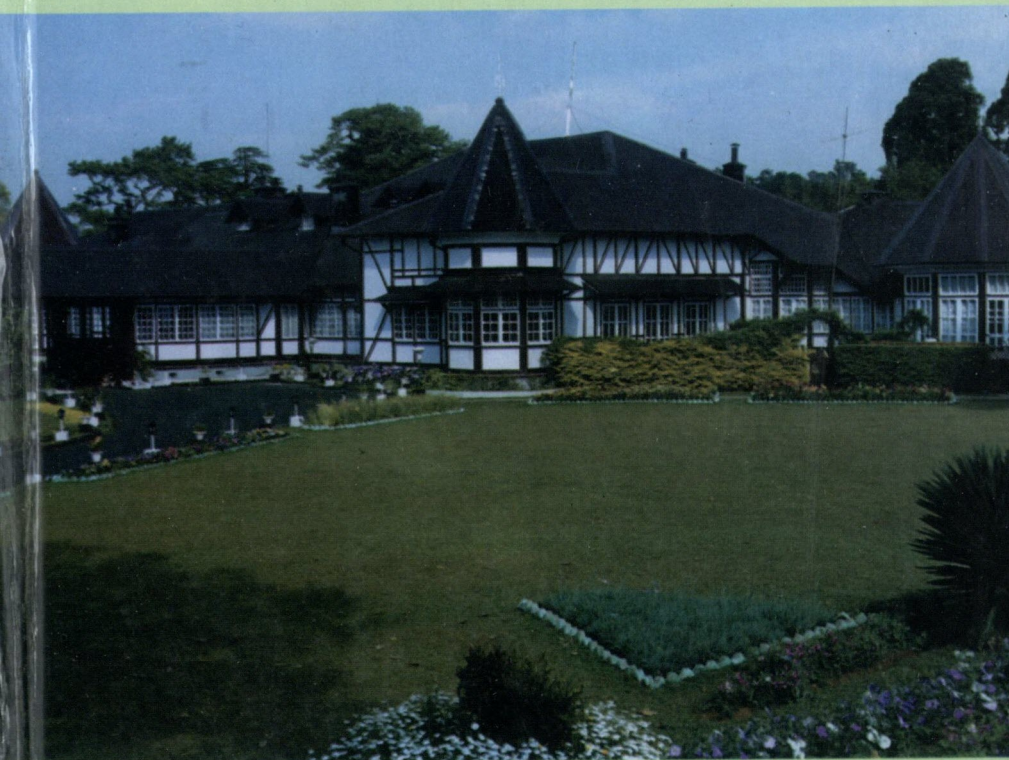


REFLECTIONS FROM SHILLONG

Speeches of M.M. Jacob



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Volume III

Edited by David R. Syiemlieh

This book is the third volume of selection of speeches delivered by Shri M.M. Jacob, Governor of Meghalaya between 2001 and 2005. In his Introduction the Governor gives his views of North East India and some candid opinion on Meghalaya. The thirty-four speeches have been divided into four broad themes relating to education; national integration and communal harmony; economy of North East India and governance. The speeches show the familiarity of Shri M.M. Jacob with Meghalaya State, where he has been Governor for ten years, and the North East region. Not many Governors have had their speeches published. This volume and the two volumes published earlier, with their focus on Meghalaya will add to the literature on the state, its people, its educational institutions, the condition of its economy and governance.

**Rs. 550/-
US \$ 40/-**

David R. Syiemlieh holds a doctorate in History from the North Eastern Hill University, where he is presently Professor and Head of the Department of History. Author of *British Administration in Meghalaya: Policy and Pattern* (1989); *A Brief History of the Catholic Church in Nagaland* (1990); *They Dared to Hope: The Congregation of Holy Cross in India* (1998) and *Survey of History on North East India 1970–1990* (2000), he has edited several volumes of the *North East India History Association Proceedings* of which Association he was General Secretary for many years. Prof. Syiemlieh has contributed articles in numerous journals and edited volumes. These relate largely to the history of the North East. He has been the recipient of several grants and fellowships — Charles Wallace Grant (1993); British Council Grant (1996); India-France Cultural Exchange Programme (1997); and more recently a Fulbright Fellowship at Notre Dame University USA, 1999–2000.

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SPEECHES OF M.M. JACOB

Volume III

Edited by
David R. Syiemlieh



Regency Publications
New Delhi-India

1963
17/11/05



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ISBN 81-89233-29-7

*Published by Regency Publications, 20/36-G, Old Market, West Patel
Nagar, New Delhi 110 008 and printed at Radiant Printers, New Delhi,
Phones: 5248 4101; 5546 2898; Telefax: 2588 4571*

*Email: info@regency-books.com, regency@satyam.net.in
Website: www.regency-books.com*

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	iii
<i>Introduction</i>	xiii

Part I: Educational Thoughts

1. Quality Education	3
2. Assessing and Accreditation of Higher Educational Institutions	11
3. Pursuit of Knowledge	16
4. Inspiring Youth	20
5. Vision in Life	26
6. Human Enjoyment	32
7. Commitment to Teaching	40
8. Celebrating an Educational Institution	44
9. Higher Education	50

Part II: National Integration and Communal Harmony

10. National Integration and Communal Harmony	57
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11. Remembering a Great Poet	73
12. Sri Aurobindo — Epitome of the Indian Spirit	79
13. Relevance of the Past	87
14. Ministering Angels	92
15. Spirit of Harmony in Song	96
16. Remembering a Freedom Fighter	100

Part III: Economy of North East India

17. Economic Development of North Eastern States	105
18. Border Trade	111
19. Development of North East India	114
20. Geo Parks for Meghalaya	120
21. Rainwater Harvesting	124
22. India's Economic Development	130
23. North East Industrial Scenario	138
24. Kerala and North East India: Cooperation in Rubber Production	142

Part IV: Governance

25. Address to Legislators	151
26. Better Governance	172
27. Administration of Justice	179
28. The Past and the Present	182

29. Administering Tribal Areas	187
30. Guardians of the Law	192
31. Meghalaya Day	196
32. Speech on the Occasion of Republic Day, 2005	201
33. Address to Legislators	205
34. Governance and Corruption	223

Introduction

NORTH EAST INDIA — MEGHALAYA

North East India

For historical reasons North East India is not well connected with the rest of India. Independence and partition of the sub-continent with East Pakistan separated the North East from the mainland. A narrow stretch of territory about 25 kms in breadth connects the region with Bengal and the Indian mainland. The region shares a common border of about 5000 kms with China, Myanmar, Burma, Bangladesh, Bhutan. 98% of the borders on North East are foreign countries and only 2% is with the Indian mainland. This is adversely affecting the economic development thereby, hampering trade and commerce.

Inhabiting the North-East are some 206 tribes, each having their distinct language, culture, beliefs, and ways of living. Besides these communities there are the Assamese and the Bengalese who are the dominant communities of the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys. The educated tribesman speaks English, which is the main language of education,

administration and the legislatures. Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram are known as tribal States, with marginal presence of other non-tribal communities.

The colonial administration thought it prudent to impose the Inner Line permit to restrict entry into the tribal inhabited areas. In more recent times the Restricted Area Permits continues to be operative in some tribal areas. Though Assam and Meghalaya are States where any Indian national may visit without permits, there is a perception prevalent amongst tour operators in foreign countries in Europe and USA, that North East India is not open to foreign visitors. This feeling certainly has to be removed, to expedite tourist flow from the West, to this region. So also, the absence of foreign visitors discourages any foreign direct investment, in building up infrastructure on setting up of industries. All these are matters that are hampering the economic development and generation of employment.

Education has advanced fairly well in the region. It has a higher literacy rate than the national average. The level of literacy rate, ranges from 88.49% in Mizoram; Tripura-73.66%; Manipur-68.87%; Nagaland-67.11%; Assam-64.28%; Meghalaya-63.31% and Arunachal Pradesh-54.74%. Thanks to the Government of India's initiatives and guidance, several reputed Universities are catering to the needs of students, including an Indian Institute of Technology at Guwahati and Central Universities like the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong and Assam University, Silchar.

But the employment of educated youths is still a far cry, which results in frustration and agitation in their minds. Absence of modernized agriculture, processing and marketing is a drawback. Due to lack of investment in industries,

the youths do not get a chance to employment. Employment opportunities are largely in government services, which is over employed and saturated.

The rural youths are also without adequate vocational education or training to face the challenges of life. The absence of suitable land tenure might be one of the reasons for people without agricultural land. Land Ceiling Act and land legislation are not generally implemented. Areas like horticultural crops, cash crops etc., would have changed the rural lives. But somehow, there is no political or administrative will and hence, that does not take place. One major reason is the absence of marketing facilities, where farmers could not get sufficient remunerative income.

Numerous insurgent or militant groups, large and small, operate locally in almost all the seven states of North East. Each militant group has some grievance or demand pertaining to their State. Though they operate independently in this region, there is also a link between all of them particularly, in terrorists training camps operated mostly in foreign soil and sometimes, in the Indian forests of the region. Most of these militant groups are young boys, who are motivated to make easy money for easy living and not based on any agenda.

Khasi-Jaintias

It is worthwhile to pen a few lines on the State of Meghalaya, with its capital in Shillong. Shillong was capital for composite Assam during the British regime and later till a separate State of Meghalaya was formed. David Scott, the British civil servant of the East India Company, was the Agent of the Governor-General North East Frontier. During the First

Anglo-Burmese War the British authorities felt the need for a road to connect Sylhet and Assam. The route was to traverse across the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. David Scott overcame the difficulties his administration faced from the opposition of the Khasi Syiems — their chiefs and people. Impressed by the favourable cool climate of Khasi Hills, they negotiated with the Syiem of Cherra in 1829 for a sanatorium for the British. Thus began the consolidation of British interests in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills.

A serious uprising by the Khasis against foreign occupation of their land followed. It began early in 1829 and continued till January 1833. Eventually the Khasi confederate chiefs were no match against the military might of the British. David Scott negotiated for the surrender of the leader of the Khasi resistance, Tirot Sing, who was then taken to Dacca for detention. After the resistance of the Khasis a political agent was posted in the hills, with its headquarters at Cherrapunjee. But the climatic condition and facilities of Cherrapunjee did not make the British happy, they then moved out to Shillong, which was then known as “Yeddo”. The name “Shillong” was later adopted, as the location of the new town was below the Shillong Peak.

In 1874, a separate Chief Commissionership was formed with Shillong as the seat of administration. The new administration included Sylhet, now a part of Bangladesh. Also included in the Chief Commissionership were the Naga Hills (present day Nagaland), Lushai Hills (present day Mizoram) as well as Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills. Shillong was the capital of composite Assam till 1969 when the autonomous state of Meghalaya was formed. In January 1972 Meghalaya was made a full-fledged state.

The state is largely comprised of the Khasi-Jaintia and the Garos, tribes which trace their history to antiquity. The Khasis tradition gives them an origin in South East Asia while the Garos have a Tibeto-Burman origin. Both mongoloid tribes are matrilineal, the origins of which have not been fully explained.

Who are the Khasis? Several historians and researchers are of the opinion that Khasis are Indo-Chinese people, speaking the Monkhmer language, which is spoken by various tribes in Cambodia. They are said to be from China — the Mongoloid overflow into India. For some unexplained reason they migrated eventually to the hills which have taken their name. Originally, the people living in the Jaintia Hills were known as Pnars and those living in the higher region of the Khasi Hills were known as Kynriam while those living in the southern slopes were known as War and those of the northern slopes-Bhoi. The name Jaintia came because their Syiem-Raja had the capital of the state at Jaintiapur, now located in Bangladesh. The Khasi Hills are under three revenue districts while the entire Jaintia hills fall into one district. The communities each have another tier of administration — the Khasi and the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Councils with their headquarters at Shillong and Jowai respectively.

Garos

So far, I have dwelt on some aspects of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills in which region, the State capital is situated. The Garo Hills is equally important. The Garos are the dominant tribe in the hills that take their name. Three revenue districts and one Autonomous District Council administer them. Absence of good road connecting the State capital Shillong with Tura,

the major town in the Garo Hills, is always felt as a factor that prevent free flow of people from one region to the other. Even the administrators who are responsible for the whole State, are found wanting for periodic visits for monitoring the projects and program implementation. The Garos are hard working and sturdy tribe with fine qualities. The region is conducive for agricultural crops, including plantations because of the favourable climatic condition. Some attempts are successfully made to plant cashew, rubber and tea, in the region. The Garo Hills is coming up in economic prosperity through agriculture, including plantations and horticulture. However, lack of infrastructure like roads, electricity, health-care, good schools etc., are concerns that requires more attention. Tura in West Garo Hills is the headquarter and a prosperous town. The tourist-friendly Wangala, the Dance of a Hundred Drums, takes place every year in some location of the Garo Hills. The North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) has set up a campus in Tura, which eventually, could develop into a State University in due course. There is an unfinished airport known as Baljek Airport, which could also be developed in due course, to attract tourists and investors from outside. South Garo Hills is one of the most backward districts in North-Eastern India. Recently, the Government of India has identified 150 most backward districts in the country. This includes the South Garo Hills. It is blessed with Simsang river, which is one of the largest rivers in Meghalaya. Legend has it, that the goddess Parvati, wife of Lord Shiva, used to take her bath in the Simsang river. Baghmara town is said to be a gift of this river.

Meghalaya is famous for some of its natural caves. There are several large caves in the Khasi Hills. The most impressive cave in the Garo Hills is the Siju cave. The first Chief

Minister of Meghalaya State, Capt. Williamson A Sangma, hailed from this area. The Balpakram National Park is a fascinating tourists destination. It is situated at a distance of 68 kms. from Baghmara, in South Garo Hills. There is a general belief amongst the Garos that when a person dies, his/her immortal spirit journeys to Balpakram to stay there, until directed by the higher power to undergo the process of re-birth. Variety of wild life, elephants, bison, barking deer, slow loris, golden langurs, birds like hornbills and peasants are seen in the park. Different types of ground orchids blossom during the month of April, in this area.

If the Garo Hills district is to be better connected with the State headquarters at Shillong, it is high time to have a good State highway from Shillong to Tura, via the West Khasi Hills. I have visited all the districts in Garo Hills, including the border area with Bangladesh, which is guarded by the Border Security Force (BSF), who are doing tremendous job in guarding the border and preventing illegal infiltration.

The Khasi, Jaintia and Garo women enjoy a respectable social position. This is largely because they are matrilineal societies. In Khasi society the ancestral house goes to the youngest girl-child in the family and the property right is almost exclusively for the women. Women through lineage preserve the family name and tradition. The custom in marriage is that men generally have to come over to the house of the wife. Children take the mother's name. Some are of the view that though there has been a growing impact of western culture on the Khasi women, their actual status has not improved much since women do not have any authorized role in the activities such as the lower level of administration — the Dorbar or in church organisation for Christians.

Shillong

I am happy to be here in Shillong and this small but beautiful hill State. The people are simple, straightforward and willing to listen. But they also believe in dialogue and discussion for all issues. They do not like to take orders, unless they feel that they are also taken into confidence.

Shillong is widely known as the “Scotland of the East” It is a beautiful town. I first came to Meghalayá as a visitor to see Shillong, during an AICC meeting at Guwahati, in 1976, convened by Smt. Indira Gandhi. After attending the session as an AICC member, I took time off to see Shillong. The reputation of the town as a place of excellence in education and modernity attracted me to make the visit. During my two days stay ‘incognito’ at the Shillong Club, I went around to see some institutions. Later, I again visited this place to inaugurate a rural station for the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, at a time when I was a member of the Council of Ministers, under Shri Rajiv Gandhi. Again on another occasion, I came to attend a meeting in an educational institution.

Later as Minister of State for Home Affairs had another opportunity come to Shillong in 1992, on receipt of unpleasant reports about communal clashes. There were reports of loss of human lives and destruction of property. During this visit, I stayed at the Pinewood Hotel and met several representatives of the people and also, visited areas of affected families and people. I remember to have attended a hurriedly convened informal meeting with some important members of the cabinet, senior officials, both police and civil. I was glad the members of the government was responsive and took immediate action to prevent the repetition of such atrocities.

Thought the Khasis, originally settled in this town at later stages Assamese, Bengalese, Marwaris, Punjabis, Biharis, South Indians, Tibetans, Nepalese, and other tribal peoples have come to live here. Generally this cosmopolitan nature of the town was reflected in harmony and understanding without any class or caste hatred.

Shillong is fortunate to have a Central University — the North Eastern Hill University, where students from various parts of the North-Eastern India, get their higher and specialized education. With the commissioning of NEIGRIHMS with super specialty hospital and medical college facilities, Shillong would become a much sought after destination. In order to save the above mentioned two prestigious institutions from over-crowding, the State of Meghalaya has to consider developing the NEHU Campus at Tura, as a State University and strengthening and modernising the district hospitals, with more facilities, specialists, technicians and infrastructure. For all this and more Shillong should have better air connectivity and a railhead to transport goods. The National Highway Bye-Pass Road, should be completed in order to reduce traffic congestion in the Shillong town. Above all, a pro-development mindset has to be developed amongst the people. People should not fall victim of anti-development lobbies, which are internationally active to prevent developing countries to grow faster, at the behest of certain organizations, with roots in highly developed countries.

Meghalaya

Meghalaya has a bright future. The infrastructure has to be developed, if villages are connected with good motorable roads, electricity and drinking water, should reach every house.

Then the services of government agencies would easily reach the people. But the major task is to prevent the present large-scale migration of youths to the cities, in search of easy living, leaving the villages without much talented youths.

Good educational institutions like Higher Secondary Schools and Colleges should be located at least, in the district or sub-divisional levels. This would also encourage officials of education and health-care, to live within the villages, rather than to run to cities. Without the administrative machinery, their presence and supervision in the village areas — no worthwhile improvement would make it happen. Meghalaya has all the resources including minerals, and the land is fertile for agriculture and horticulture. The society is culturally strong with healthy social heritage. However, the economy of the State is not able to generate wealth and employment. There is less enthusiasm for industrialization, though attempts are made by the State Government to set up an industrial estate. Agriculture is the main occupation of the people traditionally, and the absence of any marketing network has left the farmers at the mercy of middle men and the income from such farming is very meagre. Processing and marketing of agricultural produces are practiced in several Indian States but Meghalaya lags behind.

Land is fertile and suitable for horticulture like medicinal plants, orchids, ginger, and fruits like pineapple and plantains. Plantation crops like cashew, rubber, coffee, and tea are yielding profits. But no serious attempts are being made to improve the cultivation of these crops, to achieve better results. The poor performances in the agricultural sector, retards the growth of agro-based industries as well as generation of employment.

Land is a precious gift and no land could be sold to anyone other than the tribes, and in no case to outsiders. Absence of cadastral land survey puts everyone in the dark, in regards to ownership of land. Even for public purposes, the Central or State Government finds it difficulty to acquire land. I have expressed my unhappiness on many occasions — when some vested interest groups, prevent land from being acquired for public purposes. The Government is also seen as taking no remedial steps on such issues, even though the law permits it to acquire land for public purposes.

More training to the youths by using their native skills and vocational education, would make them self-employed or employable. The periodical statements through media by certain self-assumed NGOs, without any follow-up, are deterrent to a well-meaning section of people, to carry out any worthwhile program. Meghalaya needs more industrial concerns and requires outside capital to be brought in. But the land tenure is a bottleneck to the location of any industry.

The multiplicity of authorities like State Government, District Councils and Village Durbars, it has been reported, discourage any well-meaning person, to undertake employment generating enterprises. Even if a major construction work is envisaged to fix up a contractor with expertise and financially sound, is often blocked by some vested interest persons, by preventing issuing of trading license. This delays even governmental projects. A single window system initiated recently is an attempt to tide over difficulties in starting up of industries.

There are many unfinished and incomplete bridges and buildings in many parts of the State. Some structures remain in incomplete state for several years. Frequent Government

changes, as well as the transfer of officers, makes it rather difficult to fix responsibility for any failures. These are some of the disappointing observations. The expansion of the Shillong Airport and runway and an ambitious Bye-Pass project for the National Highway-44, are still in the pipeline for over a decade and are yet to be implemented.

There are innumerable NGOs functioning in major towns — some of which are engaged in social, educational and cultural activities, rendering effective services to the community. There are few NGOs who are only “Paper NGOs” — without any positive agenda or action. Some are there only to create obstacles to the good work of the Government, through protests, in various forms. I have my suspicion that certain NGOs are getting support from international pressure groups, to create confusion and prevent economic growth in the region.

The youths of Meghalaya are an asset for the future of the State. The traditional institutions of governance, District Councils, and the State Administration, should have to take up seriously the development of the personality and potential in the youth. Life in the villages should be made more youth-friendly, by introducing physical activities such as sports and games and cultural shows. The dropout rate of students at school levels is very high and alarming. Providing the school environment with more activities could bring this down. Teachers of schools require adequate training, especially in modern technological skills like computers.

Colleges or other educational institutions should be fairly distributed in the villages, rather than keeping everything in the capital town. This might create frustration and agitation among the youths, which could eventually become a serious

social problem. Employment and meaningful leisure-time activities could bring cheerfulness in the life of the youth. No one should run into unknown areas like militancy in pursuit of misguided temporary pleasure. The youths should have a dream with a vision which if properly directed would eventually witness contented youth contributing their best to their communities, the State and the Nation. The youth of Meghalaya should develop more self-confidence in themselves. They are not inferior to anybody else in the country. Meghalaya has a bright future and those glorious days are just ahead. Seize the golden opportunity and become the beneficiaries I say, and not remain as slaves of destiny.

I have enjoyed my tenure in this State — discharging the function as Governor. I have got the full cooperation from all political parties, as well as social, cultural and religious groups. When I arrived as Governor I had little idea about the people and their institutions and the government of the State. All I knew was about the administration in general. But my experience with active parliamentary life at New Delhi helped me to know the problems of governance and the constitutional remedies for unforeseen situations. Also, my experience as Union Minister helped me to handle situations peacefully and democratically. I believe in transparency of governance and discussions at every stage, whenever decisions are to be taken.

I found the tribes and other plains people living in the urban areas, able to understand and appreciate each other. All religious festivals of Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, and social festivals or ceremonies of various linguistic minority groups like Bengalese, Assamese, Marwaris, Kannadigars and Malayalis are observed by respective groups most peacefully.

Though I made several visits for political activities to other North-Eastern States particularly Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura etc., I have not taken up any political assignment for Meghalaya, though I knew many leaders of the State. I am convinced and have made every effort to impress national level planners and administrators that Meghalaya in particular and the North East in general requires better understanding and appreciation.

Governance

As everyone knows, the Indian Constitution is based on strong principles and strong foundations. There is a solution thought of in the constitution for every contingent situation. The important aspect comes up only, when a single party does not command the majority. If the single party has absolute majority, the Governor shall invite the leader of that majority party to form a government. If any party does not enjoy the majority, then the Governor has to use his discretionary powers to invite someone, who in the opinion of the Governor is capable to form the government with majority support.

In this situation, the Governor's decision assumes special importance. There are certain precedents in the formation of ministries, even though in certain situations, these precedents are not strictly adhered to. I feel that such situations can be overcome, by following healthy traditions. I always consider that the first priority should be given to the single largest party with absolute majority. In the absence of such party, the Governor could invite the pre-election coalition.

Again, in the absence of a viable coalition, the next attempt is to call for the leader of the next largest party. And

if that party does not command the majority, then a post-election coalition should be the alternative. The leader of a post-election coalition could be invited to form the government. I do not accept proposals for parading of MLAs before the Governor, to show their majority. There are cases where even the signatories changed their loyalty, during the course for trial of strength.

There are also instances in some States, where the signatories put in their signatures at two opposing camps simultaneously. In order to avoid these eventualities, I consider the best course of action is to leave the trial of strength on the floor of the House. The Governor would have to appoint a pro-term Speaker, to conduct the Swearing-in of members and subsequent trial of strength. This seems to be the best course of action open in our context.

Meghalaya Politics

Periodical change of Government is a matter of concern. It adversely affects the stability of the administration and good governance. On the whole, Meghalaya is following comparatively better financial discipline. But for lack of field supervision, some of the people-friendly programs like public health, primary education, are not fully reaching the people. This also is adversely affecting the quality of education and health-care and other services. Then again there is the problem of poor road connectivity and lack of power supply, which stands in the way for effective administration.

When I came to Shillong as a Governor in 1995 — Meghalaya had a Congress-led government, under the leadership of Shri Salseng C. Marak as Chief Minister. At the

close of the five-year term of the term of Assembly fresh elections took place. The Congress was the single largest political party with more MLAs, but short of a majority. There was no pre-election coalition for the Governor to look for. Shri S.C. Marak staked his claim by showing the support of few more MLAs to form the majority, with a post-election understanding. Being the single largest party, I appointed Shri S.C. Marak as leader of the House and gave him about ten days time, to summon the House and prove his majority.

The Opposition, led by late Shri B.B. Lyngdoh came along with his team staking their claim. He said he could parade the majority MLAs before the Governor. But even before the stipulated time, Shri S.C. Marak summoned the House and announced resignation of his government, as he felt that his partners did not stand to support him. I then invited the post-election coalition leader Shri B.B. Lyngdoh to form the government. But his government lasted for some months only. Once again, Shri B.B. Lyngdoh formed another government, with a different set of coalition parties.

Again the ruling coalition cracked, leading to the resignation of Shri B.B. Lyngdoh. Shri E.K. Mawlong, of the same party (UDP) — staked his claim and the Governor consented his claim, as he enjoyed support of the majority. Since both leaders belonged to the same party, I did not have any problem in accepting this change of guard. This proved to be a smooth transition then. In the meantime, some Ministers in the Council were either dropped or made to resign, and new ones were inducted. After a few months, a change in the structural composition of the ruling party took place and again, a change in the Ministry took place. In another political turmoil, a new Ministry headed by Dr. F.A. Khonglam, came into effect.

In a short span of five years in Assembly, about five different governments have come to power, under different leaders. Again in the ensuing election, the leader of the largest party, Dr. D.D. Lapang (the present government) staked his party's claim with a post-election coalition of more parties. In the absence of any other claim from any other party within the stipulated time, the Governor invited the largest party to form a coalition government, as they had the required number of members. They proved the majority by convening the House, as directed by the Governor, within a stipulated time.

As Governor, I am not happy about the constant changes in the Government, and lack of a steady policy for administration. The number of Ministers inducted was always more than the majority of MLAs in the House, reducing the Opposition and making them weak and ineffective — a mere farce. The Speaker's partiality sometimes eroded the value of Parliamentary Democracy — even making the people to lose faith in the Government elected by them. However, the transition from one coalition to another was by and large, peaceful and orderly, for the people to accept the changes. I am happy that the relationship between the State Government and the Governor are extremely cordial — thanks to the Chief Ministers!

The decision of the Government of India, to restrict the number of the Council of Ministers to twelve members, in a House of sixty members is a welcome step. However, the ruling parties in Meghalaya, as well as in some other North-Eastern States, have found a way out by appointing the dropped Ministers as Parliamentary Secretaries or Chairmen of Government Corporations. I consider this as a way out to maintain stability of governance. Also, the recent decision of

the Government and Parliament of India, to modify the anti-defection law, is a welcoming sign in regards to Meghalaya and other States, in order to prevent constant changes among party affiliations, thereby, making Parliamentary Democracy a matter of ridicule. Governors are happy to see a stable State Government for a fixed term.

Good Wishes

All these years I have lived in the Raj Bhavan. The Governor's residence I believe should be people friendly. I have had the pleasure through the office of Governor to be closely associated with the Government of the State. In the process I have learned much from the people, their culture, their tribal bonds and egalitarian spirit, their tolerance and outlook of life. I have often spoken in admiration of their traditions and institutions. I have made friends and come to love the place and its people. I have particularly encouraged students and youth to visit the Raj Bhavan, not only to see the heritage building and its surroundings, but more so, for getting the knowledge about the working of Indian democratic polity and administrative structures.

With these few lines, I wish the people of Meghalaya, particularly the youth in whose future the State rests, my best wishes.