time of two individuals?

The Meghalaya Police ought to hang their heads in shame for never being able to nail the killers since 1979 to date. What sort of a career graph is this? Police cannot apprehend the illegal coal mafia who continue their illegal coal mining and transportation business despite the NGT ban and despite the fact that miners continue to die inside the mines with a dead body being claimed just a fortnight ago. What rule of law are we talking about here? The interest of the police peaks only when it comes to apprehending small-time drug couriers and the HNLC. Looks like there's a method to the madness that we are yet to configure.

If police can do such a good job of intercepting HNLC messages from Bangladesh why are they continually failing to apprehend murderers who manage to get away time after time? A human life is precious no matter the community, creed or colour of that person. The fact that police have repeatedly failed to apprehend such killers has only emboldened others to follow the same ugly route. Such murderers types only need the flimsiest of reasons to carry out their dark deeds.

Of course such killings will always evoke a sense of outrage from the non-tribal community and perhaps letters will be sent to Home Minister Amit Shah and Prime Minister Modi. But what after that? Their protests have never been consistent and will be forgotten after a few weeks. No group has the patience to follow through a petition until they see results. There is no collective will to fight back. It is tiresome to watch the "othering" of the non-tribal who has always been the scapegoat for everything that has gone wrong with the state. We have seen this since 1979 and the rhetoric of making the non-tribal the fall guy is a sure-shot vote garnering tactic. No candidate whether for the Lok Sabha or the state assembly elections has the guts to speak openly about the permanent non-tribal residents of Meghalaya being equal stakeholders in the development journey of the state. The same old rhetoric is repeated in election after election which is—protecting the tribals against the wily non-tribal. And people are stupid enough to fall for that ruse instead of calling the bluff of politicians who have benefitted from the politics of divide and rule.

The othering process in Meghalaya has taken on a life of its own since the state was created. It peaked in 1979. What exactly is othering? It's a phenomenon in which some individuals or groups

are defined as being of a lower status than the in-group and are therefore labelled because they don't fit into the norms of the majority group—in this case the tribals. This influences how people perceive and treat those who are seen as being part of the out-group. The worst part about othering is that the in-group attributes negative characteristics to people or groups that don't fit the so-called noble and higher culture of the in-group. This "us versus them," way of thinking has plagued Meghalaya for decades and prevented the out-group from becoming stakeholders that can equally contribute to the state building processes.

It's troubling to note that even Christianity with its teaching based on, "treating others as you would have them treat you," has not really had any impact on our collective behaviours. By 'othering' an individual we are negating that individual's humanity and by killing him we dehumanize him completely. By othering a person or group we play a role in creating prejudices against

such people and groups and by constantly dehumanizing them we create a situation where their lives are dispensable. Often even the persecution and violence committed on such minority groups is normalized.

The question then is when will the Indian non-tribal settlers in Meghalaya ever become "Us" and not "Them"? How long will the exclusionary politics continue and at what cost? One can understand that illegal migrants cannot be sheltered here. But one cannot assume that all non-tribals are illegal migrants -U mynder or poi-ai they say in Khasi. The second word poi-ai is most degrading and dehumanizing.

Othering begins very subtly and involves unconscious assumptions about others. It includes attributing positive qualities to people who are like us and negative qualities to people who are different from us; believing that people who are different from us or our social group pose a threat to us and our way of life. Constantly being suspicious of "others" although there is no experience to back up that distrust. Many refuse to interact with people who are different from them and their social group. In normal circumstances othering means considering people outside one's ethnic group as not being as intelligent, skilled, or as special as one's group. In our case we seem to feel threatened by the "other" because he/she is more resourceful and perhaps has a more acute business sense.

Othering happens because we think of people only in terms of their relationship with a specific social group without considering them as individuals. This can happen without conscious effort or even awareness. While othering is sometimes apparent, it often functions as an almost invisible barrier that keeps people who are seen as "outsiders" from accessing opportunity and acceptance.

This has gone on for too long and will continue if we allow politics to consume us. There is a need to create spaces for community conversations that transcend ethnicities. Social spaces are much more meaningful than the excruciating demands of the politics of "othering" which has seen Meghalaya degenerate on all human development indicators. Politicians and pressure groups sow seeds of dissension because they benefit from it. They benefit from divisions and fear a public voice that counters the divisive narrative. But that public voice is imperative if we are to overcome the politics that profits from violence and death.



Letters to the Editor

How long can such killings be allowed to continue?

Editor,
The loss of two precious human lives in Ichamati on March 27, 2024 has once again exposed the vulnerability and insecurity being faced by the minority populace in Meghalaya. It is unfathomable how killing of innocent persons can help in achieving the goal of the anti CAA protestors. Although such type of killing is not a new phenomenon in Meghalaya the moot question remains- how long will this type of killing continue and why? No one knows.
Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee,
Shillong-1

When will non-tribals get justice?

Editor,
The horrific killing of two innocent men in Ichamati on 27th March, 2024 once again brought forth the hatred prevailing in Meghalaya against non-tribal people. The protest against CAA in a place which is outside the purview of the said legislation is nothing but a pre-planned racial and genocidal attack on the non-tribals residing

in Ichamati. Meghalaya's history is stained with blood of many innocent non-tribals since its birth and will continue in future as well till the State becomes "non-tribal mukt." The Government machinery and administration will wash their hands by ritualistically putting the entire blame on "unknown miscreants" as they have been doing for the past fifty years till the next innocent non-tribal life is lost in some other part of the State.

It is really baffling to observe that the conscience of the civil society, particularly the majority community who are duty bound to protect the minorities, never gets awakened in Meghalaya on such racial killings and they remain as "useless silent majority". The non-tribal, in the State is not in a position to come out openly and protest against loss of innocent lives for fear of being targeted by "unknown miscreants." Their only option is to offer silent prayers in the confinement of their dwellings for eternal peace of the departed souls.
Yours etc.,
N.K. Kehar,
Shillong-3

Too early to predict results of Lok Sabha elections

Editor,
The news item "Every

vote cast for NPP will be a vote for BJP, says Pala" (ST March 27, 2024) made interesting reading and if one reads this news between the lines there is contradiction in the statement made by the sitting MP with reference to the BJP votes, "The BJP votes will not go to NPP but they will come to me." Vincent H Pala predicted that the BJP will suffer in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Delhi, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. But he has not predicted who will suffer in the North Eastern Region or for that matter in Meghalaya, given the fact that ABP-CVoter has predicted that out of 25 seats in the North East, 21 seats will go to the BJP led National Democratic Alliance which includes 2 to the NPP from Meghalaya while 4 seats will go to others. As of now, there is no definitive prediction that the BJP will suffer in the five states referred to by Mr Pala. However, political dynamics can change rapidly, and electoral outcomes depend on various factors such as local issues, candidate selection, and voter sentiment. Since the status of sitting MPs remains unchanged until the transition of the new parliamentary term is completed. Once the election results are finalised, the newly elected MPs will replace the outgoing ones, and the 18th Lok Sabha will commence its proceedings. Until then, the sitting MPs retain their parliamentary roles and responsibilities. Therefore, here are some observations based on the current political

landscape in respect of the five states referred to by the Member of Parliament from 1 Shillong Parliamentary Constituency:
1. Maharashtra: The BJP has faced challenges in Maharashtra due to coalition politics and internal disagreements. However, it remains a significant player in the state with 23 seats in Parliament from this state while the INC have just 1 seat as things stand now.
2. Karnataka: In Karnataka there is a seesaw battle between BJP and other parties. But still the BJP has 25 seats while the INC have only 1 seat at the moment in Lok Sabha.

3. Delhi: In NCT of Delhi the BJP has faced stiff competition from AAP. AAP may have been successful in the Assembly elections but still BJP has 7 seats in the Lok Sabha as things stand at the moment and the INC has zero as well as AAP. Hence BJP remains a strong contender.
4. Punjab: The BJP with only 2 seats in Parliament from Punjab has limited influence. The INC is no doubt in a better position with 8 seats in Lok Sabha as things stand now.

5. Himachal Pradesh: The BJP has traditionally performed well in Himachal Pradesh. Local factors and anti-incumbency sentiments can impact electoral outcomes. But it has to be noted that BJP has 4 sitting MPs from Himachal Pradesh as of now while the INC has none.
One must not lose sight

of the fact that political scenarios are dynamic, and it is essential to keep an eye on developments as elections approach. The final verdict will be determined by voters' choices during the election.
Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

There is no such thing as "being more Khasi."

Editor,
With reference to term "More Khasi", I had never come across the term in the past. But as a daily newspaper reader, I saw the term in the article by Bhogtoram Mawroh (ST March 23, 2024). Personally and in actuality I do not like the term. My understanding is that the Khasi people (having religion or having no religion, having clan (kur) or having no clan, rich or poor, physically-abled or physically-disabled; white, brown or black, tall or short, thin or fat, who think, who speak, who write and who work for the good and well-being of the community and society in a non-violent way, are "The True Khasis". In our Khasi society, we are all aware that we never had a caste system or class system, we are all equal, and therefore, the terms, "more Khasi, far more Khasi" should not have been used by Bhog-

toram Mawroh or any other writer.

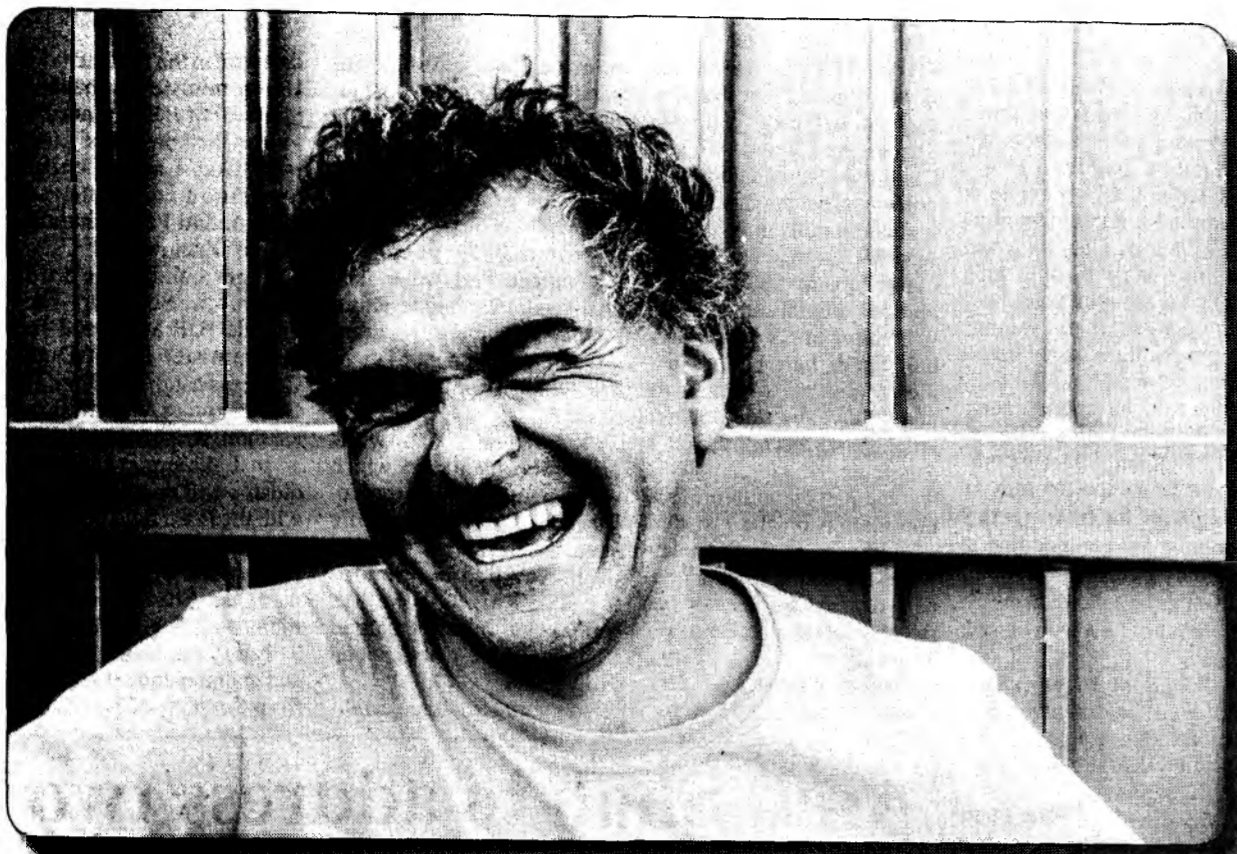
Coming to the traditional faith practitioners (Niam Khasi & Niamtre), they must not use the terms, "more Khasi/Khasi paka/Khasi nylla". The terms, "are divisive and mischievous." They must not use the terms in public, in educational institutions, workplaces, writings, etc. The practitioners must also not use the terms in Seng Khasi, Seiñ Raij, Seng Kihlang, Seng Kut Snem and while reciting "Ki Phawar" on marching to the Seng Khasi Hall after the Shad Suk Mysniem and the Seng Kut Snem's gatherings are over in the Seng Khasi College's ground.

The leaders and members of the above organizations must refrain from speaking or writing words or doing anything that may hurt the people practising different religions or those who do not practise any religion.

In conclusion, the community (The Khasi Community) is above all. All Khasi people belonging to different clans (Ki Kur), different religions and so on must be peaceful, united and try to do good for our community.
Yours etc.,
Wallambi Rani,
Upper Shillong

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

Happiness rankings are wealth, status-oriented: Study



Finland steadily ranks as the happiest country in the world.

In March 2024 the country was, for the seventh year in a row, ranked as the happiness champion.

The ranking is based on one simple question, using a ladder metaphor, that is asked to people across nearly every country in the world. But a new experimental study suggests that the ladder metaphor makes people think about power and wealth.

Since 2005, the Gallup analytics organisation has worked to measure happiness across the entire planet. The mission is particularly important as more and more governments say they are prioritising the wellbeing of their people.

For example, all OECD countries now measure the happiness of their people including the UK. More than a decade ago, Bhutan declared that the primary goal of their government was "gross national happiness", not

gross domestic product.

The world ranking is based on one simple but powerful question, called the Cantril Ladder: Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top.

The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?

As you read the question, what does the top of the ladder metaphor make you think of and what does it represent to you? Is it love, money, your family - or something else?

A group of researchers from Sweden, the US and the UK recently investigated these questions in a study on 1,600 UK adults, and published the results in *Nature Scientific Reports*.

An experiment with five independent groups was carried out.

One group was asked what the top of the ladder represented to them.

Another group was asked the exact same question, but this time the ladder metaphor, including the picture of the ladder, was removed and the term "ladder" replaced with "scale".

The study found that the ladder metaphor made people think more of power and wealth and less about family, friends and mental health.

When the ladder metaphor was removed, people still thought of money, but more in terms of "financial security" rather than terms like "wealth", "rich" or "upper class".

In a third group, people interpreted a question where the ladder metaphor as well as the top v bottom description in the question were removed.

In a fourth and fifth independent group, in addition to the above changes, the phrase "best possible life" was substituted with "happiest

possible life" and "most harmonious life," respectively.

People in the happiness and harmony groups thought less about power and wealth and more about broader forms of wellbeing such as relationships, work-life balance and mental health, compared to the other groups.

People don't want the top of the ladder

The research team also asked people where they wanted to be on the scale of the different questions. Researchers often assume that people want the best possible life but no one had tested this.

The results showed that in none of the groups did more than half the participants want a ten, the best possible life. The typical desire was a nine.

Except for the group with the ladder analogy. They typically wanted an eight. The ladder metaphor made people think more of power and wealth at the expense of relationships, mental health and work-life balance - and made people want a lower score.

What does this say about the happiness rankings where Finland are

frequently the champions?

Well, there is a risk that the ranking is based on a narrow, wealth and power-oriented form of happiness, rather than a broader definition.

This does not mean that Finns are unhappy, but the type of happiness they excel at may be power and wealth-focused.

The study findings raises the question of what type of happiness we want to measure.

A person's idea of happiness can't be determined by a researcher. That is why researchers must ask people about their concept of happiness.

Research has shown that when people define happiness, they only mention wealth and status to a small degree. It is well established that money relates to wellbeing but the money effect is weaker than many other happiness factors, where good quality social relationships have the strongest effect.

Recent research from the University of Oxford shows happiness actually causes people to be more productive and the most important factor for happiness at work is belongingness.

Salary, on the other hand, is believed to be the most important

driver for happiness at work, but it turns out to be a much weaker driver of happiness at work than belongingness.

This aligns with the general message from the happiness science that relationships are the most important factor for happiness.

What type of happiness do we want to measure?

Previous research has shown that the Cantril Ladder reflects people's income levels and social status to a larger degree than other wellbeing metrics.

The current study adds more evidence that perhaps the simple but powerful question could be supplemented with extra questions in the future, to clarify what people mean by happiness.

The study was conducted solely in the UK, so of course this research should be performed in other countries too, given the global nature of this topic.

However, the results indicate that we aren't necessarily measuring happiness and wellbeing in a way that is in line with how we actually define those concepts in our lives. (The Conversation)



'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, MARCH 31, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon is forming an angle of 150 degrees with Jupiter on your solar return chart. It is going to be a very successful year for you. You will get many opportunities to grow in your profession/business. New job opportunities will come. Those who are unemployed will get good offers. You will also make good progress in your business. And can enter into some partnership or joint venture. Your superiors will remain satisfied with your performance. You will also come in contact with lot of influential persons who will keep guiding you. Your financial position will be excellent. You can plan to buy a house or a luxury vehicle. You will fall in an intense and passionate affair with a person known to you. Marriage looks possible. You will spend your time in entertainment, amusement and many making with family. Health will remain perfect. And you will also develop religious inclination.

This week for you!

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) Authority figures, elders, parents, or influential people in your life tend to support and respect you. Your general well-being and emotional health depend on sound and meaningful relationships—both social and romantic. Financial prosperity or social success may come through your spouse at this time. Special attention to and from a partner is in focus. You keep an open mind and are receptive to new ideas and professional opportunities, which could lead to a new job while some of you, will be in for a promotion, perks recognition and prestige. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting.

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

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This can be a time of achievement, career advancement and success in business. Work-related travel or the reaching of a wider network is possible at this time. Your work status may change for the better. Friends are more willing to help you on your road to success. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. More freedom is likely to be experienced in your relationships. Integrity and honesty are the key to attaining your desires now. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This phase is favorable for investments, family, status and happiness. Money matters come into focus for you. You would adopt a serious approach to business because you are in the spotlight. Career and vocational issues may benefit from the increased clarity you possess. A lot of your energy will be applied to vocational achievement, professional success, and leadership. Your love life is more attractive and charming. You may be involved in activities connected with your children.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) A financial boost is possible, or you may gain financially through your partner. A deep and intimate connection made now could be revitalizing and even healing. You are more inclined to want to smooth over differences in a partnership concerning the sharing of power, intimacy matters, finances, and other emotionally-charged topics. Intimate relationships are intensified now. You find yourself more accountable than ever when it comes to your work and output. You may have to draw some boundaries with friends and the demands of others.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) There is likely to be more activity, movement, contact, and communications with co-workers. You are inclined to want to learn new work skills, or to improve your proficiency and output. It would be better to look at

long term investments and speculations for financial gains. Your approach to work at this time is pleasant, happy, and logical for the most part, unless you allow worry or scattered energy to enter the picture. You might also enjoy deciding on a different health or nutrition program.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This week highlights friendship, romance and love in your life. You tend to take more interest in organizing your working environment—and this is an excellent time to do so. You are especially objective and intelligent when it comes to getting a handle on your daily affairs and all the little things that contribute to a feeling of efficiency and competency. This is an especially introspective period during which you have the chance to truly uncover your personal strengths and talents. There would be some changes in your social circle, and you meet new people.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) Business partnerships may suffer from ego conflicts, or adversaries may be challenging. Use this energy to work cooperatively on interpersonal issues. You may even find that you seem to need someone's assistance in order to do what you want to achieve. When a difference arises, you are quick to settle it, and have little patience for sweeping matters under the rug. You are more willing than usual to explore life's secrets. Business projects and associations are opening up and widening your horizons so you need to think expansively.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) It would be wiser to face difficult people and tough situations rather than take the easy way out for victory and success in professional ventures. Don't take the one you love for granted but show your love and appreciation. Some associations would be competitive in business but you shine and work well in your field of activity. You may have to face difficult people and exercise special care in handling them. Your idealistic nature is stimulated, and you are likely to yearn for a connection to more spiritual or idealistic pursuits.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) Personal relationships gain a romantic and exciting quality. You've been busy with all sorts of everyday activities, deeply involved in your work and routine. It's time to balance your life with some down time — to help you balance your lifestyle and gain time to rejuvenate. Issues come to light that originate from deep within. It's an excellent time to get in touch with what's been brewing beneath the surface. A secret may be revealed. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting as business opportunities are extended to you.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) During this phase you feel attracted to people with whom you can communicate well and exchange ideas. You know how to relate to others and you do it in a natural and warm manner. You will seek chatty and enthusiastic friends who stimulate your mental abilities. Your approach to work is pleasant and happy for the most part, unless you allow worry or low energy to get the better of you. You are inclined to want to learn new work skills, or to improve your skills and output in terms of work. There is likely to be more activity, movement, contact, and communications with co-workers now.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This is a phase that brings excellent results for competition, written examinations, and legal matters. You're at your best when you are showing the world your practical, competent, and responsible side. Put off making important decisions with regard to family and domestic matters just now, and take care when it comes to communicating with family members. Extra care should be exercised when it comes to matters surrounding romance, children, and creativity. Be as non-judgmental as you can with romantic partners and your children. Spending time in solitude among natural surroundings is therapeutic and healing.

Instagram, Threads are limiting political content: Is it bad for democracy?

Meta's Instagram and Threads apps are "slowly" rolling out a change that will no longer recommend political content by default. The company defines political content broadly as being "potentially related to things like laws, elections, or social topics".

Users who follow accounts that post political content will still see such content in the normal, algorithmically sorted ways. But by default, users will not see any political content in their feeds, stories or other places where new content is recommended to them.

For users who want political recommendations to remain, Instagram has a new setting where users can turn it back on, making this an "opt-in" feature.

This change not only signals Meta's retreat from politics and news more broadly, but also challenges any sense of these platforms being good for democracy at all. It's also likely to have a chilling effect, stopping content creators from engaging politically altogether.

Politics: dislike

Meta has long had a problem with politics, but that wasn't always the case.

In 2008 and 2012, political campaigning embraced social media, and Facebook was seen as especially important in Barack Obama's success. The Arab Spring was painted as a social-media-led "Facebook Revolution", although Facebook's role in these events was widely overstated. However, since then the spectre of political manipulation in the wake of the 2018 Cambridge Analytica scandal has soured social media users toward politics on platforms.

Increasingly polarised politics, vastly increased mis- and disinformation online, and Donald Trump's preference for social media over policy, or truth, have all taken a toll. In that context, Meta has already been reducing political content recommendations on their main Facebook platform since 2021.

Instagram and Threads hadn't been limited in the same way, but also ran into problems. Most recently, the Human Rights Watch accused Instagram in December last year of systematically censoring pro-Palestinian content.

With the new content recommendation change, Meta's response to that accusation today would likely be that it is applying its political content policies consistently.

Notably, many Australians, especially in younger age groups, find news on Instagram and other social media platforms. Sometimes they are specifically seeking out news, but often not.

Not all news is political. But now, on Instagram by default no news recommendations will be political. The serendipity of discovering political stories that motivate people to think or act will be lost.

Combined with Meta recently stating they will no longer pay to support the Australian news and journalism shared on their platforms, it's fair to say Meta is seeking to be as apolitical as possible.

The social media landscape is fracturing

With Elon Musk's disastrous Twitter rebranding to X, and TikTok facing the possibility of being banned altogether in the United States, Meta appears as the most stable of the big social media giants.

But with Meta positioning Threads as a potential new town square while Twitter/X burns down, it's hard to see what a town square looks like without politics.

The lack of political news, combined with a lack of any news on Facebook, may well mean young people see even less news than before, and have less chance to engage politically.

In a Threads discussion, Instagram Head Adam Mosseri made the platform's position clear: Politics and hard news are important. I don't want to imply otherwise. But my take is, from a platform's perspective, any incremental engagement

or revenue they might drive is not at all worth the scrutiny, negativity (let's be honest), or integrity risks that come along with them.

Like for Facebook, for Instagram and Threads politics is just too hard. The political process and democracy can be pretty hard, but it's now clear that's not Meta's problem.

A chilling effect on creators

Instagram's announcement also reminded content creators their accounts may no longer be recommended due to posting political content.

If political posts were preventing recommendation, creators could see the exact posts and choose to remove them. Content creators live or die by the platform's recommendations, so the implication is clear: avoid politics.

Creators already spend considerable time trying to interpret what content platforms prefer, building algorithmic folklore about which posts do best.

While that folklore is sometimes flawed, Meta couldn't be clearer on this one: political posts will prevent audience growth, and thus make an already precarious living harder. That's the definition of a political chilling effect. For the audiences who turn to creators because they are perceived to be relatable and authentic, the absence of political posts or positions will likely stifle political issues, discussion and thus ultimately democracy.

How do I opt back in?

For Instagram and Threads users who want these platforms to still share political content recommendations, follow these steps:

- go to your Instagram profile and click the three lines to access your settings.
- click on Suggested Content (or Content Preferences for some).
- click on Political content, and then select "Don't limit political content from people that you don't follow". (The Conversation)