

In southern India's tea country, small but mighty efforts are brewing to bring back native forests



Workers pluck tea leaves using cutters at a tea estate in Nilgiris district, Tamil Nadu. (AP)

Scattered groves of native trees, flowers and the occasional prehistoric burial ground are strewn between hundreds of thousands of tea shrubs in southern India's Nilgiris region — a gateway to a time before colonization and the commercial growing of tea that reshaped the country's mountain landscapes.

These sacred groves once blanketed the Western Ghats mountains, but nearly 200 years ago, British colonists installed rows upon rows of tea plantations. The few groves that stand today are either protected by Indigenous communities who preserve them for their faith and traditions, or are being grown and tended back into existence by ecologists who remove tea trees from disused farms and plant seeds native to this biodiverse region. It takes decades, but their efforts are finally starting to see results as forests flourish despite ecological damage and wilder weather caused by climate change.

The teams bringing back the forests — home to more than 600 native plants and 150 animal species found only here — know that they still need to work around

their neighbours. Nearly everyone in the region's more than 700,000-strong population either farms black, green and white tea or works with the almost 3 million tourists who come to escape the searing heat of the Indian plains.

"In this time of climate change, I think ecological restoration and rewilding is extremely important," said Godwin Vasanth Bosco, a Nilgiris-based naturalist and restoration practitioner. "What we're trying to do is to help nature restore itself."

Degraded land and climate change threaten communities

Environmentalists say industrial-scale tea farming has destroyed the soil's nutrients and led to conflict with animals like elephants and gaur, or Indian bison, that have little forest left to live in.

Estimates say nearly 135,000 acres of tea have been planted across the mountains, damaging close to 70% of native grasslands and forests.

"There is no biological diversity," Gokul Halan,

a Nilgiris-based water expert, said of the tea farms. "It doesn't support the local fauna nor is it a food source."

The forests among the tea farms are recognized by the United Nations as one of the world's eight "hottest hotspots for biodiversity," but the areas degraded by excessive pesticide use and other commercial farming methods have been dubbed "green deserts" by environmentalists for their poor soil and inability to support other life.

The Nilgiris region has also had to clear land to facilitate the increasing number of tourists and people from India's plains who are moving to the region.

Poorer land makes it more vulnerable to landslides and flooding, which are now more common because of human-caused climate change. The neighbouring mountainous region of Wayanad suffered devastating landslides that killed nearly 200 people earlier this year, and Halan warns Nilgiris may suffer a similar fate.

Halan also warned the region is susceptible to long droughts and excess heat because of climate change, and that's already affected some tea harvests.

Restoring forests brings life back to Nilgiris

In a small mountain fold just a few hundred meters below the region's tallest peak, native trees planted 10 years ago have grown up to 4.5 meters (15 feet) tall. A stream flows amid the young trees that replaced nearly 7 acres of tea plants.

"This whole place was tea plantations and this stream was not flowing throughout the year," said Bosco, the ecologist. "Since we began our restoration work, it flows through the year and the trees and bamboo have grown well along the stream."

The forests are known as Shola-grassland forests or cloud forests because they can capture moisture from high-altitude mist.

Bosco said the plants and trees have an "incredible capacity to provide for life" across the nearly 2,000 acres his organization works to restore. The native trees maintain the microclimate underneath them by providing nutrients to the soil. That helps seal them and small plants grow even during hot, dry summers.

The region is also home to several Indigenous communities, called Adivasi, many of them classified as highly vulnerable with only a few thousand of their people remaining.

Representatives of these Adivasi communities consider themselves the original custodians of the forests and have also restored forests in the region. They say such restoration initiatives are welcome.

"When the British built tea estates, we were kicked out to the fringes of this district, our lands were lost and we lost our traditions because of deforestation,"

said Mani Raman, who belongs to the Alu Kurumbar Adivasi community.

"Such restoration work is good. By bringing the forests back, the wildlife and birds will get more food. Animals that have moved out of forests will have a place to live," he said.

Tea growers still need a livelihood

Tea growers and factory owners say that the region's entire economy depends on tea and it is relatively less harmful to the local environment compared to rampant development to cater to tourism.

"To convert tea to grasslands and shola forests will have a negative impact on the region's economy and environment," said A. Balakrishnan, the owner of a two-year-old tea factory near the town of Kotagiri in the Nilgiris.

Eighty-year-old I. Bhojan, who's been a tea grower all his life, agrees. "There is no Nilgiris without tea," he said.

Bhojan, president of the small farmers and tea growers welfare association for the Nilgiris, estimates that around 600,000 people — 50,000 of them small farmers — depend on tea for their livelihood.

Balakrishnan argued that tea plants are maintained well given their economic benefits compared to native forests.

"If tea was not there, Nilgiris will become a place for tourists only, there'll be more construction and urbanization," he said.

Finding common ground

Planting woody trees and shrubs in tea plantations, known as agroforestry, can ease the battle for space between farms and restoration, according to some experts.

Other crops and timber "can make tea plantations a bit more biodiverse compared to what is there currently," said water expert Halan.

Officials of Tamil Nadu state, of which the Nilgiris district is a part, earmarked \$24 million earlier this year to encourage farmers to shift away from chemical-laden fertilizers to help preserve soil health. The state's forest department officials also announced plans last year to plant nearly 60,000 native trees in the region.

Restoration ecologist Bosco said adding value to smaller tea farming operations by growing special, higher-quality tea on smaller parcels of land can open up more land to reforestation without hurting farmers' pockets.

He added that if those working to restore the land were paid for that service, that could be another stream of revenue for residents, as well as sourcing new products to sell from the native plants. "For example, we're trying to come up with products from some of the plants that have medicinal value," he said.

Raman added that future such work could also learn from Adivasi traditional practices.

"Adivasi people have been protecting forests for so long, wherever we live the forests are protected," he said. "The state government should be taking such work up at large scale." (AP)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, DECEMBER 1, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon conjunct Sun (New Moon) on your solar return chart. It ensures an amazingly extraordinary time period for you. You will have opportunity galore. Your popularity at workplace will reach dizzy heights. You will perform fully to your potential thus pleasing your superiors. You will be in a positive frame of mind. And will look forward to accomplish all major goals that you have envisaged. Your difficult tasks will get completed. All you will look for new job avenues. There could be some transfer/posting in your job. But it will bring good salary and pay package. Financially you will be well off. There will be joy and bonding in family ties. Auspicious events like marriage ceremony or birth of a new baby is possible. You can also invest in gold, real estate, equity shares and bonds.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) It is going to be a very favorable week for you. Students will perform well in exams / interviews. Getting admission in a good course/institute will be their top priority. You will also enjoy a wonderful/romantic tie with your soul mate and will get emotional. You will also enjoy your work and will maintain excellent relations with your bosses/colleagues. You will work very hard and will efficiently carry out your duties. Your professional life will be hectic but you will not feel the burden of your responsibilities. Those in business will achieve success in tasks that have been going on for a long time. You need to keep an eye on your rising expenses. A family dispute relating to property will get settled. And you will gain spiritual and intellectual heights. You will achieve success in your pursuits.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You will be getting mixed results this week. Your expenses will rise and budget will go out of control. You will need medical care as your health may deteriorate all of a sudden. But you will recover quickly. Need to show patience as time keeps changing. You will also have a wonderful time at your workplace. Your peers and bosses will fully cooperate with you. You will be getting good opportunities to rise in your profession. Money inflow will be continuous. And you will be spending money with both hands. You will remain busy in your work. But will still find some time for recreation and entertainment. Some religious activity / ceremony can take place at your home.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) It is going to be a wonderful week for you. You will be very confident and ambitious. And will be able to execute your plans with perfection. Your professional activities will be on the higher side. Your bosses will also share trade secrets with you which you will keep up to yourself. You will remain focused and will concentrate on your targets and will fit the bull's eye. You can also attend some business/meeting conference. You will be making best use of your communication skill and will interact with people on one-to-one level. Money and wealth will keep coming. You will also be busy in preparation for a marriage function of a family member. Overall, you will remain in good mood and spirits.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You will enjoy a very favorable time period ahead during this whole week. And will receive good news relating to your progress at your workplace. Your bosses who were a bit reluctant so far will start favoring you. A chance meeting with an influential person will open the doors of progress for you. A legal matter that was in the courts for a long time will finally get resolved. You will also avoid any arguments with your partner/family matters. You will also make investments in shares, bonds, real estate and gold. But will take all decisions wisely and carefully. A religious ceremony will take place at your home.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) It is going to be a tough week. And your nerves will be tested. But you need to show lot of patience and remain calm. There will be many problems that you will be facing in your job/business. You will work with dedication and sincerity at your workplace and your talent will get reflected in front of everyone. You will work to your fullest potential and will impress one and all. You will also enlighten people with your wisdom. You will also share wonderful bonding with your mate. And will spend quality time with them. You can go to a restaurant or hotel for a lunch and dinner. You will spend your money on household items. You will find life worthy due to the support of your near and dear ones.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) It is going to be an exciting week. You will be expected to take firm decisions at your workplace and take the lead. Your subordinates will cooperate fully. And your bosses will have full confidence in your capabilities and potential. You will also

take risks in your business and will be successful. Some tensions in family matters may lead to stress. But you will manage to handle the matters well. You will not allow your personal life to overpower your professional life. Students will study with full concentration and sincerity. And will be getting good results. You will also help the poor and needy. And it will remain in your possession. You will visit a temple or a religious place with family elders.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This week you will be facing some difficult moments in your professional as well as personal life. A family secret that was kept under wraps will come out in the open suddenly. It will also tarnish your reputation. And you will have to explain lot of things to people to regain your lost pride. However, some tensions will remain in the family. You will also not get along with your colleagues and will make repeated mistakes. At times life will appear to be dull. And everyone will understand you well. Atmosphere at your workplace will also get better. Hence there will be a sense of satisfaction in you. You will also make plans to buy a new property.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 23) It is going to be a fantastic week for you which will bring good results. You will make lot of efforts in your work and get unprecedented success. Your peers and superiors will have high expectations from you which you will manage to fulfill. You will also enjoy your work. Your enemies and opponents will be unable to harm you despite their numerous attempts. You will also develop new contacts and many people will come forward to help and support you. Your soul mate will remain your biggest strength in life. And your elders will keep giving their blessings. You will treasure family ties. Your financial status and condition will keep on improving and become more stable. It is going to be a good learning experience for you.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You will be feeling very positive and relaxed this week. Your financial condition will improve. The investments that you have made in the past will reap rich dividends. Money inflow will be continuous. Your bosses will welcome any new ideas that you give and they will have no hesitation in implementing them too. Your new plans will be acceptable to one and all. You will also get happiness from your spouse/partner. And you will be totally relaxed and will enjoy very good time at your home. Business/work related trips will keep you busy. And new contacts will bring you many benefits.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) It is going to be a tough week for you. You will find yourself in unwanted situation and will want to come out of it quickly. You will have to learn the art of walking the tight rope well. A not so favorable situation may develop suddenly at your workplace much to your discomfort. Money and wealth will keep coming. Your relations with your in-laws will come under some stress but you will manage to convince them. Ties will grow. You will complete all pending work. Thus you will achieve a lot and this will increase your enthusiasm. You will also get emotional in your ties with your mate. And love will hold more importance for you.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You will need to be diplomatic this week and put your interests ahead before others. Your negotiating skills will come to the fore and you will be able to get your work done. People will get convinced by you and will take notice of your talent. You will also develop an insight into human relations and will understand how to make the things work. The favorable placements of planets will help you in making best use of your talent and earn money. You will also make good money in your business. And will also negotiate a favorable business deal. Negative thoughts will never come in your mind. And you will achieve your goals.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) It is going to be a fabulous week. You will move ahead in your life. And will be victorious in your efforts. God's grace will help you solve all major problems that you were facing for some time now. You will pay full attention to your work. And your priorities in life will also change. Your family disputes will also get resolved. Hence your dream of fulfilling all your tasks will be realised. It is going to be a very warm and fulfilling relationship. You will also meet an old friend/colleague. There will be more enthusiasm in old relationship. Your income will grow. And your health will remain perfect.

Parents can also benefit from setting boundaries around screen time

In many households, screens are part of daily life - from work to entertainment.

But for parents, setting boundaries around screens isn't just about kids; it's also about modelling a balanced approach to screens. Our research shows parents who spend excessive time on screens may unconsciously encourage similar habits in their children.

Excessive screen time in young children is linked to developmental delays in communication and problem-solving. One explanation is that screen time displaces parent-child interactions that are crucial for development. This is often framed as the child's screen time displacing these interactions.

But when parents use their smartphones a lot, this is associated with lower responsiveness and attention towards their children, particularly when the screen time occurs during routines such as meal time.

Parents don't need to ban screens to be more present with their kids. If parents watch age-appropriate TV with their kids, this has a positive effect on literacy - possibly due to conversations about the content of the show.

There is a lot parents can do to foster healthier screen habits in the family through positive role-modelling and thoughtful management.

Managing screen time is also important for a parent's own physical and mental health.

The health impact of sedentary screen time

Screen time often means sitting for long stretches, which can be bad for our physical and mental health.

Our work has shown prolonged periods of sitting can impair blood sugar regulation, blood pressure, brain blood flow and cognitive function.

But that doesn't mean you should feel guilty every time you retire to the couch for some well-deserved Netflix.

Some of these effects can be eliminated by either exercising before a prolonged bout of sitting or breaking up sitting every 30 minutes with some light activity - ideally both.

You don't even need to pause the TV to fit in these activity breaks. One study found that breaking up a sedentary evening of watching TV every 30 minutes with short bursts of bodyweight exercise (squats, calf raises and hip extensions) increased sleep duration by 30 minutes.

This is important because sleep boosts your immune system, which helps maintain good physical and mental health.

While exercise and sleep boost, screen content also matters. Mentally passive screen use - such as scrolling through social media - has been linked to higher risks of depression and even dementia, whereas mentally active screen use (problem-solving and work tasks) may actually protect you.

While almost two-thirds of parents think they can reduce their sedentary screen time, for the remaining third, swapping passive for mentally active screen time is another option.

Our eyes and brain need a break too

Our eyes and minds aren't designed for constant screen time. Staring at a screen for too long can give us dry eyes, headaches and blurred vision - all symptoms of eye strain.

Screens also affect our brains. Research has found excessive and disordered screen use is linked to deficits in cognitive function.

Our brains need to consolidate information and recharge. Without regular breaks, we risk cognitive burnout, which makes it harder to stay productive, focus and potentially even manage screen time.

What can we do?

Guidelines recommend adults limit recreational sedentary screen time. But the message to simply "limit your screen time" may be unhelpful to many, especially when screens are embedded into modern life.

Here are some other ways to reduce the negative consequences of excessive screen time:

- ◆ **Avoid digital eye strain.** Follow the 20-20-20 rule. Every 20 minutes, give your eyes a break by looking at something 20 feet (6 metres) away for 20 seconds
- ◆ **Move regularly.** Exercise regularly and break up sedentary screen time with activity every 30 minutes for metabolic and cognitive benefits
- ◆ **Limit passive screen time.** Try swapping some passive screen activities (doom scrolling) for mentally engaging ones, such as puzzles, creative projects or educational content
- ◆ **Modelling balanced screen use for kids.** This might mean viewing educational shows together and discussing them.

Finally, we can't solely blame a lack of self-control for poor management of screen time. The content on our screens is designed to be addictive for parents and kids.

One parent reported that their child would avoid going to the toilet to the point of wetting themselves when playing the online game Roblox, because they didn't want their character to die.

Many parents can relate - albeit with better bladder control. We have all experienced doom scrolling where time seems to disappear, and we can't even recall what we saw.

If you are at risk of doom scrolling right now, one idea is to listen to some tips on how to stop. Consider going for a walk and giving yourself a break. You'll feel better for it. (*The Conversation*)

"To give anything less than your best, is to sacrifice the gift."

— Steve Prefontaine

The Shillong Times

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NEHU Affairs Need Closure

IT is unhealthy for an institution of higher learning to be in a state of suspended animation. The Central Government has done its part in sending a two-member fact finding Committee and the two have been adequately briefed and also checked out the ground realities. If the Union Education Ministry is serious about placing the right persons in the right posts and in this case purely for the purpose of advancing higher education in the region with a cultural nuance and it is important for any Vice Chancellor posted to the Universities in the North East to have a basic understanding of the culture sensitivities of the people of this region and not impose a set of mainland values with their caste hierarchies which is anathema for a tribal society that is devoid of caste and class. While those in positions of authority are respected because of the office they hold, no one will touch their feet for favours. In any case the students have been demanding their rights to better hostel facilities amongst other things. What has really triggered the revolt against VC PS Shukla is his propensity to appoint people with no knowledge of the culture of this region to sensitive administrative positions. Naturally this has raised the hackles of both teaching, non-teaching staff and students. For them the Vice Chancellor has forfeited his right to preside over the affairs of NEHU. He has been given a long rope but stubbornly refused to mend his ways.

What is expected from any Vice Chancellor is leadership qualities to inspire and guide the staff, students and faculty. His/Her very presence should inspire confidence. Besides that administrative experience too is an added quality since the Vice Chancellor has to balance between academic progress and efficient administration. Vice Chancellors are also expected to be competent managers so they can optimise the university's resources. Above all the Vice Chancellor must be a visionary who can formulate policies for the university's future. NEHU's academic standards had been on the downslide and it was expected that the Vice Chancellor would show enthusiasm in trying to raise NEHU's status but that did not happen. The Vice Chancellor should be an experienced academic leader who can uphold the university's academic standards.

Unfortunately, the NEHU VC from all accounts is one of those appointed for the wrong reasons. His appointment appears to have been influenced by external influences rather than merit. Such persons usually prioritize personal gains over the university's interests. The formation of an umbrella organisation - Meghalaya Indigenous Tribal Constitutional Rights Movement (MITCRM) comprising several leading social organisations to advocate for the cause of NEHU and their letter to President Murmu, the Visitor of the University asking her not to allow the present VC to continue his term at NEHU has sent a strong message to the Centre that NEHU will not be a dumping ground for inefficient and non-meritorious VC's in the future too. The earlier the Centre resolves the NEHU impasse the better it is for the University to pursue its academic sessions and impending examinations.

Powering India's financial revolution with savings & capital markets

By Ashishkumar Chauhan

A few years ago, if someone had mentioned India achieving a \$5 trillion economy, it might have been met with skepticism. But here we are, closer than ever to realizing that dream. This remarkable growth story is not just about numbers; it's a testament to the collective spirit, innovation, and resilience of a nation. The two crucial elements making this happen are savings and capital markets. These are pillars that empower individuals and businesses while driving national progress.

From saving in maida drums at home to engaging in one of the world's most dynamic capital markets, India's financial evolution is nothing short of inspiring. Let's delve into how these two forces are shaping a brighter, more prosperous future for all.

Saving: India's most timeless and effective habit!

Saving is not just a habit, but it is in the DNA of every Indian and we are proud of it! For decades, families have used savings as a cushion to secure their futures, achieve life goals, and weather the storm when life throws curveballs. India's gross savings rate stands at an impressive 29.8% of Gross Domestic National Income (GNDI) for 2022-23, with household savings accounting for a lion's share of 60.9%!

This underscores the pivotal role of families in driving the nation's financial health. However, today's savers are exploring beyond conventional methods and there is a noticeable shift towards modern financial instruments.

From small town households to bustling metros, people are embracing everything from mutual funds to insurance plans, and guess what? These aren't just for the wealthy! Today, anyone can start investing with just Rs500 a month.

The Era of Diversified Savings For a New India

With increased financial literacy and easier access to diverse financial products, embracing new ways to save and invest are becoming the new normal. Mutual funds, pension plans, and insurance products offer higher returns and cater to long-term goals. For instance, systematic investment plans (SIPs) start at just Rs500 a month, making wealth creation accessible to all.

Govt Schemes Driving the Change

Rice and dal is one of India's favorite dishes, but to make the dal better, you add spices. Similarly, government initiatives have significantly "spiced up" the culture of

saving. The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) has brought banking to over 53 crore beneficiaries, with deposits exceeding Rs2.3 lakh crore. This program not only promotes financial inclusion but also instills a habit of saving among millions. That's not all, programs like Sukanya Samridhi Yojana and Public Provident Fund (PPF) incentivize disciplined saving through tax benefits and competitive returns, particularly for underserved populations.

India's Evolving Demographics

Let's focus a little on India's biggest asset, its people! This country's young and dynamic population is a goldmine for economic growth. By 2031, it has been predicted that the working-age group (15-59 years) will make up 65.2% of the population, which will boost the potential for savings and investments. **Urbanization Says, "Don't forget us!"**

Urbanization is accelerating and it is accelerating at a brisk pace. Currently, 36% of Indians are now living in cities compared to 32% a decade ago. This shift, along with the rise of dual-income households, is driving a culture of saving not just for necessities but also for aspirations like luxury travel, homeownership, higher education and many more. To boost it further, digital tools and fintech apps are also simplifying financial planning. This is enabling families to dream big and achieve them.

Capital markets: The Wealth Creating Engine

Sure, savings are the providers of financial stability, but do you know who are the catalysts? It is the capital markets! This market fuels businesses, funds infrastructure, and creates jobs by channeling savings into investments. Globally, India's capital markets are one of the most vibrant. This is not at all surprising as this reflects the aspirations of a nation on the move.

Stock Exchanges Driving Participation

India's equity markets, represented by the Stock Exchanges, have seen incredible growth. In October 2024, total registered investors from the NSE crossed 10.5 crore! Today, one in five Indian families participates in equity markets, with individual holdings growing tenfold in the last 10 years to Rs114.7 lakh crore in September 2024! When you think about it, these are incredible statistics.

How Mutual Funds Simplify

The bad news is that many people still think investing is for the rich and seasoned pros. But, the good news is that it's changing fast! All thanks to mutual funds. Mutual funds are democratizing investment. Thanks to platforms like SIPs (Systematic Investment Plans), anyone can start investing with as little as Rs500 a month. No need to know about the ins and outs of the market; these funds pool your money with others and are managed by experts. That means that an average person can invest like a pro.

Debt Markets: A Steady Anchor

These are like the silent killers! This market plays a crucial role in providing low-risk, steady returns. Government bonds, corporate bonds, and treasury bills finance critical infrastructure projects while diversifying investment portfolios.

Innovation with Alternative Investments & Technology

Let's not forget the wild world of alternative investments! These days, investors can explore options like real estate, private equity, and even gold bonds, all tailored to different risk appetites and goals. What's even better? Technology is making these options more accessible to regular investors. The rise of robo-advisors, AI-driven platforms that help you invest smarter, means even those who are new to the game can make informed decisions without spending hours doing research. Digital wallets, UPI, and even blockchain technology are creating seamless, borderless financial ecosystems, enabling people to make transactions and invest in ways that weren't possible just a few years ago. It's a whole new financial world and it's accessible to everyone. Let's take the easiest of examples! Think about when you pay a petty shopkeeper for a packet of chewing gum via UPI. A voice always emerges to confirm, "Received Rsxx." Sounds familiar right? It is amazing how technology has made even the smallest transactions effortless and easier.

Sharpening Financial Literacy

Now, here's a catch: While the tools and opportunities are there, financial literacy in India still needs a little more attention. Many investors lack basic knowledge, leading to impulsive decisions or missed opportunities. Which proves that It's not enough

to just offer people access to savings and investment products, but also highlights the need to educate them on how to use these tools wisely. Targeted education initiatives by regulators like SEBI, banks, and fintech companies are empowering individuals to make informed choices. Workshops, webinars, and interactive tools are helping, as well. It's all about empowering the masses with the knowledge to make informed financial decisions. After all, when people know better, they invest better.

Challenges and the Road Ahead

Just as every revolution faces bumps along the way, India's financial journey too faces its own set of challenges: market volatility, fraud risks, and digital divide, just to name a few. Not everyone has access to high-speed internet, and not everyone feels comfortable navigating digital tools. But these challenges aren't roadblocks! They are opportunities. With stronger regulations, better digital infrastructure, and enhanced security measures, these obstacles can be turned into stepping stones, bringing financial empowerment to everyone in the country.

The Final Word:

Savings and capital markets are sides of a coin, they are all about building a future! Savings offer security, while capital markets enable growth. Together, they are building a future where individuals can secure their family's well-being and invest in their dreams. That way, a nation is rising on the foundation of financial resilience. As India gears up for a \$5 trillion economy, savings and capital markets will be the twin engines who will lead the charge. The best part is that the journey is just getting started! Get ready to witness something special.

Conclusion: Empowering a Billion Dreams

Savings and capital markets are more than financial mechanisms. They are keys to unlock dreams! They allow individuals to secure their futures and also contribute to nation-building. As India gallops towards the \$5 trillion economy mission, these pillars will play a pivotal role in shaping an inclusive and sustainable future.

The journey is challenging but exciting. With innovation, inclusivity, and education as guides, India's financial landscape is definitely poised for unprecedented growth. For every individual and the nation at large, the best is yet to come.

(The writer is MD & CEO, NSE. Views expressed are personal)

Lawless streets: How hawkers in Laitumkrah are endangering lives and livelihoods

By Lyzander E Sohkhlet

Laitumkrah, a once-thriving hub of community and commerce, is now in a dire state of disarray due to the unchecked presence of street hawkers. While this issue seems to affect all walks of life, it is the middle class that bears the brunt of the chaos. The lower classes have mastered the art of leveraging sympathy to justify their actions, and the upper classes remain largely unscathed, detached from the struggles of daily street-level conflicts. The middle class, however, is stuck in the crossfire—silently suffering the consequences. This plight is especially visible in Police Point, where hawkers selling local food items have taken over the area. Ironically, the same street is home to four established eateries, owned and operated by middle-class entrepreneurs. These businesses, which pay steep rents in an

era of unprecedented inflation, are struggling to stay afloat as their revenues drop by a staggering 45%. How can these eateries compete when hawkers blatantly set up shop right in front of their

survive amidst this chaos. Are these businesses, which provide stable jobs and contribute significantly to the local economy, any less important? Why is their plight so often overlooked? This is not just a question of space but of fairness and responsibility. The middle-class business owners, who have invested their savings and energy into creating legitimate establishments, are drowning in a sea of injustice. They must contend with skyrocketing rents, diminishing revenue, and the audacity of unregulated vendors who threaten their very existence.

The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, a cornerstone legislation for regulating street vending in India, empowers local authorities to designate no-vending



zones. These zones are crucial in areas like hospitals, schools, and emergency corridors, where unimpeded access and sanitation are non-negotiable. The lane in front of Nazareth Hospital

The lane in front of Nazareth Hospital is a no-vending zone, established to ensure ambulances, patients, and hospital staff can move without hindrance. Yet, hawkers persist, occupying the footpaths and spilling onto the road, turning the area into an impassable mess.

doors, undercutting their prices while leaving behind filth for the shop owners to clean up?

Students are another group struggling under the weight of this encroachment. Every morning, they navigate a gauntlet of obstructions on the footpaths, forcing them to walk on the already congested roads. This dangerous situation recently culminated in a tragic incident when a young girl was struck by a car while walking in the middle of the road near Nazareth Hospital. The footpaths, occupied by hawkers, left her with no safe alternative. Thankfully, her injuries were not severe, but it begs the question: if she had been critically hurt, who would bear the responsibility? Would the associations that so vehemently defend the hawkers step up to take accountability, or would they continue to justify the chaos caused by their actions?

The situation near Nazareth Hospital adds another layer of absurdity. This area has been officially declared a no-vending zone, but the hawkers continue to defy the rules with impunity. The authorities, tasked with maintaining order, seem powerless against a resistance emboldened by misguided intellectuals who defend such blatant disregard for the law. Meanwhile, ambulances struggle to navigate the cluttered lane, and shop owners watch helplessly as their livelihoods are eroded.

We often hear the argument that hawkers "greatly influence" the economy, but how many pause to consider the middle-class businesses they directly affect? Attached to this article are a series of photographs showing the real picture: eateries surrounded by hawkers, litter-filled footpaths, and the overcrowded streets that have become synonymous with the area. These images tell the story of hundreds of legitimate businesses—each employing numerous individuals and supporting families—struggling to

is a no-vending zone, established to ensure ambulances, patients, and hospital staff can move without hindrance. Yet, hawkers persist, occupying the footpaths and spilling onto the road, turning the area into an impassable mess. This defiance doesn't stop at blocking access. Hospitals are legally protected under the Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules, 2000, which designate them as "silent zones." Within 100 meters of such premises, activities that generate excessive noise or gather large crowds are strictly prohibited. The hawkers near Nazareth Hospital, however, pay no heed, adding to the cacophony of an already chaotic street. Their presence disrupts the sanctity that patients and medical professionals rely upon. The situation worsens when one considers hygiene. Municipal laws require vendors to maintain cleanliness, but the reality in Laitumkrah is far from this ideal. The hawkers leave behind heaps of litter—food waste, packaging, and other debris—that nearby shop owners and pedestrians are forced to deal with. This is especially troubling near a hospital, where sanitation is critical for patient care and recovery. Laitumkrah is crying out for order. The law must prevail—not just for the sake of businesses but for the safety of everyone who uses these streets. If hawkers are allowed to continue unchecked, with no regard for regulations or the rights of others, the consequences will only grow worse. It's time for the authorities to act decisively, ensuring that the streets of Laitumkrah belong to everyone, not just to those who refuse to follow the rules. The situation needs a solution—one that is grounded in fairness and enforcement. If the authorities fail to act, the middle class, the backbone of this community, will continue to suffer in silence. And when they are forced out, who will fill the void?

Letters to the Editor

Concerns Over VPP's Candidate Selection in JHADC Elections

Editor,
As a dedicated supporter of the Voice of the People's Party (VPP) since its inception, I have admired their commitment to reform and their promise of a principled approach to governance. I believed in their vision for change and proudly cast my vote for them during the MP elections, trusting that they would bring integrity and progress to our state.

However, recent developments have left me deeply disappointed. One of VPP's founding principles was to carefully select candidates who are highly qualified, graduates, and free from the taint of political opportunism. They assured us that they would avoid fielding candidates who casually shift between parties or prioritize personal gains over public service.

Regrettably, in the upcoming MDC election for the Jowai North constituency of the JHADC, the VPP has chosen Shri. Andrew Shullai as their candidate. Shri. Shullai is an incumbent MDC from the Congress party and previously contested the 2023 MLA elections under the TMC banner, which he lost. This decision appears to contradict the very values the VPP claims to uphold. The party's promise now appears to have been a false assurance to the people who placed

their faith in the party's commitment to clean politics.

This deviation from their core principles has been an eye-opener. When some members left the party, citing concerns about its direction, I initially dismissed their actions as misguided. But now, I understand their frustrations. They likely foresaw the erosion of the party's ideals and acted accordingly.

While I acknowledge the good work being done by some of their MLAs and their MP, it is troubling to see the party veering off course. I urge voters to reflect on these issues and choose candidates who truly embody the principles of transparency, accountability, and dedication to public service.

The VPP must realign with its founding vision if it wishes to retain the trust and support of its people.

Yours etc.,
Damechwa Laloo,
Jowai

Meghalaya's thirst for truth in water quality

Editor,
In a recent statement that has left many baffled, Union Minister for Jal Shakti, V. Somanna, claimed that Meghalaya has not reported any habitations with iron contaminants in drinking water sources beyond permissible limits - "Drinking water in Meghalaya safe: Centre in Lok Sabha" (ST December 1, 2024). This assertion, however, seems to be contrary to the ground reality experienced by

residents of many localities in Shillong and other parts of Meghalaya.

Residents in many localities report a range of issues with their water supply. These include muddy and murky water, the presence of harmful elements such as iron and arsenic, and bacterial contamination (including coliform). Apart from this, some areas receive acidic water with pH levels below 6, which can pose serious health risks.

To get an accurate picture of the situation, it is humbly suggested that the central government depute "experts" to conduct on-ground assessments. These experts should visit households to inspect the condition of water storage tanks. They may be surprised to discover thick layers of slimy mud, along with deposits of toxic elements and bacteria accumulated within. Additionally, the expert team should carry out comprehensive water quality tests across various localities and engage directly with local communities to understand their experiences firsthand. The situation becomes particularly dire during the rainy season, with residents often receiving nothing but muddy water.

Moreover, some localities in the town suffer from an "extremely scant" water supply and sometimes no supply at all. When residents raise complaints, they often fall on the deaf ears of the authorities.

The disparity between official statements and the reality faced by Meghalaya's residents underscores the urgent need for action. The

Minister, V. Somanna, categorically urged all states to conduct rigorous water quality testing on a regular basis. No excuses, no shortcuts—tests need to be done both "at the source" and where the water finally makes its splash at "delivery points." Furthermore, the Minister rightly emphasized the necessity of implementing corrective measures wherever required to ensure that households receive water that meets prescribed quality standards.

It is hoped that this stern directive from the Central Minister will jolt the Municipalities and PHED out of their slumber! The time for excuses has dried up—now it's time to act.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

VIP Culture and No Horn Zone

Editor,
Horns from vehicles contribute to noise pollution. Noise pollution can cause health problems for people and animals. From traffic noise to rock concerts, loud or inescapable sounds can cause hearing loss, stress, and high blood pressure. Hence, blowing horns around hospitals and schools are banned because they are considered silence zones. The norms on enforcing silence zones near hospitals, schools etc. are hardly being implemented in Shillong city. Patients of Shillong Civil Hospital suffer the most from the menace of noise pollution contributed by heavy traffic around

the areas. However, I find it baffling that "NO HORN ZONE" is being strictly implemented near the official residence of a Meghalaya Cabinet Minister. One noticed the security personnel are posted 24x7 in front of the residence entrance which is located opposite the Botanical Garden to note down the registration number of the defaulters. Shillong Civil Hospital deserves the most in implementation of rules laid down by Central Pollution Board where honking is banned in a 100m radius around hospitals.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah,
Via email

Alternate route to Shillong

Editor,
Recently, it is being reported that the survey of a new road from Umiam to Shillong is underway. On August 6, 2022, I had written a letter to the editor, wherein I had suggested an alternate route circumambulating the Umiam Lake. The route for this road may be Umsaw - Umbir - Mawlyndep - Nongkyndong - Nongpathaw, ending at multiple locations like Mawlai Nongkwar and Lower Mawprem.

Since the Western Bypass is already under development, it would entail a very easy connection between this expected road and the city. Currently, there is already an existing katcha road, which only needs to be further developed. This will ensure that we have a substitute entry into Shillong, which will decongest the entry into

the city. Also, in future this will enable Shillong city to expand across the Umshyri river to the western side, which is currently totally underdeveloped. I certainly think that this should be the approach of having a new route to Shillong, and it should be implemented on a war footing.

Yours etc.,
Sarad Bawri,
Via email

Concern about the Umshyri river route

Editor,
I am writing to express my deep concern about the ongoing project to construct a route through the Umshyri River up to the State Legislative Assembly in Riblong. While I understand the need for infrastructure development, I strongly believe that this project is compromising the natural beauty of the area. The Umshyri River is a vital part of Shillong's ecosystem, and altering its course will have far-reaching consequences for the environment and the local community. I urge the authorities to reconsider this project and explore alternative solutions that balance development with environmental sustainability.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Via email

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

"One life is all we have and we live it as we believe in living it. But to sacrifice what you are and to live without belief, that is a fate more terrible than dying."

— Joan of Arc

The Shillong Times

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Power play in Mumbai

A fortnight's delay for ministry formation in Maharashtra is nothing "objectionable" to frown at; yet, it eloquently hints at bad blood that would run through the veins of the new 'baby' that will be anointed into office there.

As the party that won a near majority for itself in the 288-member assembly, no question should have arisen in the normal course about BJP's right to lead the new government.

The material difference between the leader of a small regional party heading a state government and the leader of a national party sitting in the CM's chair is huge.

Bread or Circus

By Napoleon S Mawphniang

As a member of our State, I observe a profoundly distressing reality that haunts my thoughts during the night.

tion of misaligned priorities and governmental oversight. As a resident of Ri Bhoi District, I have observed the festivals organized by the government of Meghalaya occurring periodically throughout the years.

The government's methodology regarding development initiatives is aptly summarized by what I refer to as the "Maza Gold Tea Syndrome."

The government proudly announces a reduction in unemployment rates from 8.8% to 1.9%, however, the actual circumstances present a contrasting narrative.

In George Orwell's "1984," the Ministry of Plenty perpetually alters economic statistics to present an illusion of growth, despite the populace enduring significant shortages.

These government-sponsored festivals have transformed into a self-perpetuating ecosystem. While officials are afforded the privilege of state-funded accommodations and meals, ordinary citizens are relegated to the role of mere ticket-buying spectators.

The government asserts that these events will yield profits; however, they consistently operate at a deficit. The true beneficiaries are not the citizens of Meghalaya, but rather the artists, government officials, and a privileged few who gain from these lavish events.

Given that Rs 2,105 crore was allotted over five years under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), it is clear that Meghalaya's educational system still faces several difficulties.

This evokes memories of tales my grandfather shared regarding imprudent monarchs who sought to distract their famished populace with extravagant celebrations, in the vain hope that they might overlook their gnawing hunger.

The education system in Meghalaya finds itself at the lower echelons of national assessments, as only 29.1% of grade 5 students demonstrate the ability to read fundamental texts.

The government's approach is not simply erroneous; it represents a deliberate strategy aimed at preserving authority through diversion rather than genuine progress.

As educational outcomes persist in their decline, the government diverts substantial financial resources towards events such as the Cherry Blossom Festival. This reflects the opulence of France's Louis XVI, who orchestrated extravagant celebrations at Versailles amidst the disintegration of the nation's infrastructure.

into bureaucratic obscurity while citizens remained engrossed in state-sponsored festivities.

The answer does not reside in an increase of festivals, but rather in the pursuit of transparency, accountability, and authentic development.

As history illustrates, societies that prioritize spectacle over meaningful content are destined for decline.

It is imperative that we, as Meghalayans, advocate for transparency in governmental expenditures, particularly regarding these extravagant events.

2. It is imperative to hold our elected representatives accountable for their promises and behavior.

3. Cultivate critical thinking and encourage engagement in civic affairs among our youth.

4. Champion local initiatives that adeptly address authentic community needs.

Throughout history, governing bodies have employed entertainment as a mechanism for exerting influence and maintaining control.

This inequality ultimately culminated in the French Revolution. In our contemporary landscape, we observe reflections of these historical trends.

Although international artists such as Akon and Ed Sheeran undeniably generate enthusiasm, it is imperative to scrutinize the cultural implications of these external forms of entertainment.

affirmation? Furthermore, the emphasis placed on these monumental occasions frequently undermines the support for grassroots cultural initiatives, which possess the potential for a more enduring influence on our communities.

The growing reliance of the state on external financial support, now reaching \$1.07 billion, presents a considerable threat of intensifying its current crisis.

The government frequently rationalizes these occurrences through economic arguments, asserting that they enhance tourism and benefit local enterprises.

Underlying this criticism does not amount to a total rejection of entertainment or cultural events is crucial. It represents a call for balance and the delineation of priorities.

1. It is imperative to undertake a comprehensive analysis of public spending associated with entertainment events.

2. A clearly articulated policy concerning the alignment of these events with broader developmental goals.

3. Improved distribution of resources focused on education, healthcare, and the creation of employment opportunities.

We must question ourselves as we stand at this turning point in Meghalaya's history: Will we demand the significant change our state sorely needs, or will we remain passive spectators in this magnificent circus? We are the ones who make the decision.

Unlike the people of Rome, we should not be satisfied with bread and circuses as our society disintegrates. Rather, let us engage thoughtfully in the endeavor of shaping Meghalaya's future.

The writer is Advocate and Humanist and resides in Ri Bhoi district, Meghalaya.

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Let's Learn from Bangladesh...!

Most Indians are shocked by the violence against Hindus and the destruction of temples in Bangladesh.

Many of us who were alive during the liberation of East Pakistan, wonder how a nation freed by the Indian army from the clutches of West Pakistan, could react in such a way, to the very ones who helped give them their freedom.

How sad, we whisper, when gratitude is replaced by betrayal.

But maybe, there's a deep lesson for us Indians to learn from the atrocious way the Bangladeshis are behaving.

Even as our minds look with disbelief, remembering the sacrifice of our brave soldiers fighting a war on two fronts, we need to also look at our own country with the same disbelief as our own people disrespect and try to destroy the name of the man who freed our country from the British: Literally a one man army, who fought an unconventional war, and freed us from the shackles of the white colonizers.

They ruled with a heavy hand, just as Bangladesh was crushed by the might of the Pakistan army, till Indian troops walked in, captured ninety-five thousand Pakistani soldiers and set their neighbour free.

But now India sees not gratitude but betrayal, just as those who revere the Father of the Nation, is being betrayed by many inside our country.

How easy to forget, isn't it?

Both governments; that of Bangladesh and also India, glibly use the word, 'sedition'!

Such incidents abroad, we should instead be in a position to shout across the border and say, "Muhammad Yunus! Look at us and emulate us!"

Which is why they are also getting away with murder, because they are doing what they see across the border. To be able to stop such acts, we need to lead by example.

Well, weren't we doing the same with the 'sedition' word, till the Supreme Court stepped in? And aren't we ridiculously terming any anti-government sentiment as anti-national even till date?

However, since such trivial acts are considered seditious in nature, shouldn't we as a nation, start looking deeply into definite acts of betrayal or treachery as real acts of sedition?

That we need to condemn those who speak ill of our freedom fighters: They lost years of their lives, in jails, even as we spend years of our lives condemning them. And they are condemned by those who never ever raised their voice for freedom.

Shouldn't those who adulterate the assassin of the Mahatma be arrested on charges of sedition? Because by venerating a murderer of our greatest freedom fighter, he or she is saying that India should not have been freed.

Enough grounds, right, for a lifetime in jail? At least for them to taste what it is to be in captivity and to find out what it was like to have been under the British.

So, there's much we can learn about sedition, ingratitude and betrayal as we watch our neighbour showing us a mirror to our own selves.

Something else we can learn is how minorities feel when the country they call their own bully them.

The temples in Bangladesh and even Canada or Pakistan, do not have foreign worshippers, were not built for those from other countries but are used by citizens of the same country, who worship God in another way.

"They have a right to!" we scream. "Protect their place of worship!" we shout.

Our country, which could be a beacon to the rest of the world, to show them what peace and brotherhood actually is, is being destroyed by selfish politicians, and oh yes, the same is happening in Bangladesh.

But, before reacting to such incidents abroad, we should instead be in a position to shout across the border and say, "Muhammad Yunus! Look at us and emulate us!"

What we see happening in Bangladesh, could be the beginning of such despicable acts soon in other parts of the world. Slowly but surely, sporadic acts of violence are happening all over against us, because they see us doing the same.

Let us put a stop to this, and show the world, how India is a country that has learnt to live in unity through diversity.

For this, we need to learn from what is happening in Bangladesh, before it is too late.

The Author conducts an online, eight session Writers and Speakers Course. If you'd like to join, do send a thumbs-up to WhatsApp number 9892572883 or send a message to bobsbanter@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Meghalaya heading towards a surveillance state?

Editor, 'In God We Trust, All Others We Track.' Combat Direction Center at the USS Harry S. Truman

55% of the world's population will reside in urban areas, with an increase to 68%. Going by data with land space getting more expensive and restrictive, we are clearing the roadmap for the rise of the machines.

monitor, intercept, and decode communications under the direction of the Union Home Ministry.

Biometrics and facial recognition were once fantasy story lines in Hollywood movies like Eagle Eye or Enemy of the State, but today they are reality tools which, left unchecked, can turn rogue in the wrong hands.

Agencies like Research and Analysis Wing, National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO), Directorate of Signals Intelligence in the Army are of utmost impor-

tance with the growing digital influence of China and Russia but turning them into lethal engines for public monitoring will be nerve-wracking especially with the skirmishes in Bangladesh and Manipur.

Edward Snowden's memoir, 'Permanent Record', on how one man was engaged in building a system for mass surveillance, eventually leading him to bring it down for the greater good is a must read.

Yours etc., Christopher Gathpho, Shillong-10

Fire safety and use of drones

Editor, As winter sets in, many people turn to electric heaters, blowers, or traditional methods like burning wood and charcoal to stay warm.

While these methods provide relief from the cold, and prevent one from getting sick, they also pose significant fire hazards. In Meghalaya, numerous fires have been caused by short circuits, unattended charcoal fires, or improper use of blowers in the past.

The concern goes beyond winter—it's about the overall safety of our localities throughout the year. How prepared are we to handle emergencies? Are our localities equipped to receive timely assistance?

While the fire services have taken steps to address these challenges, more needs

to be done. One innovative solution to enhance fire safety is the use of drones. Drones equipped to carry and dispense water could be deployed to extinguish fires in areas inaccessible to fire trucks, such as densely packed or remote localities.

To ensure such measures are effective, proper training and awareness programs should be conducted annually in every locality with initiatives that include educating residents about fire prevention and safety, familiarizing communities with emergency protocols, and demonstrating the use of innovative tools like water-carrying drones.

By taking these proactive steps, we can minimize the

risks of fire-related tragedies and ensure a safer environment for all.

Yours etc., B. Laiphlang, Via email

Torn national flag at Secretariat: A matter of national shame

Editor,

I am writing to bring to your attention a matter of national pride and importance. The national flag hoisted in the Secretariat is gradually tearing out, which is not only a visual eyesore but also a disrespect to the national symbol.

damaged flag should not be hoisted. It is imperative that the authorities take immediate action to replace the torn flag with a new one, ensuring that our national symbol is treated with the respect and dignity it deserves.

As North-East India's oldest English-language daily newspaper, I believe The Shillong Times has a significant influence on public opinion and can help bring this issue to the attention of the state administration. I urge the authorities to take prompt action to rectify this situation and maintain the dignity of our national flag.

Yours etc., Sudarshan Dasgupta, Via email

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

"Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow. It empties today of its strength."

— Corrie Ten Boom

The Shillong Times

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India's North East & Indo-Pacific Partnerships

WITHIN a short span of time there have been two engagements on the Indo-Pacific strategic alliance in Meghalaya. The first was initiated by the American Consulate Kolkata in collaboration with Observer Research Foundation. This week the UK High Commissioner to India, Lindy Cameron and her colleague Andrew Fleming, British Deputy High Commissioner, Kolkata. It may be mentioned that the Indo-Pacific strategic alliance is led by the US and includes Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand. While the newly elected US President Donald Trump and outgoing President Joe Biden disagree on most issues, one area of consensus is the Indo-Pacific. During Trump's first term in office, in 2019 he and his team published the Indo-Pacific Strategy, which sought to maintain a "free and open" region primarily through strengthening alliances and partnerships to counter China. When Biden entered office in 2021, he doubled down on his predecessor's approach. President Trump is known to be unpredictable with his international relations and is known to be transactional more than pragmatic and far-sighted. There were times he praised the Indo-Pacific allies and times when he tried strong-arm tactics with them but as far as the Indo-Pacific alliance is concerned he was consistent in his approach of trading with enhanced diplomatic sensitivities. Kamala Harris, the Democrat candidate who lost to Donald Trump in the just concluded US elections during her campaign emphasized continuity with the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy.

It was Late Abe Shinzo the former prime minister of Japan who probably convinced Trump to shift from an Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific focus, which would include India and the Indian Ocean Region as part of a collective strategy to counter China. Japan was also an advocate for reviving the Quad, a diplomatic partnership between Australia, India, Japan and the United States with the commitment to support an open, stable, prosperous, inclusive and resilient Indo-Pacific. Japan made these moves because, during Trump's tenure, it worried about its years-long standoff over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea (also claimed by China, which calls them the Diaoyu Islands). Japan was also concerned about North Korea, which in 2017 fired ballistic missiles over its territory. Since Biden came to office, Japan has shifted its attention farther south to the Taiwan Strait. Japan believes that a conflict there could impact the security of its southwestern Ryukyu Island chain. The Indo-Pacific Strategic Alliance much like the Quad is seen as a mechanism for balancing China's influence in the region, although its members have stressed that it is not a military alliance and is open to other countries who share their values and interests. It is interesting why India's North East has become the focal point here. True the North East shares 1395 kilometres with China in the North and the latter has had an abiding interest in Arunachal Pradesh by refusing to issue visas to residents of that state because it claims Arunachal Pradesh is part of South Tibet. In fact China's overarching influence in the Indo-Pacific region and in recent times its attempts to woo countries inimical to India are what makes the Indo-Pacific Strategic Alliance an important diplomatic initiative.

Laitumkhrach Aesthetics and Middle Class Victimhood

By Joel Kyndiah

Four years ago, as a group of young people in Shillong advocating for intersectional environmental justice, under the banner of "Fridays For Future," we raised concerns about the proposed construction of the 'Barik Mall' in the PWD Estate at the Civil Hospital junction. The proposed construction aimed to create a high-end mall, similar to the Saket Mall in Delhi, replacing the earlier proposed construction of the 'Iconic Place' and terminating the design awarded for the same.

The 'Iconic Place', was envisioned as an open space for the public, featuring underground parking, amphitheatres, an art gallery, and dedicated areas for vendors — perhaps akin to the temporary kiosks set up at Wards Lake during the recent events such as the Literary Festival or the Wine Festival earlier last year. I hope I am not too optimistic in assuming that these vendor spaces, as outlined in the Detailed Project Report of the Iconic Place, would be accessible to all residents of Shillong — hawkers, the "middle class", and the wealthy elite.

When we petitioned the proposed conversion of the PWD estate into a mall, we were met with surprised reactions, both intriguing and disdainful. Nevertheless, we were firm in our resolve in intersectionally rooting environmental issues, urbanization and gentrification. As residents of the city with already limited public resources and open spaces, we felt we should have a say in how urbanization unfolds, and we grounded our petition against the mall that environmentalism goes beyond the fads of tree plantation, tote bags, and metal straws, but must be rooted in class and social consciousness, and its relationship with resource utilization and urbanization. We argued that the positioning of a mall as an "economic solution" and "infrastructural solution" reinforces a myopic understanding of economics and urban planning, and one that reinforces gentrified markets over accessible community spaces.

In this context, Lyzander Sohket's article yesterday, "Lawless Streets: How Hawkings in Laitumkhrach Are Endangering Lives and Livelihoods" (TST, 3rd December 2024), reminded me of the same response we faced from the "middle class" in Shillong when we advocated for more participatory, non-class-based public spaces in the face of unplanned urbanization and gentrification.

While my use of the term "urban planning" may be rebutted in an article in defense of hawkers and street vendors, I pre-emptively argue that the alleged economic and social disruptions caused by hawkers and vendors in Laitumkhrach, does not arise from their presence, but from a historical lack of inclusive urban planning, which fails to integrate vendors into Shillong's formal structure, as underscored by the recent protest outside the Shillong Municipal Board and the night protest in Police Bazaar, against their illegal relocation to a 'notified vending area', when no proper consultation with the Hawkers and Street Vendors Association in the Town Vending Committee was carried out in the full spirit and letter of the law.

In the article above, Lyzander Sohket positions the "middle class" as stuck in a cross-fire between the wealthy upper classes detached from the realities, of "daily street-level conflicts" of the middle class, and the seemingly manipulative "lower classes" who have leveraged the art of garnering sympathy for their "actions".

This portrayal of the middle class as voiceless victims trapped between two antagonistic forces — the wealthy elite and the "sympathy-leveraging" hawkers, is problematic, for it reflects a misplaced sense of victimhood, which if I may, — cultural critic Slavoj Zizek would argue that this narrative framing of the "middle" class between the narrative of the "rich" and the "poor" serves as an ideological fantasy that allows the middle to displace its anxieties onto the hawkers and street vendors, thus avoiding their confrontation with the structural inequalities perpetuated by capitalism.

In doing so, there is a reinforcement of a zero-sum understanding of class-relations, where the economic survival of one group is perceived as inherently detrimental to another. In reality, the struggles of the middle class restaurateurs and café-owners in Laitumkhrach and the hawkers, are interlinked, both shaped by systemic economic vulnerabilities. Moreover, this self-perception of the middle class as "silently suffering" does not account for its role in upholding an economic system and government policies that marginalize informal workers while enabling wealth accumulation of the upper and the "middle" classes.

It was also argued that hawkers cause a "gauntlet of obstructions" preventing the right of students and pedestrians to utilize the footpaths, effectively compromising the spaces of the middle classes. Though a legitimate concern, in highlighting that the area surrounding Nazareth Hospital is a notified non-vending zone, but that the vendors are flouting the same, along with the illustration that pedestrians are in danger, by citing an example of a recent accident in the area. While this observation does highlight the potential dangers posed by such a situation, it also raises the question of who has the right to inhabit and shape urban spaces.

In this regard, I cite noted French sociologist, Henri Lefebvre's notion of the "right to the city", which was recently reiterated by the Delhi High Court's judgment in *Ajay Maken vs. Union of India*, upholding the constitutional right of slum dwellers against forced and unannounced evictions.

The "right to the city" articulated by Lefebvre argues that urban spaces should not be solely controlled by market forces, such as commodification and capitalism, but should be shaped and governed by the citizens who inhabit it, and in this context, the hawkers and street vendors. Hence, this perspective challenges the implicit privileging of a bourgeois aesthetic of order that underpins the article. Arguing that "hawkers are endangering the lives and livelihoods", is to prioritize a bourgeois aesthetic of order that values controlled environments over the pluralistic dynamics of urban spaces which is evidently sliding in Shillong. Doing so alienates the hawkers and propagates a belief that we ought to conform to a middle class imagination of propriety and aesthetics.

Also, this framing of hawkers as impediments to the desired urban order of the "middle class" is arguably akin to the logic of exclusion and mob justice that underpins the "bulldozer raj" seen in recent times, where municipal authorities in India demolish the homes of individuals and even whole communities in the face of offences where an individual has allegedly committed, and as revenge against protesting ethnic and religious minorities as seen in Uttar Pradesh, and Assam. Fortunately the Supreme Court has come down heavily on this system for clearly

violating basic principles of law, and municipal executive authorities as judge, jury, and executioner.

It was also stated that hawkers and street vendors have the "audacity" to threaten "legitimate businesses" and "legitimate establishments" which support numerous families and entrepreneurs who are drowning in a sea of injustice due to skyrocketing rents and diminishing revenue.

Effectively such arguments ignore the socio-economic systems that necessitate informal labour. Hawkers inhabit a liminal space within the economy, where formal employment opportunities are scarce, and informal work becomes a means of survival. In arguing that hawkers have "audacity" to threaten "legitimate businesses", is to frame their labour as illegitimate, and overlooks their crucial role in sustaining urban economies by providing affordable goods and services to lower-income groups. The middle class's assertion of economic legitimacy and superiority reflects nothing but a cultural anxiety about downward mobility, clearly juxtaposed between eating at chic Laitumkhrach café, and a standing mess just outside of it.

While the concerns of unregulated street vending are valid for reasons such as congestion and food safety, etc., the effort of the hawkers and street vendors trying to secure their rights and implementation in letter and spirit of the National Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihoods and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 must be appreciated. The hawkers fought for this for six years since 2016, with the state government repealing the exclusionary state Act in favour of the National Act in 2022.

Rather than treating hawkers as a "menace", we must question the broader cultural logic that normalizes such antagonisms. The middle class, which I am also guilty of belonging to in the pursuit of imagined orderly urban spaces, often attempt to isolate themselves and fend for their own self-interests.

It must be reiterated that the "right to the city" is not just a legal or an economic right but a cultural right that enables everyone the capability to assert themselves and a Shillong that values the economic contributions of all the residents, and not just the middle class.

(This article is a personal reflection of the author's own views and is not affiliated with any organization or institution. The author can be contacted via joelblakkyndiah@gmail.com)

Decoding Product Management

By Shainam Kharumnuid

One of the key challenges in Meghalaya is the widespread belief that securing a government job represents the ultimate career achievement. In contrast, in metro cities across India and abroad, government jobs are often less sought after due to the abundance of private-sector opportunities offering significantly higher salaries and broader career prospects. While government jobs provide stability and can be the better choice in certain situations, private-sector roles — especially for those with the right qualifications — offer a wider array of options and greater earning potential.

The primary issue in Meghalaya is the limited presence of private-sector opportunities, which is driven by challenges such as ease of doing business, lack of incentives, social constraints, political instability, and corruption. These systemic barriers require attention, and I plan to explore them in future articles where I'll discuss strategies to accelerate Meghalaya's economic development.

Beyond addressing these larger structural concerns, it's crucial to first understand the different types of jobs that exist, the range of companies operating in various sectors,

takes a broader view, coordinating multiple projects to align with the organization's larger strategic goals.

Think of it this way: a Product Manager decides what dish to cook, a Project Manager ensures the kitchen runs efficiently to prepare it, and a Program Manager oversees the restaurant's overall operation. In many tech startups, however, Product Managers often take on all three roles.

Ownership lies at the heart of Product Management. A great Product Manager treats the product like their own business, taking full responsibility for its success or failure. This involves making tough decisions, advocating for customers, and constantly improving the product. They are accountable not just for delivering tasks but for driving meaningful outcomes and impacting business metrics.

Take Instagram's Stories feature, for example. It wasn't a lucky guess — it stemmed from a Product Manager identifying an opportunity to cater to user needs while driving business growth. Observing the popularity of short-form content on platforms like Snapchat, the PM might have discovered through research that

"The primary issue in Meghalaya is the limited presence of private-sector opportunities, which is driven by challenges such as ease of doing business, lack of incentives, social constraints, political instability, and corruption. These systemic barriers require attention, and I plan to explore them in future articles where I'll discuss strategies to accelerate Meghalaya's economic development."

and how we can bring these opportunities to Meghalaya. In this article, I'll focus on Product Management — a field primarily within tech companies — drawing from my own experience since graduating from IIT Madras and IIM Bangalore and currently heading a team of Product Managers. This field is one where only a handful of individuals from Meghalaya are currently represented and I wanted to decode this role a bit, primarily since a lot of people in Shillong do not really understand what we do in Product Management.

In today's digital landscape, Product Management has emerged as one of the most coveted roles in the tech industry. But what does a Product Manager (PM) actually do, and why are they so critical to a company's success? Let's break it down.

At its core, a Product Manager acts as the captain steering a product toward customer satisfaction and business success. They don't personally build the product (that's the engineers' job) or market it directly (handled by the marketing team). Instead, they determine what the product should be, why it's worth building, and how it can effectively solve customer problems while aligning with the company's goals.

In essence, Product Managers define a product's vision, set priorities, and work closely with designers, engineers, marketers, and other teams to bring that vision to life. They balance user needs, business objectives, and technical constraints, serving as the glue that holds cross-functional teams together.

Product Management is often confused with Project Management or Program Management, but these roles are distinct:

- **Product Management** focuses on the what and why: What should be built, and why is it important? This role is about identifying customer needs, analyzing market trends, and defining the right product.

- **Project Management** focuses on the when and how: It ensures teams deliver projects on schedule and within scope by managing timelines and resources.
- **Program Management**

Instagram users desired a way to share spontaneous, unpolished moments without cluttering their main feeds. The PM then worked with designers to conceptualize the feature, engineers to build it, and marketing teams to ensure a successful launch — all the while tracking metrics like daily active users, engagement and eventually contribution to ads revenue due to Stories. This level of ownership transformed Stories into a defining feature that boosted Instagram's relevance.

The role of a Product Manager evolves depending on the company's stage:

- **Early-Stage Startups:** PMs wear multiple hats, juggling tasks like user research, product ideation, and coordination with developers in a fast-paced environment.

- **Mid-Stage Startups:** The role becomes more structured, with a focus on scaling successful products, refining processes, and balancing growth with quality.
- **Large Tech Companies:** PMs often specialize in specific product areas, relying on established frameworks and larger teams while navigating complex organizational dynamics.

As digital products continue to dominate, the demand for skilled Product Managers is soaring. Companies recognize the value of having someone who understands customer needs deeply and can guide teams to build impactful solutions. It's a role that combines creativity, strategy, and leadership, making it one of the most exciting and influential careers in today's tech-driven world.

In a landscape where businesses thrive on exceptional products, Product Managers play a critical role in shaping innovations that matter — whether at a startup or a tech giant. It's a career that not only challenges but also inspires, making it a path worth exploring. In fact, it is slowly becoming one of the most sought after careers at the top IITs and IIMs.

(The writer is Head of Product at Nivoda and an IIM Bangalore & IIT Madras Alum)

Letters to the Editor

The Bangladesh conundrum

Editor,
The recent incidents in several parts of India reacting to the internal matters of an independent country Bangladesh is a matter of serious concern. These heightened reactions are primarily aimed to address the internal electorate, but has the potential to damage the interests of India in medium to long term. It is a fact that Bangladesh is our neighbour, and both countries share mutual trade and human relations. Both the countries have multiple diplomatic consultates, besides the embassies in respective capitals.

There is no denying that there are reports of atrocities and attacks on minorities in Bangladesh. However, these are best addressed through diplomatic endeavours, through bilateral and global forums. Increasing tensions by attacking Bangladeshis in India and their diplomatic missions, India, the bigger brother, would only be making its case worse. Already, its relationships with almost all its neighbours is precarious. China is building bridges with all of India's neighbours, with several inviting incentives.

It would be worthwhile to remember that Bangla-

desh was, comparatively, a friendly neighbour with India for the last two decades or so. With such a frenzy, our neighbours would only fall into the lap of China, which would not augur well for Bharat.

Yours etc.,
D Bhutia,
Guwahati

Supreme Court advocates for effective legal aid for the poor

Editor,
While delivering its judgment on a rape case dating back to 2009 the Supreme Court said that legal aid for the poor should not be 'poor' in quality since lack of access to legal aid affects the fundamental rights of the accused. The Supreme Court acquitted a man accused of rape and murder of a 10 year old girl in 2009, after noting several irregularities including lack of effective legal representation during the trial. The apex court observed that imposing capital punishment in such a case shocks the conscience of the Court. The Court also added that if legal aid is provided only for the sake of providing it then it will serve no purpose and if effective legal aid is not made available

to an accused who is unable to engage an advocate, it will amount to infringement of his fundamental rights guaranteed by Article 21 of the Constitution

Justices Abhay S Oka and Ahsanuddin Amanullah and Augustine George Masih said that after perusing the records of the case they found a very disturbing feature where the State failed to provide timely legal aid to the appellant. The other issue is about the quality of legal aid. Apart from provisions of Article 21 and Article 39A of the Constitution, the law on the issue of the right to legal aid has been evolved by the Court through its landmark decisions.

The Justices observed that legal aid must be effective. Advocates appointed to espouse the cause of the accused must have good knowledge of criminal laws, law of evidence and procedural laws apart from other important statutes. As there is a constitutional right to legal aid, that right will be effective only if the legal aid provided is of a good quality. If the legal aid advocate provided to an accused is not competent to conduct the trial efficiently, the rights of the accused will be violated, the bench said.

Dealing with the appeal by Ashok whose death penalty was commuted by the

Allahabad High Court to life term, the court noted the evidence of more than one prosecution witness was recorded in the absence of the legal aid advocate. At the stage of framing charges, he was not represented by an advocate. The Court observed that it was surprising that the examination-in-chief of the prime witness (father of the girl) was allowed to be recorded without giving legal aid counsel. Hence a valuable right of the accused to object to the questions asked in examination-in-chief is being deprived. The accused is also deprived of the right to object to leading questions, the bench observed.

In this case the prosecution relied upon evidence of the victim's seven-year-old cousin who allegedly saw the girl being forcibly taken to the tubewell where the offence was committed. The court, however, held this witness cannot be solely relied upon and that it is unsafe to base conviction only on his testimony. Even if his testimony is correct, his evidence can, at best be the evidence of 'last seen together.' The bench also rejected the recovery of the victim's slipper and underwear allegedly at the appellant's instance and held that the appellant's guilt beyond reasonable doubt has not been established.

In statement recorded un-

der Section 313 of the CrPC, the bench noted that the contents of the incriminating documents were not put to the appellant. Also, the witnesses may have deposed in a language not known to the accused. In such a case, if the material circumstances appearing in evidence are not put to the accused and explained to him/her in a language understood by him/her it will prejudice the accused.

The court pointed out the date of occurrence of the rape is May 27, 2009. After such a long gap (15years), it will be unjust if the appellant is now told to explain the circumstances and material specifically appearing against him in the evidence. Above all the appellant had been incarcerated for about 12 years and nine months before he was released on bail. Therefore, considering the long passage of time, there is no option but to hold that the defect cannot be cured at this stage, the bench observed.

Even assuming that the evidence of the victim's cousin can be believed, the appellant is entitled to acquittal on the ground of the failure to put incriminating material before him in his examination under Section 313 of the CrPC, the bench said. The apex court observed that it is surprising that both the Trial Court and High Court have overlooked

non-compliance with the requirements of Section 313 of the CrPC. In fact, the Trial Court imposed the death penalty in a case which ought to have resulted in acquittal, the bench stated.

Highlighting the role of public prosecutor, the bench said the officer has to play an active role in ensuring that every trial is conducted in a fair manner and in accordance with the law.

The Supreme Court also issued a slew of directions on the role of the Public Prosecutors and the appointment of Legal Aid Counsels in upholding procedural fairness and the fundamental rights of the accused in criminal trials. The Court said that the Public Prosecutor must assist the Trial Court in recording the accused's statement under Section 313 of the CrPC, ensuring all incriminating material circumstances are presented to the accused. While ensuring offenders are punished, the Prosecutor must also prevent infirmities in the trial that could prejudice the accused, the court added.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Raihan,
Via email

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"Every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home."

— Matsuo Basho

The Shillong Times

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Congress in crisis

THE rout for the Congress in assembly polls, one after another, should cause serious worry for its rank and file. Even where the BJP could not win power, the regional parties took the upper hand. The Congress joined the government as junior partner in Jharkhand and kept away from governance in Jammu and Kashmir even as the INDIA alliance trounced the BJP in both states. Haryana was a washout for the grand old party; and so was Maharashtra, where the party's tally was simply 16 in a house of 288 — the worst-ever. Where the Congress would go from here is a big question.

True, the Congress got a fresh lease of life when it won the assembly polls in Himachal Pradesh in 2022, followed by its win in Karnataka in 2023 and in Telangana earlier this year. Some keenly-watched assembly polls would follow as in Delhi soon and Bihar later. In both these, there's no hope of a good Congress show as the party's state units remain weak. Arvind Kejriwal's AAP has rejected a tie-up with the Congress in the run-up to the polls there, set before mid-February. The fight there would likely be between the AAP and the BJP. In other words, any good news is unlikely for the Congress in the near future. The BJP's stocks remain high. Madhya Pradesh, Goa, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh and Haryana elected BJP or pro-BJP governments for the third time in a row. So was the case in Bihar, where Nitish Kumar is BJP ally. However there is yet no visible anti-incumbency wave in any of these states. Inside Parliament, with a good number of seats in the lower house, the party is well-endowed compared to its negligible presence in the last house. Rahul Gandhi as Leader of Opposition is doing reasonably well, taking on the government on major issues. Add to this the presence of his sister Priyanka Gandhi.

Note the fact that West Bengal's Mamata Banerjee is preening her feathers after a fresh bout of disappointments for the Congress in assembly polls. She was lying low when the Congress stock went up. Here now is an opportunity for her to try and upstage the principal opposition and position herself in the forefront, although this is wishful thinking. Having garnered around 100 seats in Lok Sabha, the Congress retrieved its image as a strong political establishment. It is running three states and part of the power edifice in two other states. Banerjee can be content with guarding her sole fortress with rare leadership skills. Until the nephew steps into her shoes, there's less chance of a downfall for the TMC or a repeat of what happened in neighbouring Odisha. As of now, other than the tamed Congress, there's no other serious challenge to the BJP.

Urban Ideals Vs Ground Realities

By Lyzander E Sohkhlet

In response to the article, 'Laitumkhrah Aesthetics and Middle Class Victimhood by Joel Kyndiah' (ST Dec 3, 2024) his thoughtful critique of my article, "Lawless Streets: How Hawkers in Laitumkhrah Are Endangering Lives and Livelihoods," is a commendable exploration of urban planning ideals and the socio-economic struggles of hawkers. However, it drifts into romanticizing abstract concepts while skirting the pressing realities of Shillong's streets.

The invocation of lofty principles like Henri Lefebvre's "right to the city" or notions of class struggle is intellectually enriching, but it risks overshadowing the fundamental issue: urban spaces, by their very nature, must balance inclusivity with regulation to function effectively. The argument that hawkers are victims of systemic inequities does not absolve them of responsibility for the chaos and hazards caused by their encroachments. The streets of Shillong, as they stand today, are not the vibrant, inclusive hubs Kyndiah envisions—they are chaotic, unsafe, and inequitable spaces, particularly for pedestrians, students, and even nearby businesses. The notion of the "right to the city" does not grant any single group the authority to disrupt the lives of others or to infringe upon basic rights. In this context, the freedom of movement, as enshrined in Article 19 (1)(d) of the Indian Constitution, stands as a fundamental right that is increasingly being violated by the unregulated presence of hawkers along critical pathways in Laitumkhrah. The occupation of footpaths and roads not only forces pedestrians—students, workers, and residents alike—into the danger of walking along busy streets but also creates a cascade of issues, from traffic congestion to safety hazards.

In its landmark ruling in the S. Rajasekaran v. Union of India case (2014), the Supreme Court of India emphasized the need for stringent measures to mitigate blackspots—areas prone to frequent accidents. The judgment called for comprehensive safety interventions, such as better road engineering, clear signage and unobstructed pedestrian pathways, to ensure that roads and pavements remain safe for all users. Central to this directive was the recognition that encroachments, whether by parked vehicles or other obstacles, significantly contribute to the creation of blackspots and increase risks for pedestrians and drivers alike.

The ruling clearly established the principle that public roads and pavements are meant for mobility, not obstruction. Vehicles parked illegally on roads face hefty fines and towing, a practice rigorously enforced under various traffic regulations. However, a glaring inconsistency arises when hawkers are allowed to occupy these same pavements with little to no accountability. While a parked car is quickly penalized for disrupting traffic or endangering pedestrians,

hawkers, whose stalls pose similar if not greater risks, are often shielded by public sympathy and political rhetoric.

This selective enforcement creates an ironic contradiction. If road safety demands the removal of parked vehicles to ensure unobstructed movement, how can hawkers, who effectively commandeer entire stretches of pavement and sometimes spill over onto roads, be exempt? Their presence forces pedestrians, including the elderly, children, and the differently-abled, to walk on busy streets, heightening the likelihood of accidents and, by extension, turning such areas into blackspots.

The Supreme Court's judgment on blackspots offers a framework for understanding how encroachments—whether static (parked cars) or dynamic (hawker stalls)—jeopardize urban safety. Roads and pavements are not commercial spaces; they are public resources meant for unhindered mobility. When hawkers are allowed to occupy pavements unchecked, it undermines not only the safety of pedestrians but also the intent of the Court's ruling to eliminate hazards that compromise the lives of road users.

Enforcement agencies must recognize this parallel and apply the same principles to hawker encroachments as they do to illegal parking. The public good must take precedence over individual convenience or livelihood when the stakes are human lives. The right to vend must coexist with the right to walk safely—a balance that cannot be achieved without clear, consistent enforcement of laws governing the use of public spaces.

The recent Meghalaya High Court directive to the Public Works Department (PWD) on the dumping of construction materials on roads and pavements highlights a critical aspect often ignored in these debates—the fundamental right to safe movement in public spaces. In its order dated September 6, 2024, the High Court directed the PWD to take strict measures to prevent the dumping of construction materials on roads and pavements, emphasizing the dangers posed to pedestrians and commuters. The Court made it clear that such obstructions not only jeopardize public safety but also violate the basic rights of individuals to access public spaces.

While this directive targets construction materials, it draws a striking parallel to the issue of hawkers occupying road pavements. The consequences of these encroachments are equally, if not more, disruptive. Pavements are rendered impassable, forcing pedestrians—students, the elderly, and the differently-abled—onto busy streets, where they are exposed to life-threatening risks. If construction materials are considered hazardous obstructions, how are hawkers setting up stalls on the same pavements any

different?

The High Court's stance underscores the principle that public spaces must remain accessible and safe for all. The presence of hawkers on pavements undermines this very principle, creating a chaotic environment that endangers lives and disrupts the flow of daily activities. This is not a matter of class-based aesthetics, as Kyndiah suggests, but a pressing issue of public safety and equitable access to urban spaces.

In light of the court's directive, the argument that hawkers have a "right" to occupy pavements becomes untenable. Just as construction materials do not have the right to obstruct public pathways, neither do makeshift stalls that compromise the safety and mobility of citizens. The law exists to ensure a balance between the rights of all stakeholders, but that balance is disrupted when one group's activities disproportionately harm others.

It is not just about legality—it is about fairness and responsibility. Pedestrians should not have to risk their lives walking in the middle of the road, and the vulnerable, such as the differently-abled, should not face abuse for simply asserting their right to move freely. If the High Court's order applies to construction debris, then it must also extend, in spirit, to any obstruction—hawkers included—that endangers the safety and rights of the public.

To frame the middle class's concerns as a misplaced sense of victimhood is reductive. Middle-class business owners in Laitumkhrah are not rallying against hawkers out of a fear of downward mobility or a desire for a sterile, bourgeois aesthetic. Their grievances stem from tangible struggles: declining revenues due to unfair competition, exorbitant rents, and the additional burden of maintaining cleanliness in the face of unchecked hawker activity. Is it unreasonable for those abiding by laws and paying hefty rents to expect a level playing field?

Kyndiah's critique also fails to address a fundamental question: who bears the responsibility for safety and order in urban spaces? The area in front of Nazareth Hospital is a glaring example of hawker-induced disruption, with footpaths occupied and pedestrians forced onto dangerous roads. One cannot dismiss this as a mere failure of urban planning—it is a failure of compliance and enforcement. Rules designating no-vending zones exist for a reason, and their violation directly impacts public safety.

Moreover, the romanticized notion of hawkers as the backbone of urban economies must be balanced with an understanding of their impact. Yes, they provide affordable goods and services, but their unregulated presence often undermines legitimate businesses that contribute to the local economy in a structured, sustain-

able manner. Kyndiah's call for coexistence ignores the asymmetry of this relationship: while hawkers operate with little accountability, businesses struggle under layers of regulation, taxes, and rising costs.

In The Shillong Times' recently published episode of Let's Talk, Bertina Lyngdoh, a visually impaired PhD Scholar laid bare the grim realities faced by Shillong's differently-abled youth. Bertina spoke candidly about the daily struggles of navigating a city where footpaths are no longer pedestrian zones but extensions of makeshift markets. For individuals with physical impairments, these encroachments are not just inconveniences—they are barriers that threaten their safety and dignity. Bertina recounted incidents where, in seeking passage, she and others like her were met with verbal abuse from hawkers who viewed their requests for space as unwarranted disruptions to their trade. This is not an isolated issue. Across Laitumkhrah, students, the elderly, and those with disabilities face daily challenges navigating streets that should serve all but are instead dominated by unregulated vending.

Kyndiah's article, in its philosophical posturing, fails to acknowledge the human cost of this unregulated chaos. His critique of middle-class victimhood ignores the very real victimization of vulnerable groups who find themselves silenced and sidelined in the debate over urban space. To trivialize these grievances as part of a bourgeois desire for order or as an evasion of deeper systemic critiques is to dismiss the humanity of individuals like Bertina Lyngdoh. Philosophy and ideology have their place in discussions of urban planning and class dynamics, but they must be grounded in the realities of those most affected. No quotation from a sociologist or philosopher can justify the persistent harassment and neglect endured by the differently-abled, the marginalized, or the pedestrians who struggle to find a foothold in their own city.

The argument for inclusive urban spaces should not come at the expense of order, safety, or fairness. Hawkers do play an important role in our urban landscape, but that role must be defined within the bounds of law and regulation. Without this, the streets of Laitumkhrah will continue to be spaces of conflict rather than collaboration, where the rights of one group consistently overshadow those of others. Kyndiah urges us to embrace the plurality of urban spaces, but true plurality cannot exist in a vacuum of regulation. It must be built on mutual respect, where hawkers, pedestrians, businesses, and authorities work within a framework that prioritizes public welfare. This is not a rejection of the "right to the city," but a call to ground it in reality. Let us ensure that our city respects the rights of all—not just in theory, but in practice.

The writer can be reached at lyzanderedgar@gmail.com

Democratic & secular forces in Bangladesh have to work for protection of minorities

In India, people must be vigilant against divisive attempts by RSS-BJP elements

By P. Sudhir

The continuous attacks on Hindus and other minorities like Buddhists in Bangladesh are causing widespread concern. Consequent to the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government in the first week of August after a mass movement, it was expected that the end of her authoritarian rule would usher in a more democratic system in Bangladesh. However, in the chaos of the first few days, reports of attacks on some Hindu temples and houses of the minority community emerged across the country. The chief advisor of the interim government, Muhammad Yunus, had at that time assured that minorities would be protected. But incidents have occurred in the period since then. So far, there have been 2,000 documented acts of violence and at least nine members of minority community have been killed.

The current aggravation of the situation took place when Chinmoy Krishna Das, a Hindu monk, was arrested and charged with sedition. Chinmoy Das had earlier been associated with ISKCON, but had been removed from it and is now heading the Sammilita Sanatani Jagran Jote. Even if he has been expressing militant views, the charge of disrespecting the Bangladesh national flag as the cause for his arrest on sedition charges appears to be heavy handed. When Das was presented in court and denied bail, there was a clash between the police and his followers. An assistant public prosecutor was attacked by the mob and killed. This incident shows how precarious the communal situation is at present.

The response of the interim government and its spokespersons has been to downplay these attacks by claiming that these were exaggerated reports. They have sought to portray it as an outcome of the public anger against the Awami League activists and supporters. They tend to see the hand of the Indian government behind this anti-Bangladesh campaign. The Yunus-led government is making a mistake by trying to ignore the attacks mounted on the minorities by the Islamist forces.

The anti-India sentiment that exists because of the Modi government's backing of the Sheikh Hasina regime is being utilised by the Islamic fundamentalist forces as a cover to attack the minorities. With the ban on Jamaat-e-Islami lifted and

its leaders out of jail, the fundamentalist outfits like Hefazat-e-Islam are having a free run to target Hindus and to create a communal divide. Even during Sheikh Hasina's rule, such fundamentalist forces were actively working against the minorities. The interim government and the democratic forces in Bangladesh have to assert and firmly put down the communal elements who see an opportunity to establish their sectarian politics.

The attitude of the BJP, RSS and the various Hindutva outfits in India are not helping to address the situation in a proper manner. Wild and incendiary propaganda about the plight of Hindus across the border is seen by the Bangladeshi authorities and democratic circles as an attempt to intimidate and tarnish Bangladesh's new political order. Demonstrations conducted in Kolkata, Agartala and Guwahati by Hindu extremist groups outside Bangladesh Consulates using vitriolic language have further aggravated the situation. The incident in Agartala, where demonstrators of the Hindu Sangharsh Samiti entered the premises of the Bangladesh Assistant High Commission and vandalised property will only harden anti-India sentiments in Bangladesh. The fiery rhetoric against Bangladesh will endanger the security of the minorities in Bangladesh.

The people of Bangladesh will look askance at the Indian rulers preaching to them about protecting minorities, when they themselves have set an odious record in persecuting and baiting minorities. Public opinion in Bangladesh is affected by the constant rhetoric against Bangladeshis by top Indian leaders. Union Home Minister, Amit Shah, had during the Jharkhand election campaign made false and dire warnings about large-scale Bangladeshi infiltration into Jharkhand. Earlier, such infiltrators were called 'termites' by him.

It is necessary for the secular and democratic forces in both countries to assert that divisive communal politics harms the interests of both countries. It is for the secular and democratic forces in Bangladesh, who had fought against Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian rule, to stand up and assert that the country is safe for the minorities and their rights as citizens will be fully protected. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Rising storm of bigotry in Bangladesh

Editor,
If we seriously look at the cries of minorities in Bangladesh, they are not just whispers — they are alarms, warning us all of a growing storm of extremism that might threaten the very foundations of global civilization.

Just recently, British lawmakers voiced their grave concerns over this worsening situation following the arrest of an ISKCON monk Chinmoy Krishna Das. In a chilling session at Westminster Hall, they discussed how attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh have become dreadfully frequent. Arson, desecration of places of worship, brutal assaults, forced conversions, and even murders are being used as weapons of oppression against a community that makes up just 8.5% of the nation's population.

Priti Patel, Indian-origin politician and Shadow Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, expressed her out-

rage, stating: "The degree of escalation in violence is deeply concerning. What we are witnessing now is uncontrolled violence in many quarters. We are watching with horror and shock as further violence spreads in Bangladesh. The thoughts of all of us in the House are with the diaspora community here and those affected in Bangladesh. These are deeply disturbing reports."

Conservative MP Bob Blackman was equally direct, calling for action against "systematic, targeted violence" and urging the UK government to press Bangladesh to uphold human rights. Labour MP Jim Shannon expressed similar sentiments, describing the ongoing atrocities as "deeply disturbing."

So, what fuels such barbarity? The answer lies squarely in the blatant grip of religious extremism. When dogma becomes a "sword" instead of a bridge, humanity inevitably bleeds. In Bangladesh, a toxic ideology fueled by bigotry has reduced the minority community to easy scapegoats for political, social, and

economic frustrations. But this extremism isn't confined to one nation—it's a virus infecting the broader human spirit. From Bangladesh to Myanmar, India, Afghanistan, Palestine, and beyond, religious intolerance poisons societies, transforming diversity into division, coexistence into conflict, and harmony into hatred. Our silence will only embolden these forces to spread their tentacles of evil.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

How safe is Aadhar?

Editor,
The Aadhar card that we Indians use could be compromised by a single OTP which could be given by mistake or carelessness. It comprises all our details, like address, bank details, pan card details, etc. In India many people are victims of online frauds so what was the point of creating a link, which could be compromised and later have individuals running to

police stations and courts. There is a lot of stress in every individual's life these days. At times fake accounts are created, and the innocent are subjected to all forms of harassment. At times biometrics are stolen and it's become a liability on innocent victims. Please spare the citizens of the country, if the Government does not have a full-proof cure relating to online frauds. We have enough tensions in our lives and cannot be allowed to be exploited further. I would request the judiciary to take note of this issue as we the citizens of the country are tired of being exploited.

Yours etc.,
V Vashisht
Shillong - 2

Time for odd-even number enforcement for private vehicles

Editor,
Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper,

I would like to highlight the worsening traffic situation in Shillong, particularly along the route from Mawiong to Garikhana to Civil Hospital to Laitumkhrah during evening hours. The recent transition of traffic management responsibilities from the experienced traffic police to Home Guards has only exacerbated the problem. Earlier, the situation, though challenging, was at least manageable under the traffic police.

It is noteworthy that this is not a seasonal issue linked to festivals like Durga Puja, Diwali, or Christmas. Instead, it reflects a deeper problem of congestion caused by the sheer volume of vehicles. My observation reveals that many private cars on the road are used by single occupants. Families owning multiple cars add to this congestion, leading to unmanageable conditions.

To address this crisis, I urge the government to implement the even-odd rule for private vehicles, similar to measures successfully used in other cities. Unlike previous implementations in Shillong, where taxis were

affected, this rule should be targeted solely at private cars. By alternating vehicle usage based on registration numbers, we can significantly reduce traffic volume and ensure smoother commuting.

Strict enforcement and monitoring of this rule is crucial to its success. Additionally, creating awareness about car-pooling and encouraging the use of public transportation can further alleviate the situation. I hope the authorities will take this suggestion seriously and act promptly to restore order to Shillong's roads.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request
Via email

On VPP ascendancy

Editor,
The article on 'VPP-Just Another Party' (ST Dec 2, 2024) by HH Mohrmen is not in the direction of the new emerging political parties in the twenty-first century. Innovative ideas which ignite the hopes and

aspirations of the people are very much responsible for the emergence and growth of such parties at the state level. Examples may be taken of the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Odisha and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Delhi. Both the parties brought in a new dimension to the Indian political party system with the main motto of clean and clear politics and also survived in the long run keeping the aspirations of the people alive and believing in the motto of clean and good governance. It is another fact that the BJD lost the Odisha Assembly election in 2024, but still rides high in popularity in Odisha. The VPP similarly is the new entrant in the Indian party system with a high rate of popularity in the Shillong Parliamentary election of 2024. Of course, the real test of the party is to be gauged from the MDC elections, but considering its performance in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections it can be assumed that VPP still holds the same popularity in the whole of Meghalaya state. Parliamentary and MDC elections issues are of course

different but the philosophy of VPP suits the new genre of voters who are fed up with the old tradition of political party performance.

Minor issues as discussed in the article may have its impact on the short run, but still the scope is wide open for greater impact of the emotions, expectations & exceptions are capitalised by the emerging VPP. The leadership of VPP is well aware of the ground realities with strong hold on grass-root politics. New political parties also often select new candidates for election as the experienced nominees are well-rested by the voters and they later repose their expectations on new faces. Time will prove the worthiness of the VPP in the coming MDC elections and in the 2028 Assembly election.

Yours etc.,
Prof. Satya Prakash Dash
Dept. of Political Science
NEHU, Shillong

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"The journey matters as much as the goal."

— Kalpana Chawla

The Shillong Times

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Congress's comedy of errors

IN recent times the Meghalaya Congress has been floating speculations that some of its former senior members who had earlier deserted the Party and joined the Trinamool Congress would rejoin the Party. This comes after the Congress Party has been on an induction spree with several new members from different districts of East Khasi Hills joining the Party recently. Both Dr Mukul Sangma and Charles Pyngrope have denied any move to return to the Congress. But what defies logic are the statements of the Deputy CEM, Khasi Hills District Council, PN Syiem stating that people at the grassroots are asking that the Congress should decouple itself from the NPP in the Khasi Hills District Council. This statement coming as it does on the eve of the District Council elections is facile and intended to deceive. The Congress Party has been working in an easy coalition for the past year and more with the NPP in the KHADC without demur and now it's trying to hoodwink voters into believing that the coalition was forced upon it. Fact is that every Party wants to be on the ruling side and since the anti-defection law does not operate in the Autonomous District Councils, making unholy alliances is an old story and no amount of explaining away the old habit of allying with the party in power is going to convince anyone, especially the urban voters. Attempts to bring in the Anti-defection Act into the Councils proved futile as the Supreme Court struck down the Act stating that any such law to be enforced in Sixth Schedule areas has to be mandated by Parliament.

In Meghalaya it is common for parties that shared power for a full five term in the State Government or the Autonomous District Councils to go to the people during elections and beguile them by saying that they supported the ruling party only to provide stable governance or for development. The electorate knows this is a lie. Politics has always been a quest for power and never about principles in Meghalaya. The Congress after having eaten off the same plate as the NPP and shared the spoils of office for as long as it was profitable for them is now trying to whitewash its sins and appear as if it had nothing to do with the ills of governance in the KHADC.

Health Minister and NPP MLA, Ampareen Lyngdoh has aptly stated that every party would need the NPP to form the Executive Committee in the 3 ADCs. While the VPP with its promise of clean governance has captured the imagination of the voters and is likely to swing the ADC elections in its favour, there is a possibility that it may not get an absolute majority in the two ADCs in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills region. In the Garo Hills the NPP might still win more seats than the Congress and the TMC. Hence a coalition with the NPP cannot be ruled out. Until such time it is better for District Councillors and the Congress Party honchos to hold their tongues as they may be forced to eat humble pie. Who knows, the Congress might even have to align with the VPP to form the Executive Council in the 2 ADCs.

Humanizing street vendors & hawkers' issue & implementing the law in letter and spirit

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

Street vendors and hawkers are citizens living at the margins. They need not only our empathy, but most importantly they need to be emancipated from poverty, uncertainty, anxiety, exploitation and enslavement. Therefore, humanizing and engaging in what is a holistic approach to this vexed issue is desirable. Efforts in hosting continuous conversations on this issue with the aim to address the plight of the residents of the city and thereby providing spaces for every stakeholder to put forward their views, is highly appreciated. Such conversations will in turn facilitate in finding a solution.

Ministers Spoke in Tongues:

Recently, two senior ministers of the Meghalaya Cabinet spoke in divergently opposite voices regarding the relocation of street vendors from the Khyndai Lad area etc. Firstly, the Minister in charge of Tourism, repeatedly informed via the media about the relocation of two (200) hundred street vendors and hawkers to new vending spaces designated by the Government. On the other hand, the Deputy Chief Minister, who is also in charge of Urban Affairs, stated that the Government is in no hurry to relocate the street vendors and that they would continue to operate their livelihood activities from where they currently operate.

This has nearly pushed the city into confusion and has seriously impacted the livelihoods of street vendors who, during this Christmas season, had stopped placing orders for clothing and other materials following a statement from a higher authority in the ministerial office, which reiterated plans to relocate them within a time-bound period starting from November 24.

The Demand and Defending the Law:

Since June 2016, when the Street Vendors and Hawkers came together as a collective under the Meghalaya & Greater Shillong Progressive Hawkers and Street Vendors Association (MGSPHSVA), from day one they had demanded for the implementation of the Central Law, i.e. The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending Act 2014, in letter and spirit. They understood that this is the good law for the protection of their livelihoods and to regulate their businesses on the streets, pavements, walkways etc as prescribed in the Law and rules. Therefore, what the street vendors and hawkers are doing is not unreasonable and their demand is justified by the Law and Constitution.

Nine years ago and around the same months, November-December, the street vendors and hawkers under the banner of MGSPHSVA, had organised a protest in front of the Office of the Shillong Municipal Board to demand

for the implementation of the Central Law. Again, this time they marched to the same Municipal Office and also encamped at Khyndai Lad to defend the Law and their rights to livelihood as enshrined in the Law.

Important Facts of the Law:

It is important to highlight a few important facts of the Law; (i) there are two important components of Law - protection of livelihoods and regulation of activities of street vendors and hawkers so as not to impede the rights of other residents and citizens. (ii) Section 3 (1), (2), (3) and (4) are very important. They deal with the survey of street vendors, protection from eviction and relocation. This section also prescribes the holding capacity, i.e. 2.5% of the population of ward or zone or city. No eviction nor relocation of street vendors will occur until a survey has been completed and the issue of vending certificates by Town Vending Committee (TVC). (iii) Section 22 (1) deals with the Constitu-

ing zone until the survey has been completed and vending plan formulated. The Natural market is a market where buyers and sellers have traditionally congregated for sale and purchase of goods or services. In Shillong, areas like Motphran, G. S Road, Khyndai Lad, Laitumkhrah, iew Polo, Rynjah, Madanting, Nongmensong-Ishyrawat-Mawdiangdiang, Lad Smit etc are natural markets. Whereas the Second Schedule describes about the heritage markets and they are markets where street vendors have conducted business for over fifty years and street vendors in such markets shall not be relocated.

Role and Contribution of the MGSPHSVA:

Six years ago, the survey on about two thousand street vendors found that the turnover generated by each street vendor was Rs 2000 per day. Thus, in 365 days the street vendors were able to generate Rs 146 crores annually. Besides, they provide services and access to cheaper and affordable goods/services to

On December 21, 2018, during the meeting with officials of Urban Affairs, the representatives of the MGSPHSVA, had made a power point presentation of the plan for street vending detailing the time and space management and existing city profile of street vending, and also suggested various vending zones.

tion of TVC. Besides other members, the members representing the street vendors and hawkers shall not be less than 40%. The TVC plays a crucial role in ensuring that the rights and livelihoods of street vendors and hawkers are protected and regulated. The TVC is responsible for implementing the provisions of the Act, including conducting surveys, issuing vending certificates, designating vending zones, and resolving disputes. (iv) Section 5 (1) - The conditions for Street vending or for issue certificate of vending are (a) he shall carry the business of street vending by himself or through his family member (b) he has no other means of livelihood (c) he shall not transfer...including rent the certificate of vending or the place... to any other person and (v) the First and Second Schedules are appended to the Act.

The First Schedule deals with the plan for street vending which include declaration of restriction free vending zones, restricted vending zones and no vending zones. The principles to be followed for declaration of No Vending Zones are- (a) any existing market or natural market as identified shall not be declared as no vending zone, overcrowding and sanitary concerns shall not form the basis for declaring an area a no-vending zone and no area shall be declared a no-vend-

urban working class/ daily labourers etc.

Now that the Law is in place, the Street Vendors and hawkers vis a vis their Association have the important role and responsibility to resolve the issue and make Shillong safe and liveable for everyone. In fact, the MGSPHSVA has been cooperating with various government agencies in this regard. On many occasions the Association, with the support of various agencies had organised food safety trainings and health camps for street vendors. Besides, it had also facilitated enrolment into the public distribution system for street vendors to enable them to obtain government benefits.

On December 21, 2018, during the meeting with officials of Urban Affairs, the representatives of the MGSPHSVA, had made a power point presentation of the plan for street vending detailing the time and space management and existing city profile of street vending, and also suggested various vending zones. This vending plan is based on the premise that the plan for street vending cannot be done in isolation but has to be done in consonance with city planning which includes parking, pedestrian walkways ensuring accessibility to the disabled.

The process of implementing the Law had already begun. On October 2022,

the State Government had constituted the Provisional TVC as per the Law and the MGSPHSVA had elected four representatives to the Provisional TVC. The members of the Association are actively participating in the meetings and had rendered full cooperation during the in situ Survey of street vendors and hawkers. But there are attempts to thwart the process which is dangerously unlawful and is causing economic distress on street vendors and affect the low income groups who depend on street vendors for services and access to affordable goods and necessities.

Benefits of Implementing the Law:

Implementation of the law also entails the execution of policies and programs supported by Central Government amounting to thousand crores of rupees. The National Policy on Urban Street Vendors was launched in 2004 and revised in 2009. This policy aims to ensure that this important occupational group of urban population finds due recognition at National, State and Local Levels for its contribution to society. Moreover, there are the Central Government's Schemes that address Urban Poverty and Street Vendors such as (i) National Urban Livelihoods Mission (ii) PM SVANidhi Scheme (iii) Prime Minister's Integrated Urban Poverty Eradication Programme.

Empathizing with Kong Bertina Lyngdoh:

While giving due regard to The Shillong Times group for hosting continuous conversations on the issue, this writer participated in one of the debates recently. Among other participants, was the visually impaired scholar, Bertina Lyngdoh, who had expressed that on one or two occasions she was cursed by a few "khlam akor" (ill-mannered) street vendors. I appeal to Kong Bertina and others like her that if they encounter any discomfiting moments where street vendors curse them, they should come forward and complain. The Association has zero tolerance against illegals, like extortion, "dalal" activities, violence against women, children and racial abuse.

Decongesting:

Shillong is now the city of favelas and the conversion of roads in residential localities into permanent or semi-permanent open garages, is also causing huge congestion. Shillong has no robust urban local self-government. The Dorbar Shnongs are there but with limited powers to address these humongous tasks. They have no financial capacity to deal with the urban problems etc., from traffic to waste management to civic amenities. The way forward lies in truly humanizing street vendors and implementing the law with integrity and compassion.

The great Trump riddle - Will it affect India-Russia bilateral relations?

New U.S. Administration firm on Delhi reducing dependence on Moscow for defence

By Nitya Chakraborty

Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited Russian President Vladimir Putin to visit India at the time of his visit to the BRICS summit at Kazan in Russia in October this year. This was immediately accepted by President Putin and in the last six weeks since the Kazan conclave on October 22-23 this year, the Russian foreign ministry came out officially twice with the statement about the Russian President's India visit and why this is very significant for the boosting of bilateral relations.

Interestingly, no dates were mentioned as Indian officials have so far not indicated probable dates for the visit. Generally Putin's visits are slotted in November/December. Questions are being raised- Is the Indian side ready for welcoming President Putin in Delhi by December end or the dates may be fixed sometime next year. This time, the Putin visit is not so normal. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has to take into account some after effects from the side of Trump 2 administration which takes over on January 20, 2025.

For President Putin, the visit to India in the coming days is being viewed as a big diplomatic triumph in the context of the Ukraine war which is continuing since February 24, 2022. The International Criminal Court (ICC) has declared President Putin as a war criminal and there is an arrest warrant against him. He did not even attend the BRICS and G-20 summits held in friendly countries like South Africa and Brazil though the Presidents of both the countries were ready to welcome President Putin despite being ICC signatories.

India is not a signatory to the ICC statute so are the United States, China, Russia and Israel. That way India has no ICC obligation relating to President Putin. But the PMO and external ministry officials know that the Trump 2 administration will be different compared to outgoing president Joe Biden. Trump officials will be stricter in dealing with India's closer bilateral relations with Russia if that affects the American policies as viewed by Trump for South Asia. In fact, the latest interview by Trump's trusted adviser on South Asia Lisa Curtis to an Indian news agency in Washington focuses on how the Trump 2 administration will look at India's relations with Russia.

This writer had a long meeting with Lisa Curtis in Washington in 2006 when George Bush junior was the President and the India-US nuclear power deal was under discussion. Lisa is considered as an expert on India. She was working for the right wing think tank Heritage Foundation then and advising the Republican regime on South Asia. She worked as the adviser on South Asia to Trump in his first term and is very likely to get a higher position in the Trump 2.0 administration. Indian foreign ministry people closely monitor her comments on India because those indicate the coming trends.

Lisa is emphatic that the new Trump administration is keen to reduce Indian dependence on Russia for arms and equipment import. She is firm that Russia can never be a reliable partner for India moving forward since Russia is now internationally isolated due to its invasion of Ukraine but at the same time, taking into account the sensibility of the issue to India, she says that the new Trump administration will deal with this issue quietly, discreetly without making this difference in approach on Russian a big issue in India-US relations. The hint is clear. As Lisa explained earlier, Trump is a transactionalist. He believes in direct deals. So the American signal is that India has to cut its imports from Russia, both in terms of defence equipment and oil, and then, the U.S. can work on some ways to compensate for that but the primary objective is to put India's relations with Russia to a severe test. Significantly here, the Trump 2 administration is playing the China card to lure Narendra Modi to take the position of reducing Indian dependence on Russian defence equipment and oil. QUAD started during Trump's first term. The US officials had no problem bringing India to the QUAD fold at that time emphasizing on the security of India-Pacific nations against China. Our Prime Minister is vulnerable to China's threat issue. The Trump advisers are fully aware of that.

So Lisa Curtis makes it clear in unambiguous terms, 'the priority this time needs to be on the security partnership between the two countries. She says, "This is an area where the interests of both sides converge. Both the United States and India have a lot of concerns when it comes to China, such as attempts to dominate the technology market and efforts to be the hegemon in Asia. Neither India, nor the United States want that to happen. So they have a deep mutual interest in cooperation".

The China focus is all the more evident when Lisa Curtis says both India and the U.S. could never enter an alliance but develop a partnership that is 'short of an alliance'. This cooperation is based on joint moves by the two countries deterring China. This type of cooperation also prepares both countries in case of a crisis or conflict, be it the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea or another flare up on India-China border.

So the Trump 2 regime's India policy means associating India in the US administration's global policy against China covering both high technology and security. There has to be full allegiance to Trump on behalf of Narendra Modi to the China strategy and if that happens, Trump may agree to give some relief to India in terms of tariffs on Indian exports and in some other small issues. There is no hanky panky in the Trump 2 regime's views. It is a clear deal. The choice has been made clear before the Indian Prime Minister whom Trump calls a very good friend. Now the Indian Prime Minister has to decide on his response. (IPA Service)

Letters to the Editor

Car parking problems in Shillong

Editor,
Car parking is a major problem in Shillong city and its suburbs. Following the rapid increase of car ownership, Shillong city is suffering from lack of car parking areas. Numerous localities in Shillong Road have become a private parking space for residents. The parking problem in the city means actually that there is a gap between parking demand (number of cars in need of parking space) and parking supply (number of parking spaces sufficient to cars in need to park). Due to insufficient off-street parking (parking for the majority of cars park on-street). Subsequent state government in their attempt to address traffic congestion had constructed parking lots as a solution to the parking problem. However, some of these parking spaces have been converted into commercial complexes. For instance, 40% of the parking space at a parking lot located opposite to SBI, Main Branch have

been leased for commercial shops.
Shillong needs more parking space of larger capacity using modern technologies viz. mechanical garage to reduce on-street parking - the root cause of traffic congestion in the city. Kudos to Woodland Hospital for having constructed the first mechanical garage in its new building.

Yours etc.,
Dr Omarlin Kyndiah,
Via email

The dollar remains mighty

Editor,
The mighty dollar further triumphs with the coming of Donald Trump. The BRICS nations, particularly Russia and China, have shown interest in exploring alternatives to the dollar, but there are many obstacles to overcome, including economic and political pressures from the US. The US dollar has long been the dominant currency in global trade and finance. Trump on Saturday

said that BRICS countries "can go and find another sucker," and warned that any attempt to replace the dollar could result in severe economic consequences, such as 100% tariffs on countries that try to create or back a new currency. The US dollar remains deeply entrenched in the global financial system, making it difficult to displace. Replacing the dollar would require significant coordination and agreement among multiple countries, as well as overcoming economic and political influence of the US.

So for now, the mighty dollar remains firmly in place. While it is possible that a new currency could emerge in the future, it would require a high level of coordination and agreement among multiple countries. Trump's warning to the BRICS nation about de-dollarisation stems from his desire to maintain the US dollar's dominance in global trade. The threat of a 100 percent tariff is a move aimed at protecting US economic interests and ensuring that the dollar remains the primary currency for

international transactions. Trump's stance also reflects his broader economic and geopolitical strategy to keep the US at the forefront of global trade and finance.

If the US continues to weaponize the dollar, it could lead to significant geopolitical and economic shifts. Countries might seek alternatives to reduce their dependence on the US dollar, potentially accelerating the de-dollarization movement. This could involve creating new currencies or strengthening existing ones, as well as developing alternative financial systems to bypass US influence. However, such moves come with their own set of challenges and risks. The US dollar's dominance is deeply entrenched in the global financial system, and any attempt to replace it would require substantial coordination and agreement among multiple countries. Additionally, the US could impose economic sanctions or tariffs on countries that attempt to move away from the dollar, further complicating the situation. In the long run, the continued weaponization of the dollar could lead to

a more fragmented global financial system, with multiple competing currencies and financial networks. This could increase economic uncertainty and volatility, but it might also provide opportunities for countries to assert greater financial independence.

The potential benefits or drawbacks to de-dollarization are multifaceted. Some of the key points to consider for its potential benefits are - countries could gain greater control over their monetary policies and reduce their vulnerability to US economic sanctions. A more diversified global financial system could reduce the risk associated with relying on a single currency. For some countries, moving away from the dollar could lead to more stable economic conditions, especially if they are frequently affected by US monetary policy changes. The potential drawback is that transitioning away from the US dollar could cause significant short-term economic instability and volatility. Creating and maintaining a new currency or financial system would

require unprecedented levels of international cooperation and agreement. Further, countries attempting to de-dollarize might face economic sanctions or tariffs from the US, which could harm their economies. While de-dollarization could offer some benefits, it also comes with substantial risks and challenges. The success of such an initiative would depend on the ability of countries to navigate these complexities and work together effectively.

In 2022, the global trade value of goods exported worldwide amounted to approximately 24.9 trillion US dollars which is 23 percent of the global GDP. This figure reflects the extensive use of the US dollar in international trade, highlighting its dominance as the primary currency for global transactions. This widespread use of the dollar reinforces its dominance and makes it the preferred currency for many international transactions. This also means that fluctuations in the value of the dollar can have a significant impact on the global economy. Countries that

rely heavily on the dollar for trade and finance may be affected by changes in US monetary policy or economic conditions.

Yours etc.,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Ban on consumption of beef in public in Assam

Editor,
Recently, the Assam State Cabinet took a decision to ban consumption of beef in public places including hotels, restaurants, marriage functions, etc. This is very unhealthy and is an intrusion into the private lives of citizens. While we welcome respect for other citizens' beliefs and practices, in a country like India with diverse faiths their beliefs and practices should and must be respected. This is a right given by the Constitution of India. For Buddhists, for example, killing of animals, in general, is prohibited.

However, consumption of any kind of flesh is not prohibited in Buddhism.

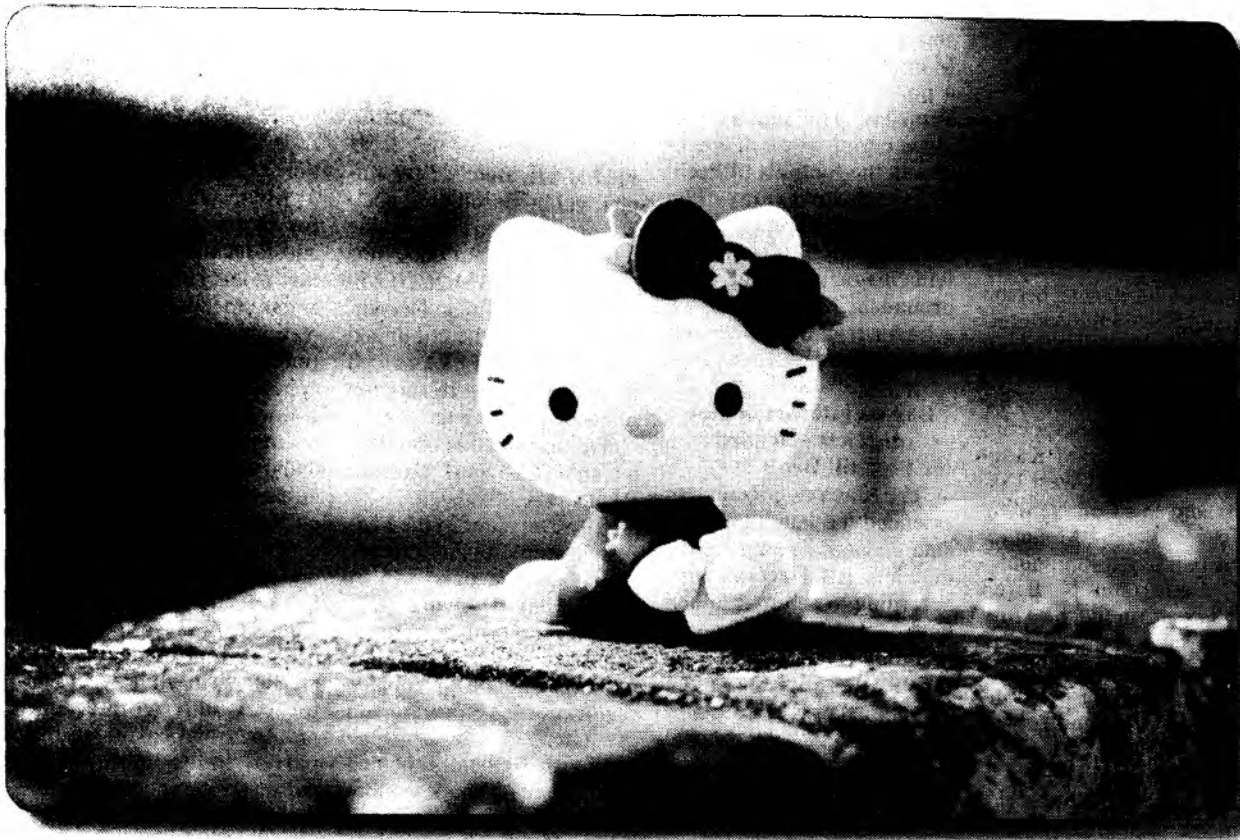
It is worthwhile to note that beef can be meat of various types of cattle, and not just meat of cows. It is a practice, especially among tribals, to consume beef. Even Assamese of various faiths consume beef in various parts of Assam. It is a common practice among all people in the neighbouring states of Assam to consume this flesh for its rich content of vitamins, protein, iron, etc. No one from the citizenry, in general, had much issues about the consumption of beef.

The Government in Assam is hell bent to please certain bosses and certain sections, rather than making a prudent economic and societal decision. We demand complete withdrawal of such a ban.

Yours etc.,
D Bhutia,
Guwahati

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

Hello Kitty at 50: A success story of simplicity and cuteness



Hello Kitty doesn't look her age. And despite recently turning 50, she is showing no signs of slowing down.

In 2025, the Japanese character - worth around US\$4 billion (£3.1 billion) a year to the company that owns her - is due to star in a live-action movie. A new amusement park and resort are also planned.

Her 50th year has been celebrated at events in Japan, Singapore, the US and the UK, where she received a birthday message from King Charles at a state banquet in Buckingham Palace.

Quite the party then, for a character with two black-dotted eyes, no mouth and a yellow button nose. Designed in 1974 by Yuko Shimizu (who is not believed to have made much money from her creation), Hello Kitty first appeared on a clear, vinyl coin purse - and has since grown into a merchandise empire consisting of over 50,000 different items sold across 130 countries.

Her longevity is partly

down to her inherent simplicity. In terms of design, she is composed of a few basic shapes, six short marks for whiskers, and a red bow. She is easy to recognise and cheap to reproduce.

The character also epitomises "Kawaii", the Japanese term for cute. According to Professor Joshua Dale, a pioneer in the field of "cuteness studies", perceiving objects as cute triggers psychological instincts for care and protection.

With Hello Kitty, children relate to the small, rounded character as being safe. Like others (see Winnie the Pooh, Mickey Mouse and many, many more), she provides a sense of innocence and comfort, which attracts fans from an early age - and continue into adulthood among those longing for nostalgia.

Part of this comes down to people's abiding enthusiasm for anthropomorphism - the notion of endowing animals and other non-humans with human-like characteristics.

Some would argue that this is also

a key element of the infantilisation of society more generally.

Hello Kitty also has an easily relatable storyline that resonates with consumers. According to her biography, Hello Kitty - full name Kitty White - is a cheerful little girl (so officially not actually a cat) who lives in the suburbs of London with her family.

She is described as being "five apples tall" and "three apples" in weight. She apparently loves to bake cookies, and her other hobbies include travelling, listening to music and making new friends.

Corporate kitty

But away from the baking and friend-making, Hello Kitty has a very serious business side to her character. Sanrio, the Japanese firm that owns her, has employed some astute strategies to build and sustain such a successful brand.

Collaborating with other firms has been a big part of this. In 1996, Sanrio launched began its first col-

laboration with an electronics retail chain in Hong Kong. But things really developed three years later when the company joined up with McDonald's to offer a Hello Kitty meal deal.

The promotion started a craze in Hong Kong with similar success in Taiwan, Japan and Singapore - where the launch in 2000 led to massive queues and even fights. Customers reportedly threw away the hamburgers as they were only interested in the special edition wedding design toy set featuring Hello Kitty and her boyfriend Dear Daniel.

This year, a 50th anniversary collection of McDonald's toys in Singapore quickly sold out and were soon being resold online.

Elsewhere, the commercial success of Hello Kitty has been linked to licensed collaborations with big brands including Nike, Adidas, Crocs and the Italian fashion label Blumarine.

Hello Kitty products have pro-

gressed from stationery and stickers to microwave ovens, toasters and vacuum cleaners.

She has appeared on Fender Stratocaster electric guitars and Swarovski jewellery.

There are also two officially licensed theme parks in Japan, Sanrio Puroland (in Tokyo) and Harmonyland (in Oita), with another due to open on China's Hainan island in 2025.

And to add to the animated series and films, comics, books and video games, next year Hello Kitty will follow in Barbie's footsteps and appear in a (partly) live-action movie produced by Warner Bros. The co-director of the film, Jennifer Coyle, says the release will "spread the message of love, friendship and inclusivity that Hello Kitty stands for".

Yet despite all of these projects, Sanrio is diversifying away from the character. Hello Kitty now accounts for 60% of the company's business in North America (it was 99% in

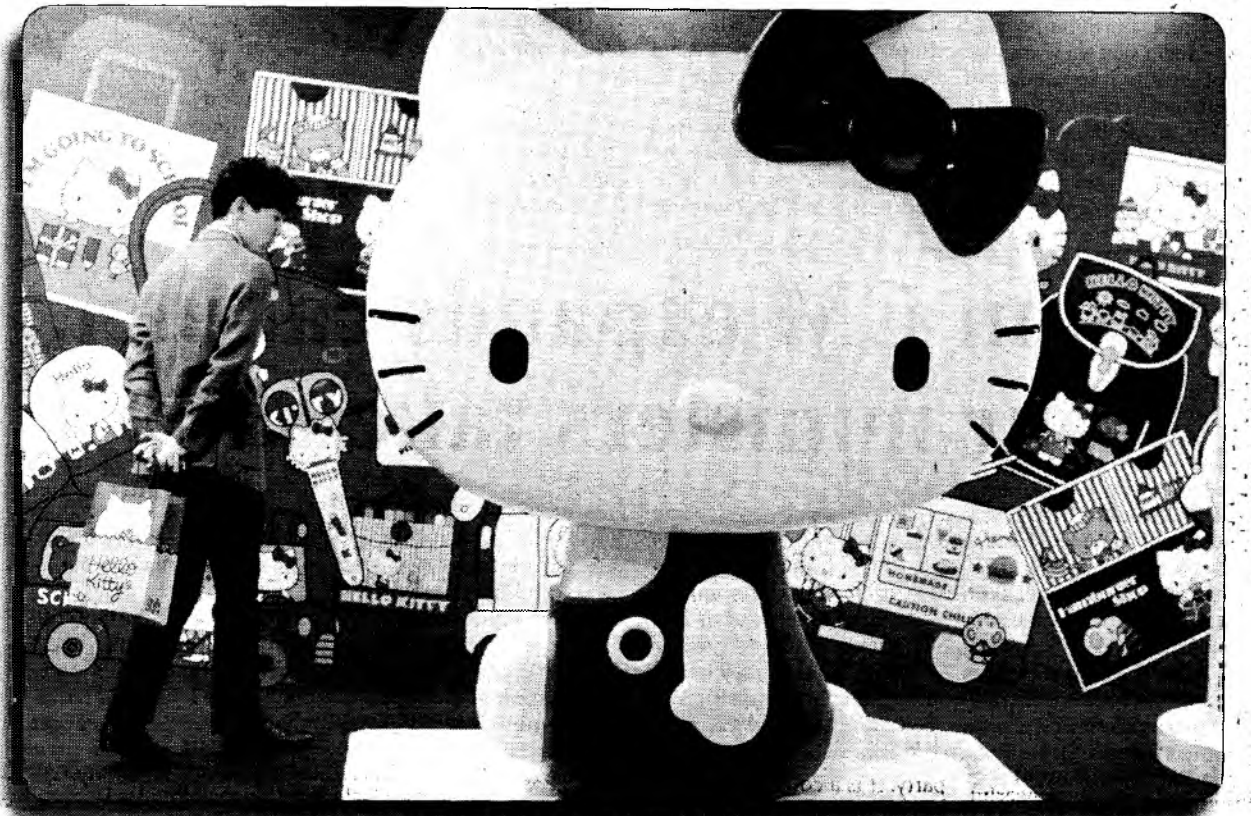
2013) and just 30% worldwide. Other characters are moving on to Kitty's patch.

According to the Sanrio 2024 character popularity ranking, Hello Kitty occupies fifth place, with Cinnamoroll (a dog with pink cheeks) sitting at the top.

Other younger creations such as Gudetama (an apathetic egg yolk) and Aggretsuko (an angry red panda) mark a notable shift from Sanrio's emphasis on cute characters towards ones which reflect social concerns.

Aggretsuko, for example, faces gender discrimination, social anxiety and a poor work-life balance. Gudetama reflects the struggles and aspirations of young people in Japan.

But as new characters come and go, Hello Kitty's familiar expression will no doubt remain unchanged, as it has for 50 years. An inscrutable gaze looking back on five decades of incredible commercial success. (The Conversation)



'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, DECEMBER 8, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Sun opposite Jupiter on your solar return chart will ensure wonderful results for you. You will get an opportunity to make your creative skills shine at your place of work. Your distinct style of thinking will help in meeting lot of challenging situations. You will interact and spend a lot of time with people on one-to-one level. And also, with those with whom you work together or share your thoughts. You will exude an air of enthusiasm and this will help in getting positive vibes from people with whom you interact. Your financial position will be excellent. You will share good equations with members of your family. Your friends will support you. And you will be source of inspiration for those who are younger to you. You will be drawn to spiritualism and religious activities in a big way.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) This promises to be a busy, dynamic, and significant phase. There would be a turning point in your professional life and also in terms of personal growth. Your emotions run high and mood swings are possible. There may be some kind of conflict in your life arising from a great urge to do something different. You need space and contact with others in order to feel content. Financial benefits may come on your way. You would impress people with your style and win their confidence and trust. You are blessed with intuition and foresight which lead you in the right direction. You are relaxed within and relate well with others at home and work.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) The planetary influence indicates favorable outcomes when it comes to legal affairs, education, and travel. You are more accepting and understanding your friends and lovers. Contentedness in love is likely to figure and to attract positive circumstances and people into your life. You are bound to enjoy increased social opportunities as well as a boost in your personal popularity and magnetism. You would think more creatively and express yourself with more sensitivity, compassion, and warmth. You may have a desire to redecorate your office or a place of work and bring in small yet significant changes. This is an excellent time under which you bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You would have an optimistic, but not necessarily realistic, attitude. You may feel a vague restlessness and discontentment with life as it is, although you are generally in a happy mood. Excellent work opportunities emerge for those working with overseas connections. At home, you accept the individuality of your spouse and that would be helpful to resolve your conflicts and move ahead in harmony. At times you feel fun loving, energetic, and willing to explore new ideas. Financial benefits may come on your way. Stress may crop up at unexpected turns and this would require you to look at some lifestyle changes and even incorporate some techniques like exercise and meditation.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) People in authority regard you favorably and events take place in which you feel like you are moving forward and growing into a new phase of your life. You will be making contact through learning, communicating and mental pursuits. This indicates an intellectually stimulating time in which the exchange of ideas with others figures prominently. You would expand your social circle and make more contact with groups and friends. Health will take a turn for the betterment and you inculcate a new diet or exercise regimen. You display great skills in sports, competitive exams, physical activities and this wins appreciation and brings up new opportunities for professionals in this field.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You are likely to form new relationships or connections that further your financial growth. This phase brings socializing, romance and stability at work place. It is time to make a lifestyle change. Any unresolved argument may create rifts in your relationships. Take a softer approach in your interactions when comes to family related matters. Your actions and emotions are balanced as you bring more accuracy in your work area. Economy at home and management of business and work are important issues. Personal relations are satisfying and you have plenty of goodwill and friendships around you. You are likely to get back to fitness routines and diet programs to enhance health and energy.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 23) You tend to entertain people with your conversation and sense of humor. You may change your image and an unconventional one at that. Your social life would be busy as you would popular among your social circle. Domestic relationships

and the home environment would be harmonious and peaceful by your efforts and care. People in fine arts, creative line and communication related fields would give a non-traditional blend to their creations and get popularity by the work done. 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. There may be minor health ailments as you need to give more attention to your health.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) You want your objectives to reflect what you're really about and you are likely to rid yourself of unsatisfying goals. You benefit from being more decisive than usual, and your ability to concentrate and focus helps you to achieve what you set out to do. A new project or goal begun at this time has a good chance of being successful in the long term. Your ability to concentrate on what really matters to you is enhanced. Love and emotional bonds keep the family and loved ones together. This is a fabulous time for joining a gym or stepping up exercise and health routines.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 23) This is a phase where you are more friendly, optimistic, and large-hearted than usual. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation from others. This is a sociable, and perhaps self-indulgent, time when the pursuit of pleasure is one of your high priorities. 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. You may change your dressing style to present a glamorous and unconventional image. Stick to a regular exercise routine and regular pattern of nutritious diet.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You could find that you are more open and trusting with friends and lovers, and that you easily win family's trust. Healthy speculation is favored as financial benefits may come your way. Some people fall in love under this influence. Certain elements of your social and financial life are stabilized, secured, and more reliable. More loving and appreciative relationships with your children may also figure. Your romantic affair and pleasure-seeking activities gives you a big boost of confidence and your personal magnetism runs high to be appreciated. This is an especially spiritual time for you, this is a time when you renew your energy and consider what things are important to you.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) Authority figures, elders, parents, or influential people in your life tend to support and respect you. They 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 career. Integrity and honesty will get you everywhere now. The more willing you are to put yourself in the limelight, the more positive the rewards. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities and family relations. You would be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) At the workplace you are likely to spend time in different places and work closely in new associations as you combine good luck and good management. Self-confidence and action are highlighted and you tend to instinctively know the right course of action to take in most situations. 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. The unattached may strengthen a romantic relationship or become involved with a like-minded partner.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) A fine balance between optimism and practicality is with you as you discover goals that suit your true self better. A more lenient and contented attitude towards others tends to bring positive circumstances into your life. A tendency to take on more than you can realistically handle should be watched. Your social life and finances stabilize. You find joy in expressing your views and ideas with people around you. You are feeling good in general, and you tend to spread the joy and happiness. You work hard and get appreciation too. This is a good time to build your skills, to get organized, and to attend to your health and wellbeing.

Do weighted blankets help you sleep better?

Rhonda James was skeptical when her husband ordered a weighted blanket for her online. But five minutes after she wrapped it around her body, she zonked out.

"It felt like a really big hug," said James, a banker in Charleston, South Carolina.

As outside temperatures grow chilly, weighted blankets can be a popular choice to warm up. Some people say the added pressure helps them soothe the worries of the day and get to sleep faster.

But research on the effectiveness of weighted blankets is limited.

What is a weighted blanket?

Weighted blankets come with extra left in the form of glass beads, pellets, cotton or another filling. Scientists haven't studied exactly how the blankets work, but they have a few ideas.

The blankets' firm touch may calm the brain's fight-or-flight response, said Dr. Neal Walia, a sleep medicine expert at UCLA Health.

"The evenly distributed weight on you tells your body, 'Hey, you're in a calm environment,'" he said.

The extra pressure also may signal the brain to release what's called the love hormone, also known as oxytocin. It's produced during bonding and cuddling, and can also lower anxiety, Walia said.

How do I use a weighted blanket?

For most healthy adults, experts say to choose a blanket that is about 10% of their body weight. So a 150-pound (68 Kg) person may opt for a 15-pound (6.8 Kg) blanket.

Weighted blankets are not recommended for babies or toddlers since they can hinder movement and breathing.

People with sleep apnea, sleep-related disorders or respiratory problems should check with a doctor before using a weighted blanket.

The blankets aren't for everyone and each person gets the best out of their blanket differently. For example, some may find them too hot



to use during warmer months.

And the extra swaddling comes at a cost: quality weighted blankets can range from \$50 to over \$300 depending on the size, weight and material.

James takes hers out of the closet to unwind when she's watching TV or sipping a glass of wine.

Lucy Taylor, a freelance writer from Wales, uses her blanket to fall asleep when her anxiety spikes during the winter.

"If my body's relaxed, my mind follows suit," she said.

Can weighted blankets improve sleep?

There isn't a ton of research on whether weighted blankets actually work, and the studies that do exist are on small groups. Most studies don't focus on the average sleeper.

Instead, they investigate whether weighted blankets can help people with chronic sleep problems, mental health conditions or developmental disorders.

There are some hints that weight-

ed blankets can help with anxiety, chronic pain and sleep. But the research isn't conclusive.

A study on 120 people with insomnia found that the weighted blankets helped them sleep better compared to a light blanket.

Another study on 67 children with autism found the weighted blanket didn't affect their sleep at all - but the children and their parents preferred it to a regular blanket.

And a third study on 94 adults with chronic pain found that a heavier weighted blanket didn't affect sleep, but was better at reducing pain compared to a lighter one.

Even though there's not yet strong evidence to back up the benefits of weighted blankets, sleep experts say there's no harm in giving them a try if you're willing to splurge.

Dr. Daniel Barone, a sleep medicine expert at Weill Cornell Medicine, suggests it to his patients after other traditional therapies and medicines.

"If it doesn't hurt and it may help, it's worth a shot," he said. (AP)

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

The Shillong Times

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Dictators as dynasts

IN what looks like a belated end to the totalitarian, autocratic rule of Syria by the Assad dynasty through half a century, the largely hated regime of President Bashar-al-Assad has crumbled and the dictator reportedly "fled" the country. Some reports suggest he perished in bombing by rebel forces which, after taking control of several urban centres, finally stormed capital Damascus on Sunday. The fundamentalist streak of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham rebels is all too glaring: they are aligned to Al Qaeda that had been targeting the Syrian regime for the past many years. It is safe to assume that life for the ordinary citizens would only worsen there; and new trouble is in store for the world at large from fundamentalists there.

Syria has long been an epicentre of human rights violations mainly at the behest of the regime on the one side and the Islamic fundamentalist forces on the other. The Assads survived in power through generations with able military support, first from the erstwhile USSR and, after the end of the Cold War, from Russia. President Putin liberally helped Syria face the rebel fighters engaged in a civil war. Curiously, The Assads claimed to be running secular governments through generations after Hafez al Assad seized power through a coup in 1971. He continued his rule till 2000. His death led to a transfer of power to son Bashar al Assad. Bashar too, like his father, kept the nation and its people under an iron grip with able backing from the military. The top ranks of the military remained filled with recruits from the Assads' own Alawite Muslim minority group forming less than 15 percent of the population. The rest of the population resented the undue importance that the Assads gave to this community in the governance systems. Rebel groups from other Muslim communities continued targeting the regime. This was more so after the Iraq War and infiltration of Sunni fighters from there to Syria. The bloody battles and purges in select provinces took the lives of tens of thousands. The present phase of the rebel offensive started last month.

Notably, Syrian rebels exploited to their full advantage a situation of extreme economic hardship of the people. Bashar's economic liberalization steps allegedly worsened economic inequalities. The rural populations bore the brunt of this pressure while the Alawite and Assad family units thrived in businesses, commerce and much else. Bashar al Assad perhaps fled to an unknown destination abroad with Russian patronage, but he might not find peace there too. Reportedly an arrest warrant had been issued to the President last year by France at the behest of the International Court of Justice over the regime's use of chemical weapons against rebels and the civilian population. This hangs like a Damocles' Sword over his head.

Letters to the Editor

Single Mothers: Choosing between ka Kur (clan) & u 'Kpa ki khun' (husband)

Editor, Reading Bhogtoram Mawroh's article, "Broken families: Unveiling the role of patrilineal and matrilineal systems" (ST November 20, 2024) I would like to offer the following comments.

Single mothers can be categorised into two groups. The first group comprises those who are divorced or widowed and this is a universal problem cutting across communities, religions, boundaries, irrespective of whether they are patrilineal or matrilineal. But there are possibilities of financial support and maintenance for them because their marriages are registered and you can get statistics on the number of widowed and divorced women (single mothers) because of the availability of records on deaths and divorced cases.

But in our matrilineal Meghalaya where compulsory registration of marriages is yet to be made mandatory, the other group of single mothers is more about abandoned mothers from unregistered marriages. In this matrilineal society today where many who still give importance to the Kur and the Kni rather than to the family and the father especially in their day to day living. This makes it even easier for a man husband to walk out of an unregistered marriage without giving any maintenance for the wife

and children, leaving them at the mercy and financial situations of these almost outdated institutions (Kur) and authorities (Kni). This is especially related to this subject of abandonment of women with children and the increasing number of orphanages in our state. If the Kur and the Kni are rich then they can take care of them, but for the vast majority of the Kurs and the Knis today, who belong to the middle income and lower income group, it becomes next to impossible to look after the extra mouths apart from their own families because of the increasing cost of living.

The practice of living together (ban shu ia shong) without getting into a formal registration of marriage is still common and still accepted in our society. But the problem arises when the man walks out of the 'marriage' without giving any maintenance. In our experience when dealing with such cases it is difficult for an abandoned woman to fight for maintenance in court without the marriage certificate. Either we'd have to rely on a birth or baptism certificate where the names of both parents are mentioned and when these too are not available, then through the lengthy process of DNA testing which is yet to be tried.

I too agree with Jennifer Dkhar in her letter to the editor (ST December 2, 2024) "I am in awe of these super-women (single mothers) who are managing things well...I may have seen very less of these cases but the few I have seen, I must say makes me want to salute them." However the adverse impact on the lives of many of these

Crash Course in Understanding Cow Behaviour

By H.H. Mohrmen

Unlike some general misconceptions, keeping cows is not new among the Khasi-Pnar people. Contrary to popular assumption it was not the Nepalis who taught them how to rear cattle. It has always been a tradition among the Khasi-Pnar people to rear cattle. It is true that the Nepalis introduced milking cows to this region. However, unlike the Nepalis, who keep cows for milk or other dairy products, the indigenous people of the state keep cattle for meat. In the past, the Khasi-Pnar also used oxen for plowing rice fields using 'ka lyngkor/ka ijuwar,' a wooden plow. However, there is no tradition of making food items from milk; feeding milk to babies is a new practice among the tribes. Among the indigenous people of the Jaintia Hills, the second most important food for babies, after their mother's milk, is banana, not milk.

The people of these hills have lived with Desi cows for ages and have evolved a tradition of harmonious coexistence with the noble animal. Keeping cows and hiring a boy, or 'nongap/sharai masi,' was once a popular economic activity. In fact, in the past, the wealth of an individual or a family was gauged by the number of animals they owned, such as goats, pigs, and, more importantly, cattle. Unfortunately, the tradition of keeping cattle is gradually declining. The main reason is that families are sending their sons to school, leading to a shortage of boys available for hire as cowherds.

The arrangement was that cattle owners would hire the boy for one season, and while he was working with the cattle-owning family, they had to provide him with everything from food and clothing to tobacco for smoking. But once winter set in, the contract between the family and the boy's parents ended, and the boy was free to return home. This tradition is connected to cowboys because once the cow herder was let go, the season of 'dat rai' also began.

The Tradition of Dat Rai
During winters, when the school year is over, kids like to spend their time flying kites, playing with tops, or going to the forest for the entire day. Sometimes, children are so busy playing that

they even forget to eat. They literally lose track of time entirely. We have a saying for this—when kids roam all day, oblivious to time and even forgetting their lunch, it is called 'dat rai.' This refers to the freedom children enjoy when they don't have to attend school or do homework; instead, they have all the time in the world to play and do nothing else. In one word, it basically means 'freedom' for the kids. One can still see this time of merriment among children in many villages across the state.

We are currently in the middle of that time of the year when the Khasi and Jaintia Hills people call 'ka por dat rai' in Pnar and 'ka por ai or pynlaitlan mrad' in Khasi. The term 'dat rai,' used for kids who lose track of time, is borrowed from this tradition. It is a practice still followed in many villages, where, after the rice grains are harvested, cattle are set free to fend for themselves. During the farming season from spring to autumn, it is the responsibility of the owners to ensure their animals do not damage their neighbors' or fellow farmers' crops or vegetables in the gardens. However, after the rice harvest, owners can set their animals free, give the cow herder a holiday, and it becomes the farmer's responsibility to protect their farms. This tradition reflects the understanding and respect for each other's livelihoods, a practice still observed in the majority of villages in the Khasi and Jaintia regions.

A Strange Phenomenon
It is also the time of year when farmers experience strange phenomena, such as the one that happened in a certain village. At Puriang, in the late 1990s or perhaps the early 2000s, an elderly man, Lyndep Kharmalki, bought a bull from a village in Ri Bhoi District to improve his cattle stock. The bull enjoyed its new home and the new company throughout the summer. However, when the 'aiom or por ai lan'—the period when animals are let loose—ended, the cattle owner began collecting his cows. To his surprise, the new bull he had bought last spring was nowhere to be found.

He searched the nearby areas, including the Sung Valley and the villages around

Puriang, but the bull was still missing. Someone suggested he visit the place from where he had bought the bull, as it might have returned there. To his astonishment, he found the bull standing shoulder to shoulder with its old relatives and friends. How did the bull find its way back from Puriang to a village in Ri Bhoi, crossing the vast, maze-like paddy fields of the Sung Valley? Do cows have a global positioning system to track their route and return to their birthplace? How an animal's instinct works is a million-dollar question.

Following the Grassland
In the Jaintia Hills, another tradition followed during winter was the practice of taking the animals to the grassland. When the land dries and grass begins to wither, it signals that time of year when animal feed becomes scarce in the Jaintia plateau. Cattle owners from Raid Jowai and Tuber, in particular, follow a tradition of taking their animals to a place called Myngksar. This grassland, where the grass remains green even during winter, is believed to be in the Amlarem region. Although I have not located the precise area, it is likely near Amlarem, the source of the river Amkshar, and hence the Pnar call the place Myngksar.

The journey of the cattle owners to Myngksar begins immediately after the rice harvest in the two regions. Cattle owners move their animals at different times and stay there until spring arrives. While feeding their animals, herders also leisurely engage in catching snake-head fish in a bamboo trap called 'khnām' from nearby streams and rivulets. Come spring, it is time for the folks and their animals to return home to their villages.

As the weather grows warmer, men and animals start moving back to their respective villages. Those who witness it describe it as the most picturesque sight. At dawn, as the spring sun rises from beyond the eastern hills, men and animals, carrying fishing rods and 'khnām,' move in a line like a train stretching across the horizon. From a distance, it is a scene of unparalleled beauty to watch this procession of animals and their

herders moving slowly, with the setting sun as a backdrop. The image is surreal—a true treat for the eyes. The story of Myngksar now lives only in the memories of those fortunate enough to have seen and experienced it.

A Crash Course
One frosty winter morning, when animals were let loose, I had a lifetime experience with cows, and I call it a crash course in cow behaviour. It was early 2012, and I was visiting church members at a place called Kremlabit in Ksehrynchang village, which is also part of my circuit rider ministry. I stayed overnight in villages from Saturday to Sunday evening. I always enjoyed staying in the village, and back then, to relieve oneself, one had to go to the backwoods early in the morning when most people were still asleep.

While walking to the forest, I noticed a herd of cows sheltering from the cold under a Khasi pine tree plantation. The herd had been there the entire night, and I initially hesitated and stopped on my way for some time. Eventually, I passed through the herd uneventfully. However, on my return, a young bull suddenly attacked me, knocking me to the ground. I did not even have time to think about how to defend myself when I found myself pinned against the trunk of a pine tree as the bull continued to hit me on my stomach. I used my hands to protect my face and I was in the sticky situation for few minutes.

Fortunately, Khlanhivot Lamare, a young man from the church who accompanied me on my visit, happened to pass by. He was also perhaps looking for a place to relieve himself, and hearing the commotion, he quickly came to my rescue. He grabbed a stick and scared the bull away. After helping me stand, Khlam, who was born in Mukhap village and must have been a cow herder at some point, offered three pieces of advice: He said I was lucky it was a young bull with undeveloped horns; otherwise, I would have been wounded. Secondly, he advised me to never ever go near a mother cow nursing its calf. Lastly, he recommended that I should always carry a stick when walking near cows for protection. These lessons remain with me to this day.

conferred the status of RCW (Regular Casual Worker). This conferment would imply that muster rolls are classified as quasi-regular employees whose services cannot be easily terminated off-hand. Additionally, in course of time they are entitled to appointment to Group D posts.

Further, the entitled RCWs could avail other official packages like maternity leave, children's education advance, festival advance and other benefits applicable to regular appointees. Unfortunately, some state establishments have circumvented the Memorandum in question by furtively resorting to breaking the continued engagement of the muster rolls by one day at least, thereby resulting in a break in service, to make them ineligible for RCW ranking. Some years ago I have been reportedly apprised by one of the concerned employees of the Department in the office of Chief Engineer, Water Resources, Meghalaya that the system of break in service of Muster Rolls was being practiced. I presume that such a strategy is still enforced in this office.

Such modus operandi will deprive the muster roll workers of their endorsed constitutional rights and the same ought to be taken cognizance of by the Personnel Department, Meghalaya and the non-compliant offices must be given a serious dressing down!

Yours etc.,
Jerome K Dindogh,
Shillong-2

Muster Roll workers' break in service!
Editor,
Nearly three decades ago the Government of Meghalaya through the Personnel & ADMV Reforms (B) Department vide an Office Memorandum dated September 16, 1996, duly signed by Mr. WMS Pariat, the then Commissioner & Secretary to the Government of Meghalaya, Personnel Department, who subsequently became the Chief Secretary of Meghalaya, passed an order that all state government offices that engaged muster roll workers who have completed over ten years of service without a break and supported by documentary proof must be

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Prioritize Education: Why Meghalaya's Concert Boom Needs Better Timing

By Krish Marwein

What matters more—short-term entertainment or the long-term future of our students?

The people of Shillong take pride in the vibrant culture and natural beauty of our state. Music events and concerts have always been an integral part of Meghalaya's identity, drawing thousands of visitors and contributing significantly to our tourism sector and economy. However, recent scheduling decisions regarding concerts and major music events during peak academic and examination periods raise serious concerns about the government's priorities.

From December through February 12, our city is set to host several high-profile concerts featuring renowned artists such as Bryan Adams, Afrojack, Blue, and Ed Sheeran. These events

region and far above the national average of 12.6%. Unified District Information on School Education (UDISE) Plus data for 2021-22 further reveals dropout rates of 9.8% at the lower primary level and as high as 27.6% in certain districts at the secondary level. Despite these grim statistics, the government's focus appears skewed toward entertainment rather than addressing the core issues affecting education.

A Call for Responsible Planning

A balanced approach to tourism and education is not only possible but necessary. The Cherry Blossom Festival's location in Ri Bhoi offers a valuable lesson: large-scale events can be held outside the city, minimizing disruption to students and residents. Similarly, concerts and music events should be

"From December through February 12, our city is set to host several high-profile concerts featuring renowned artists such as Bryan Adams, Afrojack, Blue, and Ed Sheeran. These events are expected to draw tens of thousands of attendees, creating noise and chaos in the city center. While these events undeniably boost tourism, they are scheduled at the worst possible time for students."

are expected to draw tens of thousands of attendees, creating noise and chaos in the city center. While these events undeniably boost tourism, they are scheduled at the worst possible time for students. Beyond the HSSLC exams starting February 18, thousands of students are also preparing for the SSLC exams and competitive entrance tests like CUET, all of which take place in February, March, and the following months.

To put things in perspective, in 2024, 54,134 students appeared for the SSLC exams from 679 schools, and 27,374 students appeared for the HSSLC exams from 251 schools. These numbers highlight the significant population of students directly impacted by the scheduling of these concerts. This disruption affects not just their preparation but also their ability to perform in these crucial exams that shape their futures.

planned after the conclusion of exams. This ensures students can focus on their studies without unnecessary distractions, while the government can still achieve its goals of boosting tourism and economic growth.

If the government is truly committed to reducing dropout rates, as it claims, then education must be given precedence over short-term economic gains. As the SDG Index report emphasizes, a zero-tolerance approach to dropouts must be the cornerstone of policy. This message must resonate from the Chief Minister and Education Minister down to every Village Council Chairman. Planning major events during peak academic periods sends a contradictory message, undermining efforts to improve educational outcomes.

We, as students, are not against concerts or music events. In fact, we celebrate the cultural vibrancy they bring to Meghalaya. However, it is imperative that these

"The recent Cherry Blossom Festival, held in the outskirts of Ri Bhoi, was a spectacular success, drawing over 50,000 attendees across two days. The event, which initially received a government investment of ₹2 crore, ultimately cost ₹12 crore, according to Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma's statements. However, there is speculation that the figure might be even higher."

Economic Gains at the Cost of Education

The recent Cherry Blossom Festival, held in the outskirts of Ri Bhoi, was a spectacular success, drawing over 50,000 attendees across two days. The event, which initially received a government investment of ₹2 crore, ultimately cost ₹12 crore, according to Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma's statements. However, there is speculation that the figure might be even higher. While the economic benefits of such events cannot be denied, it is critical to question whether these benefits justify compromising students' education.

Meghalaya already struggles with alarmingly high dropout rates. As per the 2023-24 SDG Index report, the state's dropout rate at the secondary level (Classes 9-10) stands at a shocking 21.7%, the highest in the

events are planned responsibly, keeping in mind their potential impact on students' academic performance. By holding such events after exams or in locations outside the city center, the government can strike a balance between fostering tourism and safeguarding education.

As residents of Shillong, we urge the government to take these concerns seriously. Education is the foundation of progress, and prioritizing it over entertainment is not just a necessity—it is a responsibility. Let us ensure that the voices of students, parents, and educators reach every household, calling for a more thoughtful approach to event planning in our beloved state.

(The writer is a student of Class - 12, St. Anthony's Higher Secondary school and can be reached at krishmarwein29@gmail.com)

"The only thing that overcomes
hard luck is hard work."

— Harry Golden

The Shillong Times

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Calm before the 'storm'

THE BJP having trounced its principal foe, the Congress, in the assembly polls in two politically high-profile states, the overall mood is seen to be loaded in its favour. This is a credit for a party that ruled the Centre and these states — Haryana and Maharashtra — for long spells since 2014. There obviously is no anti-incumbency factor at work. Clearly, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been able to retain the confidence of the nation after two continuous terms in power and he's running through a third term; his head held high. Despite the win for the Congress in Karnataka followed by Telangana, the Hindi belt seems to be backing the BJP; and the mood is reflected also in the Marathi-speaking Maharashtra. Even as the inflationary trends are adversely impacting home budgets, the nation is free of tension, with the exception of Manipur, where social divisions remain sharp. While farmers have returned to the streets in the northern sector, this too has not snowballed into a major crisis for the government.

There are those who ask the question whether this is now the calm before the storm. While the poor are fed with doles, freebies and subsidies, the middle class is faced with serious difficulties both in the urban and rural sectors. Prices and service charges are going up but salaries are remaining stagnant in most cases. As a result, people are relying heavily on personal loans from banks. As per published reports, some 67 per cent of Indian families carry the burden of personal loans; and more than half of the youths have availed it. Repayment from meagre income/salaries would mean less ability on their part to spend in future; which could affect the market dynamics. Worse, it is recorded that the huge spurt in personal loans decreased the share of loans by banks to industries from 42 per cent ten years ago to just 22 per cent. This could mean lesser chances for job creation by industries. The slowdown of the manufacturing sector in the past decade was there for all to see. Bureaucratic red tape, licence raj and associated corruption are among the reasons for the lack of growth in the industrial sector across states.

The present scenario, some suspect, is tailor-made for mass discontentment. The question is whether Modi can keep the show going at tolerable levels for more years. How the economy fares is important, as was evident in the upheavals in Sri Lanka and now Syria. Pakistan is already a gone case. The two terms of Narendra Modi in Delhi were a period of financial stability, not growth. Latest indications are that the GDP growth has majorly slowed down. This could be a temporary phase or a pointer to the future.

Potemkin Paradise of Bread, Circuses, and Broken Promises

By Napoleon S Mawphniang

I have spent many years navigating this murky terrain in my capacity as an RTI activist, humanist, and, as Eudardo Galeano put it, "the nobodies - Los Nadies." My goal has been to uncover the deep-seated corruption within our government by peeling back its many layers of dishonesty. A rallying cry for our beloved state, this goes beyond just an exposé.

An Illusory sign of advancement

The Meghalaya government has mastered illusions to an extent that rivals that of the greatest prestidigitators of bygone eras. A press release is like one of our many streams; it announces a new plan, an initiative, or a promise of development. The Chief Minister, who is also our state's Pied Piper, travels the land spinning yarns of optimism with his silky words through his "CM Connect" projects. These illusions of advancement, like the shimmering mirages that float on sunny highways, fade away when one looks more closely. The ancient Romans used bread and circuses to distract the people from the republic's collapse, and this spectacular show is eerily similar. Even though there is a whirlwind of activity in Meghalaya, many people are still going hungry.

What avarice is made of

I have viewed the corruption of our state from the perspective of RTI and, as Eudardo Galeano put it again, "the nobodies - Los Nadies," revealing a network of graft that would make the most notorious criminal syndicates blush with envy. The noble intentions of central government initiatives that are conceived in the halls of Delhi are transformed into vehicles of enrichment for the powerful upon their arrival on our soil.

A cruel irony transpires in the Soil Conservation Department. The programs that were intended to cultivate our land instead enrich the bank accounts of the affluent. The list of beneficiaries is reminiscent of a who's who of Meghalaya's power brokers, including high-ranking officials, politicians, and their network of associates. This pattern is consistent across disciplines, including Fisheries and Public Health Engineering, with the precision of a clock.

This system is strikingly similar to the "prebendalism" that is commonly observed in certain African countries, in which public offices are regarded as personal fiefdoms and exploited for private gain. This feudal governance approach has been elevated to a fine art in Meghalaya, where public resources are regarded as personal treasure troves.

A malicious machine

The mechanisms of this corrupt apparatus are both intricate and insidious. The Public Health Engineering

(PHE) and Public Works Department (PWD) payrolls are populated by ghost workers, who are akin to spectres that haunt the corridors of bureaucracy. The public treasuries are estimated to be drained of an estimated 520 crore rupees annually by these phantoms, which have a more tangible economic impact than any supernatural entity.

Umsning and Mawphlang are the nepotistic nightmare that would cause even the most brazen dynasts of history to blush, as these spirits assume corporeal form as the offsprings and relatives of political leaders and officers. This is reminiscent of the "warlordism" that is observed in failed states, where local power brokers establish personal fiefdoms within the framework of government institutions.

Charade of meritocracy

The corrupting influence of corruption has even infiltrated the institutions that were intended to protect fairness and competence. The Meghalaya Public Service Commission and District Selection Committees, which were previously intended to serve as protectors of meritocracy, have transformed into bazaars where positions are traded and sold. Formal applications and interviews are rendered mere theatre by the exchange of cash, and jobs are promised with a wink and a gesture. This degradation of merit-based selection is comparable to the "spoils system" that afflicted 19th-century American politics, but it has been refined to an extent that would impress even the most cynical Tammany Hall supervisor.

Belief in implementation miracles

The implementation of central government initiatives in Meghalaya are frequently as substantial as a shadow, despite the fanfare that accompanies their arrival. Despite the fact that funds are disbursed like water through a sieve, reports are filed that claim Herculean achievements, yet the landscape remains resolutely unchanged on the ground. These "blind bills" and inflated invoices have become the standard operating procedure, a sleight of hand that would impress the most accomplished illusionists. It is reminiscent of the "Potemkin villages" that were built to deceive Catherine the Great, with their intricate facades concealing a lack of substance.

Intimidation's weapons of choice

The apparatus of corruption is revealed in its more sinister gears when intrepid citizens dare to pierce this veil of deception through RTI applications. Threats are hissed from shadowy corners, bribes are dangled like poisoned fruit,

and information leaks from presumably secure offices with suspicious alacrity. This weaponization of power against those who seek transparency is reminiscent of authoritarian regimes that have existed throughout history. Despite the fact that Meghalaya may appear to be a democracy, those who venture to challenge the status quo are swiftly met with the iron hand of oppression.

Corrupt practices and their bitter fruits

The repercussions of this systemic decay are as distressing as they are striking. The majority of Meghalayans are struggling against a rising tide of poverty, unemployment, and inadequate public services, while a select cadre grows fat on the spoils of malfeasance. The development of our state is impeded by the very institutions that are intended to advance it. This lamentable disparity is reminiscent of the "Dutch disease" that is observed in resource-rich nations, where the exploitation of one sector results in broader economic stagnation. The resources being exploited in Meghalaya are not hydro-carbons or minerals; rather, it is the very lifeblood of public trust and funds.

The stronghold of notoriety

In my personal experiences - a wall of silence and intimidation that would astound the builders of mediaeval fortresses is encountered when attempts to seek redress through official channels are made. Complaints submitted to the Chief Minister or Chief Vigilance Commissioner of our state are lost in a bureaucratic black abyss. The police, who are intended to serve as the protectors of justice, instead function as gatekeepers, which discourages the filing of FIRs against the influential.

The Central Bureau of Investigation, a renowned institution, is rendered ineffective by the state's refusal to authorise investigations. This system of impunity is reminiscent of the "iron triangles" that are seen in political science, in which government agencies, interest groups, and legislative committees form an impenetrable barrier against reform.

Who reveals virtue?

The manner in which ill-gotten gains are laundered through acts of public philanthropy is perhaps the most vexing aspect of this corrupt ecosystem. The funds that are stolen from public treasuries are used to purchase respectability and influence by government officials who transform into prominent donors to Balang Kristan (Christian Churches). This practice is reminiscent of the strategies employed by 19th-century robber oligarchs, who em-

ployed charitable donations as a method of reputation laundering. In Meghalaya, the already Byzantine system of bribery is further complicated by the unholy alliance between corruption and public virtue.

A transformational crisis

The situation in Meghalaya may appear to be as immovable as our ancient monoliths; however, history has demonstrated that even the most deeply rooted systems can be disrupted. The Progressive Era reforms that swept across America in the early 20th century serve as a beacon of optimism, demonstrating how determined citizens can break the back of political machines and usher in an era of greater transparency.

Not merely reform is required in Meghalaya at this time; rather, a revolution of consciousness is required. We need a coalition of the willing, including citizens, reform-minded politicians, and honest officials, who are prepared to challenge the status quo with the same ferocity as our monsoon rainfall. The way ahead is dangerous, but straight. Initially, it is imperative that we persist in our efforts to shed light on the shadowy underbelly of corruption by means of unwavering RTI activism and investigative journalism. Similar to the bio-luminescent creatures that illuminate our world-renowned living root bridges, we need to shine a light when others see only darkness.

Second, we need to demand a new set of rules that truly combat corruption and give watchdog organisations the power they deserve. The accomplishments of Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption serve as a testament to the potential of political will and public support.

And lastly but certainly not least, we need to spark a cultural revolution that denounces corruption as an acceptable lifestyle. This will necessitate a grassroots movement of education and organisation, which will facilitate the development of ethical leadership from the village level to the highest echelons of government. There are many hazards and a long road ahead of us. There will be resistance from those who stand to gain from the status quo. Nevertheless, the level of risk is unprecedented. We are talking about the fate of Meghalaya, the basic essence of the state.

Being at this juncture forces us to ask: Were we to let our state wilt like a plant without sunlight? Would we persist in corrupt practices and remain stagnant? Conversely, will we have the guts to plot a different course, one that results in openness, responsibility, and actual advancement?

(The writer is Advocate, Trade Unionist and Humanist)

What's the political philosophy of MDA 2.0?

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

Political philosophy is the set of fundamental beliefs, understanding, self-image, attitude and guidelines which determine and direct how a political party acts and behaves. Some parties have an arrogant political philosophy and that gets reflected in their behaviour. While some carry a participative and more empathetic political philosophy and accordingly the approach is more people-oriented by focusing on the real developmental issues in society. With so much of festival tourism happening in Meghalaya, it bodes well to ponder on the political philosophy of the state government?

Education

In a conversation with a friend who was working in England the talk flowed towards, 'how is the political scenario different between there and here'. His answer was plain and simple - 'in England, education has changed everything.' The people there are so politically aware that no politician or party can play with its constituents. Every move that the politicians make is closely watched and analyzed. This analysis then forms the basis for electing or not electing a candidate in future elections. It is a matter of concern that such discourses/debates do not happen frequently in Meghalaya. They happen only once in a while and that too just before the elections.

The KHADC and JHADC elections are near so we can expect such debates to happen again from the first week of 2025. It can be said that the political awareness of the people of Meghalaya is limited to electioneering only. After elections, no one follows-up and checks if the tall promises made during campaigning are executed or not. For instance, on February 3, 2023 Chief Minister Conrad Sangma promised to create five lakh jobs over a period of five years if NPP comes back to power and that the jobs would be in the areas of entrepreneurship, tourism, agro-processing, and digital sectors. Then on June 6, 2023 the narrative changed to 'the state government cannot provide jobs to all', while speaking at a World Environment Day function. If the people of Meghalaya were politically aware then they would have noted this political philosophy of misleading the populace and keep their fingers ready for February, 2028. But as usual, public memory is always short.

Priorities
Ever since the festival tourism started, social media is full of it. The focus on pressing issues such as unemployment, under-employment, drugs and substance abuse, etc has died down. What is the political philosophy of MDA 2.0 on priorities? If there is a list of priorities, what is the pecking order? It would be nice for the people to hear from the state government in detail. For a poor and developing state like Meghalaya the priority should have been to invest in areas encompassing the majority of the population such as agriculture, small business and daily-wage labourers. These are the areas that need tangible interventions. Tourism already has enough foot-falls of more than 15 lakhs per annum and the focus should have been more on enabling better community-based tourism, rural tourism, cultural immersion through tourism, training and capacity building of the youth especially in the rural tourist spots, etc. Meghalaya is basically a poor household. Any poor household would look first into its basic needs such as food, water, clothing, shelter, education and health. Entertainment will only figure later when there is residual income to be spent. However, things are moving on reverse mode. The misplaced priorities are only creating a bigger distance between the poor and the state government. Many are disillusioned at the current turn of events. Yet, the state government does not seem to pay any attention to their plight. Rather, there is an air of arrogance on how it

defends the overload of festivals. This only highlights a political philosophy that they are mighty and powerful and that 'might is always right'.

Infrastructure

It is difficult to blindly validate festival tourism when the condition of basic infrastructure like roads, drains, waste disposal, drinking water, etc., are still to be appropriately addressed even in Shillong itself. We can observe the deplorable infrastructure conditions in the rural hamlets. The most pressing ones are the conditions of the schools and the health centres. Education and health are the pivots of human development. How can we expect the human resource to be effective if the infrastructural inputs are not provided for the ones who need them the most? On the other hand, MDA 2.0 has always shown a placating political philosophy when it comes to dealing with the pressure groups on important development projects such as the highways, railways, etc. This is a dangerous cocktail of ignoring the poor and needy while not having a spine to deal with and negotiate with the pressure groups. No wonder the poor of Meghalaya are feeling even more disenchanted with the actions and philosophy of the government with every passing day. It is like one entrepreneur quipped - 'looks like we are trying to portray to the world a wonderful and rich sitting room when in fact our kitchen and bedrooms are all in a very bad shape'.

Exclusiveness

The basic role of any government in a poor state like Meghalaya is to facilitate development. Nurturing and providing a space for the populace to prosper and excel is its basic duty. This is inclusiveness and participatory political philosophy whereby the views of the people are factored when delving into any development strategy. To many people this is missing from MDA 2.0. Rather, exclusiveness is at play whereby the fruits of any intervention are enjoyed by a few. For instance, in the current affairs of festival tourism, the ones who reap the benefits are the well established business houses whereas the small shops in the corner with limited capacity get ignored. It is understood that it is a competitive market. But, development studies have unequivocally found that in any developing state it is the role of the government to provide a level playing field for all. The government would point to the massive crowds that attend the events. But, it is to be factored that they are an exclusive class of people who can afford it. The majority is left in the periphery and it is also to be noted that Meghalaya has one of the highest incidence of people living below the poverty line.

Statistics

When the dust settles, it would be proper for the state government to transparently show to the people the cost-benefit analysis of this series of festival tourism. The analysis should go beyond just highlighting how much money the government has given to a certain festival (like was done in the past). The statistics should include tourist inflows, outcomes for local entrepreneurs across transportation, accommodation, food and beverages, leisure, entertainment, etc. More importantly, the cost-benefit analysis should be done by a third party on the basis of valid and reliable data to be provided by the government. Only then and on the basis of factual data can an informed inference be made as to its potency/failure to drive inclusiveness and development. This then should form the basis for their continuity/non-continuity in future! This is an empathetic political philosophy.

In the end, it is better for all if Meghalaya refrains from acting as a honky-dory state for it is not. For after political philosophy comes political ethics.

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

Letters to the Editor

No respect for zebra crossings

Editor,
It is astonishing how many people, especially drivers in Shillong, turn a blind eye to zebra crossings. Is it due to ignorance or do they simply ignore pedestrians trying to cross the road? Recently, while strolling the streets of Laitumkhrah, I saw an elderly lady standing next to a zebra crossing, trying to cross. No driver stopped to let her pass. She stood there waiting for a while until the traffic police intervened. Why is it that in Shillong, nobody seems to understand the bold white stripes on the road surface? Each vehicle is in a rush with no time to spare. Those stripes are there for a reason, not just for show.

It is important for all of us to make a mental note of the white and black stripes henceforth. We should know the traffic rules before we get a license to drive. Pe-

destrians in Shillong hesitate before crossing the road because even at the zebra crossing, we aren't sure whether the stripes are for us or just a decorative piece. If it weren't for the hard-working traffic police, our roads would probably turn into a chaotic symphony of horns, near-misses, and vehicles conducting their own survival of the fittest experiment.

To conclude, zebra crossings are a vital aspect of road safety, providing pedestrians with a designated space to cross while encouraging drivers to be more mindful and cautious. Their simple yet effective design ensures visibility and accessibility, making roads safer for everyone. However, their true value lies in how responsibly both pedestrians and drivers adhere to the rules, ensuring mutual respect and safety on the streets.

Yours etc.,
Adriall Mary Lyngdoh,
Via email

Syria in turmoil

Editor
Apropos of the editorial "Dictators as dynasts" (ST December 9 2024) the fall of Bashar al-Assad marks a significant turning point for Syria. The capital, Damascus is captured by a coalition of Syrian rebels throwing the country into an uncertain future with the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) also known as the "Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant" originally formed in 2011 under the name Jabhat al-Nusra - an affiliate of Al-Qaeda gaining ground. The group was one of the most effective factions fighting against Assad's regime, with its partner, the Turkish-backed Syrian Nation Army (SNA) formerly known as the Free Syrian Army established in 2017 under the auspices of Turkey, having taken control.

The immediate aftermath

in this power-shift is a power vacuum, with various factions vying for control. The HTS remains a dominant force. Assad's fall is a blow to Russia and Iran, who supported his regime. This opens the door for greater Turkish influence in the region. The ongoing conflict and power struggles could exacerbate the humanitarian crisis, with millions of Syrians already displaced and helpless. Both Russia and Iran have invested heavily in supporting Assad's regime to maintain their strategic interests in the region. Syria was a crucial ally and a gateway for their influence in the Middle East. Both countries have provided substantial military support to Assad, including troops, equipment and financial aid. Assad's collapse means the loss of these investments and a setback in their military presence in Syria that weakens the geopolitical influence of these two countries. It also disrupts their plans to use Syria to counterbalance Western

and regional rivals. Russia, embroiled in a relentless war with Ukraine, also faces high stakes decisions as its biggest Middle East naval base is at Tartus on Syria's Mediterranean coast. Both countries have economic interests in Syria, including reconstruction contracts and access to resources. The instability following Assad's fall jeopardizes these economic opportunities. The future of other Iranian-supported groups, such as the Houthis in Yemen and militias in Iraq, are now uncertain. These groups, along with Hamas in Gaza, formed what Iran called the Axis of Resistance. This has now been significantly impacted. Israel welcomes these changes as Iran is considered a threat.

The editorial rightly stated that, 'life for the ordinary citizens would only worsen and new trouble is in store for the world at large from fundamentalists there.' The fall of Assad's regime has created a complex and uncertain situ-

ation for Syria. Assad used strong-arm tactics against protests in 2011. This led to a civil war resulting in over half a million deaths with approximately six million people displaced. The rise of groups like the HTS and SNA brings both opportunities and challenges. While the end of Assad's rule could portend new beginnings, the presence of fundamentalist groups poses problems of stability and security. The humanitarian situation may worsen, with potential increase in displacement and economic hardships. The international community will need to navigate this new landscape carefully to support peace and reconstruction efforts.

Yours etc,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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"Trusting our intuition often saves us from disaster."

— Wilson Schaefer

The Shillong Times

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Tourism Overreach

SHILLONG witnessed an unprecedented number of tourists to witness the legendary Bryan Adams performance at the JN Stadium Polo Grounds. Hotels had run out of space so the question to ask is where were the audience that had flown in on the very day of the show parking themselves? Shillong has a limited number of hotels and homestays and no tourist would want to stay away from Shillong when the concert was to be held in the city. To ensure smooth passage of concert goers schools and colleges were closed for the day which is an extraordinary phenomenon that could only have happened in Meghalaya. No other state would have prioritised a concert over education. This happened because of Shillong's traffic situation and the pressure to keep the streets free from congestions caused by parents who pick up their wards and school buses which occupy a fair part of the road for parking. But the question that remains unanswered is why close down educational institutions that anyway don't last beyond 1 pm since examinations are ongoing. In fact many schools had scheduled December 10 for giving out the results but had to put that off by a day because of the exigencies posed by the Bryan Adams concert. Any state that has to make a choice between holding a concert on a particular day and closing the doors of educational institutions to ensure free passage to concert attendees on that day is condemned to being the laggard in educational attainments.

The other questions that arise are the carrying capacity of the ecosystem of Meghalaya. How many tourists is too much? Has any study been conducted by an independent agency to accurately determine the carrying capacity of Meghalaya or should we say East and West Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills where tourism is fairly developed? As yet there are not too many tourists visiting the Garo Hills. Even in Khasi Hills, it is East Khasi Hills mainly Sohra, Laitkynsew and Nongriat the home of the Double Decker living root bridge and Dawki which draw the largest number of tourists. Laitlum, Nongjrong and Kongthong follow suit. Not too many tourists visit Nongkhnum, the river island in West Khasi Hills. Those who do visit the place are day tourists from Assam who drive in via Rani, Patharkhmah, Mairang etc., and back.

How many footfalls can any destination take without reaching the breaking point of environmental resilience and also eating into the resources of the local residents such as drinking water availability and a clean surrounding. After all, beyond Shillong there is no waste management facility in place. No one is asking as to what happens to the garbage generated by all tourist destinations, hotels and homestays outside of Shillong at present. Should this not be a huge cause of concern? Another key concern vis a vis Meghalaya tourism is the short selling of destinations. Why should a visit to a living root bridge which showcases the traditional indigenous wisdom of the Khasi people in welding together the roots of the Ficus tree to weave a living bridge across rivers only cost Rs 50 per visitor? This is a ridiculously low pricing model and yet it continues and therefore very little benefits accrue to the communities. A State Tourism Policy on paper without any effective implementation mechanism is a washout.

Letters to the Editor

India's economic status

Editor,
Apropos of the editorial "Calm before the storm" (ST December 11 2024) the current economic situation in India is indeed complex. While the country has shown resilience and growth, there are concerns about slowing GDP growth, high inflation, and rising unemployment. The recent GDP growth rate of 5.4% for the July-September quarter is the lowest in nearly two years. Additionally, inflation remains a significant issue, with food prices contributing to the overall rise. Critics argue that the Modi government's economic policies have created a cycle of low growth, high unemployment, and rising prices. However, the government continues to emphasize its efforts to boost economic growth through infrastructure development, social welfare programs, and fiscal discipline. Whether this period is a calm before the storm or a phase of stabilization will depend on how effectively the government addresses these economic challenges and implements policies to sustain growth and improve the well-being of its citizens.

The economic downturn and persistent inflation in India have significantly impacted the financial behaviour of its population. According to the 2024 BankBazaar Aspiration Index report, there has been a sharp increase in the number of Indians relying on loans to cover basic needs and expenses. The report indicates that only 13.4% of respondents reported having no open credit, down from 19% in 2022. Rising living costs and stagnant incomes have forced more people to use credit for daily needs, from groceries to transport. The proportion of people borrowing for day-to-day expenses has increased, driven by stagnant incomes in an inflationary environment. This trend suggests that borrowing is up even for routine expenses, reflecting the financial strain on households. The inflation rate in India has also been a contributing factor, with the consumer price index (CPI) inflation rising to 6.21% in October 2024. This increase in inflation has further strained household budgets, leading to a greater reliance on loans.

It is true that a significant portion of Indian families rely on personal loans. According to a survey conducted by Saral Credit, 67% of respondents in India have taken a personal loan (As the editorial reflected) at some point in their lives to meet their financial require-

ments. This trend reflects the increasing importance of creditworthiness and the growing reliance on loans for various needs, including home purchases, renovations, and even travel. The increasing reliance on personal loans among Indian families, with 67% carrying the burden of such loans, has significant implications for financial well-being. A few key points to consider: High levels of personal debt can lead to financial stress, affecting mental health and overall quality of life. Families may struggle to meet their financial obligations, leading to anxiety and stress. Relying on loans for basic needs and expenses makes families more vulnerable to economic downturns and inflation. Any changes in interest rates or economic conditions can exacerbate their financial difficulties. High debt levels can reduce the ability to save for future needs, such as education, healthcare, and retirement. This can have long-term implications for financial security and stability. The trend of borrowing for day-to-day expenses reflects changes in consumer behaviour, where credit is increasingly used to maintain living standards. This shift can have broader economic implications, influencing spending patterns and economic growth. Overall, while personal loans can provide short-term relief,

the long-term impact on financial well-being needs careful consideration. It's essential for individuals and policymakers to address the underlying economic challenges and promote financial literacy to manage debt effectively.

The editorial is correct that there has been a significant shift in the composition of bank credit in India over the past decade. The share of loans to industries by banks has decreased from 42% a decade ago to just 22%. This decline is largely due to the increasing prominence of personal loans or retail credit, which has grown steadily and now constitutes a significant portion of total bank credit. The shift towards personal loans reflects changes in consumer behaviour and the banking sector's focus on retail lending. This trend has implications for the overall credit allocation in the economy and highlights the need for adjustments in regulatory and policy approaches to ensure sustained economic growth and financial stability.

The two terms of Prime Minister Narendra Modi have seen both financial stability and economic growth. During his tenure, India has experienced significant economic reforms, infrastructure development, and social welfare initiatives. Economic Growth: India's GDP per capita has

The phrase "You're re-fired," popularized by Elon Musk during his overhaul of companies like Twitter (now X), symbolizes the aggressive approach to workforce optimization in today's business world. While these strategies may lead to short-term cost savings, they often undermine long-term sustainability, innovation, and employee morale. In contrast, a more pragmatic strategy focusing on re-skilling, up-skilling, and strategic workforce planning has proven to be more effective in strengthening organizational resilience and stakeholder value. The experiences of Tata Steel in the 1990s and General Electric's (GE) challenges under Jack Welch highlight the significant differences between these approaches. Companies like Tata Group have shown that a human-centred approach to workforce management not only fosters loyalty but also enhances organizational resilience and trust. This was exemplified by the remarkable bravery of Tata employees during the 26/11 Mumbai terrorist attacks, demonstrating the strength of an employee-centric culture.

Elon Musk's proposal to reduce the U.S. federal budget by \$2 trillion during a potential second Trump presidency is ambitious yet laden with risks. While aimed at improving fiscal responsibility, such a move would inevitably lead to significant job cuts, particularly in public services, defence, healthcare, and other federally funded areas. The repercussions could weaken workforce efficiency, undermine corporate value, and destabilize the economy. Public-sector employment, accounting for approximately 15% of the U.S. workforce, would bear the brunt, with millions of jobs at risk. These layoffs would drive up unemployment, deepen economic inequality, and ripple into the private sector, which heavily relies on federal contracts. Industries such as defence, healthcare, and infrastructure would face severe disruptions.

For instance, healthcare programs like Medicaid and Medicare might see reduced funding, causing service disruptions and layoffs in hospitals and clinics. Similarly, defence contractors such as Boeing and Lockheed Martin, which employ thousands, could face revenue losses, leading to job cuts. Federal budget reductions would also jeopardize infrastructure projects funded by federal grants, adversely affecting construction and manufacturing industries. These cascading effects would harm productivity, weaken consumer spending—crucial to economic growth—and erode the nation's competitive edge in key global sectors.

Historical evidence reveals the pitfalls of such cost-cutting strategies. General Electric under Jack Welch initially gained from workforce reductions but later suffered declining market value as trust, innovation, and efficiency eroded. Similarly, mass layoffs after the 2008 financial crisis delayed economic recovery and

Proposed federal budget slash unlikely to enhance peoples' efficiency

By Prof. D. Mukherjee

diminished organizational capacities. Musk's drastic workforce cuts at Twitter (now X), which halved its staff, offer a contemporary parallel. The decision disrupted operations, reduced platform reliability, and diminished advertiser trust, illustrating the risks of prioritizing immediate savings over long-term stability.

A Brookings Institution study highlights the importance of federal spending in supporting regional economic stability, especially in low-income communities reliant on public-sector jobs. Drastic budget cuts would exacerbate economic insecurity, reduce access to essential services, and weaken the U.S.'s global leadership by limiting investments in education, healthcare, and technology—key drivers of innovation and competitiveness.

While reducing federal expenditure is a valid goal, Musk's proposal risks destabilizing the economy and undermining workforce efficiency. The evidence underscores the counterproductive nature of excessive cost-cutting. A more balanced approach focusing on strategic investments in human capital, innovation, and infrastructure is essential for achieving fiscal sustainability without jeopardizing economic stability and national strength. Policymakers must prioritize sustainable growth over short-term savings to maintain workforce efficiency and long-term productivity.

In the 1990s, Tata Steel faced the challenge of reducing its 78,000-strong workforce by nearly half to stay competitive amid economic liberalization and global competition. Instead of opting for mass layoffs, the company embraced a forward-thinking approach emphasizing voluntary retirement schemes (VRS), re-skilling, and re-employment. Through VRS, Tata Steel provided financial security and acknowledged employees' contributions. Simultaneously, it invested in extensive training programs to equip its workforce with new skills, enabling smooth transitions into alternative roles. This approach preserved employee morale, upheld the company's employee-centric reputation, and avoided the stigma associated with large-scale layoffs. The result was a streamlined, efficient workforce that propelled Tata Steel to global competitiveness, demonstrating that humane workforce strategies can coexist with operational excellence. The Tata Group's commitment to employee welfare is deeply ingrained in its ethos, fostering unmatched loyalty and dedication. This culture was vividly displayed during the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks at the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, owned by Tata. In the face of grave danger, employees showed remarkable bravery, with 11 sacrificing their lives to protect guests. This extraordinary commitment stemmed from the Tata Group's long-standing investment in employee well-being, including fair wages, job

security, and robust training. Following the tragedy, Tata extended comprehensive support to the families of deceased employees, underscoring its unwavering dedication.

These incidents highlight the critical role of employee loyalty in organizational resilience. Such loyalty is not forced but cultivated through respect, empowerment, and investment in employees. Tata Steel's restructuring in the 1990s serves as a model for balancing workforce reduction with dignity and care. The company avoided reputational damage and maintained morale, proving that workforce efficiency can be achieved without sacrificing employee trust.

By contrast, General Electric (GE) under Jack Welch adopted aggressive workforce reductions to boost profits. While effective initially, this strategy eroded trust, stifled innovation, and led to a dramatic decline in market value—over 70% by 2020—offering a cautionary tale against excessive cost-cutting. Similarly, Musk's workforce reductions at Twitter weakened operational stability, lowered platform reliability, and strained stakeholder trust, illustrating the pitfalls of prioritizing short-term gains.

In today's rapidly evolving technological landscape, re-skilling and up-skilling have become essential. Companies like IBM, Accenture, Microsoft, and Amazon have invested billions in training employees for future-ready roles in artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and data analytics. According to the World Economic Forum, 50% of employees will require re-skilling by 2025. These efforts not only enhance operational efficiency but also reduce costs linked to turnover and poor performance. A 2022 Deloitte survey revealed that companies prioritizing workforce development achieve a 33% higher retention rate and 29% greater customer satisfaction. Tata's human-centric policies exemplify the societal and economic value of respecting workers. Conversely, layoffs driven by short-term savings, as seen in Musk-style strategies, risk undermining labour markets, eroding consumer trust, and weakening economic stability. By prioritizing employee development and fostering loyalty, organizations can build resilience, innovation, and long-term prosperity. The lesson is clear: sustainable growth stems from valuing employees as assets, not liabilities.

Indian corporations play a critical role in shaping the nation's economic and social framework. Ensuring long-term sustainability requires a human-centric approach to workforce management, focusing on re-skilling, up-skilling, and employee welfare. Drawing from the Tata Group's resilience and global practices, companies can effectively balance profitability with ethical responsibilities.

Technological advancements demand a workforce

equipped for future challenges. Programs like TCS's Digital Learning Hubs and Infosys' Lex Platform exemplify how targeted skill enhancement initiatives can address automation and digitization gaps. Companies should allocate a fixed percentage of revenue to employee development and collaborate with educational institutions, fostering productivity and competitiveness in global markets.

Inspired by Tata's humane approach during crises like the 26/11 attacks and Tata Steel's restructuring, Indian firms should prioritize employee dignity through fair pay, mental health support, and career growth. Establishing employee support committees and offering benefits like flexible hours, healthcare, and financial planning can transform ordinary employees into a loyal, motivated workforce. In workforce restructuring, gradual optimization via Voluntary Retirement Schemes (VRS) and phased reductions ensures financial stability and operational continuity, minimizing reputational risks.

Corporates must integrate sustainability into business strategies by aligning with global Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards. Publishing annual reports on workforce investments and community impact enhances investor confidence and global alignment. Leadership is vital to this transformation. Transparent communication, empathy, and long-term planning through town halls, feedback sessions, and leadership training can unify employees and align them with organizational goals, fostering innovation and resilience.

The notion of "You're re-fired" may appeal to some as decisive leadership, but it overlooks the intricacies of modern workforce management. Tata Steel's compassionate approach and GE's pitfalls highlight that true efficiency stems from investing in employees, not dismissing them. Re-skilling and up-skilling are practical strategies for addressing 21st-century challenges, fostering innovation, and driving sustainable success. Indian corporations can secure long-term viability by treating employees as valuable assets rather than expendable costs. Through investments in skill development, loyalty-building policies, and thoughtful restructuring, companies can ensure operational efficiency and resilience. Tata Group's success during crises and restructuring underscores the power of humane strategies, while GE's decline warns against short-term cost-cutting. By embracing employee-centric practices, Indian businesses can emerge as global leaders in ethical, sustainable operations, contributing to economic growth and societal advancement. This approach safeguards corporate longevity and reinforces India's position in the global economy.

(The Author is an Educationist, a Management Scientist and an Independent Researcher)

for concern is the slowdown in consumption, particularly in urban areas. High prices of goods and stagnant wages and salaries have led to decline in urban consumption, which has been a major contributor to growth for years.

An economic slowdown in the developed world, coupled with the crisis in the Red Sea has impacted India's merchandise exports due to the Iran-backed Houthi rebels disrupting trade. India exported petroleum products worth \$31.8 billion (Rs 2.7 lakh crore) in April-August this year, down from \$35.3 billion (Rs 3 lakh crore) in the same period last year. Economist Ashima Goyal, a former member of the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee argued that there is indeed room for the central bank to cut interest rates to boost growth. This now depends on the new governor of the RBI, Sanjay Malhotra, whose views on growth, inflation and the rupee are not known to us.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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Straight from the Heart: The Bryan Adams Shillong Sojourn

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

Amidst the public discord over the closure of schools on the day Bryan Adams performed live in Shillong, the concert at JN Sports Complex, Polo, went exceptionally well, with a thunderous crowd cheering the world renowned artist. However, on the economic side of it, I would concur with James Perry, the Mawlai born Canadian and successful local entrepreneur, where he posted on social media recently, "The whole concept of all these international musicians coming to Shillong and boosting tourism is, to me, the wrong approach. Musicians and festivals are great but in the end they bring business for 1,2 maybe 3 days. Tourism needs consistent sustainable flow. Most of those coming for the big shows, likely have blown their budget on the tickets...no more budget to go to spend in rural areas. Concerts and festivals should be there but not sponsored by the Tourism Department, they should be self-sustaining. If a traveler's time coincides, then it is lucky for them".

Public Event versus Public Safety:

Let me begin by stating that the upgraded JN Sports Stadium at Polo, which today can hold up to thirty thousand (30,000) audiences is not inclusive. It totally excludes people with disabilities, the elderly and is not conducive for certain people with a slightly weakened physical condition. "According to conservative estimates, the concert held on December 10, 2024, had between 15,000 and 20,000 attendees.

Although the designated gates were assigned for different categories of ticket holders, the experience I had while entering through the gate into the ground and from the ground after the show was over, compelled me to raise a pertinent question of public safety. This poses the greatest risk to the public at large who attended the event. The entry and exit points are so narrow that the attendees had a harrowing time getting through them, besides being time consuming. On the evening of Bryan Adams' concert and while navigating through the narrow lane and steps towards the ground, one thing that struck me and which was scary was what if (God forbid) a natural disaster like an earthquake occurred or a major fight broke out. The stampede of people would be disastrous and casualties would have been of humongous proportions.

As someone who frequents the JN Indoor Sports Complex at Polo, for sports and leisure activities, I am familiar with the surroundings of the venue like the back of my hand. There is ongoing major construction surrounding the stadium. The new construction as well the expansion of the galleries to increase the seating capacity to nearly thirty thousand spectators had hampered the movements of attendees to the concert and cut down the spaces which were previously huge and ample.

There was only one designated major entry and exit point from the main gate opposite the Short Round Road. However, a few individuals who were aware of the back gate, which led towards the Fourth Furlong-Demseiniang Road, took this route after the show. Conversely, those who parked their cars in the SRGT parking, Lawmali, Pynthorbah, Bivar Road, and Oakland faced another challenge, as they had to walk another kilometre or two along the banks of the River Umkhrah to reach their respective parking places. The closure of the back gate to the public has raised concerns, especially considering its significance as a crucial entry and exit point. This gate provides easy access to various roadways, particularly the 'Lawdum-Bomfyled Road, where people can conveniently park their vehicles or walk down and up the hill

from Laitumkhrah. The closure has limited options for concert attendees who rely on this route for its accessibility and convenience.

Several factors might have contributed to the decision to close the back gate. These could include security issues or ongoing construction that requires the area to be restricted for public access. However, it is essential for the relevant authorities to communicate these reasons transparently as well as to explore alternative solutions that could mitigate inconvenience. The security personnel both from the state police, the assets protection groups and bouncers were well mannered and well behaved. They must be given credit. However, both outside and inside the ground the management was not impressive as there was a huge crowd at the gate (s) that caused great inconvenience. Then there was a long break of nearly forty five minutes before Bryan Adams hit the stage @ 8 pm smacks of unprofessionalism on the part of organizers.

The safety and security of the people in any public event is of utmost importance. Although, the upgradation and improvisation of the JN Sports Stadium at Polo, is welcoming, but the concerned authorities must revisit and conduct a special audit before allowing holding of any event which attracts huge crowds, including football/athletic matches or religious gatherings. The JN Sports Stadium at Polo, (even after completion) does not seem to be feasible any longer for hosting any event with more than five thousand attendees.

A new era of concert culture

No doubt, the high point of the Bryan Adams concert is the emergence of the new era of concert culture. To be fair, Shillong's concert-going landscape has evolved and transformed dramatically where an atmosphere of mutual respect reigned supreme. Attended by a balanced mix of teetotalers and casual drinkers, the event showcased how music can unite people beyond the influence of alcohol.

While vendors offered an array of beverage from waters to a selection of beers and whiskey, the prevalent culture was one of moderation. Long gone are the days when rock concerts were marred by unruly behaviour; this gathering was a testament to the evolving concert culture where enjoyment does not equate to excess.

Unlike past events characterized by raucous fist-fights and intoxicated disputes, the audience at the concert seemed to embrace a shared sense of responsibility. People were there for the love of music, not the thrill of chaos. The once-frequent incidents of rowdiness and public confrontations have diminished (not completely), reflecting a broader societal shift towards a more disciplined enjoyment of live performances.

As safety and enjoyment become intertwined, the music scene can focus on fostering a space where fans can connect with each other and the artists, allowing the sound of guitars and heartfelt lyrics to take centre stage. In this new era of concert culture, the emphasis is on appreciation for the artistry and the collective experience, proving that it's possible to have a memorable night to remember without becoming embroiled in negativity. One cannot deny the fact that Shillong music buffs are amazing. They sang along every line of every song rendered by the artist.

Let me conclude this piece with RS Lyngdoh's lines: "U (Khasi) u don ruh ka jingsngewthuh kaba pura ba ka jingim bun kam khlem ka rongbiria ka pynlyngkot ia ka rta..." (The Khasi people inherently understood that amidst the hustle and bustle of their busy lives, without leisure, music, and art, life is shortened).

"Healing yourself is connected with healing others."

— Yoko Ono

The Shillong Times

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Roads as death-traps

ROAD accidents in the country are steadily on the increase; and so are the casualty rates. Note also the sharp increase in the number of vehicles. The issue requires to be tackled at the government level with a sense of urgency. In all fairness, Minister for Surface Transport, Nitin Gadkari is concerned over the painful scenario and has acknowledged this in Parliament. But this alone will not make a difference. The need of the hour is action on the ground on two main fronts. One, ensuring road discipline on the part of motorists; two, and more importantly, constant vigil on the part of the roads authorities to keep analysing the cause and context of accidents so as to take remedial action if there existed any structural flaws in the road construction.

Gadkari has admitted that there was a 50 per cent increase in road accidents during his terms as roads minister, though his initial promise to the nation was to "reduce" the number. As per the statistics he provided to Parliament, road mishaps claimed 1.78 lakh lives annually; and 60 per cent of the victims were youths in the age-group of 18 and 34. Youths tend to ride/drive with high speed and often in a rash manner. Delhi, with 1,400 deaths a year, itself presents the worst scenario among cities, but Uttar Pradesh tops the states with over 23,000 deaths. Setting up instruments to check the speed of vehicles on the road, including use of cameras, can be a guarantee against over-speeding. These should be in working condition day and night; and fines should be heavy. In both these, state governments are slack. While national highways are managed by the central government, as many mishaps take place on state highways as also city roads. The authorities must be insisting on the wearing of helmets by bike-riders, but they rather look the other way. These raise the fatality levels.

One of the main reasons for road mishaps is wrong parking of trucks and other vehicles, mainly during night time when visibility is low. Unscientific laying of roads with no space for parking at most stretches, lack of proper placement of road signs, abrupt curves and turns etc are also major reasons for road mishaps. Roads are a sector that are infested by corrupt practices. Many officials are more interested in making extra-income and compromise with rules. They play into the hands of contractors. State-level road projects hardly use half of the funds meant for road construction, while the other half is shared between rackets of engineers, local politicians, officials and contractors. The long years of the Modi governance from Delhi saw massive fund inputs for development of national highways hectoring by Gadkari. Huge fund mismanagement was also evident, as was recorded by the CAG in a report.

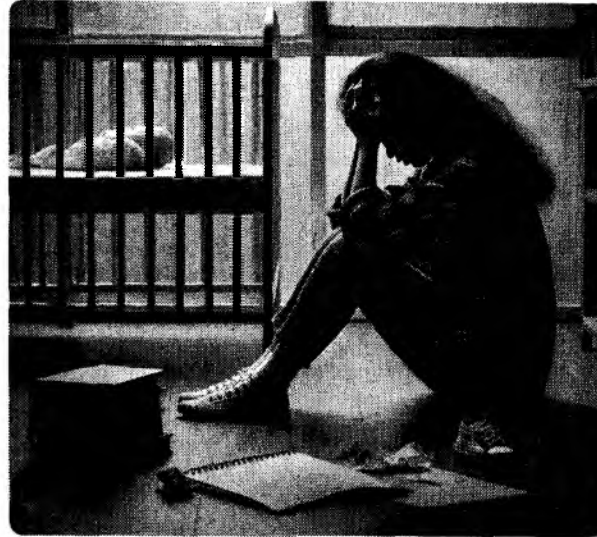
Teenage pregnancy: Trauma of a child turned mother

By Patricia Mukhim

The teenage years known as adolescence are the best years of life. They are years when one is aware of one's sexuality, sexual desires and the first flush of romantic love. Unfortunately these are also years when teenagers mistake infatuation for love. Research suggests that the average duration of adolescent romantic relationships increases throughout the teen years. By age 16 youth report that relationships typically last for six months, and by 18, relationships often last a year or more. But this again is subjective. In Khasi society we are familiar with the term 'ialang samla' meaning that a girl and a boy are dating or seeing each other. The fatal flaw is that among Khasis (there is no data yet on this) there is a tendency for the two to become close and have sex after which the girl gets pregnant. That sexual encounter happened in a fit of emotional outflow of passion which young people call 'love.' The girl often tends to believe that having sex will cement the relationship but that does not usually happen. And woe behold if the sexual encounter leads to pregnancy. The boy, himself a teenager, is in no position to take on the responsibility of fatherhood. Even if he is deeply in love with the girl, the very idea of settling down is daunting, especially if he is in high school or college. So what happens? The girl and her family members are left holding the baby.

This is a society where sex is not openly discussed as if it is a sinful thing. Hence teenagers go through that period of stress and storm without understanding the consequences of unprotected sex. Now when we talk of protected sex it means among other things that the boy uses a condom before the sexual act. If the boy refuses to do so and the girl who is so in love with him is ready to compromise, then she has to use the "Morning After" pill which is an emergency contraceptive pill to avoid pregnancy. If the two are in a long term relationship and the girl has to have these contraceptive pills over a long period, medical science says there could be complications. Any which way we look at it, it is the girl who always has to pay the price for casual sex. Usually, if a teenage girl gets pregnant she and her partner are too scared of approaching a doctor for advice and to get an abortion done in case the two are not ready for motherhood and fatherhood. I am sure that genteel society will frown at

this suggestion of abortion but will those same people come forward and help to look after the child who will be born to the girl-mother? And I am addressing especially church elders here who ferociously preach that abortion is 'sin' but who will not lift a finger to help bring up a child born to a teenage girl whose parents are destitute and are barely able to support themselves. The same set of preachers will also not consider educating that child so that it does not fall into a cyclic trap and repeat what its parents have done when faced with a similar situation.



We live in a society where open conversation between children and parents is all but absent. There is a studied silence around sex hence adolescents learn about sex from their peers or their mobile phones where pornography is rife. If the adolescents stop short of experimenting with sex and only watch pornography that may be fine but which adolescent today will refrain from having sex. If we think this is absurd we are living in cloud cuckoo land. As parents and elders we need to get real and to be prepared to accept that our adolescents are experimenting with sex and the safest thing to do is to discuss sex at home in an open atmosphere and point out the consequences of unprotected sex, especially for the girl who must always pay the price of sexual indiscretion.

Studies have shown that the level of closeness and support adolescents have experienced with their parents and siblings influences the quality of their romantic relationships. If communication between parents and children is positive and supportive in early adolescence the youth are more likely to interact positively with romantic part-

ners in late adolescence. But such conversations cannot be expected in rural households where the sex organs are all "bad" words. It's easy to use the word 'vagina' when we are conversing in English but that's a swear word in Khasi. This is the problematic part about sex education in Khasi. I have said this in the past and will reiterate that we need to come up with words for sex organs and popularise them so they are no longer taboo.

In Meghalaya it's almost a cyclic order that a teenager drops out of school for any number of reasons and before

long she is in a romantic relationship, has sex and becomes pregnant. The man/boy who impregnated her is unsure if he wants to settle down and become a father. In the first place he has no job and is still dependent on his parents. This is the point of conflict. The boy takes the easy way out and leaves the girl to bear the burden alone. Now did the girl here know of protected sex? Did she know of contraceptive pills? If she is from a village it is certain she would be ignorant about both but also would be too naïve to suggest that the boy wear a condom during the sexual act. And about the morning after pill - she might have been brought up in a culture that says, "every child comes from God," hence having a morning after pill would mean preventing pregnancy and therefore a sin.

This is Meghalaya's dilemma where teenage pregnancy has raised the total fertility rate (TFR) and hence its population. That the TFR is high particularly in rural Meghalaya where women still give birth to 10 or more children is not surprising because in the city and among educated couples the birth rate has come down.

Those who abhor secularism must learn that secularism and development are synonymous. Its no surprise therefore that this year's Nobel laureates in economics - Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson - have demonstrated that societies with a poor rule of law and institutions that exploit the population do not generate growth or change for the better.

Some people ridicule secular ideals as "sickular" and humanitarian approaches as utopian. They regard machismo and majoritarianism as panacea. But history teaches us that exactly the very opposite of this is true. Hatred only spelt disaster everywhere. On the other hand, the road to tolerance, harmony, and fraternity took countries to prosperity.

It is not just enough to appreciate or criticise the policies of other countries. We need to imbibe good things in other countries and avoid falling into the traps of some countries' suicidal actions.

It was because of the liberal attitude of the Britons that made it possible to elect a Hindu as their Prime Minister in their previous government. Hindu and Muslim ministers are there in

the present UK cabinet also. This liberal attitude is one of the main reasons behind their scoring high in the human development indices and getting the 15th rank.

This should encourage us to rectify our fault lines. For the first time in India, a Union Cabinet has been formed without a single Muslim minister in it, even though India has the third largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia and Pakistan. The second fault line lies in the human development index rank of 134, which indicates that India must improve two most important sectors, namely education and health.

While we must condemn the attacks on minorities in Bangladesh, we also need to clean our own backyard. There should be zero tolerance towards hate speeches against minorities, vilification, and lynching of poor workers who belong to minority communities.

Hitler showed the world the danger of pursuing an idea of hatred by killing and persecuting the Jews. Hitler left Germany in tatters. Now, we must embrace the idea of harmony with zero hatred against minorities so that the bad chapter of history may not repeat here and damage our country's unity and progress.

Look for the Lowly Manger. Today, being the Christmas month, I'd like to write on two manger topics. Jenny smirked bitterly as she saw boys and girls all over town making cribs to put a small baby doll, they called Jesus, into it. "What good can that baby do?" she thought bitterly. "It's time we stopped these silly traditions!"

It was a chilly evening in the city. It had suddenly rained, and the slight drizzle gently fell onto the bustling streets, casting a gloom over the crowd. Jenny had been struggling with feelings of emptiness and purposelessness for months. Despite her outward success and popularity as a comedian, she felt lost and alone. As she walked in the drizzle, Jenny stumbled upon a small, quaint church tucked away in a quiet alley. The warm glow of the candles and the soft carols drifting from within beckoned her to enter.

Inside, Jenny found a peaceful sanctuary. The priest, a kind-eyed man with a warm smile, greeted her and invited her to join the service. Since it was raining outside, and the church appeared a good place for shelter, she

decided to stay. As Jenny listened to the story of Jesus' birth, she felt a strange sense of connection. The words of the priest spoke directly to her heart, echoing her deepest longings and fears. The priest spoke of the darkness that had descended upon humanity, of the sin and shame that had separated us from God.

"Then the baby in the cradle grew up!" said the priest, "His light pierced the darkness, and gave us the gift of salvation that has been offered to all humanity through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of that baby who we all know as Jesus."

As Jenny listened, she felt the weight of her despair slowly lifting. She realized that she had been trying to fill the void in her heart with fleeting pleasures and accomplishments, but that true fulfillment could only be found in a relationship with the same grown-up baby.

The priest's words painted a vivid picture of the love and redemption that God had offered to humanity. Jenny felt her heart stirring, responding to the call of the Gospel. As the service came to a close, she felt a sense of peace and hope that she had not felt in years.

She approached the priest, tears streaming down her face, and asked him to pray with her. As they prayed, Jenny felt the presence of God enveloping her, filling her with a sense of love, forgiveness, and redemption.

At that moment, Jenny received the gift of salvation, and her life was forever changed. The darkness that had once consumed her was replaced by the light of God's love, and she knew that she would never be alone again. As she went out, she smiled at the boys and girls making mangers and cribs for the baby!

Jenny's experience was simple yet profound, but there's another thought around the crib and manger I'd like to mention: As we approach Christmas, most carols, hymns or readings speak about Jesus being born in a manger, right?

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

But where is that manger in Bethlehem?

Sadly, no lone manger exists by itself there, because a huge basilica has been built at the very place where the greatest message of humility was expounded to the world, that God did not need to be born in a palace, or a huge building, but the King of Kings showed that the trappings of glitter and dazzle was totally foreign to Him.

In everything Jesus did, from the picking of ordinary fishermen as disciples, to being born to a humble carpenter, in washing the feet of disciples, being put to death like a criminal, all beginning with His birth in a manger, Jesus was telling the world something...

Something we have lost as we started building huge cathedrals, lofty steeples, spires built to impress the uneducated poor of those days; that this God was so big, He needed huge columns and impressive ceilings. And the bigger the better. Those cathedrals, palaces, and intimidating buildings were meant to scare people into awe and terrify them into submission.

And thus, the whole message of Jesus' humble birth was lost.

It's not the fright of God's mighty power that needs to

make you His follower, but it's the simple use of His power within us that should make us run to Him, like the shepherds did, and the wisemen too. Through that humble birth, man realises God's availability, God's keenness to be approached, and God's total willingness to be harassed.

As I see political leaders moving around in monstrous cars, wearing extravagantly expensive clothes, there's one thing that comes to my mind; they feel so insecure in themselves that they need to have such gigantic, external props to lean on.

In fact, the bigger the size of the chair they sit on, the bigger the Audi or Mercedes, and larger their mansion, reveal in ratio, how large their insecurity is!

Our Jesus was born in a humble, dirty, smelly manger, but not for an instance was His greatness, or His power lessened. In fact, those who dwell in palaces were afraid of His birth and His life. King Herod was so afraid of the 'manger baby' that, cowardly that he was, he ordered all children born below a particular age to be killed. The high priests and Pharisees were equally frightened and saw to it that an innocent Man was crucified.

Today, though it is still the beginning of the Christmas month, do realise that someone born in a filthy stable has a following of one third of the world, or two billion people calling themselves Christians!

From today, in our making of friends, selecting leaders, and even voting, let us look for the manger in people and reject outright pomp, showing off and pagantry.

Let's begin this month like Jenny did, from a lowly crib in a manger in Bethlehem..!

The Author conducts an online, eight session Writers and Speakers Course. If you'd like to join, do send a thumbs-up to WhatsApp number 9892572883 or send a message to bobsbanter@gmail.com

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

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Letters to the Editor

Revision of MPSC's ACF prelims exam pattern

Editor,
Through your esteemed newspaper, we strongly appeal to the MPSC to urgently revise the screening test pattern for the Assistant Conservator of Forest (Meghalaya Forest Service). The current Preliminary Examination structure, which allocates 50% weightage to Maths (Arithmetic, Quantitative Aptitude) is deeply flawed and unfit for a post which focuses on forest management, conservation, and environmental stewardship. This pattern disproportionately favours candidates with Mathematics, Statistics, or Engineering backgrounds making it inherently biased and unfair to candidates from other science and non-mathematical disciplines.

The current pattern for the Meghalaya Forest Service Preliminary exam is: English - 100, GK and Aptitude - 100, Arithmetic - 100. This clearly tilts the balance. While candidates with a mathematical background can clear the screening test effortlessly, others feel abandoned and helpless, grappling to compete on unequal footing. This not only limits diversity in the recruitment process but also sidelines candidates who may possess superior knowledge and passion for forestry and environmental conservation.

What is particularly dis-

heartening is that MPSC has deviated drastically from the UPSC Preliminary pattern. While UPSC assigns Aptitude as a qualifying paper with only 33% as the benchmark, MPSC gives it undue weightage alongside an additional paper solely dedicated to Arithmetic. The dissimilarity in Preliminary exam patterns makes it exceedingly difficult for Meghalaya students to simultaneously prepare for state and national-level exams. This lack of alignment not only wastes their time and energy but also discourages genuine environmental enthusiasts from competing. For over a decade, Meghalaya has failed to produce an Indian Forest Service officer.

With a very limited number of posts (only five), the competition becomes even more skewed. Mathematics-heavy exam patterns give candidates with a mathematical background an undue advantage, practically securing half the marks needed with minimal effort.

We urge the authorities to adopt a more balanced and inclusive examination pattern, reducing the weightage of Mathematics. This change will not only provide a fair and balanced playing field but also encourage Meghalaya students to compete at both state and national levels without unnecessary and irrelevant obstacles.

We hope that this appeal reaches the concerned authorities and sparks a meaningful change that benefits the youth of Meghalaya and enhances the quality of recruitment for forest ser-

vices.
Yours etc.,
Daman Dkhar,
Shillong

Hindu avatars not myths

Editor,
As I read through the various articles and opinions on Hindu mythology, I can't help but feel that the concept of avatars is often misunderstood and misrepresented. The stories of Rama, Krishna, and Buddha are frequently dismissed as mere myths, devoid of any historical significance.

However, I strongly believe that the avatars of Hinduism hold a wealth of historical significance, offering insights into the cultural, social, and spiritual evolution of ancient India. The concept of avatars emerged in ancient India during the Vedic period, and the Vedas contain references to various gods and goddesses who took on human or animal forms to interact with humans.

Archaeological excavations at Ayodhya and Dwarka have uncovered evidence of ancient cities dating back to the 7th century BCE and 2nd century BCE, respectively. The edicts of Ashoka, dating back to the 3rd century BCE, provide historical evidence of the Buddha's existence.

It's time to reexamine our understanding of Hindu avatars and recognize their historical significance. By separating the historical facts from the mythological embellishments, we can gain a deeper understanding of

these figures and their role in shaping the cultural and spiritual heritage of India.

Yours etc.,
Sudarshan Dasgupta,
Via email

Secularism an imperative

Editor,
There is a line in the song, "The sound of silence", "And in the naked light, I saw/ Ten thousand people, maybe more/ People talking without speaking/ People hearing without listening". The practice of "hearing without listening" has unfortunately been followed by many people when it comes to understanding the importance of secularism. They question whether secularism is at all practical and wise for a country's development and progress, even though every chapter of a history book shows that it is secularism that ensures a country's all round development.

The Bangladesh economy witnessed the fastest growth among South Asian countries when attacks on minorities had firmly been dealt with by the Hasina administration. Bangladesh went past India's position in the global hunger index (105) and secured 84th place. It achieved 129th place ahead of India's 134th in the human development index.

After Sheikh Hasina's ouster on August 5, there were attacks on religious minorities in Bangladesh. What is the result? Its economy is now in bad shape. The managing director of a leading

Can AI understand human emotions?

Can an artificial intelligence (AI) tell whether you're happy, sad, angry or frustrated? According to technology companies that offer AI-enabled emotion recognition software, the answer to this question is yes.

But this claim does not stack up against mounting scientific evidence.

What's more, emotion recognition technology poses a range of legal and societal risks - especially when deployed in the workplace.

For these reasons, the European Union's AI Act, which came into force in August, bans AI systems used to infer emotions of a person in the workplace - except for "medical" or "safety" reasons.

In Australia, however, there is not yet specific regulation of these systems. As I argued in my submission to the Australian government in its most recent round of consultations about high-risk AI systems, this urgently needs to change.

A NEW AND GROWING WAVE

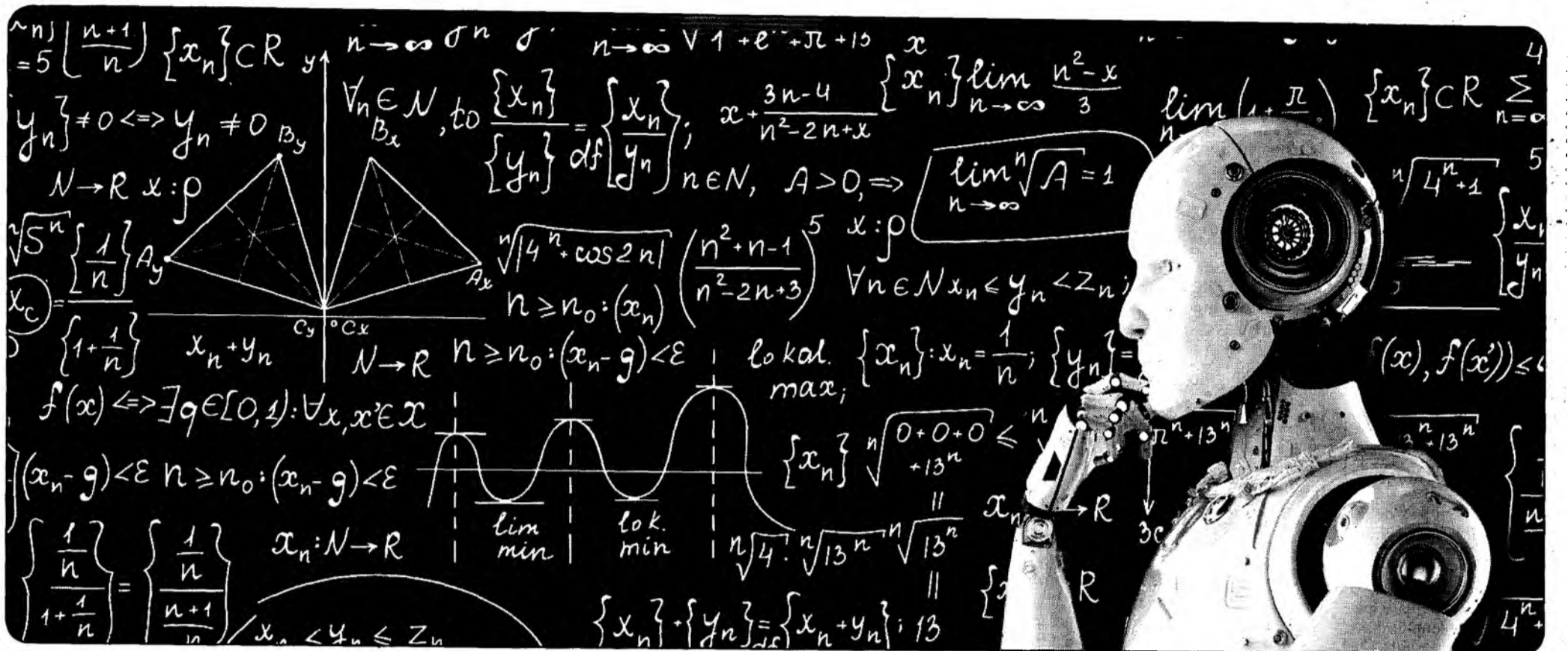
The global market for AI-based emotion recognition systems is growing. It was valued at US\$34 billion in 2022 and is expected to reach US\$62 billion by 2027.

These technologies work by making predictions about a person's emotional state from biometric data, such as their heart rate, skin moisture, voice tone, gestures or facial expressions.

Next year, Australian tech startup inTruth Technologies plans to launch a wrist-worn device that it claims can track a wearer's emotions in real time via their heart rate and other physiological metrics.

inTruth Technologies founder Nicole Gibson has said this technology can be used by employers to monitor a team's "performance and energy" or their mental health to predict issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder.

She has also said inTruth can be an "AI emotion coach that knows everything about you, including what you're feeling and



why you're feeling it".

Emotion recognition technologies in Australian workplaces. There is little data about the deployment of emotion recognition technologies in Australian workplaces.

However, we do know some Australian companies used a video interviewing system offered by a US-based company called HireVue that incorporated face-based emotion analysis.

This system used facial movements and expressions to assess the suitability of job applicants. For example, applicants were assessed on whether they expressed excitement or how they responded to an angry customer.

HireVue removed emotion analysis from its systems in 2021 following a formal complaint in the United States.

Emotion recognition may be on the rise again as Australian employers embrace artificial intelligence-driven workplace

surveillance technologies.

LACK OF SCIENTIFIC VALIDITY

Companies such as inTruth claim emotion recognition systems are objective and rooted in scientific methods.

However, scholars have raised concerns that these systems involve a return to the discredited fields of phrenology and physiognomy. That is, the use of a person's physical or behavioural characteristics to determine their abilities and character.

Emotion recognition technologies are heavily reliant on theories which claim inner emotions are measurable and universally expressed.

However, recent evidence shows that how people communicate emotions varies widely across cultures, contexts and individuals.

In 2019, for example, a group of experts concluded there are

"no objective measures, either singly or as a pattern, that reliably, uniquely, and replicably" identify emotional categories. For example, someone's skin moisture might go up, down or stay the same when they are angry.

In a statement to The Conversation, inTruth Technologies founder Nicole Gibson said "it is true that emotion recognition technologies faced significant challenges in the past", but that "the landscape has changed significantly in recent years".

INFRINGEMENT OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

Emotion recognition technologies also endanger fundamental rights without proper justification.

They have been found to discriminate on the basis of race, gender and disability.

In one case, an emotion recognition system read black faces

as angrier than white faces, even when both were smiling to the same degree.

These technologies may also be less accurate for people from demographic groups not represented in the training data.

Gibson acknowledged concerns about bias in emotion recognition technologies. But she added that "bias is not inherent to the technology itself but rather to the data sets used to train these systems". She said inTruth is "committed to addressing these biases" by using "diverse, inclusive data sets".

As a surveillance tool, emotion recognition systems in the workplace pose serious threats to privacy rights. Such rights may be violated if sensitive information is collected without an employee's knowledge.

There will also be a failure to respect privacy rights if the collection of such data is not "reasonably necessary" or by "fair means".

WORKERS' VIEWS

A survey published earlier this year found that only 12.9% of Australian adults support face-based emotion recognition technologies in the workplace. The researchers concluded that respondents viewed facial analysis as invasive. Respondents also viewed the technology as unethical and highly prone to error and bias.

In a US study also published this year, workers expressed concern that emotion recognition systems would harm their wellbeing and impact work performance.

They were fearful that inaccuracies could create false impressions about them. In turn, these false impressions might prevent promotions and pay rises or even lead to dismissal.

As one participant stated: "I just cannot see how this could actually be anything but destructive to minorities in the workplace." (*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambani

Sunday, DECEMBER 15, 2024

'Birthdate Forecast'

Full Moon on your solar return chart will enhance and optimize your creativity and imagination. This will give a potent surge to your career. Also, as imagination would be an asset this year remember to stay within the realms of pragmatism. Your abilities come in for recognition and your status will also improve. Moreover, relationships will be a big theme this year. There could be the end of one and start to another relationship or a romance. Emotions and feelings would come to the fore so be aware of this. Take care of your health as there could be some emotional stress at times.

'This week for joy'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) This phase brings joy, understanding and harmony in personal and professional relations. You gain money and influence through business ventures and partnerships. You dominate the professional scene as you bring together divergent forces. You would express yourself with charm and grace in professional life. Quality time is spent at home bringing balance and perspective into your life. You have more energy for work and your daily routines tend to speed up now. Perhaps you have a larger workload than usual. You feel full of energy and indulge in sports, physical activities and a structured exercise routine.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You are patient, laborious and clever with material aspects and manage finances and business ventures with ingenuity. This phase heralds cordial relations with extended family and friends. Cooperation and focus on harmony and understanding benefit you professionally and enhance your reputation in public relations. You need to curb comparisons and rivalry as it adds to stress. Personal relationships cannot be resolved through discussion and analysis but through love, acceptance and freedom. Changes in personal relationships and attitudes happen by themselves, with natural ease, rather than by your pursuing. You would regroup your energy and thoughts and focus on the basics, which brings achievement.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This is a phase when you are more responsible, hard working, dutiful, and serious. This enhances the ability to achieve desired goals. You would take up tasks that involve cooperation and team harmony. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation and teamwork. You would have positive feelings towards religion and related aspects. You are socially active, although you display a seriousness and self-discipline. You extend hospitality to family and friends as you entertain and organize meetings and get-togethers.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This is an excellent period under which you bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships with loved ones as suffering and negativity will be eliminated once you make a significant change in a personal relationship. You would expand your social circle and make more contact with groups and friends. It is advisable to be prudent in professional and work-related matters. Avoid hasty and rash decisions when it comes to change. Give the matter due thought and consider the entire matter with care. There will be a fluctuation in energy levels before a balance is achieved. Health will take a turn for the betterment.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) This phase brings confidence, pleasure and involvement in personal and professional relations. There are deadlines to be met and presentations to be made. Your confidence and eloquence stand you in good stead as you take centre stage. Networking could help to boost your career. The support you receive from colleagues will help you gather and process more information. You enjoy doing jobs and tasks with your partner; however mundane they may be. You turn your attention on fitness and balanced diet programs, as these efforts would bring positive results.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) You are more focused and hard working which reflects in the results that you achieve. On the financial front, progress would be steady. This enhances self-confidence and enables you to take well thought out risks. You are likely to get business and work opportunities from hitherto unknown

sources. The ability to express and communicate your ideas is extremely important to you. For you home is where the heart is as you do the extra bit and our close ones see you in a most positive way. You may be tempted to spend extra money on things that will make your life more comfortable and pleasant and represent a sense of security.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) The planetary configuration brings good financial returns as you communicate well specially with team members and other co-workers. This is an excellent time where you bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your peer relationships. You would spend time with your beloved and enjoy the feeling of togetherness. You would spend on clothes, furniture, and entertainment. Domestic relationships and the home environment would be harmonious and peaceful. You may have a desire to re-decorate your home would buy expensive household items. There may be minor health ailment as you need to give more attention to your health.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) You would take a more practical and disciplined approach towards work and on the domestic front. You assume a leadership role and take control of matters both at work and home. Those in the field of art or using their creative prowess would give a fresh dynamism to their work. You are drawn to intellectual pursuits. You take pride in your work and the thinking process helps you come up with ideas to infuse energy in the work at hand. This is an excellent week under which you bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships with loved ones.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You use wisdom to overcome any misgivings in your professional field. Inner focus helps you feel enlightened as your thoughts undergo a transformation and become stronger and more positive. Strong existing relationships are likely to grow and transform. Your finances could also improve as long as you deploy well tried out strategies. There are also some unexpected expenses on family front. In love and romance your personal relationship takes on a special quality as you communicate and express your views beautifully. Physical energy and good health enable you to keep up with a busy schedule and work commitments.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) It is time to heal old friendships with tender, love, care and move into new relationships with love and sensitivity. There is strength in your feelings of love and the power of attraction, which may open the door to new romantic relationships. New ideas and concepts floated by you at your work place will be appreciated. At work, you may take up new assignments and project that would bring creativity and new ideas. You understand that nothing can replace diligence. There may be gains from property, shares and assets in hand. You are likely to get back to fitness routines and diet programs to enhance health and energy.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You would work in association with the young and this brings confidence and you use your best talents and inspired by the youthful energy you coordinate all activities with a joie de vivre. You express inner feelings, ideas and future plans without being afraid of results and consequences. You will be creative, adventurous and unconventional at work and this brings appreciation from senior colleagues. Changes in your lifestyle can now be incorporated with long term benefits. Any unresolved argument may create a rift in your relationships; take a softer approach in your interactions with people at work and home.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This period brings more efficiency and creativity in your work in an unconventional way. There are chances of new associations and beginnings as new opportunities and changes may come. Your family would be more supportive and you will feel more comfortable. You exhibit individualism in handling business ventures and collaborations. You may take up assignments and projects and this would end on a winning note for you during the week. Your efforts to reach out to new people will be accepted and welcomed as you get success in matters connected to foreign lands too. You give attention to fitness and health related programs.

The Antarctic 'plastisphere': A hazardous new ecosystem

Antarctica, the world's most remote, harsh and pristine continent, is not free from marine pollution. Where human activity goes, plastic debris inevitably follows.

What might the early explorers of this icy wilderness think today, upon discovering a continent transformed by permanent fishing activities, research stations, military presence, tourism, and all their environmental impacts? Among these, plastic pollution stands out, as it has created a unique new ecological niche in the ocean.

Once it gets into the water, plastic debris provides surfaces that can be quickly colonised by microbial communities, forming a biofilm. This plastic-borne community is known as the plastisphere, and it poses a serious threat to marine ecosystems, particularly in the cold, understudied waters of the Southern Ocean.

THE PLASTISPHERE: AN EMERGING THREAT

As plastic debris drifts through the ocean, the plastisphere develops through typical ecological succession, eventually becoming a complex and specialised microbial community. Plastics not only provide shelter for these microorganisms but also act as a vector, allowing potentially harmful pathogens like *Vibrio* spp., *Escherichia coli*, and bacteria carrying antibiotic resistance genes, to spread across marine environments, even reaching remote, untouched areas.

Beyond being a home for microbes, the plastisphere can disrupt the natural balance of ocean life at the microscopic level. These changes don't stay in the water, as they can spread outward, potentially affecting how the ocean absorbs carbon and produces greenhouse gases. This has consequences for the air we breathe around the world.

However, it's not all bad news, as bacteria known for their potential to degrade plastics or hydrocarbons - such as *Alcanivorax* sp., *Aestuariaicella* sp., *Marinobacter* sp. and *Alteromonas* sp. - are frequently identified on plastics.

A HOSTILE RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

We currently know very little about the plastisphere, especially in the Southern Ocean, where uncovering its dynamics is key to understanding its impacts on one of the planet's most remote and vulnerable marine environments. For this reason, our recent study sought to investigate the abundance and diversity of microbial communities in the Southern Ocean plastisphere, particularly following

the initial colonisation of plastic debris.

Working in Antarctica is not an easy task. Just reaching this continent is a challenge, and once there, scientists have to contend with harsh environmental conditions: freezing temperatures, powerful winds, icebergs, and the constant pressure of limited time to carry out their work. These challenges make every moment in the field both demanding and invaluable.

This is why we approached our study with a controlled and manageable experiment. We set up aquariums filled with seawater collected near the Spanish research station on Livingston Island, South Shetlands. Inside, we placed small, rounded pellets of the three most common types of plastic polluting the sea - polyethylene, polypropylene, and polystyrene. We left them at environmental conditions (around 0 °C and between 13 - 18 h of sunlight) for 5 weeks, aiming to recreate the most plausible outcomes in the field.

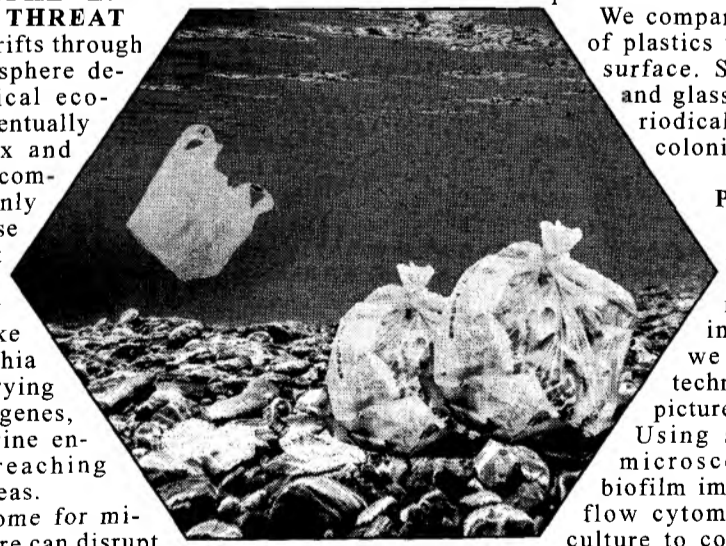
We compared the colonisation of plastics with glass, an inert surface. Samples of plastics and glass were collected periodically to track bacterial colonisation.

PLASTISPHERE DYNAMICS IN ANTARCTICA

Studying bacteria means making the invisible visible, so we combined several techniques to get a better picture of the plastisphere. Using scanning electron microscopy, we obtained biofilm images. We combined flow cytometry and bacterial culture to count total cells and colonies, and we sequenced the 16S

rRNA gene to identify the succession of bacterial settlers. This meticulous approach revealed that time was the key driver of change. Microbes quickly colonised the plastic, and within less than two days, bacteria like genus *Colwellia* were already fixed in the surface, showing a clear progression from initial settlers to a mature diverse biofilm including other genera like *Sulfitobacter*, *Glaciecola* or *Lewinella*.

These species, although also detected in water, show a clear preference for the social life of a biofilm community. Moreover, we did not detect clear differences between the bacterial communities from plastics and glass, suggesting that any stable surface can host these communities. While similar processes happen in the other oceans, in Antarctica the process seems slower. The region's lower temperatures slow bacterial development. (*The Conversation*)



"Deep in their roots, all flowers keep the light."

—Theodore Roethke

The Shillong Times

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CM Connect & Public Grievances

THIS is the first government that has tried its hand at innovative strategies to take governance closer to the people. CM Connect as the name suggests is an attempt by Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma to listen first hand to peoples' grievances. This takes him to distant villages where people are able to speak to the Chief Minister on a one on one basis which is something that could not have been thought of in the past. Although India is a democracy, once elected the MLA who becomes a minister moves around in a stultified domain away from the people who elected him/her. Ministers travel in speed and inside vehicles with tinted glasses for security reasons. This leaves them blind to the condition of the roads and they don't get to observe the ground realities in the course of their travels. Also what has happened to democracy in India is that ministers are treated like royalty and they in turn dole out their patronage in the form of doles. The recipients of such doles then become beholden to the MLA/minister for as long as he/she sits on that chair. In a scenario where the voting public has become poorer by the day and living on doles would they dare point out governance anomalies? They would not like to rock the boat by airing their grievances publicly. This is the reason why several people who air their views on governance failures through letters to the editor prefer to remain anonymous. This in itself is an indicator that we are not a fully functioning democracy where people understand the power of their votes and are not beholden to any elected representative.

CM Connect has seen people drawing the attention of the Chief Minister to several issues such as the failure of district and block level officials in addressing their grievances. And those concerns are not personal. They include the poor quality of roads; irregular water supply or no water supply at all despite the much touted JJM scheme. Obviously, the CM Connect scheme would not be popular with the officials at the Block levels because now they can be hauled up for non-performance or tardy implementation of schemes which is more the rule than the exception. The CM Connect strategy is to cut through the red tape and bureaucratic hurdles which has been the bane of governance in this country and which also sets back development by several decades. Add to that corruption that afflicts every level of governance and you have a perfect recipe for the political class to be defeated in the forthcoming election. There are several occasions when decisions on implementation of certain schemes have been taken by ministers but between the signing of the files and their actual implementation is a yawning gap. It is important for people to take an active part in the CM Connect scheme and for all villages and blocks to demand that the CM come and hear their grievances and their pain points. This is the only way to improve governance.

Letters to the Editor

Rock Concert Mania

Editor, Shillong is truly proud to be called the "rock capital of India." The fact that every rock concert draws a mammoth crowd in spite of the high-priced tickets, proves that people here are die-hard music lovers. Khasi people like most tribal groups in this region, are exceptionally gifted in music. We feel proud that our state has produced internationally renowned music groups like the Shillong Chamber Choir and recently, the Kiddies Corner Choir which won many medals at the international competitions. In the city we have many well-known local rock bands who perform at the regional and national levels. We are yet more proud that there are many budding musicians among the youth who are promoting traditional music and thereby keeping alive the rich musical legacy of our ancestors.

However, many things are good but when they are exaggerated, they become detrimental to people's well-being. What we see lately, is the excess of rock concerts coming into our state especially in Shillong. The Tourism Department should be commended for the extravagant Cherry Blossom Festival this year which saw the performances of many internationally acclaimed bands. Positively, the live performances of these international rock bands not only puts the state in the world map of music but they also inspire and motivate our local musicians towards greater perfection in the art.

But negatively, they deprive the local musicians and musical bands of the big financial aid which the government could have given them. It is true that while these concerts generate income for the local people and bring joy and enthusiasm to all music lovers, yet there is also the negative impact on the young people. I am speaking here of the moral aspect of such mass revelries where we witness youth getting out of control and becoming tipsy and boisterous. This presents a very negative picture of our state and our people to the outsiders. Many are of the opinion that in this year's festival, there has been an excessive invasion by foreign bands which of course touches the state's exchequer.

I thought that the Cherry Blossom Festival was over, yet I am shocked to see that there is another rock concert coming soon in February next year. Although I myself am a musician and a music lover, yet I would personally discourage such an event at a period when our students are busy preparing for the public examinations. Why do the organizers choose to hold such a concert knowing that our youth would not resist such a temptation, during this particular time? This is going to be a huge distraction for the students who are supposed to be engaged in serious preparations for the upcoming examinations. Many of our students are Ed Sheeran fans and so the actual distraction caused to them will not be limited to that day alone but it will be days before and after the event. Even those who are not able to be physically present, will be tempted to scroll through social media and imagine the

Twin bills for one nation one election must be examined for potential risks

Over centralisation puts federal structure and democracy under strain

By Dr. Gyan Pathak

The twin bills introduced in the Lok Sabha on December 17 seeking 'one nation and one election' - that is simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabhas of the States and Union Territories - contains provisions that reek of over centralization of governance in India that has the potential risks of creating irreparable damage to the federal structure of the country and ultimately to democracy.

The potential risks voiced during discussions in the Lok Sabha by the leaders from the opposition, and even the statement by the Union Home Minister, Amit Shah suggested that the bills need to be discussed in greater details. Amit Shah said that the bills did not attack the "basic structure doctrine, as claimed by the Opposition" and principles such as judicial review, federal structure of the Constitution, separation of powers, secular character, supremacy of the Constitution had not changed. Meghwal even alleged that the objection to the

such legislation. It also shows the challenges and hurdles before the one nation one election legislations.

The Opposition termed the laying down of the legislations as a 'dictatorial' move, though Union Minister of Law Arjun Ram Meghwal had asserted while introducing the bills that the legislations would not tamper with the powers enjoyed by states. He said that the bills did not attack the "basic structure doctrine, as claimed by the Opposition" and principles such as judicial review, federal structure of the Constitution, separation of powers, secular character, supremacy of the Constitution had not changed. Meghwal even alleged that the objection to the

its five-year term.

It means legislative assemblies will be denied full five year terms as per the constitutional provisions of five-year term in case of mid-term polls. The bill seeks adding Article 82(A) (simultaneous elections to the House of the People and all Legislative Assemblies) and amending Articles 83 (duration of Houses of Parliament), 172, and 327 (power of Parliament to make provisions with respect to elections to Legislatures).

It is obvious that federal autonomy of a state would be curtailed as far as elections, formation of governments, and governance are concerned. It is clear from the provision that the tenure of

"The potential risks voiced during discussions in the Lok Sabha by the leaders from the opposition, and even the statement by the Union Home Minister, Amit Shah suggested that the bills need to be discussed in greater details."

bills by the Opposition were political in nature. Nevertheless, his references to the risks cannot be accepted as valid without examination by the JPC in the coming days.

Congress MP Manish Tewari opposed the bills saying that they assault the Constitution's basic structure doctrine. Samajwadi Party MP Dharmendra Yadav said that introduction of the bill is an attempt by the BJP to bring in 'dictatorship' in the country. Trinamool Congress MP Kalyan Banerjee said the bills hit the basic structure of the Constitution itself. We must remember that the state government and the state legislative assemblies are not subordinate to the Central government or to Parliament itself. Now let us see what are the provisions that may put the federal structure of the country and democracy to peris. One of the provisions is that if the Lok Sabha or any state assembly is dissolved before the end of its full term, mid-term elections will be held only for that legislature to complete the remainder of

the House of the People (Lok Sabha) will be five years from the appointed date, and the tenure of all legislative assemblies elected after the appointed date will end with the tenure of the Lok Sabha. If it is not interference with the state's federal autonomy, then what is it?

The proposal under the bill seeks to insert a new Article 82A(1-6), which pertaining to delimitation, and readjustment of allocation of Lok Sabha seats among states after every decadal census. The provision needs thorough discussion since it may affect the share of the states in the power structure of the country.

The second clause says that the terms of all states' assemblies elected after the appointed date and before the expiry of the full term of the Lok Sabha shall come to an end on the expiry of the full term of the House of the People. This provision would curtail a five-year term of some assemblies and thus the spans of the state governments.

Under Article 82A(5) the Election Commission of India (ECI) will have the power of not holding any particular assembly election along with the election to the Lok Sabha. This provision has the potential to be misused, and in that case the basic purpose of bringing the legislations of 'one nation one election' will be defeated. Moreover, Article 82A (6) has a provision that even if a state poll was held later, the term of its legislature would expire with the term of the Lok Sabha. It is again curtailment of the five-year term of state assemblies and governments.

In case of the governments falling before completion of its five-year term, the bill seeks to amend Article 83 of the Constitution and provide a five year fixed term for the Lok Sabha unless it is dissolved sooner. If it is dissolved the next Lok Sabha term will only be for the unexpired term. It is clearly problematic. More so because all the bills pending before mid-term poll would expire, since the provision treats the term before dissolution as full-term. It is clearly a dual standard and prone to exploitation and misuse.

There are many more risks to the federal autonomy of states and democracy, because the provision of the proposed legislation for one nation one election is heavily tilted in favour of the rich and national political parties which may clip the wings of poor and regional political parties affecting regional development and democracy. It would create political imbalance, too much centralisation, diminishing powers of state legislatures and governments, voter confusion resulting out of distinct regional and national aspirations, greater difficulties for holding simultaneous elections both administratively and financially, empower central government to call the shots and other challenges regarding transparency in conducting free and fair polls. It would be difficult to keep democratic process inclusive. As for reducing the financial burden, the claims are elusive since the provisions are likely to put additional financial and administrative burden on the state. (IPA Service)

Making Meghalaya's Festivals More Equitable

By Avner Pariat

The recently held Cherry Blossom Festival seemed to be a resounding success (finally). This is good news after a few rocky years. Last year a sudden and powerful torrent played havoc with the festival and the Ne-Yo show was also mired by controversy owing to some overreaching moral crusaders but it still went according to plan. Though again it seemed to under-perform as per projections which were hoped for by the Department of Tourism. This is all a matter of conjecture of course as the data has never been shared. Certain assumptions were also made by an association of Shillong hoteliers according to room occupancy but nothing concrete regarding the numbers from the festival itself were made known after the event had concluded.

segregating Tourism income smoothly from this big data set. A lot of assumptions would have to be made which might not have a bearing in reality. However, he also admitted that a more direct way to gain revenue would have to be thought of. This is the need of the hour, both for the government to benefit from and to silence its vociferous critics, who opine that those festivals are a waste of money. It is clear most of the citizens will never benefit directly from a Cherry Blossom but at least indirectly the revenues it generates must be enjoyed by them. For me, this is the more serious issue that the government must address.

If we turn to other lesser regarded festivals (in my opinion) like the Shillong Literary Festival and the



However, this year - even the most cynical of us have to admit that it was a big success based solely on the optics. Whereas last year, the ground seemed to be only partially filled up, this year every nook and corner seemed to have revelers dancing away to the music of Senegal's biggest hip-hop export - Akon, the purveyor of "convict music" as he himself calls it. This is great news because it means that this festival can indeed pull in the crowds. This also means that this property can finally stand on its own now and wean itself from a support of the Tourism Department. That should be the end goal here. The government has always been talking about developing a Private Sector so now this is the time to act. Pulling out support

Tri Hills Ensemble (ably organised by the Department of Arts & Culture) which also happened in November 2024, we can see how an intimate and sustained involvement with many stakeholders can also lead to great success. In both events, the government departments themselves were directly involved in the programming and proceedings. I enjoyed them both quite a lot. Yes, these types of festivals will never know the types of crowds seen by a Bryan Adams or a Ne-Yo concert. That will never happen in a thousand years BUT such festivals are actually MORE IMPORTANT. Not only do they cost less for the government to organise which is a very important consideration, but they actually build

"A lot of assumptions would have to be made which might not have a bearing in reality. However, he also admitted that a more direct way to gain revenue would have to be thought of. This is the need of the hour, both for the government to benefit from and to silence its vociferous critics, who opine that those festivals are a waste of money. It is clear most of the citizens will never benefit directly from a Cherry Blossom but at least indirectly the revenues it generates must be enjoyed by them."

from Cherry Blossom can allow it to grow and be a good exemplar for others to follow. Now, if the Tourism Department pulls out its support, it will have extra money to put into other properties as well. This should be encouraged so that other lesser-known events are galvanised and supported.

To truly honour the democratic ideals of inclusion and representation, there is a need to rethink the current approach to festival organization. One approach might be to spread funding around and place greater control and decision-making power in smaller groups which was the norm previously. Training them to be more professional with a strong emphasis on financial considerations can ultimately help our beleaguered exchequer. On that note, I asked a Tourism official once about how the state would gain monetarily from festivals and he opined that it would mean bigger GST collections. I was sceptical about this approach as we would have a difficult time

a sense of solidarity and community. They will never ever make more money than Cherry Blossom but both had numerous organisers and participants who all benefited monetarily. Some people got to build the pandals, some got to print flexes, some got to do the sound arrangement and organise panel discussions, etc with many shortcomings and uncertainties. They were not perfect, not up to "global standards" nor run by professional companies but they SPREAD MONEY AROUND. For me, that is very important. This creates goodwill towards the Tourism Department and the government, which is exponentially better than anything one huge festival can do. Again, these types of events are not commercially sexy or attractive for most companies which is why I say let them have Cherry Blossom. Government should pull out now and let it flourish under their patronage. These smaller, more unique festivals need more help now.

required for businesses to start and operate © Digitizing government processes to enable online applications, renewals and inspections, making it more convenient for businesses to interact with regulatory authorities (d) ensuring transparency in government procedures to build trust and reduce corruption. This includes clear guidelines and timelines for approvals and decision-making.

Other points include establishing efficient mechanisms for resolving commercial disputes quickly and fairly can boost investor confidence. Investment in infrastructure such as transportation, communication, and utilities to support business operations and growth is imperative. Access to finance for businesses, especially small and medium enterprises (SMEs), through supportive banking policies and financial instruments is key and also developing a skilled workforce through education and training programs to meet the needs of businesses and industries. Its important to implement tax reforms to create a fair and predictable tax environment, reducing the burden on businesses and encouraging investment.

Reducing the compliance burden on businesses by eliminating redundant laws and procedures, and decriminalising minor, technical or procedural defaults is required. These measures can create a conducive environment for businesses to thrive and contribute to economic growth.

In 1995, the Congress Government in Meghalaya under Salseng C. Marak (1993-1998) played a significant role in the state's politi-

cal landscape. His tenure saw various initiatives aimed at promoting industrialization and investment in Meghalaya. The establishment of the Single Window Agency (SWA) in 1995 was one such effort to streamline the investment process and attract businesses to the state. While the SWA did make some progress in simplifying procedures and attracting investments, there were still challenges and bureaucratic hurdles that limited its effectiveness. But in 2004 the then Government messed up things and the State saw the flight of capital in the process of so-called industrialisation in Jaintia Hills which was never ploughed back but instead impacted the natural environment.

The recent establishment of the Invest Meghalaya Agency (IMA) aims to address these issues more comprehensively by introducing a more unified and transparent system. The IMA aims to promote and facilitate investment in the state. Its objectives include: encouraging both domestic and international investors in various sectors within Meghalaya by simplifying the process and reducing bureaucratic hurdles. The aim is to promote industrial and economic development to create job opportunities and boost the State's economy by offering attractive incentives and support to businesses under schemes like the Uttar Poorva Transformative Industrialisation Scheme (UNNATI) and the Meghalaya Industrial and Investment Promotion Policy (MIIPP) 2024.

Ensuring that investments contribute to sustainable and inclusive growth, lever-

aging Meghalaya's unique strengths and resources the IMA has a lot of potential to drive economic growth and development in the state. By attracting investments, simplifying business processes, and offering incentives, it can create a more business-friendly environment. This will lead to job creation, infrastructure development, and overall economic prosperity. Bringing all the departments together under a committee, headed by the Chief Minister under IMA will help drive the Agency. However, the success of such an initiative depends on effective implementation, transparency, and continuous support from both the government and the private sector. Ensuring that investments are sustainable and inclusive will be the key to achieving long-term benefits for the people of Meghalaya.

It is heartening that the government will avoid industries, which are not environment-friendly and focus on new technology-based industries in the food processing sector among others. Areas such as tourism, information technology and pharmaceutical industries are the way forward. It is also heartening to hear from the Chief Minister that there is no question of bypassing the KHADC. Every agency has got its power based on institutional provisions. Those powers cannot be negated hence all procedures will be followed."

Yours etc,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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"We cannot be more sensitive to pleasure without being more sensitive to pain."
— Alan Watts

The Shillong Times

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China, trust-deficit

PEACE, not confrontation, helps in economic progress. The leaderships of both India and China understand this – the primary reason why the two sides set aside the past and broke bread after a four-year military and diplomatic stand-off. The meeting held between Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi and India's national security adviser Ajit Doval in Beijing this week appears to have produced some results. The two sides have reached an understanding on a set of six subjects. The Union external affairs ministry explained in a statement that the meeting provided "positive directions for cross-border cooperation and exchanges, including resumption of the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra, data sharing on trans-border rivers, and border trade." The rest are in the realm of conjecture. Obviously, the issues between the two nations are vexed and would require time to thrash out.

The relationship between China and India is marked by repeated instances of aggression from the former, putting New Delhi on the defensive. The 1962 invasion was disastrous for India as the Government of Jawaharlal Nehru and the military wings were taken unawares. Nehru posed as the dove of peace on the world stage and failed to equip India with military prowess. The Chinese leadership took full advantage of this situation. India lost over 5000 sq-km of land along the northern border stretches. The animosity continued for a couple of decades until Rajiv Gandhi as prime minister opted for a thaw through a visit to China in 1988. The two sides decided to treat bygones as bygones and concentrate on the present. China benefited hugely from this in the subsequent decades. Through trade agreements, Chinese goods flooded Indian markets – as part of its global push. Claiming that it invested in peace to promote its economic progress, China quietly raised its military strength to emerge as the world's third top military power – after the US and Russia.

China can be trusted to give pinpricks to India as and when it deems fit. Its leadership, through generations, has demonstrated ruthlessness of a high degree but is avoiding wars. What it did in Galwan in 2020 against India was a show of brute force, short of a war; what it attempted against Bhutan in 2017, in Doklam, which India attempted to halt, was a quiet military push to grab land, but here too it did not progress into a war. China keeps threatening Taiwan, the breakaway republic, with diplomatic muscle-flexing, but Beijing is wary of the US military support to the small nation in China's south. It keeps a safe distance with the US. China being keen on its economic growth cannot afford to wage a war. Notable also is the fact that despite the acquisition of Rafale fighter jets etc., by the Modi government, China boasts five times the military prowess of India.

It's Now or Never for the NPP-led MDA Government

By Patricia Mukhim

The political culture of Meghalaya has always been about balancing of special interests, procrastination, equivocation, pandering to interested groups and tokenism perfected to an art form. Politics in Meghalaya has always meant delaying decisions that are in the larger interests of the people because politicians in government have always lacked that killer instinct to bite the bullet and do what has to be done. Take the issue of railways. Why has it taken so long for any government to take a decision that is going to benefit the larger public? Why have successive governments succumbed to pressure groups and other bleeding heart radicals who claim to know our best interests without ever consulting us? Often the problem about delayed decisions is that generations of people suffer the consequences. Each time a new Chief Minister assumes office he promises to take up development work on a war footing but that only leaves us more battle-scarred than ever. Those promises of development only remain in the realm of the imagination and five years just pass us by.

One of the arguments advanced by governments that have been in the driving seat in Meghalaya is that they lack a majority and are hamstrung by malcontents among their coalition partners. They claim that every good intention is shot down by the hair-splitters who without carrying out any research on the long term economic benefits of having railways coming in to the Khasi-Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, give their learned views as if they are business managers and gate-keepers of society. The oft repeated assertion that railways will cause influx, presupposes that those who travel by train are going to settle down in Meghalaya. Alternatively, they also assume that the people who would be employed at the railway stations would be the ubiquitous 'outsider.' Why can't the local tribals work as porters and also in other railway related jobs?

The other issue of course is land acquisition which has always been the devil's brew in Meghalaya. Land acquisition has never been a straightforward process and neither is it a transparent transaction. Right now a

senior minister in the MDA Government is a land shark who is buying up land like there's no tomorrow. This is the crux of the problem. If the Government needs land it has to meet with the land owners along the area required for acquisition after calling for a public meeting. The sordar/rangbah shnong should be present; so too is the presence of the communities residing along the stretch in case they need to be relocated. The Government should make the terms of acquisition clear and fix the compensation as per an agreed settlement and no escalation in land price should be allowed thereafter. The Government should actually seal such deals legally so that in case any hurdles come up at a later stage it can deal with the recalcitrant outlier effectively.

In terms of its current political strength the National

private sector has to come in and that is the reason why the Investment Meghalaya Authority (IMA) has been created to facilitate investments by private sector investors. What the MDA Government could do better is to create a climate of transparency and engage with civil society to allay their fears about land alienation.

The present government can point to the manner in which the cement companies in Jaintia Hills are functioning with tribal directors who are also perhaps the landowners on which the companies are set up and are the majority shareholders in the company. We are not sure if that is the case with the cement companies or whether the tribal directors are mere idle partners lending their names to facilitate the business. If at all land is to be leased the terms should be clear so that it also inspires a climate of confidence among the investors.

The MDA government is now in a position to take hard decisions in the larger interests of the state. Perhaps it's time to have a referendum on whether people of Meghalaya want the railways or not. We the voters should be able to vote on such issues so that a few people who take decisions on our behalf do not railroad their way and keep the state in a perpetual state of dystopia. Meghalaya has no business being one of the poorer states in the country or the state with the largest number of malnourished children or the state with a high school drop-out rate and where the health system is struggling to fix itself, courtesy years of having allowed it to malfunction. Again to be fair to the MDA Government it is struggling to repair the health system but fixing a broken system takes much more effort than managing a system that has been efficiently run from the word 'go.'

Often the problem about delayed decisions is that generations of people suffer the consequences. Each time a new Chief Minister assumes office he promises to take up development work on a war footing but that only leaves us more battle-scarred than ever. Those promises of development only remain in the realm of the imagination and five years just pass us by.

Peoples' Party (NPP) is in the majority with 32 MLAs. If it wishes to, it can push through many pro-people development agenda which have been hanging fire for decades. This is the time for the MDA Government to do what those before it could not achieve because of a plethora of reasons. It's a now or never moment for the NPP. If this present government misses this opportunity it is likely to lose the 2028 elections. Actually, what I am stating here is not my personal opinion. I was having a conversation with a young lady who told me that the NPP has everything going for it right now. It has to take those long-pending decisions like the railway project and also ensure that Meghalaya has a fully func-

tioning airport. Enough of the delays and we have also had enough of every project being mired in controversy. To be fair to the MDA Government, at least two projects that were virtually on hold – one of them for decades – have been completed. These are the two 5-star hotels – the Vivanta and Courtyard by Marriott. Its because Meghalaya now has these 5-star luxury hotels that big names like Bryan Adams and other rock stars are agreeing to come here and perform. Otherwise, it would not have been possible to hold the G-20 meet and several other embassy and consulate level meetings such as were held in recent times. These two 5-star hotels and other less-starred ones too have been able to provide jobs to several young, dynamic and hardworking men and women.

And while there are all kinds of allegations about favouritism and nepotism in the manner in which event managers are selected for different events and a host of other opportunities that are coming up as well, the reality is that several young people are doing something rather than just cooling their heels. It is a sad reality that those who don't get into the charmed circle of being gainfully employed will have their share of heartburns but who says that life has always dealt a fair deal. The fact of the matter is that there is some kind of buzz and some have gained from the different verticals that have been created from the Meghalayan Age Ltd, PRIME and several others. No government anywhere will be able to create jobs for everyone. The

Festival economics: The Cherry Blossom Festival

By Jason Manners

I am compelled to respond to Avner Pariat's recent article "MAKING MEGHALAYA FESTIVAL MORE EQUITABLE" (ST Dec 19, 2024) which contained several inaccuracies and misconceptions.

As the organizer of the festival, I would like to provide some context. The Cherry Blossom Festival is a flagship project of the Department of Tourism, Government of Meghalaya, and has been entrusted to Rockski EMG since 2021. Our team has worked diligently to build the festival from the ground up, and while we have faced challenges, including a sudden torrent in 2022, we have continued to grow and evolve.

In a region like North East India, where corporate sponsorship is scarce, government support is crucial to bridge the financial gap. This is not unusual, as many Indian states and countries follow a similar

Season and it is successful in drawing visitors from near and far, contributing to the state in flow of revenue year after year (Customer Data indicates presence of many repeat visitors).

I'd like to highlight that Rockski EMG has been investing heavily in the festival as a PPP model, taking huge risks and uncertainties, unsure of even making any profits. The setbacks of 2022 and 2023 demonstrate our commitment to making the festival work in the state. Despite these challenges, we have persevered, and our efforts have finally paid off with the success of the 2024 edition. As someone who has navigated the ups and downs of the event industry for 15 years, I can attest that success rarely happens overnight. It takes hard work, dedication, and perseverance to create a successful event. For the first 5 years of my event career, I incurred financial



model. For instance, Thailand's "Amazing Thailand" initiative accepts proposals

losses but I was fortunate to have a day job to keep me afloat. I'm heartened to

Our festival's ticket pricing is designed to make the event accessible to a wider audience. We pay the same rates as other countries and major cities for A-list artists, but we cannot charge standard ticket rates due to the region's economic constraints. A similar Festival in another country with the same lineup will cost 100 USD (INR 8500) and above per day for general access while we charge just 20% of that rate. The government's sponsorship helps reduce the pricing, making the festival more attractive to the Indian market while ensuring a positive GST revenue for the state exchequer.

from credible promoters and provides sponsorship based on the amount of tourism they bring.

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see that the Government of Meghalaya has recognized the importance of supporting alternative enterprises and creating a more vibrant ecosystem.

In fact, to make the Festivals in Meghalaya more equitable, numerous Festivals have been entrusted to CREDIBLE event professionals and the government has created the M-STEP scheme, which aims to support aspiring and professional event entrepreneurs. This scheme provides gap funding for various event-related ventures, helping to bridge the financial gap for many event entrepreneurs and accelerate their growth timeline. The M-STEP scheme is a testament to the government's commitment to promoting growth and development in the state. By spreading money to support various events and initiatives, the government is creating a more diverse and vibrant economy that benefits our community as a whole.

If Avner Pariat has any genuine suggestions or concerns regarding the festival, I encourage him to write to the Department of Tourism, Government of Meghalaya, directly.

I hope this response provides a clearer understanding of the Cherry Blossom Festival's success and its impact on the state's economy. I would also like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the people of Meghalaya, without whose support and enthusiasm, the Cherry Blossom Festival would not be what it is today. Their love and encouragement have been a constant source of motivation for us, and we are committed to continuing to deliver a world-class festival experience for them.

Letters to the Editor

Compulsory teaching of Khasi and Garo in schools

Editor,
Apropos the news article titled 'Govt Mulls Compulsory Khasi, Garo Languages Up to Class VIII,' published in The Shillong Times on 18 December 2024, I am writing regarding the government's initiative to make Khasi and Garo languages compulsory up to Class VIII. As a teacher, I am thrilled by this long-overdue decision.

In this respect, I would like to inform that the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE) has already prescribed the 'Learn Khasi, Learn Hindi' and 'Learn Garo, Learn Hindi' textbooks for Classes 5 to 8 over the past five years. I have personally used these books for many years to teach Khasi to non-tribal students and Hindi to tribal students, with excellent results. This has proven that children can definitely learn Khasi and Garo if teachers put in sufficient effort in their classes. These books also include functional grammar and day-to-day conversational sentences, both in English and Hindi, that help students improve their conversation skills in local languages.

But what is unfortunate is that many schools in urban areas currently do not have fixed, regular slots for teaching Khasi and Garo. No school should neglect this aspect any longer. My suggestion to MBOSE is to

direct all schools in Meghalaya to strictly allocate at least two classes per week for compulsory Khasi and Garo lessons.

Furthermore, MBOSE should consider instructing all schools to implement a policy requiring students to speak Khasi or Garo in all schools in the state for at least two days a week. This compulsory speaking practice among school friends and teachers will help students quickly develop their communication skills in these languages.

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

Relentless Journalism

Editor,
"It is not enough for journalists to see themselves as mere messengers without understanding the hidden agenda of the message and the myths that surround it." — John Pilger, Hidden Agendas

As the media landscape in the Northeastern part of India gets more blurry, I am reminded of Anna Politkovskaya, Gauri Lankesh, Binalakshmi Nepram to name a few who have taken on the strong and mighty. The chicken neck corridor which links us with the rest of the country has turned us into mere mortals for power brokers at Lutyens Delhi. Having spearheaded the cause of women's rights to being vocal on issues such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), 1958,

to insurgency, environmental concerns etc., the Editor of The Shillong Times was recently honoured with the Saahas Shrestha: Shero of Courage award which should inspire potential authors and media specialists from the region to enable a better journalistic space brimming with ideas.

Ms Mukhim's writings, appearing in major outlets like The Scroll, The Indian Express, The Wire, The Hindu, and The Assam Tribune, have countered bad reporting that has marred regional understanding and opinions, providing analysis and outspoken views that the mainstream media sometimes overlook.

The sparks of the geo-political embers burn bright as ever with regime changes in Syria, the Middle East crisis, Bangladesh's governance problem or Myanmar's junta. The lack of a think-tank to discuss and enlighten these core topics is a far-fetched dream. Ms Mukhim who was also a member of the National Security Advisory Board at one point of time stood shoulder to shoulder with former Generals and policy makers to carve a blueprint for the nation's security giving more latitude towards future engagements with this part of the world. Shillong played host to a brainstorming session on the Indo-Pacific Strategy, jointly organized by the US Consulate and the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) last month.

The Northeast of India is gradually becoming a focal point for foreign powers; consequently, narratives change very quickly.

Journalists like Ms Mukhim could very well usher in a new breed of 'Fourth Estate' digital warriors carving out a new template in this Brave New World.

Yours etc.,
Christopher Gathpho,
Shillong-10

State should nurture young talents

Editor,
A kite needs guidance and support, before reaching high in the sky. But, after it gains that height, it can fly on its own. This highlights the fact that a person needs every kind of support in the very beginning so as to bloom in her/his talent. The decision makers of our country must pay heed to it. The policy makers must acknowledge that young talents, both in academics and sporting fields, need government support in their formative years when it matters the most. Otherwise, many talented boys and girls cannot reach the heights they deserve.

In the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics, India got 71st position with zero gold, 1 silver, and 5 bronze medals while Hong Kong achieved 37th rank with 2 gold, zero silver, and 2 bronze medals. The number of medals a country wins in the Olympics should ideally be proportionate to the number of young people in that country. India's position vis a vis its demography is more advantageous than that of many countries. Now, if we compare the number of

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

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

Only a small percentage of families in our country can afford to financially and logistically nurture the talent of their children. Imagine what would have happened if almost all the children of our country had the financial springboard either from their parents or from the state to aim for medals at the Olympics. India would have been at the top of the Olympics ladder had it reached a high ranking like Hong Kong's fourth position in the Human Development Index from its present ranking of 134.

The state can play a big role by trying to create a level playing field especially by paying greater attention to health and education. Those countries that give top priority to these two issues naturally score high on the Human Development Indices (HDI). This is because the HDI is a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development like - a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable, and having a decent standard of living.

To become a competitive sportsperson, a child first of all needs good health and

a decent standard of living, both of which are among the three key dimensions of human development. Hence there is a close connection between the rank of a country in the global hunger and human development indices, and that of its performance in the Olympics. In this context, it is pertinent to recall the observations of Nobel laureates Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo. They marked high malnutrition as a significant contributor to India's Olympics under-performance and urged the need for better investment in the health sector as a whole.

The economists wrote in their book, Poor Economics, "Of course India is poor but not as poor as it used to be, and not nearly as poor as Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Haiti, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda, each of which, per head, has more than 10 times India's medal count."

"Catch them young" is an unavoidable roadmap for a country's success in sports. The improvement both in hunger and human development indices is in sync with this roadmap. Merely giving money and incentives to sportspersons only after they attain success in international arenas is like putting the cart before the horse.

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

Santa Claus was inspired by real figure who fought against miscarriages of justice

Santa Claus is based on the real historical figure of St Nicholas, a Byzantine bishop born in present-day Turkey. Because of the extraordinary legends and miracles attributed to him he became one of the most popular saints in Europe.

Dutch migrants probably spread his fame to the US and there the patron saint of children was transformed through books, magazines and films into the familiar Santa Claus, or Father Christmas, figure we know today.

There is the story about St Nicholas that everyone knows - the one about him giving gifts to the poor in the dead of night - the Santa Claus origin story. But there's another story that is probably less familiar to most of us.

It's a story about how Nicholas fought against a miscarriage of justice. The story begins when a local businessman goes to see the provincial governor. For reasons that are lost to history, he wants three innocent men, Nepotian, Ursyna and Apolyn, killed. The governor, a notoriously dishonest man called Eustathios, is only too happy to help.

The earliest writing on the life of Nicholas is to be found in the Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca, and believed to be written in the first half of the 9th century by Michael the Archimandrite. It suggests that once the bribe had been paid, the men were condemned to death.

Word of what was happening reached Nicholas and he raced to the square. Just as the executioner raised his sword to dispatch the first prisoner, Nicholas threw himself between the executioner and the condemned man. Grabbing the executioner's arm, he ripped the sword away, untied the innocent men and set them free.

He then admonished the governor. When faced with the righteous fury of Nicholas, Eustathios fell to his knees and repented, promising to change his ways, sources suggest.

This is a very different image of St Nicholas than most people are used to in the 21st century. This is not the kind and humble 4th Century bishop, the proto-Santa Claus. Instead, this is the action hero, the St Nicholas who is not afraid to face down an executioner's sword.

As bishop of Myra - a coastal town in what is now Turkey - St Nicholas was a leading Christian figure in an empire that was growing more and more concerned about the increasing power of Christianity.

The Roman emperor Diocletian decided it was time to send out a message. He ordered the torture of any Christian who refused to worship the Roman gods. It unleashed a reign of terror. Nicholas was one of those imprisoned and tortured. The persecution by Diocletian



Saint Nicholas of Myra saves three innocents from death (1888) by Ilya Repin. (Wikimedia)

lasted between eight and ten years.

When Bishop Nicholas was finally freed, he was a changed man. Putting his life on the line for people he had never met could have been simply because he knew what it felt like to be innocent and have your freedom taken away.

And so while the story of St Nicholas secretly handing out bags of gold to a poor family should be remembered and eventually become the inspiration for the jolly, rosy-cheeked figure of Santa Claus, there are other aspects to this character.

Nicholas was a wealthy man and so when he gave

away his gold it was an act of kindness but nothing that he could not afford. That he chose to do so anonymously showed his humility. These were the acts of a compassionate bishop, of a man who would soon become celebrated, then famous and eventually a saint.

And as the centuries passed, the legend of St Nicholas would grow and grow - as would the powers attributed to him. From controlling the weather to appearing to Roman emperors in dreams, there seemed to be little that St Nicholas could not do.

He became the patron saint of children, pawnbrokers, unmarried women, sailors, repentant criminals, students, business people and countless European cities. And of course eventually he would become reimagined as Santa Claus.

But there is something about the story of the rescue of the three innocent men and Nicholas's fight for justice that stand out against all the embellishments, the Christmas films and the myths. It's a tale that shows how and why the legend of Nicholas spread across the world. (*The Conversation*)



Illustration of Saint Nicholas resurrecting the three butchered children from the Grandes Heures d'Anne de Bretagne (created between 1503 and 1508). (Wikimedia)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, DECEMBER 22, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon semi-square Mars on your solar return chart will bring mixed results throughout the year. You will be putting your best efforts to get the things moving. Money inflow will be normal. Nothing will come easy. You will appear to lose hopes and get bogged down a bit. Yet you will not give up. You will have setbacks on job/business front but gradually things will get better. Your superiors and colleagues in the office would be understandable and would support you fully. You will also get unexpected support from family and friends. This will keep you going. Elders will give you good counsel and guide you properly. Your partner/spouse will be your biggest source of strength. Ultimately things will turn in your favor. And situation will change. Your financial position will gradually get better and you may get a new job. Children will perform well in studies. You will undertake a short trip with family for relaxation.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) Your efforts, confidence and courage bring success in monetary gains and your energy increases for work projects. Your job environment is lively. You are most likely to express your social, romantic, and artistic qualities through intellectual pursuits. This is a very self-expressive time when you have lots of energy, but not necessarily self-discipline to match. You express yourself creatively, through activities with children, romantic hobbies, or sports when learning, short trips, and other forms of communication and making connections, appeal strongly. It is easier than usual to be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This period brings love, harmony and entertainment in professional and personal relations. A romantic short trip may be undertaken. People look upon you with more respect, tolerance, and acceptance. You don't feel the need to prove yourself, and that feels good. You have the chance to shine. It's a great time to pick up information from your environment and the people in it. Your mind is often distracted, particularly when required to stick to routine. You might spend time in traveling and visiting friends and relatives. There will be a fluctuation in energy levels before a balance is achieved. Health will take a turn for the better.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This period brings success in professional and personal relations. You take more pride than usual in your creations, your love affair, your children, and your hobbies. After a period of self-protectiveness, you are now more spontaneous and more willing to take risks. You are inspired creatively and emotionally. Pleasure and amusement play an important role in your search for freedom of self-expression now. Still, despite the fact that you love your career now, you are also working especially hard. The inclination is towards more detail work, and it can get to you at times. Personal projects are on an upswing. You will be considerably more productive, healthy, and focused.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This is favorable time for hobbies, sports and competitive exams. You display great skills in sports or physical activity that wins you appreciation and opportunity to travel. Beware of a covetous and suspicious person around you who could cause misunderstanding in your personal relationships. People notice and admire you for your pleasant and cheerful personality. You are bold in your love yet not aggressive either. A strong desire for companionship and sociability dominates during this period. Health and energy need to be conserved through a busy time at work.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) The planetary configuration increases confidence, courage and efforts at the work place. It's a great time to do something entirely new and pioneering. Work that needs to be done in and around the home becomes a priority. You have many opportunities to boost your feeling of security and comfort. You may find yourself in a position in which there is a blending of the financial with social or public affairs. Although you like the good things of life and may spend quite a bit on clothes, furniture, and entertainment, your innate sense of security will not permit you to go overboard to the point of extravagance. You will have the ability to build up financial reserves and resources. For this placement can bring a good deal of success in all monetary pursuits.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) An excellent phase is in store especially for money, career, and romance. Friends and loved ones take priority at this time. People at work might be surprised by your ability to assert yourself and your needs. You don't find yourself

lacking in opportunities to socialize. You are likely to enjoy a strong feeling of happiness and solidarity in friendship, or with groups of like-minded individuals. You are more peace-loving than usual and slightly detached on a personal level and feeling towards religion is enhanced. Examining the past in order to improve the future is certainly worthwhile, as long as you don't waste your energy.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) There is success, responsibility and maturity at the work place. You have much energy for new money-making projects, or for stepping up existing ones. Matters of the heart touch you deeply. You are more stimulated by all that is unconventional and your ideas are original and progressive. This is a time to follow your dreams and ideals, and to plant a seed in the form of a wish for the future. You possess extra charm in your professional life. Strong opportunities for love and fun would occur. More opportunities to socialize and network could present themselves now.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) This week is good for money, 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. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you at this time. Your love and affection life are more attractive and charming. Public relations work, promotion, and other such endeavors are favored now. You give attention to fitness and health related programs.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) Public relations work, promotion and the fore. Diplomacy, correctness in manner, finesse, and charm will be a big plus in aiding financial gains, especially in areas requiring public contact. You feel attracted to people with whom you can communicate well and exchange ideas. Recognition is likely to come your way whether you ask for it or not, and the responsibility that comes right along with it. Do what you feel is right, keeping in mind that you are at your most visible in this phase. You might also enjoy analyzing different health or nutrition programs. It's a great time to make improvements to your regular routines.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) This is an excellent time to create a budget or financial plan, or to rid yourself of old habits that undermine your sense of personal power and self-mastery. Smoothing out your close personal relationships is what makes you happy at this time. If single, you are more willing than normal to enter into a committed relationship. In general, you are adaptable when it comes to your affections. You receive pleasure from anything that expands your horizons, both physically and mentally. Foreign places may particularly appeal now. You tend to be expansive and generous when it comes to love. Dealing with one situation at a time releases some tension and anxiety.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) All the matters hidden and personal come into focus now. Conflicts with a partner over values or personal possessions are likely to occur. Circumstances are such that your diplomacy skills are required. This is the time when you are most desirous of change on a deeper level. You are more willing than usual to explore life's secrets. Social interactions of a personal, one-on-one kind are emphasized. Your popularity is increasing, and is reinforced by your own ability to cooperate and harmonize. Taking care of business is a focus. A health routine started now is likely to be successful.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) It's a generous, pleasantly emotional and creative time. Striking a balance between your attention to your career and to your family life is necessary. You will also thoroughly enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities, especially in the company of a loved one. You have good team spirit right now, and you are more tactful and obliging with your co-workers. You need the energies, companionship, and support of other people, and they may also seek out your support and companionship. It's important to include others rather than to go solo for the time being. However, bending too much to the will of another is not advised either. You take more pride in the work you do and in your health routines than any other time. This is a good time to build your skills, get organized, and attend your health and wellbeing.

Holidays help us rest, recover

Greek philosopher Plutarch of Chaeronea (1st-2nd century AD) observed that our lives are divided between relaxation and exertion.

For example, there are times when we are working and times when we are on holidays. He said rest was important: Rest gives relish to labour.

In ancient Greece and Rome, many people also recognised that taking a holiday was an opportunity to restore the health of the body and mind.

However, not everyone was convinced holidays were healthy or even a good idea.

Take a holiday. It'll do you good

In the ancient world, people sometimes went on holidays to try to improve their mental and physical condition. This usually meant moving from one climate to another, hoping this would help.

In one of his letters, the Roman writer and jurist Pliny the Younger (1st-2nd century AD) writes about how he tried to cure a man called Zosimus of an illness that made him spit blood.

Pliny sent him on a holiday to Egypt. Zosimus returned after a long holiday "with his health restored".

However, Zosimus became sick again. So Pliny sent him on another holiday, this time to Gallia Narbonensis (in modern day southern France). Pliny tells us in his letter: the air is healthy there and the milk excellent for treating this kind of [illness].

But watch where you go and how you get there

People also sought out or avoided specific places, depending on whether the places were considered healthy or not.

The physician Galen (about 129-216AD) tells us the water at Mytilene, on the Greek island of Lesbos, had qualities to treat various illnesses, including hydrops, a type of fluid build-up that leads to swelling: *This water is suitable both for those with hydrops and for the other swellings, being strongly dry-*



ing. Similarly, it is also suitable for those who are obese, and particularly when someone also compels them to swim more in it quickly, and after bathing more, not to drink or eat immediately [...].

Doctors also advised people to seek out or avoid specific modes of travel.

For instance, when treating headaches, the physician Caelius Aurelianus wrote about the benefits of sea voyages: *Sea voyages improve perceptibly and gradually open the bodily pores, give rise to a burning effect by reason of the saltiness of the sea, and, by working a change, repair the bodily condition. We must try to arrange voyages to places where the climate is mild and the north wind prevails, conditions the opposite of those which can aggravate the disease.*

But he advised against travelling on fresh water: *Voyages on rivers, bays, and lakes are considered unsuitable, since they cause the head to become moist and cold by reason of the exhalation from the earth.*

It's easy to overdo it on holiday

Not everyone in antiquity thought holidays were healthy. Some thought holidays could be harmful, because we sometimes drank or ate too much.

For example, the physician Galen complained about how people on

holidays tended to make their health worse rather than better.

In his work *Hygiene*, Galen observed that people who are unwell because of their difficult work routine, such as slaves, needed the opportunity to restore their health by having a holiday.

But Galen noted these people did not always use holidays to restore their health because they used holidays to eat and drink too much: *They are able to make such provision for themselves during those days on which there is some public festival, when they free themselves from the services of a slave. But due to lack of control they not only do nothing to correct those things collecting deleteriously in the body, but they also fill themselves full of these things by eating badly.*

Greek writer Athenaeus (2nd-3rd century AD) mentions how "every-one [...] eagerly awaits festivals", because on festive holidays the tables are full of drink and food. Clearly, it was easy to eat and drink too much.

Holidays waste time and are only for the lazy

In the ancient world, people sometimes complained holidays were a waste of precious time.

Philosopher Seneca (1st century BC-1st century AD) said the religious practice of taking every Sunday away from work meant people wasted "a seventh of their life".

Similarly, the writer Claudius Aelian (2nd-3rd century AD) said holidays were simply devised as an excuse to be lazy: *Look at you men - devising endless pretexts and excuses for idling!*

How do you want to spend your time?

While many of us will use our holidays to rest and recover, others will need to, or choose to, work this festive season.

The ancients would have said that holidays present new possibilities, not just for our health but for other things too. For example, Pliny the Younger sometimes used holidays to study Greek. It's hard to disagree with that. (*The Conversation*)

"If you would take, you must first give,
this is the beginning of intelligence."

— Lao Tzu

The Shillong Times

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A Doleful December

DECEMBER 2024 will be remembered as a month of sorrows. On December 25, Osama Suzuki who played a pivotal role in the rise of Suzuki motors - a company that gave India its small car segment - the Maruti 800 passed away at the age of 94. Suzuki led the company for four decades. This was followed by the death of Dr Manmohan Singh, India's former Prime Minister, on December 26. Dr Singh has his list of contributions towards empowering Indian citizens with legislations such as the Right to Information, Right to Education, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme but above all the economic liberalisation of India which freed it from the stifling license-permit raj. On December 29 the world learnt of the death of Jimmy Carter the 39th President of the United States of America at the ripe old age of a century. As politicians Dr Manmohan Singh and Jimmy Carter were gentlemen par excellence who measured their words and took no credit for what they did and least of all never used the media to promote themselves and their achievements. These men lived at an age that believed in purposeful living and high thinking, quite the antithesis of those who followed after them.

In September 2019, Jimmy Carter warned Americans against re-electing Trump saying quite bluntly that he thought it would be a disaster to have four more years of Trump. Subsequently when Trump contested the 2024 elections, Carter's grandson, Jason Carter told a section of the media that the former president wanted to live long enough to cast his vote for the Democratic nominee Kamala Harris and he did exactly that by voting via mail for Harris who lost to Trump. Carter was a humanitarian worker who believed in peace building efforts during his Presidency when he brokered peace between Israel and Egypt which has sustained to this day. He set up the Carter Centre to wage peace, fight disease and build hope. This yielded a Nobel Peace Prize in 2002.

If Jimmy Carter was the unlikely President, Dr Manmohan Singh was the unlikely Prime Minister as this responsibility was literally thrust upon him. But Dr Singh had proved his mettle as the Finance Minister of the country who pushed through the much needed economic reforms that has placed India firmly and decisively amongst the comity of nations after pulling her out of an economic crisis that required a brave Prime Minister who took up cudgels on behalf of his Finance Minister and was unwavering in his faith on Dr Singh. While Dr Singh lived a quiet life after he lost his Prime Ministership in 2014 and only spoke when he was prodded by the media he also hardly made any comments on behalf of the Congress Party or on his own behalf, believing in the adage - actions speak louder than words. Both Jimmy Carter and Dr Manmohan Singh are exemplars of decency and dignity in politics with never a snide remark escaping their lips. That era has now ended. Today's political leaders are brash egotists and devoid of grace.

UGC Draft Flexi-Degree Awarding Policy: A Critical Review

By Prof. D. Mukherjee

The University Grants Commission (UGC) released the Draft UGC (Minimum Standards of Instructions in the Award of UG and PG Degrees) 2024 on Thursday, 12th instant which, inter alia, emphasizes flexibility and a multidisciplinary approach in higher education, attempts to align India's education system with global trends. However, when contextualized against the stark realities of India's labour market and the quality of its degrees, the policy raises critical concerns. With 40% of employed Indians under-skilled or under-educated and 13% of advanced degree holders jobless, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the core issues of employability, skill alignment, and degree utility require deeper scrutiny. Moreover, India's rank of 124th among 145 countries in the ILO's global skills index underscores systemic deficiencies in infrastructure, pedagogy, and educational outcomes. A comparative analysis with the United States and China further highlights the gaps in India's higher education system, particularly in addressing the demands of a rapidly evolving global workforce.

India's employment crisis and the quality of its degrees reveal a stark disconnect between higher education and labour market needs. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reports alarming statistics: under-skilled workers and degrees with limited practical value, particularly in arts and humanities. Humanities degrees, while valuable for critical thinking, lack employable skills, growing from 6% in 2020 to 29% in 2024, exacerbating the issue. In contrast, the U.S. combines liberal arts with vocational training, producing versatile graduates, while China's investment in STEM and technical education positions its graduates as global competitors. India's emphasis on quantity over quality—evident in the proliferation of substandard institutions—dilutes degree value and worsens unemployment among advanced degree holders. The UGC's policy of flexibility aims to promote multidisciplinary learning, credit transfers, and diverse educational pathways. However, implementation challenges persist. Without sufficient infrastructure, trained faculty, and robust assessments, flexibility risks weakening academic standards. For example, switching disciplines or stacking modular credits may lead to fragmented rather than cohesive learning experiences.

India's faculty-student ratios, outdated teaching methods, and limited research funding hinder the policy's success. By contrast, the U.S. supports flexibility with advanced facilities, interdisciplinary research, and skilled faculty, while China blends flexibility with rigor through academia-industry partnerships. To bridge the gap, India must focus on skill development, modernized pedagogy, and institutional quality to align its education system with global workforce demands.

To address the challenges of technological disruption, does India's higher education system integrate technology at every level—from curriculum design to degree awarding processes is a valid question in the minds of the academicians. Online and hybrid learning models, digital credentialing, and AI-driven personalized learning pathways can enhance access and quality. However, the success of such initiatives depends on overcoming infrastructure bottlenecks, particularly in rural and under-served areas. The UGC draft policy's emphasis on digital platforms is a step in the right direction, but it requires significant investment in broadband connectivity, digital devices, and teacher training. For instance, while India has launched initiatives like SWAYAM to promote online learning, their reach and impact remain limited compared to China's comprehensive e-learning platforms, which are integrated with universities and industries. The United States has long pioneered online education through platforms like Coursera and edX, which not only provide access to high-quality courses but also offer industry-recognized certifications.

India's push to increase higher education enrolment has led to a rise in institutions, many lacking proper facilities and qualified faculty. The focus on Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) often compromises quality. In contrast, countries like the US and China have expanded their systems while maintaining high standards through accreditation, performance-based funding, and strong industry ties. India's challenge is shifting from quantity to quality. The UGC must focus on accreditation reforms, enforce quality benchmarks, and encourage investment in faculty development and research. Curriculum redesign should emphasize skill-building, entrepreneurship, and problem-solving to enhance degree relevance. The UGC's push for liberal arts education aims to replicate the success of the US model, but Indian programs lack a skills-oriented approach. Unlike the US, where liberal arts colleges emphasize internships and experiential learning, Indian institutions fail to connect academic learning with employability. China combines STEM with humanities, ensuring students are prepared for diverse careers. In comparison, India must revamp its humanities education to include digital literacy and industry exposure. While the US excels in research, interdisciplinary education, and industry links, and China leads in STEM and technology integration, India's higher education system struggles with quality and relevance. The lack of a strategy to integrate skills, technology, and market-oriented curricula limits India's global competitiveness.

A recent announcement about a PhD titled "Olfactory Ethics: The Politics of Smell" prompts a vital question: Should research be judged solely on market relevance? History shows that seemingly impractical research, like early quantum mechanics, led to transformative discoveries. Similarly, humanities research uncovers insights that enrich culture and challenge narratives. India's tradition of philosophy, literature, and art thrived because scholars explored unconventional ideas freely, unbound by constraints of immediate utility. To address these chal-

enges, the UGC and higher education regulatory bodies should adopt a pragmatic approach to curriculum overhaul and introduce mandatory skill-building modules, internships, and industry projects across all disciplines. Again, accreditation in real time instead of just documentation in files and papers and fixing accountability is sine-qua-non for ensuring quality benchmarks. Besides, technology integration in terms of expansion of digital infrastructure and promoting blended learning models, invest in training programs to equip faculty with the skills needed for multidisciplinary teaching, foster collaborations with industries to ensure that curricula align with evolving job market demands and last but not the least to increase funding for research and innovation and create incentives for innovation in pedagogy and curriculum design. India's higher education system is at a crossroads. While the UGC draft policy's emphasis on flexibility and multidisciplinary education has potential, its success depends on addressing fundamental issues of quality, employability, and infrastructure. By learning from the United States and China, India can chart a path toward a more skill-oriented, technologically integrated, and globally competitive education system. The focus must shift from merely awarding degrees to equipping graduates with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

NEP 2020 is attributed with essence to meet the contemporary requirements but India's challenge in fully implementing policies like NEP 2020 lies in inadequate infrastructure and the overlapping responsibilities of the state and central governments, as education is in the Concurrent List of the Constitution. This often leads to delays, inconsistencies, and uneven implementation across states. To resolve this issue, a coordinated approach is necessary, where both the central and state governments align their priorities and resources. The central government can take the lead in creating uniform policy frameworks, while states can be empowered with adequate funding and autonomy to adapt these policies to local contexts. Establishing a centralized monitoring body could ensure consistent standards and quality across institutions nationwide. Additionally, public-private partnerships can help build the necessary infrastructure, especially in rural and under-served areas. By streamlining governance and resource allocation, India can ensure uniform education delivery with high standards across the country, facilitating the successful implementation of NEP 2020. India should concentrate on quality and simply not quantity if she aspires to obtaining elevated rank from 124th position out of 145 countries in ILO Report.

(The author is an Educationist, a Management Scientist and an Independent Researcher)

and underprivileged. If those of us who have the means don't offer support, what is the point of our wealth and comfort? Let us all find every means to make a difference in the lives of those who work tirelessly just to survive.

Yours etc.,
Albert Khyriem
Shillong

Denouncing Violence and respecting the sanctity of all places of worship

Editor,
I am writing to express strong condemnation of the recent incident at the Church of Epiphany in Mawlynong, where an individual trespassed into the church and shouted slogans. As a

Celebrating the idea of grace and decency in the New Year Fulsome tributes pouring in for Manmohan Singh tell us a lot about the qualities we cherish in a Prime Minister

By Jagdish Rattanani

The fulsome and wholehearted tributes pouring in for Dr. Manmohan Singh who died last week at age 92, tell us about the man and the leader that the former Prime Minister was but they also tell us much more. For one, they bring to the fore the qualities that we like in all people, more so in those we call leaders. These are the very qualities that have all but disappeared from the treasury benches since Dr. Singh left office as Prime Minister in 2014.

The qualities include the idea of grace, the charm of the understated, a restrained manner of speaking, an approach marked by humanity, a distinct sense of simplicity and humility, a keen sense of listening and a resolute refusal to use words that can cause hurt. Add to that a sense of hesitancy if not an outright refusal to land a punch, and a quick withdrawal of anything that might have looked remotely harsh even if it was 'the bitter truth', and the attractiveness of Dr. Singh as the leader we desire becomes irresistible. This is even without considering the innumerable bonuses that came with his technical knowledge, his vast experience and his humble background that made him begin with a life of struggle.

Were there no downsides to Dr Singh? Of course, there were. History will pass judgement, and probably, as Dr. Singh himself said once, that judgement will be "kinder" than those who have accused him of presiding over an establishment that, all said and done, lost its path and ceded power to the BJP for the first time. The man Singh said would be "disastrous" in the job succeeded him as Prime Minister. In Jan. 2014, he told reporters: "... I sincerely believe that it will be disastrous for the country to have Shri Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister." Consider now that Singh himself saw this as a "harsh" comment later and issued a corrective, when he was asked years later about the original remark. In 2018, he said, "I did say Modi will be a disaster as the PM. Now I recognise I used a harsh word I should not have used. I don't want to repeat it. But time is not far off when the public at large will have the chance to pronounce on the efficacy or otherwise of public policy which has been put in place by Modi-ji." The statement stands out and will probably remain etched in history as one of the most graceful rejections of the idea of Modi as the Prime Minister of India.

Contrast this with the ugliness with which the politics over Dr. Singh's funeral is being played out now, with the BJP attack dogs and stooges in the lead. An unnecessary controversy is sought to be raked up over the alleged Congress party mishandling of the late rites of the former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao when he passed away. The difference between grace and gracelessness is as sharp as ever. Almost every issue in the post-Manmohan Singh era is sought to be sensationalised, 'gimmickised' and/or

communalised. Policies and schemes are under-baked and over-sold.

On the one hand, we can see India pouring its heart out in memory of a life journey of grace. On the other hand, is a path of bitterness, a pulling down of civility and finger-pointing. It is the plain truth that the government delayed in naming a memorial spot so that the last rites for Dr. Singh were per force conducted at a public crematorium. If that simple statement is accepted, there will be no controversy and the government can go about fixing it now.

Generally speaking, it is said, leaders ought to be and often are concerned about the legacy they leave behind. Indeed, this is a question that all people are invited to consider at some point in their lives. An exercise used in everyday training programmes, often some version of the original mentioned in Stephen R. Covey's bestseller ('The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People') is simple: participants are asked to imagine their death, and then to explore what they might like said at their funeral. The answer mostly has nothing to do with power, money, race, religion or caste. "What will you be remembered for?" is a question that triggers answers that mostly celebrate service, humanity and connection. The exercise can help people discover purpose, live more meaningfully and develop care towards fellow human beings. When the curtain falls, away from the heat of the trivial and the trumped up, the story is eternal: grace outshines the grotesque, the simple kurta will outshine haute couture, and small actions can speak louder than all the table-pounding, the chest-thumping or the blurring of one-liners.

As we step into the New Year, some of these messages are reinforced even more at a global level, where the respected former US President and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Jimmy Carter passed away in hospice care at the age of 100. The contrast between Carter and Donald Trump, who will be sworn in for a second term as US President on Jan. 20, 2025, once again, is stark. It is a similar story of grace versus gracelessness. Consider Carter's clear and consistent position on Israel, his fight for the rights of Palestinians, or his words to the American people even before he became President: "If I ever lie to you, if I ever make a misleading statement, don't vote for me. I would not deserve to be your president."

It is true that Carter lost the next election to Ronald Reagan. Manmohan Singh after two terms lost to Modi. Near-term twists led to a gathering storm that dictated the turn of politics in both cases. Yet, long after they are gone, leaders known for their grace will stand out as winners in hearts, minds and history books.

(The writer is a journalist and faculty member at SPJIMR. Views are personal.)
(Through The Billion Press)
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Letters to the Editor

Death of humanism and statesmanship

Editor,
The world has lost two great stalwarts -- Dr Manmohan Singh, and Jimmy Carter. Both were gentle humanists and ideal servant leaders. Modest, humble, and selfless, they both left their mark on their times. Unlike many American presidents, Jimmy Carter, a devout and true Christian, never waged war, or shed blood. If his presidency was remarkable, his post-presidency humanitarian works were even more so.

In his capacity as finance minister and prime minister, Dr Singh's contributions to India include -- economic liberalization, abolition of the crippling "License Raj," the RTE and RTI Acts, plus humanitarian measures taken to uplift the most vulnerable sections of society. By bal-

ancing economic liberalization with humanitarian acts, he struck a middle path -- in between vulture-capitalism, and state-sponsored socialism.

Jimmy Carter is credited with many altruistic measures that fostered humanitarianism and peace, both domestically, and worldwide. Especially remarkable, are his emphasis on human rights in US foreign policy, his establishing diplomatic relations with the Peoples' Republic of China and his arranging the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel.

Both leaders were statesmen. Both were exemplary public servants. Both left the world a better place. As if things were not bleak enough -- with Trump-2 about to begin, and a global trend towards authoritarianism -- the world has just lost two great stalwarts.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

How kindness made a difference

Editor,
Just last week, while watching PCN, I was deeply touched by the story of a blind man from Mawngap. He told the media how a stranger's kindness, who is a non-Khasi, changed his life. About four months ago, I had read a letter written by Sailil Gwali, which detailed his chance meeting with that blind man near the Jeep Stand at Lewduh. The blind man must have encountered many people in his life, but it was Sailil Gwali's compassion and awareness that made a difference. Mr Gwali noticed the blind man's struggle in the market, selling kwai and cigarettes in small plastic bags, and shared his story in The Shillong Times through a letter to the editor. Without that effort, no one, not

even the local MLA, Matthew Kurbah, might have known about the blind man's plight. After the story was published, many people visited the blind man and his blind wife, offering help. Inspired by this, MLA Matthew Kurbah not only promised to build a new house for the blind family but also extended his support to three other families in desperate need of shelter. Last week, in the presence of the local headman, secretary, and elders, the MLA inaugurated the newly built houses. It was a heartwarming moment that left everyone deeply touched. What I find even more touching is the blind man's statement to the media. He said, "It's not just me. There are many others who are equally helpless and in need of support." His words remind us of the importance of extending kindness to those who are struggling. I also want to thank Sailil

Gwali for inspiring us regularly with his letters to be more compassionate. His frequently published letters in The Shillong Times highlight the plight of the poor and serve to raise awareness. They are touching, emphasize the importance of treating hardworking villagers, who come to the market to sell their vegetables and fruits, with kindness and respect. It is unfortunate that urban buyers usually exploit them by bargaining excessively, leaving them with barely enough money to cover their bus fare back home as if they do not have a stomach to feed. It is heart-breaking to see these poor families struggle for basic survival, unable to send their children to school because of financial problems. Instead, these children end up working in the fields or as labourers.

I sincerely hope more leaders will follow MLA Kurbah's example and step forward to help the needy

religion and its adherents. They bring shame to our community and undermine the efforts of those who work towards promoting peace, understanding, and harmony. I urge all Hindus to join me in condemning this incident and to reaffirm our commitment to the values of tolerance, respect, and peaceful coexistence. We must not allow misguided individuals to hijack our faith and use it to justify acts of violence and hatred. Let us work together to promote a culture of mutual respect and understanding, and to build a society that values diversity and inclusivity.

Yours etc.,
Sudarshan Dasgupta,
Shillong-4

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