

"There is nothing like a dream to create the future."

— Victor Hugo

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Faith, Religion, Chauvinism

INDIA is a land of diverse faiths some indigenous, others adapted. All have learned to co-exist over centuries because diversity is India's strong point. Faith is a fundamental aspect of human existence. It guides human action or inaction but it is purely personal and has been present throughout history. Faith originates from individual experiences, personal reflections, and cultural influences. Faith is shaped by upbringing, education, and exposure to different belief systems. It evolves and develops as individuals grow and encounter new experiences. Since faith is personal, a person holding a particular faith would not consider it a duty to force someone else to accept and believe the same faith. It is when faith becomes a religion that the idea of conversion comes in. Religion uses faith to organise people of similar faiths into a structure, complete with rituals and modes of worship of a particular form.

All religions have their roots in teachings by a person who claims to have been inspired by a god or gods. That's where the problem arises. There may be several such prophets with claims to having direct communication with god/gods and that person is given a special status in society and becomes the purveyor of messages of salvation from immoral human conduct. When several such preachers, teachers, saints and mahants each begin to preach that their religion is the only true one then religious chauvinism creeps in and conversion begins. This claim to exclusivity is what divides people, especially those without the capacity for rational thinking. Their gullible minds tend to consider such teachings as absolute truths. While religions may have had some specific historical events or figures that serve as their foundation, over time they have evolved through interpretations, adaptations, and the influence of cultural, social, and political factors. In India, for decades people have tolerated all faiths until some years ago when certain faiths were demonised and Hindus were made to believe they were an endangered community. It is not certain how those that have adopted the indigenous faith in Meghalaya were also made to feel they needed to assert themselves against those considered to have adopted a foreign religion. Such converts were considered as traitors of indigenity. It's true that Christians too had a condescending attitude towards those of the indigenous faith, often referring to them as pagans, meaning non-believers in the Christian God. This is how societies with the same bloodline are divided by religion.

However, it is when religion takes the form of a political project which uses peoples' beliefs as a mode of mind control that societies are torn apart. People of the same indigenous roots are then no longer able to unite on other more important issues. Left to themselves humans are capable of co-existence and sorting things out through a process of dialogue without the need for taking defensive stances to support their faith and reject others as unbelievers. Khasi society needs to resolve this existential crisis before further damage is inflicted on the community spirit.

Nongkseh: A Gateway to Khasi History

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

An exploration of the past can be divided into two categories: history and pre-history, with the distinction being based on the presence or absence of written records. In that sense, the history of the Khasis started when Reverend Thomas Jones brought out the Khasi translation of two Catechisms (one in English and one in Welsh) giving birth to the Khasi alphabet. There is some controversy regarding this claim as some argue that it was Alexander Burgh Lish, a Baptist missionary who, in his essay, 'A Brief Account of the Khasesees' for the first time, wrote Khasi words in the Roman script. Therefore, A.B. Lish, not Rev. Thomas Jones, deserves credit for first creating the Khasi script and thus heralding the beginning of the community's history.

Notwithstanding this minor controversy, it does not mean that before the coming of the British, the Khasi had no way of recording the past and passing it to the younger generations. The lack of script is more than compensated by the richness of the oral culture, which gives a unique glimpse into the past. One of those oral narratives is about the founding of the Hima Shillong, a powerful chieftainship which in 1859 became divided into the Hima Khyrim and Hima Mylliem. Hamlet Bareth Ngap Kynta's book 'The history and culture of the Khasi people' gives a very detailed account of the founding myth and the various events that took place in the Hima which was based at Nongkseh (a village 5 km to the south of Shillong). One of those is about the civil war in which the Chieftainship almost became extinct.

According to tradition, U Piar was the 6th Syiem from the ancestral lineage which traces its descent from Ka Pahsyntiew, who had a mythical origin. During his rule a civil war began between the two parties: on the one side there was the Syiemship being supported by the Nongkseh Thangkiew Basan (head of the founding clans), while on the other, there were three Basans who wanted to annihilate the ruling clan. In the war, attackers besieged and burned the royal residence. The Thangkiew Basan saved his chieftain's daughter Ka Jait Kiri and took her to a sanctuary in the west. Another ruling clan member, Ka Khein, escaped to Mawpdang and started another clan, which survives to this day. After the war ended, people brought

Ka Jait Kiri back, restoring the ruling clan line. So, Nongkseh was a very important site for understanding the history of the Khasi. Recent archaeological excavations have further reaffirmed its importance.

Couple of weeks ago, my friend and I went to Nongkseh to search for the old market of Shillong. Before the coming of the British and the setting up of Shillong around Lewduh (also called Bara Bazar), this market was very important. After asking around, we finally found the market was behind the house of a family. We asked the permission of the family to enter their compound and look at the monoliths that were in the backyard. We took pictures and were about to leave when suddenly from the other side appeared Marco Mitri and AC Mawlong, both professors from the history department of NEHU. Marco Mitri is well known for his excavations around Lum Sohpetbneng, where he found evidence of a Neolithic settlement dating to around 770 BCE and 1220 BCE, approximately 3,243 years ago. He had also discovered the site of Myrkhan, a village close to Nongkseh, which was a workshop dated between 1885 BCE to 1765 BCE, or approximately 3,900 years ago. So, the establishment of the Hima Shillong in Nongkseh was of high strategic value.

We exchanged greetings and then we realised that the monoliths that we found were just a small section of the original market, which was located just behind the house. In the original market there were dozens of monoliths, some still standing while others had fallen down. Pine trees covered the site, which must have once been an open space for stalls like those still found in the weekly markets of Sohra, Umsning, and others. Marco took us to the dig site where he had found many artifacts which attested to the variety of goods that were traded in the market. One of the intriguing finds was wheel made pottery, which revealed that the market had visitors from the plains, possibly, both from the Brahmaputra valley and the plains of Sylhet (or Shella Hat in Khasi). His previous dig at Lum Sohpetbneng yielded 2,058 handmade potsherds of differing varieties, all crafted without a wheel. Today pottery making has completely disappeared from the Khasi

region and is now limited to the village of Larmai in the Thadlaskin Block of West Jaintia Hills. These are not wheel-made pottery.

Marco also found a lot of seeds which he has sent for identification and dating. Austroasiatic speakers were among the first to cultivate rice in South China, their original homeland. During their migration to Southeast Asia and South Asia, they introduced agriculture, especially rice cultivation. The rice consumed in India today is a hybrid between the semi-domesticated indica species and the japonica species brought by the Austroasiatic people who are today identified with the Khasis and the Mundas. In his previous excavation, Marco found rice seeds, but those were of the wild variety. Evidence of domesticated rice would actually confirm the hypothesis of Austroasiatic speaking people bringing domesticated rice to South Asia.

Archaeologically, the Khasi appeared to have arrived in their present location by around 2000 BCE or 4000 years ago, but genetic evidence puts them at 3000 BCE or 5000 years ago. The area around Nongkseh seems to have been a very important site for settlement. It is also located not far from Nongkrem, the oldest iron smelting site in all the North East. This site is over 2000 years old. We can gauge the industry's importance from the fact that iron slags were the most common finds. These were telltale signs that iron smelting was a very important activity that took place in the market. The market, in fact, could have grown around the workshops. Till the coming of the British, the Khasis were exporting both iron tools and ore to the plains in exchange for other goods. Iron was such an important commodity that the Jayantia Buranjis mentions that when the Syiem of Jaintiapur and Ahom soveiteign would exchange greetings with each other, the former would attach pieces of iron with the message. The word 'Pnar,' a sub-group of the Khasi, is supposed to actually mean Pakka Nar (or good quality iron).

The discovery or introduction of the iron industry among the Khasi was a very important event and, according to Marco, could have been an instrumental factor in the formation of the early Himas, one of which was Hima Shillong. Slave raid-

ing was an important activity among the Khasis who were described by the Garos and Nagas as "those who live up above and draw fire from heaven to make iron" in the 1958 book 'Secret Lands Where Women Reign' by Gabrielle Bertrand. At the same time, the degraded landscape seen around Sohra resulted from the trees being cut down for charcoal to fuel the industry. Heavy rainfall, without trees to anchor the soil, gradually washed away the soil over many centuries, leaving the landscape barren except for a few patches where local communities designated certain areas as Law Kynthang (sacred forest) or Law Adong (Restricted forest). It appears that the market at Nongkseh was trading in enormous quantities of iron.

Marco also showed us many cists, which were stone coffins containing the ashes of the dead, found throughout the village. These contained the remains of the founding clans, like the Thangkiew. The structures were built as a dolmen, using several upright stone slabs to support a flat roofing stone. It was surrounded by several upright stones with the entrance facing to the east. If the clan were to allow samples to be taken, it could tell the exact date when the first groups arrived in Nongkseh and established the settlement and the market.

Nongkseh is one of the many sites in Meghalaya which will help understand not just the history of the Khasis but shed more light on the link between South Asia with South East Asia and South China. Being the second oldest community in South Asia, the history of the Khasis goes back many thousands of years ago (much earlier than the steppe pastoralists who brought Sanskrit and early forms of Hinduism to South Asia) and the lack of a written script is no more a handicap in understanding it. The work by Marco Mitri and others like him will be invaluable. Maybe, one day Nongkseh could become an open-air museum (a dream Marco shares) where researchers and tourists would visit the site and understand more the significance of the place and the people who shaped the history of an entire region, stretching all the way from South China to South Asia.

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

Chad Cement and dismissive attitude of the indigenous faith

By Heirtami Paswet

In October of 2019, the Jowai police took custody of a mentally challenged man named Rimialson Daw after an FIR was filed against him. His crime? A barely intelligible Facebook post directed at the recently deceased Archbishop Dominic Jala. In the following days, the local news outlets, especially the vernacular ones, were inundated with posts expressing outrage against him. As a citizen of the 21st century, I believe in free speech but I also find it childish to spread vitriol against religious leaders or any religion for that matter. I recall scrolling through Mr. Daw's Facebook page and immediately thinking to myself that my resume paled in comparison to his. He had posts in unintelligible English claiming that he was once married to Aishwariya Rai, had served as a general in the Indian Army and was also a thermonuclear scientist. Many, of course, refused to believe that he was mentally unstable and hurled insults and threats at his family.

A few days ago, I stumbled upon an Instagram reel by 4Front Media where a man by the name of Reading War—who as it turns out is my brother-in-law—claimed that indigenous festivals like Chad Sukra and Behdienkhlam are meaningless as people no longer own paddy fields. I watched the entire video and the full context turned out to be worse than the snippet. Towards the end of the discussion, Kong Reading, fumbling for words, perhaps tried to articulate that since the indigenous culture derives its essence from agriculture, festivals like Chad Sukra and Behdienkhlam lose their meaning if the environment deteriorates. One would think such a serious issue to be treated with due consideration, instead the panelists broke into laughter with Rev. Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh mockingly christening the festivals "Chad Cement".

Unlike Rimialson Daw, the panelists are not mentally ill and in any context, this is extremely patronizing and inexcusable. Most followers of the indigenous faith across the Khasi-Jaintia hills are scandalized by this cavalier attitude. This

discussion exposes a deep-rooted misunderstanding of the indigenous faith by those who no longer practice it which often results in a dismissive attitude towards its festivals reducing them to meaningless extravaganzas and rituals devoid of any mythology or theology. A few writers like Omarlin Kyndiah, Hammarsing Kharhmar and HH Mohrmen have attempted to elucidate the essence behind indigenous festivals to rid them of any lingering colonial biases. However, it is clear that this bias persists among a large section of our society. If even liberal-minded figures like Rev. Pyrtuh and Kong Reading—who himself visits us every Behdienkhlam (which, by the way, is not an agrarian festival)—hold such views, imagine what sort of misconceptions the masses harbour.

In the past, educated natives were not followers of the indigenous culture and could publicly speak ill of it with impunity, however, today, with many Christians recognizing its significance and with education no longer being a monopoly of a single faith, things are changing. Even political parties and pressure groups now condemn (though not explicitly) any actions that are against the sentiments of the indigenous faith followers—which was something previously unseen.

The bottom line is, faith is a deeply sensitive issue all over this country where the right to free speech feebly applies. Personally, I prefer the American-style free speech (i.e., with no restrictions), but either everyone should have the liberty to say whatever they wish or, restrictions should apply universally.

The issue of environmental degradation is a serious one and the more we are aware, the better. The town of Jowai has over the years made headlines for its poor management of waste. To its credit, the Sein Raji leads an annual cleaning drive of both lawmusing (market) and Wah Myntdu but more efforts are required from the masses and the government. I hope everyone learns a lesson from this incident.

Letters to the Editor

The Manufacturing sector and the 10-billion-dollar economy

Editor,
The Assembly session recently concluded and I think most people didn't pay attention to what issues were being discussed in the House. The most pertinent question was raised by the MLA from North Shillong, Mr Adelbert Nongrum, Nongrum raised the point about the importance of the manufacturing sector and asked the government what it is doing to boost the growth of the manufacturing sector to make it realise its dream of turning Meghalaya into a 10 billion dollar economy by 2028. Interestingly the Chief Minister didn't give a clear-cut answer but went on to explain about the method of how the gross domestic product is calculated. There are two methods of calculating the GDP in India: the first method is based on economic activity at factor cost and the second method is based on expenditure at market prices. The Chief Minister explained the second method which ironically is unrelated to the question raised by the MLA from North Shillong. If Meghalaya attained its goal of becoming a 10 billion dollar economy, it would roughly translate to a GDP per-capita of around 2 lakh which is almost double the current GDP per capita. This would signify a significant achievement in growth and

we will definitely move up the economic ladder and be at par with states in the country that are currently sitting mid-table in the GDP per-capita ranking. For Meghalaya to achieve such a lofty milestone and have a sustainable growth, the manufacturing sector should be the bedrock of the economic road map. The manufacturing sector has always been and will always be the backbone of the economy; it is interesting that in normal conversation too when a person is being asked to be tough and resilient, he/she is told to grow a backbone.

The Government is currently throwing its weight behind the tourism sector hoping it will steer the economy of the state to greater heights. However dangers of over-reliance on the tourism sector to boost growth and development cannot be overstated. The Covid pandemic has laid bare the dangers of too much focus and reliance on the tourism sector. One reason why the Sri Lankan economy collapsed was because it was over reliant on the tourism sector while Thailand and Vietnam were able to weather the Covid storm primarily because they have a strong manufacturing sector. Closer home, the tourism sector in Goa is going through a midlife crisis and this will have a huge impact on its economy since tourism contributes almost 17 percent to its economy and employs roughly 35 percent of its population.

On a positive note, as far as our state is concerned,

Prime Meghalaya which was initiated by the current Chief Minister is a path breaking initiative and for our state to be at par with some of the most industrially advanced states in the country, much more needs to be done to boost the growth of the manufacturing sector.

Yours etc.,
Gary Marbaning,
Via email

No Preacher of Hate

Editor,
I am writing in response to the misunderstandings that arose from the recent talk show held in Shillong on March 24, 2025, which many believe has hurt the sentiments of numerous members of society. As an active participant in this event, I wish to state the following:

1. I fully respect my fellow citizens' right to express their opinions and engage in rebuttals. My intention in responding is to provide perspective and address any misunderstandings. I do not seek to justify my actions alone; rather, any justification must come from a higher authority or higher being.

2. I engaged in thorough preparation before the talk show, articulating points for the specific public discourse. One notable point I made was: "Ka shad, ka kmen kaba ngi ong ka kolshor kan ym don lynda don ka rep kba, u kba u iasoh bad ka neigt Blei, mane Blei," which translates to: "Dances/festivals that we

consider cultural will not occur without rice cultivation. For the Hynniewtrep people, rice cultivation is linked to the divine." My references to indigenous dances and festivals are rooted in this cultural context.

3. Revered cultural and religious dances such as Shad Sukra, Behdienkhlam, and Shad Suk Mysiem are intrinsically linked to the primordial agricultural activities of our ancestors. These dances not only reflect religious elements but also capture the essence of the socio-cultural, economic, and political life within the Hynniewtrep community. However, I am particularly concerned about the deteriorating environmental conditions in our State and the decade-long decline of 3.99% in rice cultivation area in the Jaintia Hills, as this will impact not only the economy but also the socio-religious and cultural practices of our indigenous people.

4. The "Shad cement" comment made during the discussion was intended metaphorically and should be understood within the proper context of our dialogue. It does not equate "Shad cement" with any revered indigenous festival and does not suggest replacing it. I have no intention of disrespecting or belittling the belief system of the adherents of the indigenous faith of Hynniewtrep community.

5. In the recent rejoinder to the Shillong Times, I expressed, "To my own

'kur and kha' (kith and kin) and the general members of society who were offended by the 'shad cement' comment, I owe an unconditional apology." I want to reaffirm that I stand by my words and sincerely appeal to everyone not to doubt my sincerity.

6. As a citizen actively involved in movements aimed at fostering unity among diverse communities in our State, it pains me to see how the nuances of the discussions and comments from the talk show were perceived as offensive and hurtful. Therefore, I reiterate my unconditional apology to my "nia ruit, pa ruit, pa heh, pa diah, bei heh, bei khian, san pun, mai dong, kong mai" (these are indigenous terms for our paternal, maternal and societal relations) and groups such as the Sien Raji, Shillong, etc.

7. I feel privileged to have been raised in a family that taught us the values of both Indigenous and Biblical traditions. Life is an evolution in itself and through this journey, I learned to embrace the language of faith over the language of religion. I discovered the language of love as opposed to the language of religion, which can foster hate. I learned to speak the language of peace instead of the language of religion, which can lead to war. I chose to communicate the language of justice rather than the language of religion which often results in exploitation and enslavement.

8. Finally, I earnestly urge my "kur and kha" and fellow citizens to remain

committed to justice, peace, communal harmony, and equality in all aspects of life. Let us not be misled by divisive politics that seek to create discord and confusion.

Yours etc.,
Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh,
Via email

The world needs healing- Who will heal it?

Editor,
Michael Jackson's song "Heal the world/ Make it a Better Place/ for you and for me and the entire human race," was a song that was very close to my heart while I was in school. Then, I had liked it for the rhythm and the tune and honestly, I never really gave the lyrics so much thought. All that mattered was that it was a very nice song to sing and very pleasant to the ears. Today, when I go back to this song, I realise that our world really needs a lot of healing. The world we are living in is unwell and ailing. What is it that ails our world? Climate change, diseases, poverty, inequality, political unrest, diseases, violence, hatred, anger, aggression and a lot more. Across the world, people are falling prey to some form of illness in society.

What I fear most is the state of mind of people both young and old. As human beings what is revealed or what can be read of people is just a tiny percentage of what lies buried in their minds. Mental stress and pressure

has increased at an alarming rate. Mental stress does not discriminate and distinguish. It can trigger anything in anyone. How many of us are able to deal with these pressures daily and how many of us are submerged in this hell hole?

It is here that the parent in me is filled with fear. I fear for the lives and future of our children who are living in this world of pain. I fear of what is to become of them in the years to come. Every parent struggles to make ends meet and to give their children the best that they can afford to in this world. Alongside the basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter we long to give them all that would not make them feel left out in this rat race of competition and partiality. We try to arm them with education and skills that would help them face the world with courage so they can brave myriad challenges without fear. We want no harm to come their way as we do not want them to fall prey to hardships, pain, trials and tribulations. To give them the best and keep them safe is the priority of every parent. We do it not because it is our duty and responsibility but because of the love, affection and devotion that we have for them. If we see them in pain and in fear, in disarray and confused, it causes distress and heartaches. But the real world is where we experience aggression and violence, rape and murders, abuses of various forms that are corroding the society and if left unchecked will turn

the world into a place that is unliveable.

Hence it is a priority to make our homes and educational institutions safe and happy. We need to nurture children with kindness and compassion so that they learn and internalise fellow feelings and a fraternal spirit. We need to mould their young minds into becoming upright and conscientious human beings. Educational institutions are temples of education that can teach our children not only mechanical learning but life lessons. Education is not only about securing high marks but most importantly for receiving love, kindness, generosity and empathy.

As a society we need to focus on safeguarding the lives of people, especially the youths who today are facing numerous challenges that is debilitating their health and well-being. After all they are the future pillars of society. If the pillars are weak the structure will crumble and fall. It is our bountiful duty to explore ways and means to make this world a better and most importantly a safer place for our children. Shouldn't we start looking closely for a cure to heal the world? Shouldn't we hand over a healthy world to our future of tomorrow?

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

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"We have all the light we need, we just need to put it in practice."

— Albert Pike

The Shillong Times

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Signals from 2024

SPECULATIONS about an early retirement for evergreen Prime Minister Narendra Modi — raised by a senior Shiv Sena leader — may not have any grain of truth. Modi has hectored the nation with a high sense of confidence; and his confidence kept growing due also to the weak positioning of the Opposition. The political and economic stability he provided to the nation has been his great strength. Both are supplementary and complementary to each other. While nations in the neighbourhood struggled with a deficit of both in recent times, India has been an oasis of peace for most part — and not to ignore the scenario in isolated regions like Manipur. Even the terrorist-extremist-militant outfits have been kept under control in Kashmir and the once volatile North-East, through the past decade. Situations perhaps conspired to create the present scenario much to Modi's advantage. On the development front too, there has been a spectacular march forward in some matters like highway development. Overall, in a general sense, Modi has not let the nation down. Any perception about the PM's replacement is, thus, not based on ground realities.

Yet, the question is whether India should carry on and on under the same leader for ages. The US, from where the system of democracy gathers its main inspiration, does not allow its chief executive in the form of President to remain in the saddle for more than eight years. Change is in the order of things. Even the same party need not carry on and on, as Americans repeatedly reinforced through successive elections. The two party system in itself is America's great strength. Crooks there cannot barge in from the sidelines and spoil the nation's governance — unlike in India where crafty regional sharks are waiting in the wings, or even scheming, to wear the crown in Delhi. For the BJP, to its advantage, there is a strong second line of leadership. Choosing one among them is an easy exercise. Hence, it would be in the fitness of things if Modi does not attempt another term. He has the mandate to rule for four more years. It will be well advised that he hangs up his boots and gives way to a new leader at the right time.

It would be imprudent on those outside the party to propose any name for replacement. The decision, as and when it comes, would be based on the thinking and will of the RSS. Modi's meeting with the Sangh leadership in Nagpur may or may not have any serious significance. Yet, there are the imponderables. Modi failed to get a majority for the BJP and its alliance in the 2024 polls. It meant the people had already begun having some reservations on his continuation. The scenario under him could be worse by the time the next polls are held in 2029. The RSS cannot afford to overlook the signals from 2024.

Conquering the self - The stairway to heaven

By Bijoya Sawian

The main concern of any faith is conquering the ego. It is the most odious and detrimental trait in anyone's personality. It completely annihilates the very essence of religion. In its entourage it has Hatred, Greed, Envy and Sloth in all their inglorious glory. The fact that this is either not fully understood or is purposely ignored shows the nadir to which humanity has plummeted. This is evident in every aspect of our lives be it familial, social, emotional, intellectual, political and religious. Conquering the Self is the first victory and, to me, the height of success. Heaven is not just the heaven above but heaven, the perfect state of being, on earth and within each one of us.

I have worshipped U Blei everywhere because He pervades the entire Universe. Whether I am in Ajmer Sharif in Rajasthan or Basilica of Bom Jesus in Goa, the Jain temples of Ranakpur, the stupa in Kathmandu, the Golden Temple of Amritsar, the Bahai Lotus temple in Delhi, the Meenakshi temple in Madurai, Kamakhya and the Nam Ghars in Assam, I pray to U Blei and connect and pay obeisance to the Divine Energy that resides in that particular sacred space. That is only natural. Yet it does not matter where I am. I strongly feel my belongingness to Niam Khasi. That was how I was brought up.

My father who was born a Hindu was a man of vision and luminous intelligence and he was not a radical. He knew and understood the importance of a cultural identity as a focal point and foundation of our lives. He respected all religions and felt that the Khasi worldview, ethics and etiquette was in harmony with the world around us. He made sure that we grew up as Khasis because we lived in a traditional Khasi home. He did not want us to have an identity crisis. He was very clear about that. My mother, made sure we attended all the pujas in my Meikha's and Parad's house and during the Pujas, on ashtami we would accompany father to the Ramakrishna Mission and pay reverence to Goddess Durga and have the prasad.

My maternal grandfather, Jeebon Roy was not against any religion, he was against conversion in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills because he felt that the missionaries were simply replacing the indigenous religion and culture, making the people ashamed of everything connected to it and nothing else. The white

men were pushing the flock into a cultural vacuum. Jeebon Roy thought this was callous and not ethical. He felt it was not good for the people in the future. He foresaw the times ahead when the majority, not the exceptions, would not be able to stand shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the world because of an amorphous identity. I was not quite sure about this until, one day, many years ago, my mother's cousin who was in the IFS came over. He came to borrow books on Khasi culture. Wherever he went people wanted to know and his knowledge was zilch.

I find it strange that there is so much conflict and bitterness based on religious beliefs. No one's religion is the best, the oldest or the most evolved. Even if it is, how could one feel superior and one-up about religion? In that moment of misplaced arrogance one completely nullifies the essence of religion. In this earthly life the biggest achievement is conquering the ego. The single most important victory is the conquering of the Self. Every religion professes that and humility is always glorified. Respect is the bedrock of all relationships—familial, social, marital, political, cultural and so on. Respect irrespective of caste, creed, colour and class. Respect for all God's creations animate and inanimate. That respect is worship. Your thoughts, your words, your gestures and your deeds are your prayers. Specific places of worship are mere clubs if your life is not in harmony with what your recite and chant, sing and play inside these places. Worst of all blasphemies is this constant attack on other religions spreading hatred and suspicion causing havoc in this one lifetime you have been blessed with. If one harbours hatred and venom one cannot claim to be religious.

When I was referred to as a pagan in school I found it exotic. When I told my mother she said it does not matter. They don't know that a thread of paganism runs through all religions. Paganism is based on the proven theory, the inextricable inter-connectedness between Man and Nature. How beautiful is that! And think about it, there is no religion that does not consider this to be an indisputable truth. If one wants to name the numerous beliefs that are common in all denominations it would fill a book. Anyone who is educated

(not merely literate) knows it. Divisiveness, however, is the rage and we go out of our way to find the differences rather than the similarities. It suits the people who hunger for power at all costs. They are the new demons of our times.

Westernization is attractive, it is meant to attract and appeal to our senses. It bears reminding that many hugely successful westerners journeyed to India to find happiness and fulfillment in India. Steve Jobs and Richard Gere are but two of the thousands who did so. Well, westernization does not matter as long as one does not have this grossly misconstrued notion that it is superior to one's tradition and culture. It is not. Take fashion for example. It is horrifying to know that young people actually feel embarrassed to wear the jainsems, dharas, mekhlas of various designs and all the beautiful attires of their communities. Our NE youth look good in Western wear, unfortunately they often opt for dresses and jeans even when it is not appropriate for the occasion; a funeral for example I hope the traditional Khasi jainboh, dhotis will return some day. It is the same everywhere in our country. Rather generously endowed women and men who would look decent and classier in a salwar or a churidar suit would squeeze into attires and jeans that seem to be crying for assistance to be released!

In our part of the world a white man will always be welcomed but not a fellow Indian. The British made sure that the hillmen will always dislike and be suspicious of plainsmen. Their devious Divide and Rule policy worked wonders here, far beyond their expectation. So, we do not mind people coming from Rome and Wales to spread education and preach. We, however, vehemently object to those coming from other parts of India who, in fact, only come to teach. It is a known fact that the missionaries had come mainly to preach and felt that the Khasis, "do not need education beyond Class 6." That period is over. The story of the struggle for higher education is part of my family saga. We bear no grudge because it was all part of those times, two centuries back. I do feel a sense of remorse, however, that Babu Jeebon Roy has not been respected and recognised by the numerous governments for his contribution to the Khasi and Jaintia

Hills and its people. He was not a Christian but had not made an enormous contribution by bringing in Higher Education to our people? Regarding the schools where some of our children study outside the State — one does not become a Hindu by eating vegetarian food and reciting slokas. To the best of my knowledge one cannot be converted to Hinduism. You are born one or the gotra of a Hindu male can also be adopted by his spouse. I love hymns and so did my mother. We sang them but that does not make us Christians. We sang, 'Come Hear The Angels Sing' with as much fervour as we would sing Syntiew ka Ri and other Seng Khasi songs. My mama used to belt out Kishore Kumar songs (not very melodiously but never mind) but that did not metamorphose him into a 'dkhar.' They say poets are the true chroniclers of the times and their understanding of the world is elevated. Our poet laureate, Rangbah (L) Soso Tham attended the first Seng Khasi meeting and also the first Shad Weiking. Some people are just born great.

I fully agree that a Department of Indigenous Affairs should be formed within the Ministry of Culture. We had, undoubtedly, been ignored. There has been a great change though in recent times because of a more progressive generation of Khasis at the helm. I am deeply grateful to their commendable approach. There should also be some kind of screening before people from outside come in for interviews and documentaries. I cannot get over one documentary on the root bridges. The anchor was in a dress and red stilettos. She was falling all over the bridge giggling away while she tried to explain how the bridges were formed. Those bridges, the examples of brilliant indigenous engineering, were reduced to a ramp for an amateur model. I take this as an affront.

These are the best of times and the worst of times. Is identity fluid or static? The answer and the choice is ours. I am comfortable in my cultural identity and it has stood me in good stead. Whatever it is, let us choose peace and harmony above all else. There are many problems to be solved, many issues to be tackled so let us not get swamped by our ego because that is the quickest one-way ticket to hell.

They say that being rich is not counted by what one has but by what one can do without. We can do without hatred.

An open letter to the Home Minister

By Patrick Kurbah

Meghalaya, a state which has historically sought peaceful and crime-free coexistence, is now in the clutch of a worrying erosion of law and order. A noticeable surge in crime—ranging from theft and drug-related offences to targeted violence against labourers—has begun to shatter the calm and security of living that once defined this hill state.

Despite the urgency of the situation calling for immediate, coordinated, and effective action, relevant state authorities have failed to address the critical nature of the issue.

Just in Shillong alone, a pronounced spike in crimes has been disrupting day-to-day lives of late. According to data from the Meghalaya Police reported in The Shillong Times (December 2024), between January and October 2024 alone, Shillong recorded 187 burglary cases—a sharp 20% increase over the same period in 2023.

These burglaries now account for nearly 18% of all property crimes reported across the state, indicating a disproportionate concentration of such activity in the capital.

Neighbourhoods like Laitumkhrak, Pohkset, Nongthymmai, Mawlai, and Polo are most affected. What is particularly troubling is the changing modus operandi—criminals are increasingly targeting homes during daylight hours when residents are away, reflecting a shift that may be a response to heightened nighttime vigilance.

Looking back, the trend appears to be more than just a recent anomaly. In 2023, Shillong recorded 876 theft cases, a staggering 42% rise from 617 cases in 2019. This consistent increase over the past few years indicates long-term erosion of public safety and hints at deeper structural and societal issues.

One of the key drivers behind this rise in property crime appears to be the escalating drug problem. In September 2024, the Superintendent of Police (SP) of East Khasi Hills acknowledged a likely connection between the increase in theft and the district's growing substance abuse problem. Petty crimes, especially thefts, are increasingly being committed by individuals struggling with addiction, seeking quick money to sustain their habits.

Supporting this assessment, various media reports show growing concern among residents about the increasing involvement of minors in drug-fueled burglaries. Many thefts have been captured on CCTV and circulated widely on social media, amplifying public anxiety. The involvement of children and teenagers points to a deeper crisis: the widespread penetration of drugs into the younger demographic, especially because of socio-economic issues like unemployment.

Yet police patrolling and strict measures have lagged behind, despite reports suggesting that substance abuse among the youth has reached epidemic proportions, wherein consumption of substances like

heroin is among the highest in Meghalaya, surpassing even Punjab.

Even in mid-2023, citizens had started raising concerns. A letter to The Shillong Times in June 2023, recounted a thief repeatedly entering a home in Upper New Colony, underscoring not only the audacity of criminals but gaps in investigation.

The substance abuse crisis in Meghalaya is not limited to Shillong. Data from the Meghalaya Social Welfare Department reveals that the state's opioid consumption rate stands at 6.34%, more than three times the national average of 2.06%. Alarmingly, over 50% of tobacco users in Meghalaya begin usage before the age of 17, significantly higher than the national average of 23.6%.

In August 2024, the Social Welfare Minister revealed that the number of drug users in the state had risen from 2 lakh to 3 lakh in just one year—a dramatic 50% increase. This means approximately 10% of Meghalaya's population is now affected by drug use — an alarming statistic indeed. Among youth aged 15 to 29, the usage rate reportedly touches 30%, indicating a particularly vulnerable demographic.

Despite 653 drug-related cases being registered and 1,161 arrests over five years, the conviction rate is just 25%.

Even former Governor Phagu Chauhan, in a public statement in September 2024, labelled drug abuse as a "silent epidemic" that is damaging the state's youth and threatening socio-economic stability.

Despite the gravity of the situation, comprehensive crime data for 2023 and 2024 remains elusive. The absence of transparent, regularly updated statistics significantly hampers accountability and limits the capacity of both the public and policymakers to understand the scale of the problem.

In Meghalaya, the Human Rights Commission has taken note of specific incidents, including the mistreatment of a peaceful hunger striker and the killing of a daily wage labourer, yet a state-wide review of the law and order situation is still lacking.

The data and incidents outlined above point to a clear and disturbing trend: Meghalaya's law and order situation is deteriorating rapidly. The convergence of rising property crime, a spiralling drug epidemic, and violence against citizens in broad daylight demands urgent attention.

While the government has initiated several commendable steps—such as launching the DREAM mission, pushing for a special NDPS court, and legislating for worker safety—these actions need to be scaled, sustained, and more effectively enforced.

Meghalaya stands at a critical juncture. The future well-being, socio-economic stability, and reputation of the state depend on bold and immediate action. The time to act is now.

(The author is a legal consultant)

Letters to the Editor

Foul water, foul governance

Editor,
There is a grave concern regarding the quality of public water supplied by our government in Upper Shillong, particularly in Mawngianglah village. Each morning, residents receive cloudy, brown and yellowish water laden with visible dirt and suspended particles resembling raw sewage. While the thought alone is repulsive, this is the very water the villagers must rely on for washing clothes, cleaning utensils, and even drinking.

One can only imagine the plight of mothers forced to feed this poison to their infants and children. The health consequences may not be immediate, but over time, they could be severe and irreversible.

Just the other day, a resident rinsing his mouth reported gagging from a foul, urine-like stench emanating from the very water meant for daily use. This is the state of our most basic necessity—this is what the government deems fit for its people.

While the nation strides toward progress, our leaders

seem determined to drag us backwards. Despite constitutional mandates and proclamations about the right to clean water, we remain neglected. This is not just an inconvenience; this is a crisis. A matter of survival. We have long heard that the government turns a blind eye to our struggles—but will it remain deaf to a state emergency?

Must we wait for a tragedy before action is taken?
Yours etc.,
Barilang Pyngrope
Allahabad

Why is Finance Dept flouting its own rules on officiating employees?

Editor,
It has come to our notice that, despite being fully aware of the irregularities, no action has been initiated against government employees holding officiating posts in violation of clear rules outlined by the Finance Department. The Department is aware of such violations but has not intervened to address them. Specifically, the Finance Department's

Office Memorandum dated December 1, 1998, set forth a standard procedure for government employees holding higher posts in an officiating capacity.

The memorandum states that government employees would only be allowed to hold dual charge when the employee's scale of pay was identical within the same cadre, and only for a period not exceeding six months. Additionally, the arrangement should be based on the seniority of officers in the next lower rank, as per the gradation list, stationed at the headquarters of the vacant post.

Moreover, the Finance Department's subsequent Office Memorandum on July 31, 2018 (No. FEG.2/2001/Pt-1/22) clearly stated that individuals holding dual charge should receive a Charge Allowance of 10 percent of their basic pay.

While these orders are straightforward, it appears that they are being blatantly ignored. We reiterate the instance where we have learned that a grade four employee has been allowed to officiate in a higher post and is receiving the salary of the higher position, which is well above the pay of their original post, instead of just the prescribed

Charge Allowance. The appointment of this employee has raised questions, as the seniority principle outlined in the gradation list was not followed.

This case seems to be just one of many, as there are likely other such violations occurring in different departments. There have even been instances where government employees, sidelined by favouritism, have had to approach the courts to seek justice, since the government and its departments refuse to adhere to the very rules and orders they themselves have set in place. Such incidents expose the government's blatant disregard for fairness and transparency.

The perpetuation of favouritism through such actions casts a dark shadow over the government and creates a toxic environment. This practice promotes inequality, sending a message that merit takes a backseat to personal connections and influence. It is essential that the authorities address this issue with urgency. We urge the concerned departments to investigate these matters and take action to eliminate undeserving individuals from officiating posts, while promoting the appointment of qualified in-

dividuals in accordance with the established rules.

The "blue-eyed boy" phenomenon, where personal connections outweigh merit, is now widespread, even influencing high-level decisions. It is an open truth that favouritism, driven by political and bureaucratic preferences, is damaging the integrity of the system. If we are to build a truly fair and merit-based bureaucracy, it is vital to root out such practices and uphold the principles established by the government itself.

We reiterate that departments must identify and review individuals who have been allowed to flout the rules and regulations. The Finance Department, as the guardian of these procedures, must act decisively to rectify these irregularities and maintain public trust. Only by doing so can they fulfil their duty to the people and to the government employees, as the government claims to be "pro-people."

The growing influence of favouritism could damage the credibility of the Chief Minister's good intentions. The recent success of the Voice of the People Party (VPP) in the District Council polls reflects public frustration with such practices. If the system continues to overlook these issues,

the VPP's rise in 2028 could become a reality, serving as a stark warning that cannot be ignored.

Yours etc.,
Sanbor Wahlang,
Shillong - 3

Catch them young!

Editor,
The level of competing civil service aspirants in the state is commendable especially with the support of the state authorities under the Chief Minister's initiative to train and tutor aspirants for the UPSC. There are no dearth of talent and skill sets. However, the next levels is for the Government to focus on scouting for young minds at the High School level, from Class 8 onwards and giving them an insight into the civil services examinations so that as they go up the academic ladder their thought processes are sharpened and they develop that competitive spirit. Other than civil service aspirants, the Government can ally with reputed institutions to train the youth for other exams such as SSC, RRB, IES, IAS, even NDA, CDS and IMA and tap the unexplored talents, skills and potential. Hope that such initiatives are undertaken ef-

fectively.
Yours etc.,
Dominic S. Wankhar,
Via email

Intellectuals with inflated egos

Editor,
The letters by OR Shal-

lam and Dr Omarlin Kyndiah which appeared in the Shillong Times on March 31, 2025 under the caption "Misrepresentation of Behdienkhlam and Chad Sukra: A call for respect and constitutional adherence" and "Let bygones be bygones" respectively made interesting reading. The words that both these gentlemen expressed were genuine, reasonable and factual. The Khasis are an ancient race and ardent believer in their social and cultural practices and they have their own genuine and strong belief system which are ancient. They know that the tongue is boneless. The tongue which is boneless is considered deadly because it can wield immense power through words. Words spoken can inspire, comfort, or heal, but they can also hurt, deceive, and destroy relationships or reputations. Cultures and philosophies across the world emphasize the impact of speech—some likening

harsh or manipulative words to weapons capable of doing irreversible damage. Ancient writings often stress the importance of controlling the tongue, as spoken words can lead to conflict, spread falsehoods, or provoke anger. The saying "The pen is mightier than the sword" reflects a similar sentiment, highlighting how communication, whether written or spoken, can shape or disrupt societies.

It was correct on the part of OR Shal lam to raise his genuine concerns and rightly concluded "It is only through mutual respect and understanding that we can truly work toward a sustainable and harmonious future." It was indeed nice of Dr Omarlin Kyndiah to have made his reasonable and sensible points and ended with, "Let bygones be bygones!" Marks of a genuine intellectual.

Intellectuals with inflated egos should be careful of their tongue. Remember it is boneless.
Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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"A memory is a beautiful thing, it's almost a desire that you miss."
— Gustave Flaubert

The Shillong Times

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Bangladesh's Pipe Dream

MOHAMMAD Yunus, Bangladesh's Chief Adviser to the interim government recently visited China. In his fervour to woo China to invest in Bangladesh he threw a bait by including the seven states of North East India as an attractive investment destination. Yunus's statement, "Seven States of India—the Eastern part of India, known as the Seven Sisters—are landlocked. They have no way to reach out to the ocean. We are the only guardians of the sea. This opens up a huge possibility (that) this could be an extension of the Chinese economy," has created a flutter in India.

Yunus has correctly studied the economic prospects of India's North East which has much to export by way of mineral products such as coal, limestone and horticultural products. An important part of the Act East Policy was to ensure that the North Eastern states bordering Bangladesh such as Meghalaya, Assam and Tripura would be better able to transport their products by looking south towards Bangladesh's Chittagong port. But that was when Bangladesh was a friendly country with Sheikh Hasina at the helm. Now with the anti-India stance that Yunus has adopted by insisting that the only way forward for Bangladesh mending ties with India is to extradite Sheikh Hasina so that she can be put to trial — a prospect that India is not agreeable to, the two countries have turned into hostile neighbours, more so since Bangladesh is fanning the flames of religious extremism. Mohammad Yunus's reference to the North Eastern states demands a measured response from India's foreign policy and defence establishment as it has the propensity to create unrest in a region that has seen relative peace in the last ten years or so. That has happened after militant outfits harboured in Bangladesh by the Khaleda Zia regime were flushed out, courtesy the friendly relations between India and Bangladesh after Sheikh Hasina took over the reins in Bangladesh. China's role in fuelling such statements cannot be ruled out since that country has been looking for a strategic foothold in India's North East particularly Arunachal Pradesh and claiming it as part of South Tibet.

This statement however, holds true of the North Eastern states which are joined to the rest of India by a narrow 22 km corridor. This demands that Delhi takes a more nuanced view of Yunus' statement and negotiates its way towards using Bangladesh as a crucial trade corridor, with connectivity through India's Northeast offering expanded commercial opportunities. However, the chauvinism embedded in Yunus' statement makes it a diplomatic bombshell. What cannot be overlooked is the sheer arrogance embedded in the claim of being the "guardian of the sea." If Mohammad Yunus thinks that Bangladesh can piggyback on China without that country extracting its pound of flesh he is sleepwalking. China is unlikely to invest heavily in Bangladesh if it cannot establish itself as a geo-strategic power over the Indo-Pacific region. Meanwhile Bangladesh continues its journey without an elected government, which is a troubling prospect for the country.

University Without a Leader, A Generation Without Direction

By Bijoy A. Sangma

A university stands for its students, its faculty, and the pursuit of knowledge. When leadership fails, it is these pillars that bear the brunt. The unfolding crisis at NEHU is more than just an administrative dispute - it's a warning sign of deeper structural flaws in India's university system. With students protesting and faculty questioning governance, can the institution rebuild before further damage is done?

Established in 1973 through an Act of Parliament, North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) was envisioned as a central institution dedicated to addressing the educational aspirations of the Northeast while promoting research and regional development. Over the decades, it has contributed significantly to academia, public administration, and scientific research, producing distinguished alumni across various disciplines.

In its formative years, NEHU played a crucial role in bridging the educational gap between the region and the rest of the country. Strong academic leadership, faculty recruitment, and a thriving research culture helped establish its reputation. The university attracted professors from across India and abroad who contributed to its interdisciplinary approach to education, and students from across the Northeast and beyond sought admission to NEHU, seeing it as a gateway to higher opportunities.

However, recent years have witnessed growing challenges, including administrative bottlenecks, funding constraints, and a weakening of its academic environment. Concerns raised by faculty and students, coupled with a decline in national rankings, have put NEHU under scrutiny. While criticism has been directed at governance and leadership, these issues also reflect broader systemic challenges faced by Indian universities.

A Microcosm of India's Higher Education Challenges
For nearly four years, NEHU has been navigating a complex governance landscape. A combination of administrative restructuring, faculty concerns, student protests, and political interventions has resulted in tensions within the institution. At the centre of these challenges is Vice-Chancellor Prof. Prabha Shankar Shukla, whose tenure has been marked by significant debate over leadership approaches, institutional transparency, and academic standards.

However, NEHU's situation is not unique. Many higher education institutions in India grapple with governance structures, centralized decision-making, and financial constraints. The issues unfolding at NEHU serve as a case study for the need for institutional reforms across Indian universities, reinforcing the importance of academic autonomy and transparent leadership.

A Challenging Transition
When Prof. Shukla assumed office as Vice-Chancellor on July 27, 2021, his appointment, like many in higher education, was met with scrutiny. Some faculty members and students raised concerns regarding the selection process, highlighting the need for greater transparency in academic appointments.

By 2022, discussions on administrative efficiency gained momentum. Faculty members voiced concerns about participation in decision-making,

resource allocation, and the pace of institutional reforms. While the administration has sought to address these challenges, differences in expectations have led to tensions.

In response to faculty and student concerns, the administration has maintained that restructuring efforts, procedural delays, and broader policy shifts have impacted decision-making. However, critics argue that a more consultative approach is necessary to foster trust and institutional cohesion.

A Decline in National Rankings

A major turning point came in October 2024, when NEHU witnessed a significant drop in its national rankings - from 59th place in 2021 to 136th place in 2024. This decline, though concerning, is a reflection of multiple factors, including research output, faculty appointments, and institutional reputation.

The administration has acknowledged the challenges but attributes them to a broader national trend affecting several public universities. Factors such as reduced funding, delayed faculty promotions, and shifting evaluation criteria have contributed to the ranking fluctuations. While critics see this as a failure of leadership, university officials argue that long-term solutions require structural reforms beyond immediate administrative changes.

Despite differing perspectives, the impact of ranking fluctuations is undeniable. Lower rankings can affect research funding, academic collaborations, and student enrolments. Addressing these concerns requires a collective effort from all stakeholders, including the administration, faculty, and student community.

Student Protests and Faculty Appointments

By November 2024, student frustrations culminated in an indefinite hunger strike demanding leadership changes. This protest was not just about one individual but reflected broader anxieties about governance and institutional direction.

In an attempt to address concerns, in mid-November 2024, the administration announced key appointments, including Prof. Sherwin May Sungho as Pro-VC of the Shillong Campus and Dr. Fameline K. Marak as Pro-VC of the Tura Campus. However, their decision to decline the roles was viewed as a signal of discontent within the academic leadership.

While student organizations voiced strong opposition to existing governance structures, the administration maintains that policy decisions require procedural adherence and cannot be dictated solely by protest actions. The Vice-Chancellor's temporary leave until November 29, 2024, led to the appointment of Prof. Nirmalendu Saha as Acting VC, a move seen as an interim solution rather than a long-term resolution.

Institutional Autonomy and Political Dynamics

As the situation intensified, political involvement became a key point of contention. The Voice of the People Party (VPP) attempted to mediate between stakeholders, but the NEHU Students' Union (NEHUSU) strongly opposed political interference in university affairs.

This raises a critical question for Indian higher education institutions: how to balance insti-

tutional autonomy with external support? Whether Indian universities can be insulated from excessive political interference while ensuring accountability. NEHU's current predicament serves as a microcosm of this national debate - how much institutional autonomy is necessary for universities to flourish, and where does legitimate oversight become an impediment to growth?

While political engagement can sometimes be necessary for reforms, excessive involvement can risk undermining academic freedom. NEHU's crisis underscores the need for clear boundaries in university governance to safeguard independent decision-making.

Government Response and Calls for Stability

By February 2025, demands for Prof. Shukla's removal reached the highest levels of government. Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan and Minister of State for Education Sukanta Majumdar stated that any action must adhere to legal and statutory provisions governing central universities.

This legal stance, while procedurally sound, has prolonged uncertainty at NEHU. The Non-Teaching Staff Association (NEHUNSA) has urged the Education Ministry to grant special statutory powers to the Acting VC to restore institutional stability. Meanwhile, Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma has engaged with central authorities to seek a resolution.

The administration maintains that governance reforms take time and must be implemented within legal frameworks. However, students and faculty continue to express concerns over delays, emphasizing the urgent need for decisive leadership.

A Call for Institutional Reforms

On March 22, 2025, Prof. Shukla addressed faculty members, calling for collective efforts to stabilize the university. He acknowledged delays in Career Advancement Scheme (CAS) promotions attributing to prolonged unrest and assured that they would be resolved soon. However, trust in leadership remains fragile, and calls for governance reforms persist.

The administration asserts that structural improvements and procedural adherence are necessary for long-term stability. However, critics argue that unless trust is restored through inclusive decision-making, institutional credibility will continue to suffer.

Lessons from NEHU: The Need for Structural Reforms

NEHU's challenges are not just about one university or one administrator; they reflect larger issues within Indian higher education.

- 1. Decentralized Governance:** Universities must reduce over-centralization and promote collective decision-making, ensuring that faculty and students have a greater voice. The ability of one individual to disrupt an entire institution's functioning highlights the dangers of excessive centralization. Universities must strengthen collective decision-making processes, involving faculty and students in governance. Decision-making processes must become more inclusive and consultative, with clear timelines for faculty promotions, research funding allocations, and student welfare

initiatives.

- 2. Transparent Leadership:** Institutional appointments and promotions should be more transparent to build confidence within the academic community. The NEHU crisis underscores the need for greater transparency in university administration. Clear, accountable leadership structures are essential.

- 3. Autonomy vs. Political Influence:** Universities must safeguard their academic independence while engaging constructively with policymakers. While external interventions can be well-intentioned, they should not compromise institutional independence.

- 4. Student-Centric Policies:** Decision-making must prioritize student welfare, ensuring that academic progress is not disrupted. The NEHU administration must proactively engage with students, address their concerns, and invest in improving infrastructure. Ultimately, universities exist for students. When governance collapses, students are the primary victims. A responsive administration that prioritizes student welfare is crucial.

- 5. Reinvigorating Faculty Engagement:** A structured roadmap for faculty development, including better funding mechanisms, research incentives, and international collaborations, must be a priority.

- 6. A Visionary Leadership Model:** The Vice-Chancellor's office must move beyond crisis management and articulate a long-term strategic vision.

Can NEHU Rebuild Itself?

Yes! NEHU's challenges are not insurmountable. Institutions are not built in a day, nor do they decline overnight. Despite current challenges, NEHU has the potential to restore its legacy. However, this requires a commitment to governance reforms, improved administrative accountability, and greater stakeholder engagement. Political interference at all levels must be minimized, and faculty participation must be strengthened in decision-making.

Above all, NEHU must reaffirm its core mission: education with academic excellence. The true measure of a university is not just in its rankings, but in its ability to inspire learning, foster research, and serve its students. A university is not just its buildings, rankings, its administration, or its politics - it is its students and their aspirations, its faculty, and the knowledge it generates. If NEHU does not reclaim its academic integrity, its decline will serve as a grim reminder of what happens when governance fails in higher education. NEHU stands at a defining moment - not just for its own revival, but for the future of education in the Northeast and India. With the right reforms, it can rise again, rekindling hope and excellence. But the cost of inaction will not be borne by its leaders - it will be carried by an entire generation left without direction, dreams fading in the absence of vision.

(Bijoy A. Sangma is a development professional, policy analyst, an advocate, commentator on governance, economic policies, social justice and religious freedom. Currently a PhD scholar, he has previously worked with national and international organizations in leadership roles, contributing to thought leadership in public policy and social transformation. e-mail: bijoy.sangma@gmail.com)

AUTISM and the Sustainable Development Goals

By Dr Shabina Ahmed

The United Nations designated April 2nd as World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD) in 2007 through a General Assembly resolution, emphasizing the need to raise public awareness about autism. Since then, discussions have been held on various aspects of autism, with different themes each year aimed at promoting the full realization of human rights, fundamental freedoms, and equal participation in society. This year the theme is "Advancing Neurodiversity and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)." Autism advocacy has made significant progress, but there are still critical areas that need to be addressed, especially their neurodiverse nature. Globally, autism prevalence is rising. The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the USA estimates a prevalence rate of 1 in 36 children, a sharp contrast to the rate two decades ago, which was approximately 1 in 100 children. In India, while there is no nationwide population study, community-based research addressing children aged 1-10 years has reported a prevalence of 15 per 15,000 (0.15%). The estimated prevalence in India is around 1 in 68, as published in the Indian Journal of Pediatrics in 2021.

Autism is not a disease that can be cured; it is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that manifests in early childhood and continues throughout life. This year also marks the 100th anniversary of Dr. Grunya Efimovna Sukhareva's pioneering publication, which provided the first clinical description of autism.

With the increasing incidence of autism, we expect to see a growing number of individuals on the spectrum, including more adolescents and adults. This raises three key concerns:

- 1. Early Intervention and Accessibility:** Are early intervention programs meeting the growing demand for autism assessment and intervention? Current multidisciplinary approaches to autism management lack uniformity in service delivery. Due to a shortage of qualified professionals, many parents travel across the country seeking diagnosis and therapy, leading to financial strain and delays in critical intervention periods. A stepped-care model is required to bridge this gap. This model should include:

- Developing a trained non-specialist workforce, including Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), Anganwadi workers, parents, and caregivers.

- Utilizing digital technology to capture self-reported observations and support intervention.

- 2. Education and Transition to Adulthood:** How many autistic children are integrated into mainstream education, and how well do they transition into adolescence? Determining the exact number of autistic students in higher education is challenging due to variations in diagnosis and presentation. Some isolated studies report only 0.1% in Lithuania 1.2% in England of autistic students in higher secondary education. While some are mainstreamed, many require special classes or units with limited inclusion in general education settings.

- 3. Employment and Economic Inclusion:** How many autistic adults attain gainful employment? Research highlights significant challenges in employment opportunities for autistic individuals. Employment rates vary widely across different regions, reflecting diverse challenges and opportunities. In India, specific employment data is lacking, but in the USA, unemployment among autistic individuals is estimated at 85%-90%. These statistics underscore the urgent need for inclusive hiring practices and supportive workplace environments.

The Way Forward: Advocacy efforts must shift from mere awareness to active acceptance and inclusion. Autistic individuals must be heard, with those who can advocate for themselves playing a leading role alongside their parents. Their voices should influence inclusive policymaking.

Society must challenge harmful stereotypes that portray autistic individuals either as geniuses or as completely incapable of independence. Instead, the focus should be on their diverse abilities and unique challenges. Neurodiverse individuals can be valuable assets in workplaces, and employers must become familiar with their strengths.

Healthcare professionals should adopt rights-based services that consider coexisting disabilities and comorbidities. Rather than forcing autistic individuals to conform to neurotypical standards, support should be centered on autonomy and dignity. Efforts should be made to prevent school and workplace dropouts by ensuring smooth transitions.

Workplace inclusivity must improve through flexible schedules, quiet environments, and alternative communication methods. Hiring practices should evolve to accommodate automation and AI-driven industries, where neurodivergent employees can contribute unique problem-solving skills.

There is also a pressing need to rethink autism diagnosis and service accessibility, making them more inclusive and available across different populations. A shift from a purely multidisciplinary approach to a more naturalistic model is required, ensuring that functional capabilities align with developmental levels.

Despite policies promoting inclusion, challenges persist. In India, approximately 45% of individuals with disabilities are illiterate, and only 9% complete secondary education. Any effective inclusion plan must invest in environmental and support services, including teacher training, cultural attitude shifts, and improved data collection.

This year's WAAD theme, "Advancing Neurodiversity and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)," underscores the importance of addressing this global concern, mobilizing resources, increasing awareness, and advocating for change. By celebrating this day, the UN aims to create a more inclusive society where differences are accepted and valued.

(Published for Autism Awareness) Author's Email: shabinaloveschildren@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Can You Eat GDP for Dinner?

Editor,
When the quality of our food is compromised, the health of citizens is the first thing to suffer. India may be seen as a rising global power, but when it comes to providing its citizens with safe and healthy food, it continues to fall dangerously short, a fact that was discussed by Patricia Mukhim in her eye-opening piece published last Friday, titled "Food Safety and Health: We Are What We Eat."
Food adulteration has now become widespread, though often underreported. If we take a closer look at different sectors, we'll find shocking examples everywhere. Powdered milk mixed with harmful chemicals, adulterated cooking oils and ghee containing unsafe additives -- these are just some of the many products sold in the

market that can seriously harm our health. What's even more worrying is that well-known brands aren't always trustworthy. We've often noticed heavy metals in branded cold drinks, germs partying in fruit juices, and burgers loaded with bacteria, with video clips of such incidents frequently going viral on WhatsApp. If we can't rely on what we buy from the market, how are we, the common consumers, supposed to feel safe?

The authorities have only recently acknowledged the fearsome issue of pre-cooked, substandard snacks like "channa," "bhujia," "dalmuth," "khumra" chips, sweets, and chocolates, which are often poorly packaged and sold in massive quantities without proper labels or "expiry dates". All these pre-cooked items contain preservatives that exceed the safe limit. Why were these issues not flagged earlier? And how many people have already been affected or are likely to become vulnerable to deadly illnesses by

consuming such items over a longer period of time?

Equally troubling is India's "heavy dependence" on chemical fertilizers, which is another disappointing fact, as Patricia Mukhim laments. Indiscriminate use of urea and DAP (Di-Ammonium Phosphate) and various kinds of pesticides has caused long-term damage -- not just to the soil, but also to the environment and public health. Day by day, our immune systems are weakening, and the risk of diseases like cancer is on the rise. If things continue this way, the situation could become far more disastrous in the near future.

Patricia Mukhim, in fact, hits the nail on the head when she writes, "Governance suffers because departments work in silos." This lack of coordination and dysfunction within government agencies only results in serious shortcomings. Take the example of the Directorate of Health Services (DHS) and the Shillong Municipality Board. Both are

responsible for public health in their own way, but they rarely work together. The same is true for the Department of Agriculture, which often doesn't collaborate with the Animal Husbandry or Forest departments, even though their work is closely connected, especially when it comes to agricultural production, soil health and environmental concerns.

Let's think metaphorically. What would happen if the liver forgot to release bile, or the pancreas stopped producing enzymes when food reaches the stomach? The whole system would break down. The person would develop serious health problems. That's perhaps what's happening in our government machinery. The different departments are failing to work in collaboration, and the result is a major mess. Is it not a case of full-blown administrative indigestion!

As a matter of fact, food safety is not just about science and testing; it's also about how effectively the system

is managed. If government departments continue to work separately, in silos, without sharing information or cooperating, we can't expect real change. So, isn't it time for a united, all-round approach -- one where departments communicate openly, share responsibility, and operate with full transparency? Why wait for a disaster to force collaboration? Indeed, only a "holistic approach" can deliver lasting solutions.

If India truly wants to rise as a global leader, it must first fix its food safety and security system. Economic growth means nothing if people don't have access to safe and healthy food and a clean, sustainable environment. At the end of the day, "we are what we eat" -- and if we keep ignoring this, we may face a public health crisis that no amount of development can undo. After all, what's the point of economic progress if the health of the citizens continues to decline? Can we eat GDP for dinner!

Yours etc.,
Salil Grewal,
Shillong

Politics creating a toxic environment in NEHU

Editor,
University politics is an important component of any democratic nation. It promotes critical thinking, fosters community engagement, creates awareness about social justice issues, and promotes inclusivity, diversity, and equity but university politics also has its fair share of negativity. It can create division among students, faculty, and non-teaching staff potentially leading to violence and campus toxicity and overall affects the functioning and rating of a university.
Recently our premier institution North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) has been in the news for all the wrong reasons. The genesis of the problem

starts with the autocratic behavior of its Vice Chancellor, Prof. Shukla who according to my understanding is a man with an egoistic nature, and an arrogant person and his actions later snowballed into an agitation where the students ultimately had to resort to hunger strike to demand his removal. I will not dive into the complexity of the issue since I'm not part of the University nor related to the protest in any way but I am voicing my concern and as a concerned citizen of the state.

The root cause of this issue is all political because I feel the VC is appointed mainly by political pressure from outside and he is here to carry out his agenda. Another thing is the involvement of a new political party who are trying very hard to bank on this issue, mainly to further advance their political interests. There is so much politics in the University that students who are neutral, unbiased, or apolitical are forcefully exposed to unnecessary political discussion which in turn affects their studies and at the same

time causes emotional distress. The involvement of faculty and teaching staff is another concern because this will definitely impact academic freedom and a teacher's political leanings or beliefs will undoubtedly affect their neutrality in teaching and research.

My personal view is that if this disruption continues, the ones who will lose out will be students, so my appeal to the relevant stakeholders is that they put their political intentions behind them and instead come up with a practical approach as soon as possible so that the students of NEHU can go back to their classrooms and continue with their studies instead of hitting the streets to demand their rights.

Yours etc.,
W. Tariang,
Via email

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"You reclaim your power by loving what you were once taught to hate."

— Bryant H. McGill

The Shillong Times

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Waqf and more

WITH the Lok Sabha passing the Waqf bill and the Rajya Sabha set to do so by manipulated support from nominated / independent members, the die is cast for major changes in the present religious land/property management system for the Muslims across the country. Prima facie, such reforms should not be discouraged, and not simply be limited to one religion alone. The intentions of the Modi government might be to set things right, but the apprehensions of Muslims are justified to the extent that the BJP – an adjunct of the RSS – has often been suspected of having an anti-Muslim mindset. The bill, once passed by both houses, would go for presidential signature and become law. Yet, uncertainties remain. The DMK has threatened to move the Supreme Court; and Mamata Banerjee has assured Muslims that the opposition would scrap the law if and when they get power at the Centre. The good side of the present endeavour should not however be lost sight of.

Waqf involves huge properties under the control of the Muslim religious heads, all of which had been given as donations by rich members of the community in the past, or by other entities, and can be used only for religion-related purposes. Yet, corrupt practices have crept into the system. Waqf boards hold nearly one lakh acres of land and immovable properties therein with an estimated value of 1.2 trillion rupees, as per government estimates. Large parts of these have been encroached upon or grabbed mostly by influential Muslims themselves – as is also the case with properties of Hindu shrines. Christians being a more disciplined community, such loss of properties might be less, if any. Criticism is that the proposed law grants the central government undue powers to control the management of these boards and determine whether a property is qualified to be called waqf. Worse, a move is to include two non-Muslims on each of the waqf boards that manages these properties. This could be a major worry to Muslims, also as outsiders have no role in the running of religious institutions of Hindus or other communities.

With PM Modi surviving on support from the JDU and Telugu Desam for his government's continuation and for passage of bills in Parliament, their support was sought and received. However, they have made sure that the new law would not have retrospective effect – meaning no one can come and stake claim for these properties based on their past whims. The new law would guarantee as much. The government claims its aim is only to improve the management of waqf properties and their registration process. Some 14 changes recommended by JDU and TD have been incorporated into the bill. In all fairness, the BJP-led government's obsessions should not limit itself to the unruly style of functioning of the wakf boards, but also of the Hindu religious institutions that are no better when it comes to mismanagement or loot of precious temple funds across the board.

Politics like nature abhors a vacuum

By Patricia Mukhim

Why do I get the sense that there might be a sort of political storm anytime soon in this abode of clouds? The political storm will unsettle the staid and laid back attitude of some political parties that are not used to confronting problems head on or even trying to introspect as to where they failed and why. After the KHADC elections, the Congress, a national party scored zero, NPP, also a regional party scored 4 while the BJP also got a zero which was expected. Among the regional parties the UDP scored 5 while the HSPDP got just 1 seat. The VPP got 17 seats out of 29 which makes it 59% of the total seats.

If voters were rational then many of the present set of legislators would not have been elected. The choice of a particular candidate or party has never been a rational choice. It's purely emotional and this is proven by successive studies. The book "The Political Brain – The Role of Emotion In Deciding The Fate of The Nation," by Drew Westen is a good primer for those aspiring to win the next elections in 2028.

like clowns when they attack the NPP as a party or its candidate because they are all still sleeping in the same bed and sharing the same blanket although they jostle for space as to who gets more of the blanket especially during the cold winter. So people are no longer impressed by the UDP and HSPDP. They feel these are the B-team of the NPP who are just putting up a

beat them, you join them. Considering that their major foe in 2028 will be the VPP, the UDP candidates will have to use more than rhetoric to retain their seats. It is becoming increasingly evident that Shaktiar Warjri too might join the NPP.

Let's face facts. In the Khasi-Jaintia Hills the NPP has been painted as a Garoled party and the VPP is seen

A video clip of Dr Sangma visiting the ongoing construction work of the Tura Medical College saw him saying that as per the works on the ground they seem to tally with the statements of Chief Minister Conrad Sangma in the House. The TMC is a lost cause in Meghalaya but Dr Sangma is unlikely to return to the Congress now, not with Vincent Pala at the helm. So what's the way forward for him?

political performance. Sadly that performance has now become a complex mixture of effort and happenstance. Both the UDP and HSPDP are left with no more weapons in their arsenal except rhetoric which loosely defined is the art of persuasion. Those UDP MDCs that won this time did so on their own merit and personal credibility. It had nothing to do with the Party. So too with the HSPDP.

Three years down the line the UDP might have lost its identity. The 2 ministers – Paul Lyngdoh, and Kymen Shylla seem quite comfort-

will win over some non-VPP Khasi MLAs and the BJP and form the next government too unless there is a political earthquake measuring 7.7 on the Richter.

Now what happens to Mukul Sangma and his TMC MLAs? He is feeling restless too and in the last budget session Dr Sangma was seen commending Chief Minister Conrad Sangma on how he fielded the questions. A video clip of Dr Sangma visiting the ongoing construction work of the Tura Medical College saw him saying that as per the works on the ground they seem to tally with the statements of Chief Minister Conrad Sangma in the House. The TMC is a lost cause in Meghalaya but Dr Sangma is unlikely to return to the Congress now, not with Vincent Pala at the helm. So what's the way forward for him? Will he start a new regional bloc like the VPP and fight the election on the same plank – cleaning up the Augean stables? And then form a coalition with the VPP? After all, Ardent Basaivmoit and Dr Mukul Sangma are comrades in arms with a common enemy, the NPP. So this aspect will be interesting to watch!

But if we think the BJP is sitting with folded hands and waiting for things to play out without it using its toolkit, we have another thing coming. The BJP is having parleys with some regional party leaders and making them see the light. For too long these leaders have believed in principles only to be let down by their respective parties. Now they too want to play a decisive role in politics instead of playing second fiddle. This is where there may be some major shake ups in the next couple of months. Those who have been regional party stalwarts are now toying with the idea of whether to lean into the future or get sucked in the past. They also know that nostalgia does not win elections. They cannot keep reminding the electorate what they did during their tenures as MLAs when those tenures are all but forgotten. Voters are impatient and want solutions to problems. This is the choice that those politicians who are cooling their heels today will have to make. 2028 is not too far away anyway and the faster the choices are made the better negotiating spaces those politicians will have.

I am no soothsayer but having seen how politicians behave over the years, this is just a surmise. I hope I am right because voters have become shrewd and have no qualms about voting candidates from the BJP today!

The Unbearable Lightness of Flickering Bulbs

By Ellerrine Diengdoh

You may ask me what has prompted this tirade this time. My answer is, frustration!

Picture this. I am in the middle of a class, using PowerPoint to make education come alive, when suddenly the power vanishes, then it comes back and then it goes off again (my students will testify to this in court!). I can only tell you, there is no pain like standing in front of a class, trying to salvage your lesson! It is so painfully frustrating!

And this is not a one-time disaster, it is the daily reality of living in Meghalaya, a state drenched in rain. Drowning in it, to be precise. The irony is that we have so much water that we should actually be swimming in electricity. Yet we generate a pathetic "651.74 MW, comprising 377.03 MW from state utilities, 18.04 MW from private utilities, and 256.67 MW from central utilities" (Feb 04, 2025 IST [NE NOW])

So what does our government do? It goes, begging at the doorstep of other states, spending crores every month just to keep our lights dimly flickering.

And who benefits from this grand expenditure? Not us, the citizen who

against me? Have you also ever wondered why we are now paying more money for NOT having electricity than when we actually did? The power is out for hours, but the bill keeps climbing.

What exactly are we paying for? The unplanned social bonding with neighbors as everyone gathers outside, cursing the power cuts?

The free memory training as we try to recall where we last put the emergency torch?

The opportunity to hone our shadow puppetry skills under candlelight?

The unexpected cardio workout of running to charge devices the second the power comes back?

The thrill of watching our neighbors die with envy when our inverter is turned on?

Imagine the businesses that can't function without electricity. Hospitals and clinics where a power cut could literally mean the difference between life and death. Shops depending on cold storage to keep food from rotting. Online jobs that need constant connectivity. Schools, colleges, and universities trying to function in a digital world. And then there is everyone else, just

The actual culprits here are the industrial giants, those smoke-belching, power-guzzling leviathans that devour 57% of the state's electricity while the rest of us sit in the dark. Because in Meghalaya, like everywhere else, if you are small, you get crushed but if you are big, you get fed!

dares to own four light bulbs and gets smacked with a 600 Rs bill.

Not small businesses either, struggling to keep their fridges running but somehow billed as if they are operating a steel plant.

The actual culprits here are the industrial giants, those smoke-belching, power-guzzling leviathans that devour 57% of the state's electricity while the rest of us sit in the dark. Because in Meghalaya, like everywhere else, if you are small, you get crushed but if you are big, you get fed!

I applied for a government solar rooftop scheme in 2021. It is now 2025, and I am still waiting for a divine reply from the Sun God himself. Maybe the government is still consulting astrologers to find an auspicious time to approve my application. Or maybe they are too busy handing out free solar lights, and you guessed right, to the ones rich enough to build their own nuclear reactors if they wanted to!

Meanwhile, Rajasthan leads India in solar power generation, with an installed capacity of approximately 33,467.98 megawatts (MW). Gujarat follows closely with around 32,924.03 MW, and Tamil Nadu ranks third with about 24,585.29 MW of installed solar capacity. And we, Meghalaya, "the abode of clouds", who brag that ours is a land blessed with rain, rivers, wind and blinding sunlight, cannot even keep the streetlights on. This is next-level, award-winning, frame-it-and-hang-it-on-the-wall humiliation!

And we must not forget our beloved MeECL. This is an organisation that somehow manages to lose half the electricity it buys in what they call "transmission losses", which is just a fancy way of saying, "we have no clue where the power went!". So who pays for this shameful incompetence? You and I do. This isn't a power crisis, it is government-approved daylight robbery!

Let us now turn our attention to these (over)smart meters. My electricity consumption remains the same each month, yet my bill fluctuates like the stock market. Is this happening to everyone, or have the smart meters developed a personal vendetta

trying to wash, clean, cook, and exist without feeling like they have now gone back to the 1800s.

Despite all this, the government has come up with all sorts of fancy initiatives:

The Smart City project, but who will power this so-called smart city when we can't even keep the dumb city lit?

PRIME, to build a new army of entrepreneurs. But how will they run businesses, by hand-cranking their machines like in the 1800s?

STEAM education in schools, to teach students the ancient art of fire-making since they will need it when the lights go out?

The solution is staring us in the face.

Fix the miserable grid. Before dreaming up futuristic projects, how about ensuring that the electricity we do have doesn't disappear altogether?

Renewable energy is everywhere, yet we remain pathetically power-starved. Meanwhile, this government hires consultants for everything, probably even to remind them to exhale after inhaling. So either make them do something useful for once or just admit we are paying obscene fees for professional head-scratchers.

The government must also hunt down every last rupee from the miserable industries that have feasted on free electricity for years. Pulling the plug on them isn't punishment, it is a minor inconvenience. Because when we, the lesser mortals, miss a bill, we don't just get a polite reminder, we get a disconnection notice delivered at the speed of light!

And we do not want to be fed the same recycled excuses:

We are working on it. We know you are not!

We need more time. You have had decades!

We will improve. After we start using kerosene lamps again?

This is not a request. This is not a plea. This is a demand for what is rightfully ours. Because we the people of Meghalaya deserve better. And those in charge should remember, when history looks back at this moment, it will remember who failed and who paid the price!

Letters to the Editor

Insecurity begins in the mind

Editor,
Please bear with me as I begin this missive with what I feel is a relevant quote. The quote is from Alan Watts' book "The Wisdom of Insecurity"
"To be secure means to isolate and fortify the 'I' but it is just the feeling of being an isolated 'I' which makes me lonely and afraid. In other words the more security I can get, the more I shall want. To put it plainly: the desire for security and the feeling of insecurity are the same thing. To hold your breath is to lose your breath. A society built on the quest for security is nothing but a breath retention contest in which everyone is taut as a drum and as purple as a beet."
And a little later in the same chapter.
"In other words, if we can really understand what we are looking for - that safety is isolation, and what we do to ourselves when we look for it - we shall see that we do not want it at all. No one has to tell you that you should not

hold your breath for ten minutes. You know that you can't do it, and that the attempt is most uncomfortable."
It is intriguing to read even the most intelligent people believing in safeguards to preserve the society. What is being missed by all is the psychological aspects of this search for security. This quote I hope sheds some light on it and is relevant not just for individuals but societies too.
There are many examples of groups of people who have done well in the most adverse of circumstances. In India perhaps the Parsis and the Sikhs displaced during the partition stand out. Both categories were faced with a loss of homeland and no reservation were availed by them. Yet they not just survived but thrived.
Looking further the Jews in Israel in spite of being outnumbered by Arabs have not succumbed to the feeling of being victims.
The Japanese after World War 2, the progress of the Singaporeans, the Taiwanese are other relevant examples of strong determination. Often it is adversity and not the much-championed cushioning from it that helps

societies to succeed.
Yours etc.,
Paramjit Bakhshi.
Via email

Need to investigate death of KIIT student

Editor,
A thorough investigation is needed to find out the reason behind the death of Arnab Mukherjee, a third-year BTech student at Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) in Odisha. He was found dead under suspicious circumstances near an under-construction building about 10 km from the KIIT campus on Monday. Given a 20-year-old Nepalese BTech student, who allegedly died by suicide in her hostel room at the same deemed university in February, had reportedly faced continuous harassment on campus, the death of the Bengali student raised questions about whether he also faced similar treatments. The police must conduct an impartial inquiry to find out whether he was murdered, and if he himself

jumped from the seven-story building, then the reason behind it.
Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

A public apology

Editor,
Please kindly allow me to express my admission and public declaration through your esteemed paper, that I had thoughtlessly written derogatory remarks on Facebook against the legal advocates merely on the basis of disgust on reading some news regarding the release on bail of persons charged with rape and murder, forgetting that it is also the legal advocates who defend the victims and the innocent.
Therefore, I hereby tender my humble apology to the legal advocates and the Shillong Bar Association, who have sent a legal notice to me.

Yours etc.,
Fabian Lyngdoh,
Mawbri, Ri Bhoi.

Shad Suk Mynsiem

Editor,
Appros to the letter by Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh captioned, "No intention to offend anyone" (ST March 29, 2025), I read the paragraph No 6 of the letter about the "Shad Suk Mynsiem" where Kong Sweetymon Rynjah opined that Shad Suk Mynsiem is "primarily a thanksgiving dance and not a religious dance as it does not entail any religious rituals, but we only beseech through prayers and exhort before the Almighty." These words made me ponder as I believe the dance is a religious dance for worshipping U Blei U Nongthaw U Nongbuh, U Trai Kynrad (The Almighty God of the Khasis). My observation, understanding and belief are that the Shad Suk Mynsiem is a religio-ritualistic thanksgiving dance to worship U Blei by offering thanks to Him for the blessings and guidance in the bygone days, and again

seeking blessings and guidance for the coming days.

Coming to another point, the name "Shad Suk Mynsiem" was coined by the Seng Khasi (Kmie), Mawkhari, in the year 1912, and since that year the Seng Khasi had successfully organized the dance annually. However, in recent years, the name of the dance has been used by Khasi people in some Khasi villages for dances similar to the Shad Suk Mynsiem. The dances in the villages are not organized by the Seng Khasi, and the villages are under the jurisdiction of the Hima Khyrim. I had watched the dance in some Khasi local YouTube channel and I would like to request the Seng Khasi (Kmie) to do something on this issue as I believe the Seng Khasi is the 'sole owner' of the name Shad Suk Mynsiem.
Finally, I wish a grand success to the religious-ritualistic thanksgiving dance this year, 2025.

Yours etc.,
Wallambi Rani
Upper Shillong

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"Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty."

— Mother Teresa

The Shillong Times

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Institutional Integrity

THE North Eastern Indira Gandhi Regional Health and Medical Sciences (NEIGRIHMS) has come a long way since it was first started in 1987. It took a while for the Institution to become fully operational and to find its feet in this state. Today NEIGRIHMS caters to the health needs of patients from all seven states and is growing from strength to strength. It is a Post Graduate Research Institute apart from offering the MBBS course. While there have been controversies in the past as there are wont to be in any institution, in the last 4-5 years, NEIGRIHMS has moved on an even keel. However, the eternal challenge for every institution, particularly an institution offering healthcare facilities is to keep adding more departments and services to cater to an ever-growing number of patients and illnesses. Like every government institution, NEIGRIHMS too has had to face challenges of funding for state of the art diagnostic equipment. Unlike private healthcare facilities the process in government run institutions is cumbersome and involves constant negotiations with the Union Health Ministry. Despite these constraints NEIGRIHMS has done fairly well. This is one of many institutions modelled along the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi.

All government institutions work according to a set of rules, regulations and principles. Whether it is in employment or procurement of essentials they have to follow set procedures and are held accountable by those very rules. While there have been complaints from local patients that the nurses recruited by NEIGRIHMS in the past few years are from outside the region and are not conversant with the local language and culture thereby making it difficult for patients and their families to communicate with them, perhaps the Institution has not addressed this lacuna. Cultural sensitivities add to the quality of healthcare. A local pressure group has raised the issue that the reservation policy for Scheduled Tribes is not strictly followed by NEIGRIHMS in their recruitment process for nursing staff. While civil society engagement with a public institution is by no means unconstitutional, the manner in which such engagement happens is a matter of concern. The pressure group allegedly shut the director's room cum office and asked him to move outside to discuss the matter. In the first place it is wrong for anyone to approach the matter with such belligerence. There is a method for discussing issues with mutual respect and within the ambit of laid down principles.

Of course those leading organizations too must be flexible and react with prudence at such unexpected turn of events and be flexible enough to accommodate views but also to firmly communicate their views when unreasonable demands are made on them. This ability to situationally morph in response to such demands is what makes a good institutional leader. But the same set of guidelines for engaging with institutional heads must also be respected by leaders of pressure groups. Confrontation is not the way forward; discussion and accommodation of diverse views is what keeps institutions on course.

A dance with peace within

By Hammarsing L. Kharhmar

The annual thanksgiving dance organised by the Seng Khasi Kmie (Shillong) in the first half of April, at the historic Weiking ground, is a grand and awe-inspiring event. At the dance arena viewers are treated to a mesmerizing scene in which hundreds of male and female dancers dressed in some of the most unique, elegant and vibrant attire move gracefully and energetically to music that occupies two contrasting realms at the same time: the primordial and the futuristic. In fact, the entire dance feels like it exists in many worlds simultaneously: the past, the present and the future. It is truly timeless.

The dance was first held at its current venue in 1911, but the roots of the dance go deep into pre-history, when the world was young, and all its inhabitants lived closely with nature. All traditional dances, especially in our country, are deeply rooted in an agrarian past, when survival often depended on a good harvest and daily life was centered around agriculture and cultivation. These dances have expressed gratitude to Mother Earth and paid obeisance to the Creator since time immemorial and continue to do so, till today. They help preserve and transfer knowledge from generation to generation. They also, very importantly, bring people together and are vital catalysts in the development of culture and in the advancement of civilisations. The survival and continuity of these dances over hundreds and thousands of years have organically transformed these festivals into distinct celebrations of Identity and Essence.

The most popular translations of "Shad Suk Mynsiem" are "Dance of Peaceful Hearts", "Dance of Joyous Souls" and "Dance with a Peaceful Heart. To this list, I would also like to add: "Dance with Peace Within". We live in a world in rapid transition. We are growing more and more connected, but at the same time we are also moving farther and farther away from each. In this churn, driven by aspiration, fortunately there is also greater introspection which is leading people around the world to search within and without. We are all slowly awakening to the priceless value of Indigenous systems and wisdom, which not too long ago were considered primitive and irrelevant, but which are now being revered as some of the most important treasures of Humankind. The pivotal moment being the deep meanings and relevance being shared by the Indigenous themselves.

At the Shad Suk Mynsiem, the dancers celebrate

their culture and their religion with pride and responsibility. The cultural and the spiritual flow seamlessly as 'One'. The dance is now held in hundreds of villages and towns across the Khasi Hills, organised by different branches of the Seng Khasi. In addition to the Shad Suk Mynsiem there are many more traditional dances. The music, attire and even the sequence of events and ways of dancing vary from village to village and region to region but they all share the same foundation. This diversity in such a small area and population is extremely rare to find and must always be protected.

One of the greatest contributions of the Seng Khasi, in the first quarter of its

your Truth'. These simple but powerful lines continue to resonate and will forever inspire. At every Shad Suk Mynsiem you can feel this Truth, he spoke about. The dancers and musicians celebrate and honour their culture and their religion.

The three most striking elements observed immediately at the dance are:

(1) The sublime attire, intricate jewelry and ceremonial accessories worn by the dancers.

(2) The subtle and solemn movements of the female dancers, circled by male dancers who adjust their steps and shuffles to the rhythms and their changes.

(3) The otherworldly music, which feels familiar (given that similar instru-



existence, was bringing the dance to Shillong and holding it in all its grandeur, at a time when the British were at the peak of their powers across the world and our

ments exist around the Indian Subcontinent and beyond) but is unmistakably Khasi.

All three elements often overwhelm the onlooker, scattering the viewer's atten-

The most popular translations of "Shad Suk Mynsiem" are "Dance of Peaceful Hearts", "Dance of Joyous Souls" and "Dance with a Peaceful Heart. To this list, I would also like to add: "Dance with Peace Within". We live in a world in rapid transition. We are growing more and more connected, but at the same time we are also moving farther and farther away from each.

city was the administrative capital of their expansive Assam province. The decision to hold the dance by the Sixteen founders of the Seng Khasi and their mentors is one of the greatest examples of powerful vision and valiance. In 1916 at a foundation day celebration of the organisation (Seng Kut Snem), Rangbah Rash Mohon Roy Nongrum, the first Chairman (President) of Seng Khasi spoke these lines at the end of his speech which he had titled "Ka Jingieid" (Love): "To long kiba ieid jalade ba phin nang ban ieid ia kiwei, ba phin ieid ia U Blei ia la ka Niam bad la ka Hok". This translates as: 'Do love yourselves so you may learn to love others, to love God, your Religion and

tion but if you focus gently, first into the music and then into the movements you will start to notice a synchronicity where the entire arena becomes One. The white whisks seem to answer the beats and melodies and the jangle of the dancer's jewelry adds to the sound scape. The arena begins to look like a surreal moving canvas of soft clouds floating above a sea of colours.

There are Seven rhythms — Hynhiew Skit — that are played during the festival, beginning with the Ksing Lumpaid at the Iing Seng (Headquarters) which is played to gather people together, usually before a program is set to begin. The next rhythm played as the congregation proceeds towards the

dance arena, is the Ksing Lynti which is the most recognizable Khasi beat. On reaching the venue, before entering the dance ground, each person bows to touch the Earth and offer a prayer to the Eternal Mother, Mei Ramew. A short ceremony is then conducted by an elder of the Khasi faith, Niam Khasi. Immediately after follows the first round of the sword dance, Shad Mastieh, which I firmly believe deserves to be included in the list of Indian Classical dances.

The drums stop for a short period and then the dance truly begins when the sound of the Ksing Kynthei and Padiah fill the venue and the female dancers enter the ground to begin their dance at the center. Four distinct rhythms — Padiah, Nalai, Klang, Dum Dum — with ethereal accompanying melodies played on the 'Queen of Instruments' — Ka Tangmuri — are looped till evening starts to set in and the Sun casts a soft golden glow over the dancers. The music stops momentarily and then resumes with the sword dances. First the Shad Pyllun and in the final segment, the visceral and exquisite Shad Mastieh is performed again, but this time the arena is packed. The atmosphere is thrilling. The dancers move with passion and dedication. It is a matter of great pride to be in the ground at that moment. The Duhaliyas (traditional musicians) play their instruments with even more gusto, feeding off the dancers energy and vice versa. Then, in the very final sequence of the dance at the ground, two rows of dancers charge towards each other with swords twirling, as if to go into battle rushing faster as they draw nearer, but then just as they are about to clash, they stop and gently raise their whisks and swords together like folded hands and bow before one another three times, chanting "Hoi Kiw." It is a deeply spiritual moment. Everyone and everything comes together at this moment.

Shad: Dance, Suk: Peace, Mynsiem: Soul I always find the same questions floating into my mind at every dance I go to: "When was this music first composed and by whom?" "When and how were these movements first imagined and performed?" I know we will never find the answers and we don't need to. What we do know is that these unique expressions of gratitude and reverence to the Divinity and Nature around us and within us, continue to bring 'Peace to the Heart and Soul.'

Khublei Shad Suk Mynsiem Basuk Bakmen ia phi baroh! (A very happy and joyous SHAD SUK MYNSIEM to you all).

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Latent Opportunities in Meghalaya's Economy: Harnessing Dormant Potentials

By Bahunlang Pde

Meghalaya's remarkable landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and robust community values distinguish it as a unique state, yet economic challenges persist. Discussions regarding economic advancement frequently emphasize the development of infrastructure—railways, airports, and large-scale events such as concerts and festivals. Resistance to these initiatives, however, does not arise from a lack of awareness of their economic potential. Rather, concerns center on the potential influx of external populations, cultural erosion, and the loss of land and identity.

Addressing these valid concerns requires a balanced approach: economic progress that enhances the welfare of residents without undermining their traditional way of life. This necessitates a strategic integration of development and growth, firmly rooted in Meghalaya's cultural foundation. A solid foundation ensures enduring stability.

1. Localized Infrastructure Development

Railways: Rather than establishing extensive railway networks that may encourage significant external migration, priority should be given to intra-state rail systems (e.g., Shillong to Tura or Jowai). Such networks would primarily facilitate the transport of goods, reducing costs for farmers and small enterprises while creating employment opportunities in logistics, maintenance, and trade. This approach would limit excessive external influence. For instance, in 2020, the East Coast Railway introduced five intra-state special trains in Odisha, demonstrating the viability of this model.

Airports: Accelerating the expansion of Umroi Airport and establishing small intra-state airstrips would enhance connectivity within Meghalaya. This development would generate direct employment in airport operations, hospitality, and supply chains, ensuring that aviation growth benefits local communities. Tamil Nadu's intra-state flight routes, such as Chennai-Coimbatore and Chennai-Madurai, provide a pertinent example.

2. Skill Development Aligned with Opportunities

Investment in vocational training programs tailored to infrastructure projects—such as railway technicians, aviation personnel, event managers, and hospitality professionals—is essential. Collaboration with institutions like the Meghalaya Skills and Innovation Hub would ensure that training aligns with emerging employment prospects. For example, preparing youth for roles in railway maintenance or airport logistics would enable local residents to occupy key positions. Partnerships with skill development institutes could facilitate short-term internships in mainland India, providing valuable exposure.

3. Leveraging Tourism and Creative Industries

Meghalaya's natural beauty and traditions represent underutilized economic resources. Tourism initiatives should extend beyond sightseeing to employ local residents as guides, artisans, and transport providers. Integrating concerts with tourism growth would attract visitors, whose expenditures on accommodations, food, and experiences would benefit the local economy. A proposed "Meghalaya Cultural Journey" could link music festivals with heritage sites and rural homestays, ensuring that tourism revenue directly supports local communities.

4. Strengthening Local Entrepreneurship

Subsidies should be provided to businesses aligned with infrastructure development, such as retail outlets near railway stations, food vendors at airports, and transport services for tourists. For instance, supporting tribal women in selling handicrafts at concert venues and airport terminals would retain economic gains within the community.

Building Community Trust and Support: Economic opportunities abound, yet skepticism toward external influences remains a significant barrier. Addressing this requires proactive engagement. So here are some suggestions:

1. Prioritizing Community Dialogues

Town hall meetings across Shillong, Tura, and rural areas, involving tribal leaders, student unions, and youth organizations, would foster transparent communication. These discussions should highlight how projects generate local employment—railway stations require porters and operators, while airports need ground staff and security personnel. Concrete data, such as the Indian railway sector's employment of over 1.2 million individuals, could illustrate the potential for job creation, instilling confidence in the community.

2. Success Stories

Sikkim's Pakyong Airport, operational since 2018, exemplifies sustainable development, employing predominantly local staff while enhancing tourism without compromising cultural integrity. Similarly, Assam's music festivals, influenced by events like the Hornbill Festival, have elevated regional artists and created employment in hospitality and logistics.

3. Leveraging Visual and Audio Media

Compelling short videos depicting young individuals training as airport staff or local vendors benefiting from concert attendance could be disseminated via WhatsApp, local radio stations (e.g., Shillong's Red FM), the Hello Meghalaya App, and social media platforms. Collaborating with local influencers and musicians would reinforce the message that increased cultural events create opportunities for Meghalaya's artists.

4. Grassroots Campaigns

Distributing flyers with clear job projections (e.g., "Railways = 500 local jobs in five years") and organizing free community workshops on "Employment Opportunities Through Development" would enhance accessibility and informed participation.

5. Employment Linkages

A railway station generates numerous positions, including construction workers, cleaners, ticket sellers, and food vendors. An airport increases tourism, necessitating local guides, artisans, and drivers.

6. Involving Locals in Decision-Making

Community advisory committees, comprising tribal councils and student bodies, should participate in infrastructure planning. Allowing residents to influence decisions—such as the location of railway stations or festival programming—would ensure that cultural authority remains with the local population.

Final Notes

While Meghalaya's official employment figures may suggest stability, underemployment remains a critical concern, with many residents reliant on low-yield agriculture and a still-developing tourism sector. Progress hinges on enhancing infrastructure and fostering creative industries. Sustainable transformation requires embracing the community as integral stakeholders, ensuring that railways, airports, and cultural events are driven by local leadership rather than external forces. By reframing resistance as an opportunity for collaboration, Meghalaya can achieve enduring economic growth and self-reliance.

Letters to the Editor

Complexities of politics

Editor, The special article "Politics like nature abhors a vacuum" by Patricia Mukhim (ST April 4, 2025) is a compelling analogy. Just as nature fills voids with new elements, politics tends to fill power vacuums with new leaders, ideologies, or movements. When there's a lack of leadership or direction, it creates an opportunity for others to step in—sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. This dynamic can lead to rapid change, but also instability if the transition isn't managed well. It reminds me of how revolutions or shifts in governance often arise when existing systems fail to address people's needs.

Those who don't lean to the future will get sucked into the past, is really a thought-provoking sentiment. It suggests that progress and adaptability are crucial to growth, both for individuals and societies. Dwelling too much on the past, or resisting change,

might hinder one's ability to move forward and thrive in an ever-evolving world. History can be a teacher, but it should not be a cage. It is almost like saying the past is the foundation, but the future is the horizon we must aim for.

"The Political Brain" by Drew Westen which Mukhim refers to is an interesting read, the author argues that voters are driven more by feelings than by logic or policy details. He challenges the traditional view of the mind as a rational calculator, showing that emotions like values, imagery, and moral sentiment dominate decision-making. The book delves into how political campaigns succeed or fail based on their ability to connect emotionally with voters. Westen emphasizes that elections are won in the "marketplace of emotions," where candidates must appeal to voters' feelings about parties, principles, and personalities. He provides examples from the American presidential elections to illustrate his points and offer insights into how political messaging can be more effective.

It is a fascinating read that flips conventional political analysis on its head.

Yours etc; VK Lyngdoh, Via email

Limitations of Aadhaar in Ration Card Verification

Editor, Aadhaar is a 12-digit unique identification number issued by the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) to residents of India. It simplifies identification and verification, enhances access to government services and subsidies, and strengthens national security.

Currently, ration card verification is being conducted across all fair price shops in Shillong. Beneficiaries whose names appear on their respective Below Poverty Line (BPL) ration cards are required to authenticate their identity using fingerprint verification. However, if a beneficiary's fingerprint is not linked to their Aadhaar

card, they are instructed to visit the nearest Aadhaar Kendra to update their biometric data.

A major challenge arises for elderly individuals whose fingerprints have faded due to age, making it impossible for them to update their biometric data. As a result, these vulnerable individuals—who are most in need of government subsidies—are unable to complete the verification process, thereby losing access to essential benefits.

It is important to acknowledge that Aadhaar-based verification is intended to ensure that BPL benefits reach only genuine beneficiaries. However, the inability to link fingerprints has led to the exclusion of elderly individuals from these critical subsidies. Therefore, the concerned authorities should consider alternative solutions, such as granting exemptions for elderly beneficiaries or implementing an offline verification mechanism, to ensure they continue receiving the support they rightfully deserve.

Yours etc.... Krishna Chettri, Shillong-2

Taming the dragon's breath in NE India

Editor, In 2006, Mohammad Yunus who wrote his autobiography "Banker to the Poor: Micro-Lending and the Battle Against World Poverty" and a stalwart for the rights of the poor, a modern day Robinhood arrived to usher a global microcredit movement. Muhammad Yunus is a household name but this same saviour now the Chief Advisor of the present Bangladesh Government made an immature statement about Northeast India saying that since the region is landlocked, Bangladesh can provide the seven states access to the sea for trade and commerce.

Yunus' recent visit to Beijing to discuss the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project (TRCMP) was the centrepiece of the discussion amongst 2.1 USD billion in loans and investments. The Chinese have always used unrestricted warfare

in various domains to alter the international political landscape. In a news item in The Economic Times, dated March 6, 2025, Pareth Baruah the exiled chief of ULFA, allegedly relocated to China and in the Xishuangbanna Dai region of Yunnan from Ruifli, near the Arunachal Pradesh-Myanmar border.

A write-up in January 2024 from the Observer Research Foundation titled "The Digital Silk Road in the Indo-Pacific: Mapping China's Vision for Global Tech Expansion" by Sameer Patil and Priyvi Gupta gives a 360 degree view of how the dragon's breath has reached from companies, undersea cables and surveillance tools. Recent events highlight the importance of prioritizing India's national security in the North Eastern Region and working in collaboration with our neighbours. This requires a strong political will.

Yours etc., Christopher Gathphoh, Via email

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

The masters of migration

By Will Hawkes

As I sprinted across the flower-rich meadow on the eastern coast of Cyprus, I could barely see my car. The air was full of tiny black dots, pelting like bullets past me. I hauled open the car door and breathed a sigh of relief once inside. I was surrounded by millions of flies, amid the most incredible migration event I have ever seen.

The migration cameras my team and I use to monitor these insects counted nearly 6,000 flies per metre per minute. Being hit by a fly travelling over 25mph (helped by the wind) hurts enough to make you want shelter quickly.

All of these flies had just travelled at least 60 miles (100km) across open sea from the Middle East to Cyprus. This journey forms part of their springtime migration towards northern Europe.

Butterflies and dragonflies are well-known insect migrants, but not because they're the most numerous. That title is given to the flies. I have studied all of the insects migrating through Cyprus and the Pyrenees on the France-Spain border. Flies make up nearly 90% of all migrants. Yet they have been consistently overlooked by scientists and their ecological contribution has been hugely underappreciated.

My colleagues and I set out to change this. We have spent months collecting written sources that mentioned fly migration from anywhere in the world. Our findings, now published in *Biological Reviews*, could change our perception of flies forever. Previously, nobody really knew the extent to which flies migrated, yet they are the most numerous and most ecologically important of all terrestrial migrants.

Fly migration has been part of written human history for millennia. In the book of Exodus, when the pharaoh of Egypt didn't let Moses's people go, God sent a plague of flies to change his mind. Then God removed flies from the land until "not a fly remained". This last biblical quote is key.

If these flies had been misidentified mayflies coming out of the river Nile, which are known to amass in huge numbers, their ex-

hausted bodies would have remained for days. Because they all disappeared without a trace, this suggests a huge migration of flies. Egypt is on an important fly migration route. So perhaps fly migration was significant enough to be the subject of divine intervention.

Flies migrate to reproduce, moving to exploit seasonal food resources. All over the world, it's mostly females that migrate. They have been recorded migrating through mountain passes high in the Himalayas, on ships hundreds of miles out to sea in the Gulf of Mexico and in their millions migrating through western Europe. Amazingly, while on fieldwork in the Maldives, I saw Forci-

in rotting carcasses and animal dung. One study showed that the larvae of just 50 houseflies (*Musca domestica*), - the very ecologically similar and equally abundant autumn housefly *Musca autumnalis* migrate south through the Pyrenees in their millions - can decompose up to 444kg of pig manure.

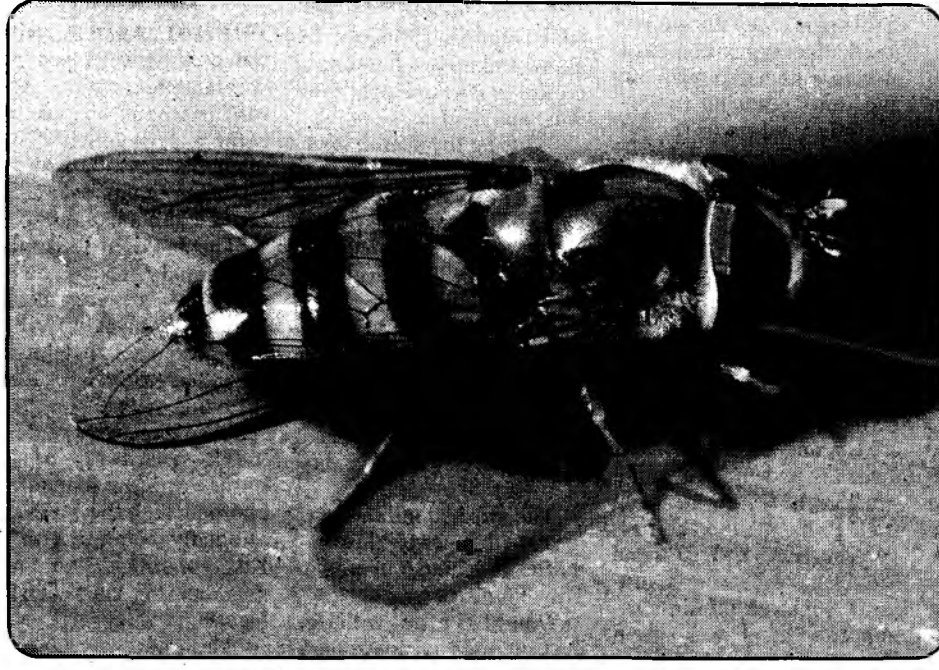
The ecological roles of flies are not all positive, though. My latest study shows that monoculture crops provide lots of food for some migratory fly species (18%) that have subsequently become crop pests. Some (16%) carry diseases, such as mosquitoes that migrate huge distances and bring diseases such as malaria.

But migratory flies have an overwhelmingly positive impact on the planet. Hoverfly larvae eat trillions of aphids each year in southern England. Insect migration is already known to be the most important way that the nutrients plants need to grow are moved across the land and flies make up the majority of the insects that transport the nutrients.

The movement and subsequent death of trillions of migrating flies, whose bodies contain elements, such as phosphorous and nitrogen which plants need to grow, could be vital to soil health of the soils too. Migratory birds have been noted feeding on and moving at the same time as migratory flies, perhaps using them as fuel for their journeys.

We're only just waking up to the significance of flies. Hopefully, it's not too late to protect them. One German study found that the number of aphid-eating migratory hoverflies declined by 97% over the last 50 years. Fewer aphid-eating hoverflies means more crop-eating aphids and also fewer pollinators. So that's a terrifying statistic that could have drastic consequences.

A sunrise of hope exists, however. These brilliant migratory flies have so many young that if we improve landscape connectivity, reduce pesticide usage and provide suitable habitat, they can bounce back really quickly. We need these flies as much as we need the air we breathe. So next time you see a fly up against your window, open it and let it out. It has a long way to go and such important work to do. (*The Conversation*)



pomyia midges use their soft foot hairs to stick to dragonfly wings to hitch a lift over the Indian Ocean.

VITAL ROLES

Flies are so important to the planet and to us. No other group of terrestrial migrants (including vertebrates such as mammals) are as ecologically diverse as flies. More than half (62%) of all migrating flies, including hoverflies, are pollinators. Without them, food crop production would decline.

As they migrate, flies transport and disperse pollen between flowers. This could help plants adapt to climate change by maintaining genetic diversity.

Many migratory fly species (34%) are decomposers, ensuring the planet isn't covered

Here's how to keep a friendly bacteria happy

The microbial community living within our large intestine is a highly dense and complex ecosystem. While some of these microbes cause illness and disease (such as bacteria and viruses), others are friendlier to us and help keep us in good health.

Akkermansia muciniphila is one of these friendly bacteria.

Researchers have known for years that Akkermansia is associated with good health. One of the important roles it plays in our gut is maintaining the function of our gut barrier.

This keeps the bad bugs out while making sure we can still absorb the important nutrients from our diet that keep our cells working as they should.

But when there's an imbalance of Akkermansia in the gut, it can lead to problems with our health.

This unusual bacteria lives in our large intestine and survives off of mucin - the layer of mucus that covers the large intestine's surface.

Mucin provides a small but important separation between the human cells and microbial cells that call the large intestine home. If this mucus layer is disrupted, microbes can come into direct contact with the human cells.

This may result in inflammation as the human cells react to the bacteria - potentially leading to the development of disease, such as inflammatory bowel disease.

Akkermansia muciniphila is a very fussy eater. It only uses the glycoproteins (molecules containing protein and carbohydrates) in mucin as an energy source. But just how this bacteria extracted energy from glycoproteins was a mystery until recently.

Research conducted by myself and colleagues discovered that Akkermansia muciniphila deploys a range of different enzymes that work together in order to unlock the sugar found in mucin.

Using mucin taken from a pig,

we analysed both enzyme activity on the surface of cells alongside their genes to understand which enzymes were involved in breaking the glycoproteins in mucin down.

We discovered that Akkermansia muciniphila uses 66 different enzymes to extract the important energy it needs from the glycoproteins in order to do its important work. We are the first group to describe this process.

IMPORTANT FOR HEALTH

Studies looking at Akkermansia's interaction with the immune system in mice have revealed that it calms the immune system down and may prevent obesity and diabetes from developing.

Researchers have highlighted specific peptides (a type of molecule) that it secretes which have this effect on the immune system. Due to its friendly nature and calming effect on the immune system, Akkermansia muciniphila has even been used to develop probiotics.

Researchers have also found that people who have a metabolic disease, such as diabetes or fatty liver disease, have fewer Akkermansia muciniphila in their large intestine. The more lean and athletic you are, the more Akkermansia you have.

Although Akkermansia muciniphila only eats mucin, our diet does still affect it - though indirectly.

Colon-dwelling bacteria such as Akkermansia use the carbohydrates they extract from the fibrous foods in our diet as fuel. In return they produce substances called short-chain fatty acids.

These compounds feed the top layer of human cells in the colon. In fact, 10 per cent of our energy comes from this process.

The more researchers learn about Akkermansia muciniphila and the other microbes that live in the colon, the more we understand the importance of eating a variable, high-fibre diet.

(*The Conversation*)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, April 6, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon trine Rahu on your solar return chart thus ensuring an extraordinary time period for you. You will have opportunities galore. Your business will prosper and flourish. You will also get good gains and profits. Government related work will get done. You could also enter into a new partnership, association or joint venture. Your popularity at your work place will peak. And you will be in top form. Your peers and colleagues would be talking of your abilities and efforts to get the work done. You will be able to perform fully to your potential thus pleasing your seniors. Your exceptional performance could lead to bonus, increments or equity shares coming your way. You will also remain busy with business trips. Your financial growth will be great. Your romantic life will be wonderful and you will develop a liking for some person leading to marriage.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) Your efforts and confidence and courage bring success in the form of monetary gains and your energy increases for work projects and your job environment is lively. Domestic relationships and the home environment tend to be harmonious and peaceful through devotion and considerable efforts on your part. You may find your children at an age that requires more attention and discipline. You have more energy at your disposal to express yourself creatively, through activities with children, romantic hobbies, or sports. Short trips, and other forms of communication and making connections, appeal strongly now.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This phase brings love and harmony in professional and personal relations. You have the chance to shine, largely because you project yourself with self-respect and modesty. You are especially appealing and charming in personal and family relations. Your children may need more discipline than they previously did. You may enjoy the challenge of tackling a variety of subjects. Talking, writing, and studying can be good ways to handle stress. You might invest 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 offers a natural curiosity, facility with words, and the ability to multi-task successfully. You are especially good at mediating conflicts. Smoothing over differences and using your diplomacy skills figures now. Your mind is always active with new ideas for an increase of income. This is a very self-expressive time when you have lots of energy, but not necessarily self-discipline to match. You are inspired creatively and emotionally. You want others to take notice, and you are more sensitive to the appreciation of people. Personal projects are on the rise. You will be considerably more productive, healthy, and focused.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This is a favorable period for hobbies, sports and competitive exams. Beware of a covetous and suspicious person around you who could cause misunderstanding in your personal relationships. You are bold in your love, yet not aggressive either. Artistic self-expression is important, possibly through music, fashion and writing. Your communication style tends to be sharper, more direct and to the point. You may work hard at making yourself feel more secure, and you may be called upon to take charge on the home and family front. You may have more energy to invest in homemaking, house repairs, re-decorating, or family activities. In fact, if you are feeling very restless, moody, or defensive, it would be a good idea to do any of these things.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) The present planetary configuration increases confidence in personal relations; courage and efforts at work place. It is a great time to do something entirely new and pioneering. Discussions and ideas about finances and material security figure strongly. 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 in 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 23) This is a period that brings love and understanding in personal and professional relations. Friends and loved ones take priority. People at work might be surprised by your ability to assert yourself and your needs. You do not 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 feelings towards religion are enhanced this week. 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) Success, responsibility and maturity are the keywords. You have a great deal of energy for new money-making projects, or for stepping up existing ones. Matters of the heart touch you deeply. You may willingly play a supportive role to the family and offer compassion and selfless love. This is a rather happy, goal-oriented time on the professional front. This is a time to follow your dreams and ideas, 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 occur. More opportunities to socialize and network could present themselves now.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) This phase 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. Much of your energy will be applied to vocational achievement, professional success, and leadership. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you at this time. Your love life is more attractive and charming. Public relations work, promotion, and other such endeavors are favored now. You give attention on fitness and health related programs.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) Diplomacy, correctness in manner, finesse, and charm will be a big plus in aiding financial gains, especially in areas requiring public interaction. You feel attracted to intelligent people with whom you can communicate well and exchange ideas. You know how to relate to others and you do so in a natural and warm manner. More contact with authority figures is likely. 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 during this time. 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. You are looking to expand your activities, and you may find that you have a lot of energy for higher studies, travel, or brand-new subjects. Smoothing out your close personal relationships is what makes you happy. If single, you are more willing than normal to enter into a committed relationship. It's a good time to work out money problems or other issues of sharing with a partner. You receive pleasure from anything that expands your horizons, both physically and mentally.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) All that is deeply personal comes into focus now. Conflicts with a partner over values or personal possessions are more likely to occur. Circumstances are such that your diplomacy skills are required. Your self-mastery skills matter more than usual. This is the time when you are most desirous of change on a deep level. You are more willing than usual to explore life's secrets. On a more practical level, you may be dealing with joint finances and shared resources now more than usual. Social life takes priority in your life. Social interactions of a personal, one-on-one kind are emphasized.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You would be generous, emotional, and sympathetic with people around you. You will also thoroughly enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities, with 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.

Is added protein good for our health?

Protein intake dominates fitness advice. Whether you want to build muscle, improve your fitness or watch your weight, the common advice handed out by everyone from fitness influencers to doctors is that we need more protein.

But while protein does play an essential role in maintaining our muscle mass and overall health, all this increased attention on the importance of protein in the media and fitness circles has sparked a surge in products marketed specifically for their protein content.

Some chocolate bars, ice cream, pizza, coffee and even alcoholic beverages now market themselves as protein foods.

But our enthusiasm for protein might have gone too far. While protein is certainly important for our health, most of us don't need these protein-enhanced foods as a regular feature in our diet. Not to mention that this marketing may lead to a "halo effect," where consumers mistakenly equate high protein content with overall nutritional value.

This effect can lead to the perception of protein-rich foods being inherently nutritious - even though many may not be.

Protein is essential for maintaining muscle mass and immune function.

Nutrition guidelines recommend people aim to eat around 0.75g of protein per kilogram of body weight. But some evidence suggests this recommendation may be an underestimate - and that the recommendation should be around 1.2g-1.6g per kg of body weight per day.

There's also a strong body of evidence that suggests the amount of protein we need changes depending on our health.

For instance, people need to eat more protein when they're recovering from an illness. Research also shows that older adults should be aiming for at least 1.2g per kg of body weight in order to combat age-related muscle loss.

Athletes also need to eat a greater amount of protein to support their training and recovery. Moreover, with the rising popularity of weight-loss drugs, strategies increasingly emphasise protein intake to minimise muscle loss while losing weight.

But just because protein is good for maintaining muscle mass, that doesn't mean more is better. In fact, it seems that even when we consume large amounts of protein, only a some of this is actually used by the body.

Most of us probably need a little more protein than current guidelines suggest, but less than is often promoted by wellness influencers on social media (with some even suggesting we need up to 3g of protein per kg of body weight).

Ironically, the necessary amount of protein suggested by emerging evidence (1.2g-1.6g per kg of body weight per day) is close to what the average protein consumption already is in most western countries.

Most people can probably benefit from being more protein aware - not about how much protein they're consuming, but about the quality and

frequency of their protein choices. Ideally, we should aim to consume small amounts of protein-rich foods more often during the day.

Current evidence suggests around 20g-30g of protein (around a handful of a protein source) at each meal supports muscle maintenance alongside physical activity.

In an ideal world, this protein would come from whole foods (such as nuts, seeds, milk, eggs and legumes). But fortified protein products may have their space as a quick and easy snack - especially for those who may struggle to eat this much protein at each meal. It's important to eat these foods in moderation, however.

ULTRA-PROCESSED PRODUCTS

Supermarkets are full of "protein-enhanced" products. But while these products may contain additional protein, they may also contain additional sugars or carbohydrates.

For example, protein milk often contains double the protein of regular milk. It does this by removing water or adding dried milk.

Protein bars are another example. But depending on the brand you choose, alongside their additional protein content they may also be high in sugar.

Many protein-fortified products share another common trait: they fall into the category of ultra-processed foods. Ultra-processed foods are commercially made products that include ingredients you wouldn't typically find in your own kitchen.

Research shows regularly consuming ultra-processed foods is consistently linked with poorer health outcomes - such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes.

Current discussions around ultra-processed foods suggests uncertainty regarding whether it's the processing itself, the poor nutritional quality of these foods or the combination of both of these factors that contribute to these negative health outcomes.

Another issue with protein-enhanced products is that while they do indeed contain extra protein, some products may lack fibre, vitamins and essential minerals.

A lack of fibre in modern diets is currently one of the biggest contributors to population-wide ill-health.

All foods have their place within a balanced diet. But protein is only one component of overall nutritional health.

The rise in protein-fortified foods as health foods is indeed concerning. Protein-enhanced products are occasional foods that might support meeting protein intake, but they should not be mistaken for universally healthy foods.

For people looking to reach their protein goals, choose a variety of protein sources, consider the role of convenience foods within the context of whole diet and think about other nutrients like fibre to really maximise health.

(*The Conversation*)

"Kindness is more than a virtue.
It is a source of strength."

—Vivek Murthy

The Shillong Times

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Left's Change of Guard

THE Left movement in the country has a new head in the form of experienced parliamentarian MA Baby — who has a long history of political engagements in the CPI-M, the largest among the left parties. Baby's selection was finalised by the party's politburo and ratified by the central committee at the party's 24th 'Congress' held in Madurai. Baby succeeds Sitaram Yechury, who held the general secretary post for 10 years but passed away in September last. Notably, the recent years were disastrous for the party. A set of old leaders, now mostly past 70, sat tight at the helm of the party for long, refusing to stand aside or rejuvenate it with young blood. Notably, from the Communists' high aura as the principal opposition in Parliament around the 1960s, it had won power in three states — Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura repeatedly — until the Trinamool Congress ousted it from West Bengal and the BJP did so in Tripura. The CPI-M holds its head high in Kerala, where it along with the weak CPI runs the Left Democratic Front government.

While Baby has considerable political experience and parliamentary innings, the choice on him was made amid reports that another senior leader, Ashok Dhawale from Maharashtra, was proposed for the post by the West Bengal leadership. Dhawale, from the Maratha stock, is president of the party's farmer outfit, the All India Kisan Sabha, and also functioned as the state CPI-M chief, zealously organising peasants and making a major mark at the state and national levels. He was unlike the other top brass of the CPIM, whose activities were limited largely to media appearances. They showed less interest in organising mass struggles of the poor and the laid-back peasantry. Little wonder, Dhawale failed to "impress" them. Baby, with able backing from the Kerala party and chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan, crossed the hurdles and emerged winner.

Communism in India has earned a poor reputation in recent years for its abject failure to fight for the causes of the poor, the downtrodden and the disadvantaged segments of the society. Instead, even in Kerala, it plays communal card to retain power and win elections. The over 30 years of the Communist rule in West Bengal, in the final analysis, undercut the state's economic development. This hurt all segments of the society. Mamata Banerjee reaped a rich political harvest from the Left's failures there. In Tripura, the native tribes felt let down under the long CPI-M rule and turned against it. While the party remains strong in Kerala, it is accused of being a plaything in the hands of vested interests. Corruption accusations are directed not just against chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan but against several party leaders across the board. The repeated terms in power there naturally corrupted the party wholesale. Restoring strength to the down-and-out Left at the national level will be a herculean task for 71-year-old Baby.

Letters to the Editor

Victims of the world of make believe!

Editor,
The recent food poisoning in Karnataka of several young students from Meghalaya culminating in the untimely demise of two young students one from Lyndem in East Khasi Hills and the other from Nongstoin, West Khasi Hills has raised many an eyebrow and unleashed widespread public resentment against such a heinous fatality tantamounting to breach of human rights in its outrageous forms. This unsavoury incident in a private run school in Karnataka which is managed without proper license. To make matters worse the boarding school is run without proper infrastructural facilities worth its name like a hygienic toilet, besides other living amenities that befits its good name. In all thirty students were stated to have fallen sick requiring urgent medical assistance in hospitals, but, as stated above two from our State succumbed to toxic food substances. These students were virtually at death's doors after consuming contaminated food-leftover by the Holi revelers elsewhere. To add insult to injury such leftover eatables from marriages and other relatable festivities are more often than not provided to the

student-boarders to consume to their hearts' content.

Recently while I was in conversation with some of my friends on manifold trending topics that were gripping the world at large, our discourse veered towards the foregoing tragic episodes in course of these brain storming discussions. A close friend raised a pertinent question to ask why BJP, leaving India apart, being one of the richest political parties in the world was unable to be a benefactor of quality food-provider to those students who have come from afar leaving behind their respective hearths and homes to pursue education, learn Sanskrit and imbibe Hindutva orientation religiously? This contention, he said, is premised on the fact that some well-known social media users have revealed that RSS volunteers in collaboration with some prominent local leaders have arranged to shuttle the gullible children in substantive numbers to Karnataka and elsewhere with an exclusive assurance to provide the latter qualitative education and free hostel facilities such as food and accommodation. And those students after having duly completed their avowed educational assignments, shall accordingly be returned to their respective homes.

These strategic manoeuvres, I have been apprised, is factored on the premises that the RSS is unerringly alarmed at the exponential

In the previous article, we discussed the importance of rice as a staple food. However, rice is not only a dietary staple; it also serves various cultural and ritual purposes. Among the Khasi-Pnar people, many would not consider a meal complete without rice. For the Khasi-Pnar, lunch or dinner is incomplete without it. Hence, breakfast is called *ja step/ji korti*, lunch *ja sngi/ji bashngai*, and dinner *ja miet/ji smi*—each meal prefixed with *ja*. Yet, rice has many other uses and is deeply woven into the community's way of life.

The Spirit of the Dead Visits

People still observe the tradition of keeping the doors ajar for three consecutive nights after a family member dies, and rice pot is never kept empty, some amount of cooked rice is always in the rice pot. It is believed that the spirit of the deceased returns to consume the rice. Elders often remind the younger generation never to wash the rice pot after dinner. Care must be taken to ensure that it always contains some rice—leaving the pot empty is forbidden. This practice stems from the belief that the spirit comes during the stillness of the night to partake of the rice.

Rice as a Lucky Charm

The concept of *khaw rneeng* or *khoo rneñ* illustrates how closely the people are connected to rice. This tradition is followed by nearly all Khasi-Pnar families. Before setting out on a journey, a family member—typically the mother, grandmother, wife, or sister—picks a small amount of rice into a bundle and gives it to the traveler.

Before embarking on a journey, most Khasi-Pnar receive *khoo rneñ* from their mothers or sisters—a symbolic blessing and wish for a safe journey. Many people also consider rice a talisman. Some keep a few grains of rice packed in their newly purchased vehicles for good luck. Others carry *khoo rneñ* in their wallets.

Another layer of meaning in *khaw rneeng* relates to the concept of a person's lifespan. It is believed that every person is born with a spiritual share of rice for their lifetime. When someone dies, it is said they have exhausted their share. If a person dies young, people often say it was because they did not carry enough rice to last

Rice Connection with Rituals and Traditions

By H.H. Mohrmen

through life.

Rice and the Measurement of Life

The Pnar not only have three different names for rice depending on its form but also use sayings like *dang boon khoo*. When someone miraculously survives a fatal accident, it is said that they still have rice left in their spiritual quota. Similarly, if a gravely ill person recovers, people say it's because they still have plenty of rice. Conversely, when someone dies young, the common phrase used is *wa da lut khoo*—meaning they ran out of rice or did not carry enough.

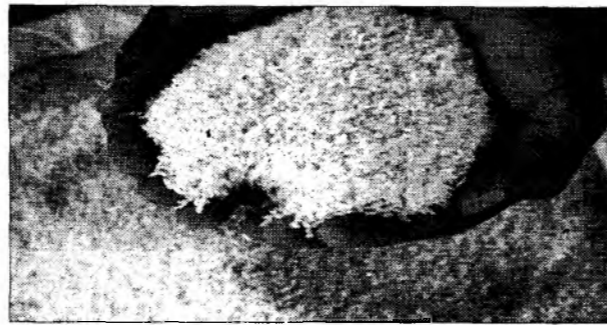
This unique relationship with rice not only highlights its role as food but also re-

themselves from curses or evil spells—chewing the rice is believed to neutralize the effects.

In traditional practices, rice is also used by worshippers of *u thlen*, where *khoo thlen* or *khoo/khaw tyndep* is used to cast a spell and capture a victim for sacrifice. When someone is involved in an accident and falls unconscious, they are sometimes made to eat rice in the belief that it can help them regain consciousness.

Rice Cultivation and Varieties

Rice grown in jhum (shifting) cultivation on hills is called *kba loom*. However, this method is gradually declining in the Jaintia Hills.



flects its deep connection to the way of life among the people.

Ritual Use of Rice

For reasons not entirely clear, when a chicken is slaughtered, rice is placed on the plate used to collect its blood. Rice is also used in various rituals. For example, during the *choh syiar* rite, a rooster is sacrificed during cremation. It is used in *thmat pylleñ* (egg divination) rituals as well.

A family is considered poor if there is no rice left in the container—*ym em khoo de ha u prah/wien*. In modern times, churches—particularly Protestant ones—use rice for fundraising through the tradition of *khaw kham* or "a fistful of rice." The cook sets aside a handful of rice each day before cooking the rest. This act is a sign of gratitude for the blessing of another meal, and the collected rice is donated to the church.

The Spell of Rice and Its Other Uses

Rice is also used to attract good luck and ward off misfortune, referred to as *eh pyрмаi* or *eh rmgiew*. When someone feels uneasy, lacks confidence, or is emotionally low, they are advised to chew some rice to boost their charm and aura. Some people carry rice to protect

Other varieties include sticky rice (*khoo pnah*) and red rice (*khoo Pnar* or *khoo soo*), which are unique to the Pnar. Transplanting rice seedlings into paddy fields is a relatively recent practice; earlier, people would sow rice directly. The four stages of cultivation are ploughing, sowing, weeding, and harvesting.

Once dried, rice is *de-husked* using two wooden tools: *u thlong* and *u synrai*. *U Thlong* is made from a large tree trunk, hollowed out to hold rice. *U Synrai* is a long, evenly-shaped wooden tool used to pound the rice and separate the husk or to grind it into powder.

The Khasi saying, "*u Khoo na iing; ka doh na trep, u jhur na kper*," reflects the people's self-sufficiency. Literally, it means, "Rice from the granary, meat from the pen, and vegetables from the garden." This highlights the community's control over its basic food needs. The traditional practice of rice-fish farming further showcases the nutritional value of the rice ecosystem.

Other Foods from the Rice Ecosystem

Many people think paddy fields are solely for growing rice, but the ecosystem offers

much more. Beautiful rice terraces cut into hill slopes and river basins are impressive, but what lies in the fields is equally important.

During the rice-growing season, farmers harvest not just rice but other valuable resources. Bunds or *stiar hali*—narrow strips of land between fields—divide the land into sections and help retain water. These bunds also create beautiful patterns and are essential for managing the fields. The irrigation canals, dams, and check dams found in rice fields are excellent examples of indigenous engineering.

Besides grass, *stiar hali* also support herbs like *tamyrdoh* (chameleon plant, *Houttuynia cordata*), *iali stiar*, and *tyngkhieh/khliang syiar* (*Centella*, *Centella asiatica*). These leafy vegetables are part of the indigenous diet and are believed to offer health benefits. Today, they are also sold in local markets, becoming a source of income for farmers.

Another food found in the rice ecosystem is the fish known as *dathli* (in Pnar), *Hi shlai* (in War), or *dohthli* (in Khasi). Known in English as snakehead fish (*Channa pardalis*), they range from two to five inches in size. With dark brown coloring and a snake-like appearance, these fish survive in wetlands or mud and remain alive through the dry winter, re-emerging when the rains return.

Locals classify snakehead fish into three types: *dathli wyrthoh*, *dathli yngam*, and *dathli heh*, based on size and shape. As farmers begin tilling fields at the start of summer, these fish return with the water and thrive in the flooded paddies.

Rice, which requires abundant water, ensures these fields stay wet—ideal conditions for the fish. In turn, the fish help by eating insects that harm the rice and fertilizing the soil with their waste.

This rice-fish farming system practiced by the Pnar is likely one of the earliest examples of its kind. At the end of the season, farmers harvest rice, catch fish, and collect herbs. Thus, the rice ecosystem not only provides staple food but also supplements the community's nutritional needs and income.

The deep cultural connection with rice and its ecosystem is a testament to the long-standing tradition of wetland cultivation among the people.

Bumper to Bumper-Fixing the jams

By K L Tariang

The news that traffic congestion in Shillong results in an annual opportunity cost loss of ₹550 crore, whether for the state or just Shillong city alone (Shillong Times, April 3, 2025), is alarming. The significant rise in vehicle registrations in Meghalaya over the past five years, with nearly 50% registered in East Khasi Hills, as also reported earlier have led to such congestion. While the growing number of vehicles on the roads can be seen as a sign of progress, the rise in vehicle numbers is, however, not matched by adequate infrastructure to ensure smooth traffic movements. There is limited scope for road expansion and flyover construction within Shillong and in the other district headquarters and this further exacerbates congestion. Moreover, even if such infrastructure projects were feasible, their benefits would be short-lived, as the relentless rise in the number of vehicles would in no time exceed their carrying capacity. A time may come when even the implementation of an odd-even vehicle regulation for vehicle movement, if ever considered, may be ineffective due to the sheer volume of vehicles. Traffic personnel, especially in Shillong, have increased in number and have managed the situation well so far. But they may soon find themselves overwhelmed by the rapidly growing vehicle population.

Shillong experiences more traffic congestion as being the state capital, the presence of more government and private facilities within it attracts a constant stream of visitors. These include residents from nearby districts who search for better basic amenities such as healthcare services, likely due to inadequate medical facilities at the respective district headquarters, old or new. Additionally, Shillong's superior commercial and marketing facilities also frequently attract visitors from these districts. The private or commercial transports of these visitors to Shillong add to the already growing number of vehicles of the local commuters moving within the city while occupying many parking spaces as well. Compounding the problem is the steady flow of tourist vehicles from outside the region. Many tourists prefer to pass through Shillong rather than take alternative routes, even when available, before heading to tourist destinations in the Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills regions.

Conversely, district transport offices across various district headquarters of the state seem to be well-equipped to register vehicles of more and more local applicants for private use and for small and medium commercial vehicles for passenger transport. While registering more of the latter vehicles is an initiative meant to generate employment, their excessive registrations raises concerns about the sustainability of the initiative. Moreover, their growing number has contributed to the decline of both private and government bus services, once vital in connecting district headquarters and other destinations within the districts.

Such bus services, if revived, upgraded, and efficiently managed could significantly reduce traffic congestion caused by the proliferation of small and medium transport vehicles at key destinations, including Shillong. With the increasing registration of new vehicles, mitigating traffic congestion, whether in Shillong or other district headquarters, poses a significant challenge. The Shillong Urban Mobility Policy and the Meghalaya Parking Policy introduced by the government recently which aimed at addressing these challenges may take years to show results if both are ever implemented.

The most obvious solution to prevent further congestion for now is to impose stringent regulations on new vehicle registrations, not just in Shillong but also in other congested district headquarters barring registering those justified or essential ones.

Several developed countries have implemented efficient models to restrict the purchase or registration of new private vehicles in order to reduce traffic congestion. It however depends on the state government's willingness to adopt and enforce

such models here.

Nonetheless, a potential starting point could be to regulate the maximum number of vehicles each household is allowed to register based on specific criteria. Additionally, making it mandatory to provide proof of a designated parking space, certified by the local Durbar authority, before approving new vehicle registrations. Currently, many registered vehicles who do not have such parking spaces are parked along roadsides in various localities within Shillong, either during the day or overnight, a situation that is understood to also occur in other district headquarters. Such roadside parking not only clogs local roads but also worsens overall congestion when these vehicles are driven within the city or towns. Moreover, overnight parking on narrow city lanes impedes emergency services, a concern recently highlighted by the Deputy Commissioner of East Khasi Hills district.

The effort of the government to reduce traffic congestion within Shillong by the introduction of STEMS (Sustainable Transport and Efficient Mobility Society) which started operating a small fleet of buses for student commuters is well appreciated. This is one of the potential solutions to the worsening traffic congestion. It also lays the groundwork for a well-structured transport model that could eventually be expanded to public transport if promoted.

It may, however, be unfeasible for STEMS to operate school buses indefinitely. Presently, STEMS is efficiently administered by its current CEO, Isawanda Laloo, an IAS officer but as in any government organization, there are potential leadership changes in this establishment as well which could lead to administrative inconsistencies and likely to inefficiency. Additionally, STEMS may face financial constraints in expanding its fleet to meet growing demands. Instead, prominent schools in Shillong could take the initiative to operate their own bus services for their students — an approach already adopted by many schools in Indian cities and even by some schools in Shillong and Jowai. The management model of the STEMS bus may be adopted in these school buses.

If state government officials who are not entitled to a government vehicle were to commute to their offices by bus, if arranged by the government at reasonable fares, it would set an example to parents of students to opt for school buses for their children as well. This will help reduce traffic congestion during peak hours and also free up parking spaces (often occupied by these private vehicles of these officials' around government offices and the Secretariats in Shillong) for members of the public visiting the offices for work.

Meanwhile, the government has proposed to establish an Administrative Complex in Shillong's new township with the aim of easing congestion in the city. This is a sound initiative for long term solutions. However, its outcome largely depends on whether a significant number of office workers prefer to shift from their current deep rooted establishments and who may not be easily persuaded by incentives or relocation offers, if any. Consequently, they would continue commuting through Shillong roads by private or commercial vehicles to reach their new workplaces thus undermining the primary objective of the initiative. Incidentally, the road leading to the new township is already showing signs of traffic buildup, particularly during morning hours.

Ultimately, addressing traffic congestion requires a multi-faceted approach that balances regulations with sustainable alternatives. Imposing restrictions on vehicle registrations can be an effective measure but it must be complemented by adequate and improved public transportation, sound urban planning and awareness campaigns for public participation. Success will depend on the government's bold measures and public's willingness to adapt to necessary changes.

Pratap Singh Higher Secondary School in Haripur Catholic village, Uttar Pradesh on March 29 and he picked up a water bottle placed on a table. This enraged the Biology teacher who reportedly hurled casteist slurs and said, "How dare you touch the bottle? Now it has become untouchable. Who will drink from it?" It appears that the science teacher practices untouchability.

It is intriguing that he, with utmost unscientific temper, teaches at the higher secondary level a science subject, that too Biology, which says all living human beings are relatives and have originated from one woman. Biology teaches us that fragments of the mitochondrial genome carried by all humans alive today can be traced to a single woman ancestor, living an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 years ago.

But the Biology teacher is not alone, as per a study, he is one among every four Indians! According to the India Human Development Survey (IHDS-2) in 2011-12, 27 per cent of the respondents across India said that they had been following the practice of untouchability. Be that as it may, the teacher then confined the student to a room during recess and so severely beat him with a stick that two fingers of his student got broken. The student sustained severe injuries on his thigh, shoulder, and jaw,

apart from the broken fingers. When he reached home crying, his family rushed him to a hospital, where an X-ray confirmed the fractures.

As was the teacher, so too the police. When the student and his family went to Kishani police station to lodge a complaint, the police allegedly refused to take action. Then, they moved the Superintendent of Police. The SP, however, assured an investigation and action against the accused teacher.

The teacher might have got inspiration from Dronacharya to break two fingers of the Dalit student. He tried his best to cripple his student just like Dronacharya crippled Eklavya, so that he could never use his education in archery. That we have been given the Dronacharya award to sports coaches shows we failed Ambedkar and the Indian Constitution.

The above incident is just the tip of the iceberg. The National Crime Records Bureau's data show the crimes against Dalits increased from 50,744 in 2021 to 57,428 in 2022. Many parents educate their children from the school level that they are on a higher pedestal of the caste ladder. In some schools in Tamil Nadu, students wear colour-coded wristbands to show their caste identity.

A teacher from a lower caste was appointed in a school in Tamil Nadu, where students were mostly from

upper castes. A 'caste-educated' student threw a firecracker at her in a classroom. It ruptured her eardrum and she was forced to leave.

Similarly, a young student was killed in Rajasthan in August 2022 for not getting enough education on caste. The student touched a drinking pot, and as a result, he was beaten to death by his teacher in Surana village of Rajasthan's Jalore district.

All these clearly showcase the level of hatred lower castes still have to face every day from the higher caste groups. In such a situation, the caste reservation is not just to set the past wrong right. But it is a necessary antidote to counter caste nepotism at present.

It is too much to expect from people, like the Biology teacher or the police at Kishani police station or the 27 per cent Indians who practice untouchability, that they will not favour candidates of higher castes during the selection process for admission, recruitment, and promotion. Therefore, caste reservation is still necessary not only in government but also in the private sector as a necessary antidote to caste nepotism.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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

The casteist slur prevails

Editor,
A 15-year-old Dalit, Class 11 student went to Narendra

"Peace is a journey of a thousand miles and it must be taken one step at a time."

— Lyndon B. Johnson

The Shillong Times

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Overtourism killing destinations

THE video posted on social media by a gentleman from Karnataka showing a huge, rowdy crowd at Nongriat where the famed double decker living root bridges once provided wondrous delight, has gone viral and should push the Tourism Department to rethink the manner in which it is selling destinations online and through its portals. The living root bridges stand testimony to the scientific wisdom of the Khasis who wove bridges out of the aerial roots of the Ficus Elastica plant commonly called the rubber plant. It was a dire need to create bridges across rivers hundreds of years ago when the concept of a government was yet unknown. There are hundreds of such root bridges across Khasi and Jaintia hills of Meghalaya. If all of those are invaded by mass tourism then the work of the ancestors dating over hundreds of years would be destroyed by humans trampling over them. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has taken cognisance of the existence of such bridges in Mawkyrnat and is assisting the village communities to continue to repair the living root bridges with new aerial roots and to strengthen them with bamboos. The Meghalaya Living Root Bridge Foundation has done much to create awareness among the villagers to exercise caution while selling such destinations. But it cannot be denied that greed has trumped sustainable tourism.

Those who have seen the video will certainly not want to visit Nongriat. More so if they are high end tourists with a fascination for eco-tourism and the mystical silence that surrounds such destinations. Nongriat has become a victim of over-tourism. The only definition of overtourism is when any destination has more footfalls than it can handle and the place is then quickly shunned by those who value quality eco-tourism destinations. Sadly, the communities surrounding the double decker bridges at Nongriat including the Dorbar Shnong are in denial about this negative fall-out. Their take is that tourism should continue to grow without limits because it has become a livelihood. This debate between mass and niche tourism has not even started yet because of the sudden tourism boom. However, those who understand tourism are saying that the manner in which tourism is managed in Meghalaya is no longer sustainable and more people are visiting Arunachal Pradesh instead. This is not good news for Meghalaya where home-stays have sprung up like mushrooms.

The absence of an over-all monitoring and regulatory authority that is non-government but run responsibly only adds to the confusion. The Meghalaya Tourism Development Forum (MTDF) comprising tour operators should have awakened to this disaster in the making. The Government-sponsored, Rural Tourism Development Society also does not seem to have a handle on the trajectory in which tourism is headed in Meghalaya. What's the point of having such bodies if they cannot carry out the tasks assigned, which in the main is to make tourism a sustainable venture in Meghalaya? The Nongriat scenes call for urgent public debate since no one owns the environment. It is a shared legacy and all should have a voice in this debate.

Revisiting India-China Relations

By Jaideep Saikia

In the shuttle-medley that is being played out in the east, between Bangladesh, Manipur and Myanmar, an important expanse in the region that has been momentarily lost to central players is North East India's Arunachal Pradesh.

Arunachal Pradesh first came into view when Bob Khathing, and his able band of Assam Riflemen, "liberated" Tawang from Tibetan tax collectors in February 1951.

A McMahon Line which had internally embraced Tawang into India, perhaps one of the most important monastic (Gyelugpa sect) locations south of the Potala in Lhasa, was drawn in 1914 when British India's Henry McMahon and Tibet's Lonchen Shatra (China's Ivan Chen left in a huff) agreed on a line. Historians and cartographers have to unearth why a Line became a Bane.

And, then there was 1962.

1962 has been the subject of many scholars and observers. The manner in which the Chinese responded to India's "Forward Policy" has been documented by far too many. Few, however, have felt the need to introspect on the reasons for the declaration of the Chinese ceasefire and tactical retreat even as a Prime Minister's heart went out to the people of Assam.

But the Chinese went back to a place (where they are still perched!) called the Thagla Ridge. The Chinese holding position almost approximates the Watershed Principle that McMahon drew. It would interest Indian Sino observers as to why that is the case! Have there ever been affirmations of belligerence and intrusion in the Kameng sector of Arunachal Pradesh by the Chinese? Especially in the sub-sector of Namka-Chu?

One of the most important security challenges of modern India is the continuing impasse that characterises the India-China boundary.

It must also be comprehended that there are extra-regional powers that would like to keep India and China at loggerheads. It suits the purpose of such powers because China's continued involvement with the border with India will not allow it to focus on its primary objectives including Taiwan.

But to hark back to history, there were attempts by China to equitably solve the boundary question by seeking to engineer an East-West Swap. The swap proposal was simply China retaining the territories—including Aksai Chin—in the west

while India keeps everything it possesses in the east.

Most observers of the India-China boundary are of the opinion that such a "package proposal" that bases itself on the "as-is-where-is" line is the most pragmatic of solutions. Indeed, in the words of CV Ranganathan, India's ambassador to China from 1987 to 1991, "the record of over five decades since India's independence and China's 'liberation' shows that the Indians and Chinese need to break out of a historical pattern—in which they have unilaterally projected their best hopes and their worst fears upon the mixed realities of the two countries" (Chapter on China in "External Affairs; Cross-Border Relations" Lotus Collection, 2003, General Editor: JN Dixit). To that end (and once again quoting Ranganathan) "both India and China would have to give up the high degree of self-righteousness that has marked the attitudes of both sides when they first confronted their differences in the later 50s of the last century.

It would also be of interest to the reader that top Chinese scholar and boundary expert, Wang Hongwei (who wrote an article in 2003 along with me titled "Giants at Peace") had stated that "Non recovery of the entire southern slope (south of the McMahon Line: Author) could not really be considered 'disgrace' by selling out territory because China's case for ownership of all that region was actually rather weak".

However, the fact remains that the Chinese have been shifting their goalposts. The shift in Beijing's position coincided with the Sumdorong Chu crisis. It seems that China "intended to underline its new, active claim in the east".

Beijing had shifted goalposts which according to former Indian foreign secretary Shyam Saran—during a webinar on India-China boundary which was hosted by me on 30 August 2020—was a clear departure from the earlier Chinese accommodative disposition. The reason for this departure was because of the enhanced strength that had come China's way vis-a-vis India. One does not have to master rocket science to comprehend that China is willing to make concessions only when it perceives India to be in a relatively strong position, or when its own position is weak.

Therefore, the most important aspect that needs to be examined is (a) why the

Chinese went back on the "package proposal". This about-face needs serious examination along with an analysis of (b) what should henceforth be the Indian stand that would make Beijing revisit and once again offer the East-West Swap proposal?

In order to understand the above, it is important to closely study the reasons for which the 15 June 2020 intrusion in Galwan as well as the one in Yangtse on 9 December 2022 took place. I have made a careful study of both the incidents and have come to the conclusion that the intrusion in Galwan was primarily geared towards messaging (a) the United States that it could not use India as a countervail to China (b) caution India's neighbours that India cannot be relied upon for their security and most importantly (c) to straitjacket India to its land commitments and from attempting to venture into the maritime domain that the People's Republic wants to be their sole preserve. It is another matter that the Indian state (read: Indian armed forces) was able to call Beijing's bluff and Galwan (notwithstanding the fact that certain military gains were "achieved" by China) did not translate into the larger strategic objectives that were sought.

In Yangtse the Chinese objective was different and had to be comprehended in light of the new Chinese "Land Border Law" which came into effect from 1 January 2022. In my opinion, Beijing is constructing a "Second Great Wall of China" and was consolidating its land boundaries.

Walls, it must be realised, are built to keep away invaders. The Great Wall of China was constructed to stave off invasive attempts by nomadic hordes from the Eurasian Steppe. Therefore, the Great Wall of China—constructed for the 7th century BC—is for fortification. But it also implies that China would not "cross the wall" onto the other side. Indeed, therein lies the reason for the enactment of the "Land Border Law".

But in the bid to seek correct consolidation, China wants encroachments which would constitute its "Second Great Wall". Yangtse is an eyesore for the PLA. The elevated position in which the Indian Army stands characterises an unacceptable platform for the fortification it seeks. Hence the attempt to occupy the spur on the night of 9 December 2022.

But the most important question before the Indian state is how to get China to resurrect its East-West Swap proposal. Serious analysis states that Beijing has to be forced into it by showcasing India's prowess. However, the power differential between India and China is vast and it would not be possible for India to catch up with China's economic or military might. The answer, therefore, is only in India creating deft moves that forces China to acknowledge India's aggressive moves in global fora.

Quad, entering into military alliances with China's adversaries and conducting exercises such as "Yudh Abhyas" or "Exercise Malabar" are good openings. The last Indo-US "Yudh Abhyas" conducted in Utarakhand's Auli in November 2022 rattled Beijing, and over two decades ago (2002), during my visit to China, Think Tank leaders in Beijing informed me that they were very uneasy about India aligning herself with countries such as the United States. Sensing an opening I had countered by querying as to why China was supporting India's arch enemy, Pakistan. The answer was "Oh, never mind Pakistan. India and China should be friend each other on their own terms. Pakistan must not be allowed to come between two brothers". It was obvious that India's proximity with China's rivals perturbs Beijing. The stratagem that India should adopt should, therefore, be to build a "position of strength" by exploiting China's Achilles Heel, her nervousness as a result of India coming into alliances with its opponents. This is particularly so at this time when China braces herself for a Taiwan scenario. The "position of strength" that would be garnered should accompany "Track II" level overtures that must also forcefully suggest Chinese revisitation of the East-West Swap of 1960 and 1979.

It must become the "Indian Way" to advantage herself by arming careful "chess pathways". As the present Indian external affairs minister, S Jaishankar has written in his tour-de-force "The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World", "The India Way, especially now, would (should: my emphasis) be more of a shaper or decider rather than just be an abtainer".

The Himalayan move in the chessboard would be able to engineer such a smart manoeuvre. (The author India's foremost strategist and bestselling author)

Congress in Crisis: Vincent Pala's Leadership and the Unmaking of a Legacy in Meghalaya

By Divesh Ranjan

In Meghalaya's once Congress-dominated political landscape, change began quietly in 2012 with the formation of the National People's Party (NPP). Initially dismissed, the NPP won just two seats in 2013, and its leader, Conrad Sangma, lost his own. But fate intervened—his father P.A. Sangma's untimely death in 2016 propelled Conrad into Parliament and reignited his political ascent. This marked the beginning of the NPP's rise, coinciding with the slow, steady decline of the Indian National Congress—ironically, alongside Vincent Pala's growing influence within Meghalaya Pradesh Congress Party.

Despite national trends favoring the BJP, Dr. Mukul Sangma kept the INC afloat in Meghalaya between 2013 and 2018, governing effectively with limited central support. However, internal rifts deepened; AICC's strategic lapses surfaced, and Vincent Pala's rising influence quietly eroded Mukul's authority—setting the stage for a political unraveling. The NPP capitalized on Congress's internal cracks, while the BJP chipped away from the outside, pushing its "Congress Mukth Bharat" narrative. Toppling such a dominant force demanded both external pressure and internal betrayal—something the INC failed to prevent. As loyalty waned and missteps piled up, the AICC's inertia sealed the party's decline.

Leadership Blunders and Internal Power Struggles

The Indian National Congress (INC) suffered its first major setback in Meghalaya in December 2017, when five senior leaders defected to the National People's Party (NPP) just before the 2018 Assembly Elections. In a knee-jerk response, Congress removed Dr. D.D. Lapang as state president—its first major blunder. Leader defections before elections were not surprising, especially after the BJP's rise at the Centre. But Congress mishandled it by abruptly replacing Dr. D.D. Lapang instead of planning a gradual transition. Misled by flawed advice, the party underestimated the influence of the five-time Chief Minister—an error that significantly weakened its position.

Had Dr. D.D. Lapang stayed as state president, Congress might have gained more seats and formed the government in 2018. His removal, orchestrated without consultation, fractured party unity. Dr. Celestine Lyngdoh, who replaced him, lost his own seat by just 70 votes—a loss many attribute to the leadership change. Officially, Lapang was removed due to age and health, but insiders saw it as a power play orchestrated by Vincent Pala, then-MP, to sideline both Lapang and Dr. Mukul Sangma. Internal factions opposed to Mukul further weakened Congress, denying it the chance to form the government despite winning the most seats. After Lapang's exit, Dr. Celestine maintained party unity, but Vincent Pala's influence steadily grew. Celestine's endorsement of Pala as his successor cemented Pala's control. In 2021, Pala officially replaced Celestine as state president, sidelining senior leaders like Charles Pynrope, who was prepared to lead. This decision triggered internal dissent and led to the defection of 12 Congress MLAs—marking the party's second major blow.

Ironically, even Pala's former loyalists, like Kennedy Khyriem and Dr. Celestine, eventually joined NPP, reinforcing the belief that his leadership weakened Congress. Meanwhile, Conrad Sangma knew his path to a second term hinged on Dr. Mukul Sangma leaving the party—and that's exactly what happened. Meghalaya Congress Under Vincent Pala: Under Vincent Pala's leadership, the Congress in Meghalaya has faced deep internal strife and major defections—all 17 leaders left before the 2023 Assembly Elections. Despite these setbacks, the INC managed to secure 5 seats in the elections, largely due to its core ideological vote bank and anti-incumbency against NPP. In the 2024 General Elections, the INC's win in Tura was largely due to BJP backlash against the NPP-BJP alliance in Manipur. However, these wins were isolated, as internal cracks deepened and a few months before the dis-

trict council elections three MLAs, including key leader figures like Dr. Celestine, once loyalists of Pala, eventually defected to the NPP, further weakening the party. A major blow came when the Congress supported the NPP in the District Council—a move widely seen as a betrayal of its ideology. This blurred the lines between the INC and NPP, alienating voters and eroding the party's credibility. The District Council episode marked the third major setback, severely damaging the party's presence in the state.

Vincent Pala's 2024 Lok Sabha defeat exposed his failure to build grassroots support or a strong party machinery. Unlike 2019, his vote share collapsed—only 1.99 lakh votes with a staggering 35.8% loss margin. This came on the heels of his 2023 Assembly Election loss, deepening the blow to his leadership. A key flaw in Vincent Pala's leadership has been his failure to emerge as a credible opposition voice. His inconsistent stance—shifting between praise, silence, and criticism—has left even party workers uncertain. During the crucial District Council vote count, when Congress's decline in the Khasi Hills became clear, Pala was notably absent from the state. His failure to lead, boost morale, or chart a path forward highlighted a serious lack of accountability at a critical time. Interestingly, Pala's political trajectory has mirrored the NPP's—his rise aligning with its growth, and his recent decline matching the party's setbacks amid anti-incumbency in the general election. Pala's earlier wins owed more to Congress's strong grassroots network than his own leadership. As the party's base eroded in Meghalaya, so did his support. His failure to rebuild the organization and lead decisively has deepened Congress's decline. Now, after a crushing defeat, both his and the party's future hang in the balance unless a major course correction follows.

Time for Accountability: For Congress to regain relevance, Vincent Pala must take responsibility for the party's decline and step aside. Just as Rahul Gandhi resigned after the 2019GE loss to uphold accountability, Pala must do the same. His continued deflection of blame has eroded trust, discouraging capable leaders from stepping up. Without a leadership change, any real revival of the party remains unlikely.

A System of Influence Over Merit: The AICC faces growing criticism over Congress's decline under Vincent Pala. The key question: should leadership be judged by proximity to central leaders or by results? In contrast, parties like the NPP and VPP are led by credible, widely respected figures like Conrad Sangma and Ardent Basiaawmoit. Meanwhile, Congress continues to rely on businessmen over credible, ideological leaders—weakening its foundation. True leadership demands vision, integrity, and unity, not personal gain. Congress must shift focus from connections to competence, to rebuild itself as a serious alternative to the government.

Sleeper Cells - A Silent Threat Within Congress: Amid rising concerns, there's growing speculation that sleeper cells within Congress are working to weaken the party from within, particularly in Meghalaya. These hidden elements, possibly aligned with rival forces, are eroding the party's foundation. To counter this, leadership must thoroughly review the actions and loyalties of key figures. The real issue lies in the central leadership's disconnect from ground realities. If rival parties like BJP and NPP have indeed infiltrated Congress, urgent action is needed to expose and neutralize these threats.

The Meghalaya Congress must also accept that the worst has already happened. Any further exits should be seen not as losses, but as chances to rebuild. Now is the moment for bold, fearless decisions and a fresh start. Revival depends on strong leadership and deep grassroots engagement. The party's future lies in empowering workers with a clear, inspiring vision that restores confidence and drives collective commitment.

(The author is Political Advisor & Strategist: Email diveshranjanitg@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

Quality education matters; not pass percentage

Editor, I am a 15 year old student. Today, I am proud to share that I passed my Board Exams in First Division, with an overall score of 87%, and I received letters in all subjects. I am incredibly thankful to God for this achievement and deeply grateful to my teachers at Synd Hr. Secondary School who have guided and supported me throughout this journey.

This achievement means a lot to me—not just because of the marks, but because it reflects the effort I have put in over the past year. I have worked very hard because I have a clear dream for my future. I want to become an IPS officer, and I know that the path will not be easy. But I believe that with hard work, discipline, and the right guidance, I can achieve my goal.

This year, I noticed that the pass percentage for the board exams has been much higher compared to previous years. It's great to see so many students doing well, and it makes me happy to see my friends and classmates succeed. However, I've also heard many people saying things like, "It's just quantity, not quality." And to be honest, that makes me a little scared.

What if what they're saying is true? What if we're not being prepared well enough to face the real challenges ahead?

What if we're passing the exams but not truly learning what we need to? These questions stay in my mind. I want to believe that our education is strong, that we're building the right foundation for our future. And in many ways, I believe we are. I've seen how hard our teachers are working. I've seen them stay back to explain lessons, to prepare us, and to support us whenever we need help. I respect them so much for that. They are trying their best to help us reach our goals.

But sometimes, even with all that effort, we need more. The world is changing fast. The competition is getting tougher, especially for exams like the UPSC, NEET, JEE, and others that students like me dream of cracking. If we really want to be ready, we need strong and updated teaching methods, better resources, and more training for our teachers. We need exposure to competitive environments from an early stage.

So today, I want to make a small request—not just for myself, but for thousands of students like me. I ask our Government, our Education Department, and all those in leadership to please invest more in the quality of education, especially in our region. Help us to be prepared not just to pass exams, but to face the real world. Help our teachers so that they can help us even better. Help us to grow into the leaders, officers, professionals, and responsible citizens

that our country needs. We students are not afraid to work hard. We are ready to dream big. But we need your support to turn those dreams into reality. With the right guidance, there is nothing we cannot achieve.

This is the voice of a student who wants to grow, serve, and make a difference.

Yours etc., Iwanaki L Khongji, Via email

How mobile services are failing consumers

Editor, This is a follow-up to Salil Gwalali's letter to the editor dated March 31, 2025 in The Shillong Times, titled, "Calling out the abysmally poor Jio mobile service." It highlights the extremely poor service provided by RELIANCE JIO, AIRTEL, VODAFONE, and BSNL, which are telecom companies we are unfortunately forced to depend on.

Their failure to deliver the high-speed data and reliable services they promise has caused serious dissatisfaction and inconvenience among the general public. For the past week, Jio's service has further gone down, with many phone calls having no audibility at all. Gwalali's experience is not an isolated case, and it is important to recognize the growing frustration caused

by such substandard services. The fact that telecom companies continue to sell recharge plans that fail to meet basic expectations shows a serious lack of accountability.

By speaking out, Gwalali has voiced the concerns of many silent users and started an important conversation about the need for improvement. His letter makes us all aware that consumers deserve honesty and transparency from their service providers. It is also essential for consumers to unite and demand better services from telecom providers. By doing so, we can move toward a more accountable and customer-focused telecom industry.

Let us continue to raise our voices and advocate for meaningful change. It is the public's democratic right. We owe it to ourselves and future generations to demand fair treatment and hold these companies accountable for their hidden agenda of making money without improving services.

Yours etc., Andrew L. Mawphlang, Shillong - 6

Delay in project implementation

Editor, Apropos of the news "Scrapped rly project: M'laya to return Rs 209.37 crore to Centre" (ST April 7, 2025) made interesting reading. It is

appropriate that the Government of Meghalaya has decided to return the Rs 209.37 crore to the Centre for the project that has not taken off. It may be recalled that recently the Government of India requested the return of Rs 98,000 crore in unspent funds due to inefficiencies in fund utilization by state agencies. These funds were allocated for various welfare schemes, such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, Jal Jeevan Mission, and Swachh Bharat Mission, but remained idle in state accounts.

Reasons for this include bureaucratic delays, procedural bottlenecks, and mismatched priorities between the Union and State governments. Additionally, some funds were withheld due to political disagreements, such as Tamil Nadu's rejection of the National Education Policy. The request to return unutilised funds by the Government of India is a pragmatic step to ensure that public funds are utilized effectively and don't remain idle. However, it also highlights deeper issues in governance, such as bureaucratic inefficiencies and mismatched priorities between Union and State governments. Addressing these systemic challenges might be just as important as reclaiming the funds.

A day ago, the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) foreclosed five projects in Assam due to delays and incomplete work.

For example, the Bongaigaon Town Water Supply Scheme, sanctioned in 2011, was only partially operational, and other projects faced similar issues. While this decision ensures accountability and prevents further misuse of funds, it also highlights challenges in project execution due to poor governance at the last mile - the Block level and also lack of timely oversight.

Whether it is the right move depends on how effectively the funds are redirected and whether lessons are learned to improve future project management. Stricter measures could include regular progress audits, penalties for delays, and incentives for timely completion. Improved monitoring and better coordination between agencies might also ensure these projects stay on track. When projects like these which bring real benefits to communities are implemented there is need for stronger measures and strict monitoring systems in place. The Union Government has a duty to ensure that public money is well spent and projects are executed without time and cost overruns.

Yours etc; VK Lyngdoh Via email

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

"Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished."

— Lao Tzu

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Poverty of ideas

THE run-of-the mill politicians today are demonstrating a serious deficit – a poverty of ideas. Some of those from within the BJP, however, substitute this with an aggressive Hindutva agenda. The others, including those from the Left that once claimed to have a crop of intellectuals in its rank and file, rarely speak up. Most politicians today seem to lack a vision for the nation's future. Some, instead, whip up communal passions. Note the way a BJP MLA from Telangana threatened to march Hindus from his state to adjoining Maharashtra and demolish the tomb of Aurangzeb, the sixth Mughal emperor in the 17th Century. He passed away in 1707, and what remains ever since is no more than his tomb. The vestiges of the British Raj too are here for all to see. The singular obsession of the Sangh Parivar and its adjuncts to however, target only the Muslim hallmarks, mosques or monuments, smacks of a deeply communal mindset – and this undercuts the cause of national unity. Muslims form nearly 20 per cent of the nation's population.

Abysmally, the level of political discourse here keeps sinking to new lows. In the years immediately after Independence, western educated Jawaharlal Nehru with his modern and secular mindset sought to unite the people under one banner. Secularism eventually became an article of faith for the nation and it was added to the preamble of the Indian Constitution as a guiding principle in 1976. Yet, many in the BJP are unable to digest this. The Babri Masjid offensive helped the BJP come upfront and raise the communal frenzy in the Hindi belt. This eventually hoisted it to power from a negligible presence in Parliament in the 1980s. The BJP however did not go overboard during the past two terms of the Modi government, which rather retained the composure that marked the AB Vajpayee terms in power. For the sake of ensuring law and order, Modi kept the hardcore communalists in the party largely under control. Yet, there have been occasional eruption of such sentiments among the party's rank and file, resulting in communal conflagrations in some states.

A tomb is, by all means, inconsequential. It harms none and should provoke none. Hardly anyone today cares a damn for Aurangzeb's tomb, least of all the Muslims, and yet it is sought to be used by BJP-RSS hawks to whip up communal passions. They are doing a disservice to the nation. Within the BJP, even among ministers, there is hardly any leader who demonstrates an intellectual aura or a vision for the future. An exception, of course, is roads minister Nitin Gadkari. He demonstrates a rare understanding of the complexities of technology and the mechanisms that drive the modern world. In the present scheme of things, intelligent and educated people are generally kept out of politics. From top to bottom, the ranks are filled by semi-literates, manipulators and the muscle-flexing lot. This is a sad commentary on India as it is today.

Letters to the Editor

We need safe spaces to walk on

Editor,
I'm not old, but old enough to say this - When I was younger, I definitely remember Shillong feeling like a very safe city to walk in. It did not matter which locality, lane, by-lane or what time of day it was, the city had a cosy familiarity that made walking around feel safe.

But cut to today, as someone who is a regular walker, I find myself looking over my shoulder every two minutes. The streets that once felt familiar now seem unsettling. The reasons are hard to ignore. Half the streetlights in the city don't work, leaving dim lanes ever darker. The number of drug addicts I see on the streets are alarming. And then the police presence—or rather, the lack of it. The only place I see officers everyday is outside a certain house—not to protect us, but to keep honking at bay. Elsewhere, not so much.

And if I as an adult feel this, I wonder what young students returning from tuition or school feel, or people

walking home after work. Should fear be a part of their routine?

Shillong is changing, but not for the better. We need working streetlights, visible policing, and serious action against the rising drug problem. Safety shouldn't be a privilege—it should be a given.

Yours etc.,
Emic Nongkynrih,
Via email

Cong should learn from its roots

Editor,
A meeting of the All India Congress Committee to mark the occasion of the centenary of Mahatma Gandhi's presidency of the party and the 75th year of the Constitution is scheduled to be held in Gujarat. This is an opportunity for the Congress to infuse the spirit of the new environment prevailing in the country. The Congress fell short on its performance in the Lok Sabha elections and other state elections. The party workers need to be trained to maintain discipline which was missing in the Patna meeting when Rahul Gandhi was also present. Though elections to the Gu-

Religion, Identity, and Solidarity: The Case of the Khasi and Khmer People

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

The death of the two Khasi boys in Karnataka because of food poisoning brought out some reaction from certain sections of the civil society and certain individuals, not from Seng Khasi or Sein Raji. Not long ago, Sein Raji had opposed the State Government's decision to consecrate the state's first university, Captain Williamson Sangma State University, through a massive Christian prayer service by holding a press conference. But this time around, when the death of an indigenous faith practitioner has taken place far from home, neither Sein Raji nor Seng Khasi have had a press conference or sent any press release about the incident. If official statements of condolence or condemnation have been released, I sincerely apologize for not being aware of them. I don't want to create fake controversy for publicity. But as things stand, it is mostly the non-indigenous faith practitioners who have expressed sadness, anger, and frustration over the deaths, as the boys who died were Khasis first, regardless of their religious affiliation. This raises an important question: Does the indigenous identity of the Khasis derive from their adherence to indigenous faiths, or from solidarity that transcends religious affiliation? To answer this question, one must turn away the gaze from Meghalaya and look further east where the brethren of the Khasis had built one of the most powerful Empires in South East Asia, the Khmer Empire. In his 2024 book 'The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World' William Dalrymple devotes a great deal of effort in demonstrating ancient India's influence on an important region that sometimes does not get a lot of attention, South East Asia, known as Suvannabhumi, or the 'Lands of Gold'. Following the severe curtailment of trade with the Roman Empire because of political shifts in Egypt and Southwest Asia, Indian traders sailed east, exchanging manufactured goods for spices, gold, camphor, resin, and other raw materials of the region. This region today comprises modern nation states of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia. Of these, people of Vietnam and Cambodia are genetically, linguistically and culturally related to the Khasis who were part of the earlier wave of migration from South China bringing agriculture to South East Asia and then South Asia. While northern Vietnam, Korea, and Japan were part of the 'Sinosphere', i.e., adoption of Chinese, language, literature and civilization, Cambodia and South East Asia was part of a larger 'Indosphere' where indic ideas of kingship, religion, literature, mythology, and music was predominant. In this regard, the achievements of

the Khmers (identified with present day Cambodians) are very noteworthy.

In 802 CE, "just two years after Charlemagne had declared the birth of the Holy Roman Empire in Italy, another young warrior, the Khmer Prince Jayavarman II, performed a similar ceremony on Phnom Kulen (a mountain range in Cambodia), initiating another world-changing empire". According to William Dalrymple, by the 12th Century, this Khmer empire was probably the richest and most powerful state on earth. It ruled over most of Mainland South East Asia and stretched as far as Southern China. The young warrior who created this colossal empire was a hostage in Java (Indonesia) which was steeped in Buddhism. After his escape and return to Cambodia, he rejected the Buddhism of his neighbours and enemies, declaring himself independent. But he accepted another foreign faith from South Asia, Hinduism, and considered Shiva as his personal deity.

After building his empire which came to be known as Kambujadesa or Cambodia, Jayavarman II marked the occasion by the installation of a sacred symbol of power known as the Devaraja dedicated to Shiva making it a national symbol, a state religion and an emblem of sacred protection. He also declared himself as Shiva's representative on earth and supreme sovereign. The process of conversion of Cambodia from the traditional animist cults to Puranic Hinduism was already an ongoing process since the 3rd century CE. But it was the conquests of Jayavarman II that accelerated the process. The influence was so great that, in time, a myth became widespread claiming that a South Indian Brahmin named Kaundinya founded the Khmer state (known as Funan by Chinese). This, according to William Dalrymple, appears to be based on a south Indian myth.

Most probably, this myth must have been a fabrication by the Brahmins who held important positions in the Khmer royal court. This is a common modus operandi used by Brahmins to convert royalty to Hinduism. Arup Kumar Dutta also mentions this in his 2016 book, 'The Ahoms: A Reimagined History'. The story of the 600 rule of Ahom is told by a Deodhai, an Ahom priest, who during his narration lamented at the increasing influence of the Brahmins brought from North India and how they converted the Ahom rulers by claiming that their gods are the same. So, it's not military conquest which converted the ethnic communities of South East Asia to the religions of South Asia, Buddhism and Hinduism, but it was nevertheless

a missionary activity laced with intention and subterfuge.

Over time, the ever-widening 'Indosphere' encompassed the peoples of South-east Asia, who discussed, appreciated, adopted, adapted, and improved upon ideas from South Asia. It is from an inscription in Cambodia that a dot representing the world's oldest surviving dateable zero was found, predating the oldest such inscription from South Asia (fort of Gwalior) by 200 years. The world's largest religious complex in the world, Angkor Wat, is a temple dedicated to Vishnu. This temple is based entirely on architectural forms pioneered in South Asia, but it was never an Indian city. And this is where the originality of the Khmers and the adaptation of the foreign faiths with their local practises become very important.

The Laws of Manu (a treatise on Hindu Law) strictly insists on the avoidance of fish and sternly forbade the eating of either pigs or hens, on pain of losing caste. However, on the walls of the Bayon Temple, originally a Hindu temple, there "is a sculpture of a kitchen in which the cooks are about to drop a whole suckling pig head first into a bubbling cauldron as a cook blows on the kindling to fan the flames. There are also images of men fishing with nets". Another Khmer inscription mentions of a feast that required "two thousand bowls, two pigs, eight hundred large fish, meat gravy and a quantity of beer". Another aspect of Khmer society which the foreign religions could not influence was the high status of women: women remained owners and disposers of property. In contrast, the Laws of Manu and Indian Brahmanical tradition excluded them. A Khasi friend of mine who has Khmer friends, told me that women still own the most agricultural land in Cambodia. There are even references to women priests officiating at Cambodian temples, and evidence that these roles passed by matrilineal descent, which hints an earlier more expansive matrilineal tradition which the Khasis have still kept intact. But maybe most importantly, the caste hierarchy "never crystallized ... and ideas of ritual impurity and elaborate bans on eating with members of different castes completely failed to take root". In short, though a great deal of influence came from India, which transformed the society and polity of Cambodia, the Khmers were never Indian but remained Khmer throughout all this process.

The difficulty in understanding this nuance irks modern scholars in South East Asia. Just like the colonials who use the trope of purveyors of civilization to justify their colonisation of South Asia, R. C. Majumdar, an Indian historian and professor known for promoting Hindu nationalist views, claimed in his book published in 1944 that Hindu princes had conquered, settled and ruled South-east Asia comparing it to an 'inferior civilization' being overwhelmed and colonised by 'a superior one'. However, in the post-colonial period, scholars from South East Asia pushed back against this idea of Indian colonialism and claims that "their ancestors were savages, brought to civilisation by sword-wielding Indian adventurers and zealous missionaries of the Brahmin priestly caste". They are also not happy with their homeland being claimed as being part of 'Greater India' or Akhand Bharat. The whole concept of 'Indianisation' became almost a dirty word in South-east Asian university departments and looked down upon. Instead, they stress on the reciprocal relationship of 'acculturation' and cultural 'convergence' and exchange between South Asia and South-east Asia.

Scholars consider Khmer and other Austroasiatic speakers indigenous to Southeast Asia, the first peoples after the initial African migration, to inhabit the region. One group kept moving west and in time became the Khasis who, after the Dravidians, are the second oldest community in South Asia. Over time, culture went into transformation and the Khmer and Khasi culture (which includes religion) has changed irrevocably from what it was thousands of years ago when they first left South China. But it is also to be accepted that some vestiges have lingered which connect the past and the present. In this scenario, where almost all Khmers now follow Theravada Buddhism, a foreign religion, are they indigenous? What about the Taiwanese aborigines, many of whom are Christians, but were the first people to settle in Taiwan (the birthplace of the Austronesian language)? Can they be called indigenous? The answer is straightforward – yes. Because they are the first settlers. It doesn't matter if their faith has changed, their indigeneity has not changed. The attempt to equate indigenous faith with indigenous identity is fraught with many problems. The death of the two Khasi boys, one of whom belonged to the indigenous faith, eliciting no reaction from the Seng Khasi and Sein Raji, is an excellent example that it is not religion but solidarity that defines the indigenous identity of a community. That has been the case in the past and it will always be the case in the future as well.

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

some lessons from those illustrious leaders.

Rahul should learn lessons from his family history. They had done a lot for the country Rajiv Gandhi and Indira Gandhi sacrificed their lives for the country and the present Congress leadership must learn lessons from them. It is well known that Rajiv Gandhi won 408 Lok Sabha seats but afterwards Congress party never won so many seats so that the party could form the government on its own strength. So the party has to go into its own roots and not follow the policies of other parties. Now the Mumbai Corporation elections can be held any time hence the party should show its performance.

A clear message should reach the grassroots level workers about the policies of the Congress party

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

Multi-faceted significance of rice

Editor,
The write up published in The Shillong Times, Tura (April 7, 2025) under the caption: Rice connection,

of South Asia, R. C. Majumdar, an Indian historian and professor known for promoting Hindu nationalist views, claimed in his book published in 1944 that Hindu princes had conquered, settled and ruled South-east Asia comparing it to an 'inferior civilization' being overwhelmed and colonised by 'a superior one'. However, in the post-colonial period, scholars from South East Asia pushed back against this idea of Indian colonialism and claims that "their ancestors were savages, brought to civilisation by sword-wielding Indian adventurers and zealous missionaries of the Brahmin priestly caste". They are also not happy with their homeland being claimed as being part of 'Greater India' or Akhand Bharat. The whole concept of 'Indianisation' became almost a dirty word in South-east Asian university departments and looked down upon. Instead, they stress on the reciprocal relationship of 'acculturation' and cultural 'convergence' and exchange between South Asia and South-east Asia.

Scholars consider Khmer and other Austroasiatic speakers indigenous to Southeast Asia, the first peoples after the initial African migration, to inhabit the region. One group kept moving west and in time became the Khasis who, after the Dravidians, are the second oldest community in South Asia. Over time, culture went into transformation and the Khmer and Khasi culture (which includes religion) has changed irrevocably from what it was thousands of years ago when they first left South China. But it is also to be accepted that some vestiges have lingered which connect the past and the present. In this scenario, where almost all Khmers now follow Theravada Buddhism, a foreign religion, are they indigenous? What about the Taiwanese aborigines, many of whom are Christians, but were the first people to settle in Taiwan (the birthplace of the Austronesian language)? Can they be called indigenous? The answer is straightforward – yes. Because they are the first settlers. It doesn't matter if their faith has changed, their indigeneity has not changed. The attempt to equate indigenous faith with indigenous identity is fraught with many problems. The death of the two Khasi boys, one of whom belonged to the indigenous faith, eliciting no reaction from the Seng Khasi and Sein Raji, is an excellent example that it is not religion but solidarity that defines the indigenous identity of a community. That has been the case in the past and it will always be the case in the future as well.

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

with Rituals and Tradition by HH Mohmen made reading so interesting that I felt worthy of mentioning it in this esteemed newspaper. I was not aware of the important role that rice plays culturally and ritually among the Khasi-Pnar people too. Besides being a staple food of Indians, rice is a compulsory food item believed to be auspicious for most of us in our daily lives. As a Nepali I would like to mention the multiple uses of rice in Nepalese cultural, rituals and religious matters since the time immemorial. Many in Meghalaya too must have been noticing the application of rice as 'tika' (rice besmeared with vermilion) on the foreheads of Nepalese in some festivals and auspicious occasions. Of course, Marwaris and Beharis too, use rice in celebrating rituals. How nice it is to observe that a staple food like rice is linked with the religious and cultural beliefs of so many people in India.

Yours etc.,
Deepak Chhetry,
Tura

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

8. The Crabs in the Bucket

All quiet on the work front

By Ellerrine Diengdoh

Disclaimer:

The following piece is a work of absolute fiction and any resemblance to real persons, living or habitually absent, is purely coincidental. No employees, tea breaks, or mysteriously disappearing files were harmed in the making of this satire. If you find yourself offended, please take comfort in knowing you were probably not the only one. And if you were not offended, congratulations, you might be the chair!

"We deserve what we get and we get what we deserve," this is not a proverb, it is a diagnosis of our collective "work" culture in Meghalaya. For decades, we've turned the magnifying glass on the government, yelling "corruption!" and "negligence!" with the unbridled passion of a Shakespearean mob. But today, we will turn it back on ourselves. We will examine us, the employees, the functionaries, the folks on the frontlines where government inefficiency often begins. Because if we look closely, the problem is not just "up there," it is also draping over the colleague's desk, taking a kwai-break and whispering the same tired gossip for the 5th time today!

Now, I will take you on a guided tour, to the "Land of Permanent Pending". A place many of us know all too well and if we are brave enough to look closely, we will recognise the specimens we encounter there:

1. Artificial Ignorance (AI)
Habitat: Commonly found near a file, a task, or a basic instruction, though they instinctively avoid all three.

Behaviour: Believed to be highly evolved and very qualified, but when asked to perform a task, they suddenly lose all language skills and memory. They are known to feign confusion so convincingly that even trained actors take notes.

2. Operation Double Agents (ODA)
Habitat: These species can walk and slither and are often found lurking near both your desk and the boss's office.

Behaviour: Masters of duplicity and first cousins of the chameleon. They whisper sweet anti-management gossip to you and then march upstairs to report your every word.

3. Bare Minimum Crew (BMC)
Habitat: In front of the Boss' office or around the work place looking tired.

Behaviour: They've been going through "a personal crisis" since the summer of 69. They perform just enough to avoid termination. Attendance is 100%, productivity is ZERO.

4. Sweet-Talk Strategists (STS)
Habitat: Wherever a boss/boss' wife's birthday/ anniversary is happening.

Behaviour: Their true skills lie in complimenting superiors, forwarding devotionals/motivational memes and messages and dreaming up creative excuses for not attending meetings and work. Can rise through the ranks without even a lifting a stapler.

5. The Misunderstood Geniuses (TMG)
Habitat: In a cloud of self-pity and old certificates.

Behaviour: Born brilliant but tragically ignored. They believe they are God's gift to mankind and everyone else is too stupid to appreciate their genius. They will never apply themselves, but will give you a five-hour monologue on how they would have done it better.

6. The Houdinis (HH)
Habitat: Unconfirmed.

Behaviour: Technically employed. Rarely seen. You're more likely to spot "Bah Jyl-lud" than this person at their desk. Yet, on payday, their signature is always first.

7. The Award Chasers (TAC)
Habitat: In every committee, WhatsApp group, and official photo ops.

Behaviour: Usually perched somewhere with just enough power to delegate everything except praise. Their full-time job is to look like they have a full-time job. They survive entirely on borrowed effort, riding on other people's backs like it is free public transport. You do the work, they will write the foreword. You write the report, they will ask you to, "just add my name somewhere at the end!"

8. The Crabs in the Bucket

(TCB)

Habitat: Behind you, beside you, occasionally smiling at you.

Behaviour: These creatures operate in packs, united by one mission, no one must rise above the group. If you're efficient, you're "showing off". If you're lazy, you're "useless." If you're promoted, you're "well connected." Their method is simple, don't improve, don't let others improve, and if anyone tries, yank them back down with gossip and character assassination.

9. The Name Droppers (TND)

Habitat: Any conversation where status needs to be established.

Behaviour: "I know him" is their mantra. They survive off vague connections, like the one time their cousin shook hands with the Chief Secretary. That is all you need to know.

10. The Divine Appointees (TDA)

Habitat: Wherever power resides.

Behaviour: These divine creatures were never selected, they were ordained. Their qualifications being the niece of a former DC or the son-in-law of a powerful contractor. Question them and you are attacking a political lineage. Their job description reads "Exist!"

A groundbreaking report by the Institute of Professional Laziness and Strategic Office Loitering (IPLSOL), 1st April 2025, has revealed some shocking statistics:

It was found that 82% of government employees believe they are overworked, even though 67% of them weren't exactly sure what their job titles were.

82% of employees feel overworked (mostly by life, not by work).

100% agreed that "someone should do something" but were not available for a follow-up.

In fact, when asked why work in Meghalaya moves at the speed of a continental drift, most participants cited "weather," "traffic" and "the system," as their top three excuses. The researchers were later unavailable for comment, as they had all applied for study leave.

These are the sum of our collective sins, and the sad truth is that we have adapted perfectly to this. We have learned to survive in this prehistoric swamp of red tape by becoming part of it. We even teach our children to aim only for government jobs, not because we want them to make a difference, but as a shortcut to a security without scrutiny. We blame "the system", yet we are fluent in it. We know exactly where it cracks and where to slip through.

Deep down, we do not want a better system, we want a familiar one. One where we do the bare minimum and still feel entitled to a pension, a promotion and respect we have not earned.

Our leaders are not some strange, corrupt aliens who landed from another planet. They are homegrown, organic and 100% locally sourced. They are exactly what happens when you take the average citizen, add power, remove consequences and give them a podium. They loot with impunity because we taught them how. We steal too. We steal time, we steal credit, we pocket schemes, we steal office supplies, we steal opportunities that belong to someone else. We fudge reports, fake receipts, pull strings, grease palms, cut corners. We forget that stealing a safety pin or hijacking a scheme meant to electrify an entire village, is still stealing. Petty or grand, it comes from the same place!

Why then do we rage at their arrogance, scoff at their greed, debate about reforms from the comfort and security of our homes, only to turn around and cheat the system the moment no one is watching? Let us drop the act. We are not powerless, we are complicit! We don't just tolerate corruption, we nurture it and pass it down like a family recipe.

We did not end up with corrupt leaders by accident, we built them, lie by lie, bribe by bribe, silence by silence. They did not rise on their own, we lifted them, carried them on our backs and cheered them on. So when the stench hits, don't look up. Look in the mirror. That rot? It's us!

"You can become a winner only if you are willing to walk over the edge."

— Damon Runyon

The Shillong Times

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Missing Tourist

NEWS of a Hungarian tourist simply disappearing without a trace once again shines the light on the tourism practices and principles being practised in Meghalaya. It is not known how a foreign tourist — a first-time visitor — could land up at a tourist destination in Meghalaya and venture out on his own. There are pitfalls in visiting a place without a guide to warn a tourist of dangerous treks and that includes the health status of an individual tourist. It's not easy to go down 3000 steps to Nongriat to watch the splendour of the Double-Decker living root bridge. Most people go down early before the sun is up and retrace their steps back to the top after midday when the heat has subsided. Many tourists coming from other states of India are seen returning halfway because they find it daunting to go down those 3000 steps. They fear that they might not be able to climb back since they are not used to such steep climbs. That's one important reason why every destination needs professionally trained guides who will warn the tourists of the possible dangers of exerting themselves beyond a point or even of slipping and tumbling down the stairs and landing up with serious injuries.

That a tourist would be missing since March 29 and has not yet been found despite great effort by the police to scour every place including the nearby caves in case the tourist entered any one of them and might have got claustrophobia and collapsed inside. Anything is possible when people who are new to a place go out and explore such places on their own. The point of this incident is whether the communities running such destinations have learnt any lessons. Hotels where tourists stay should have all the details of the tourists including which places they plan to visit after checking out of the hotel. But in this community, asking questions is not a strong point. A tourist is asked minimum questions because people believe they should not be intrusive. In any other country tourists cannot just take off alone and explore any place without someone keeping track of their movements.

However, this is not to say that traveling solo is not a practice. Many tourists prefer to travel solo because they value the silence and don't want to be bombarded with explanations but to discover the destination themselves. In fact, travelling solo is an exercise of self-discovery, that gives the tourist a unique perspective about the place. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that traveling alone does come with its own set of risks. The absence of a travel companion can make a person more vulnerable to various challenges, including accidents and other security threats, which include difficulties in handling emergencies in case of a health problem and also of navigating unfamiliar environments. Hopefully the Hungarian tourist will be found sooner than later.

Why Meghalaya's roads never seem to reach their destination?

By Bijoy A Sangma

"Why do road projects in Meghalaya take such an awfully long time to complete?" When eminent journalist Patricia Mukhim posed this question, she gave voice to a frustration shared by thousands. The sight of half-built roads, abandoned construction sites, and never-ending delays has become an all-too-familiar reality. But why does this cycle persist despite massive budget allocations and ambitious promises?

Indeed the social media post by Patricia Mukhim recently posed a strikingly relevant question: "Why do road projects in Meghalaya take such an awfully long time to complete?" This question resonates with thousands of Meghalaya's citizens who continue to endure poor road conditions, abandoned construction sites, and seemingly endless project delays.

Over the past few years, the Meghalaya government has demonstrated a clear commitment to enhancing the state's road infrastructure. Significant projects have been initiated, and substantial funds allocated, reflecting a vision aimed at improving connectivity and fostering economic growth. However, despite these commendable efforts, challenges persist that hinder the timely and effective realization of these infrastructural ambitions.

The problem is not merely a lack of funds - Meghalaya's budget allocations for infrastructure have reached record highs - but rather the deeper issues of inefficiency, administrative roadblocks, corruption, and weak project execution. The question remains: Why do Meghalaya's roads remain perpetually unfinished, despite significant investment and political will?

Ambitious Plans and Financial Commitments
In his 2025-26 budget speech, Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma reaffirmed his administration's commitment to infrastructure development. The Chief Minister emphasized 'infrastructure development as a cornerstone for Meghalaya's growth. The budget earmarked Rs 2,873 crore for road connectivity projects, including significant undertakings like the Shillong Western Bypass and the proposed Border Economic Corridor.

The state has made significant efforts to improve connectivity under its flagship Meghalaya Integrated Transport Project (MITP), which includes rehabilitating and upgrading Non-Urban Roads, Urban Roads, and Tourism Roads. The Public Works Department (PWD) is improving 402.96 km of roads under MITP Component-1, including 325.54 km of Major Roads statewide, 67.26 km of Urban Roads in Jowai, Nongstoin, and Williamsnagar, and 10.17 km complementing tourism infrastructure.

Furthermore, the Union Ministry of Finance sanctioned Rs 2,500 crore for the development of new roads under Externally Aided Projects (EAP). This substantial financial backing aims to bolster the state's

infrastructure and improve road connectivity, reflecting a concerted effort to address the region's unique challenges.

Despite significant financial commitments, the ground reality remains disappointing. While well-maintained roads like the Shillong Bypass and parts of the Shillong-Guwahati Highway prove infrastructure development is possible, key projects remain stalled or slow. The Shillong-Dawki road, meant to boost trade with Bangladesh, faces major delays due to land acquisition and environmental issues. In December 2024, the state aimed to complete it by 2026. Similarly, the crucial NH-44 two-lane expansion, connecting Meghalaya to Barak Valley and Tripura, faces setbacks, frustrating travellers and businesses.

Despite increased spending, the end results often do not match expectations. The frustration of citizens is justified when projects stretch over decades, with completion dates pushed further into the future while costs continue to escalate.

Administrative Deadlocks and Execution Challenges

Road projects in Meghalaya often face years-long delays due to slow-moving administration. Approvals from multiple state and central agencies create procedural bottlenecks. Land acquisition remains a major hurdle, with compensation disputes, environmental clearances, and local opposition stalling projects. Urban Affairs Minister Sniawhalang Dhar acknowledged that smart road projects in Shillong are delayed due to challenges in relocating utilities like PHE pipelines and MeECL electricity poles.

Additionally, there is a glaring lack of coordination between the state's PWD, contractors, and local communities. Road contracts are often awarded without proper feasibility studies, leading to mid-project redesigns, legal disputes, and extended timelines.

The government's tendering process, while well-intentioned, frequently results in contracts going to the lowest bidder, who may lack the financial strength or technical expertise to deliver quality work on time. Contractor expertise is crucial for timely, quality completion. Instances have been reported where contractors lacked the necessary technical know-how, leading to substandard work and delays. The Meghalaya High Court has directed the state to hold contractors accountable for repairs if roads deteriorate within a specified time, highlighting concerns about construction quality.

Sub-contracting is common in large infrastructure projects, but excessive reliance can dilute accountability and affect timelines. Contractors in Meghalaya require contractors to perform a significant portion of the work. Payment delays further worsen the situation, often causing financial disputes and halting work.

In Meghalaya's Sixth Schedule areas, non-tribal

labourers must obtain a Non-Tribal Labour Service License, whereas tribal labourers are exempt. Interventions by NGOs and civil society groups to inspect these licenses, along with instances where labourers lack the required permits, often lead to disruptions and thus - delay in projects.

While specific reports on labour disputes in Meghalaya's road projects are limited, general challenges in the construction sector often involve inadequate labour management, disputes over wages, and poor working conditions. Such issues can lead to work stoppages and project delays.

Adding to these challenges, Meghalaya's heavy dependence on central funds - over 67% of its revenue comes from central transfers - means that projects must adhere to strict funding guidelines, causing further administrative delays. The need for multiple approvals, periodic fund releases, and bureaucratic red tape often results in prolonged stagnation, leaving roads half-built for years.

The Elephant in the Room: Corruption

Beyond inefficiency and mismanagement, allegations of corruption have long plagued Meghalaya's road projects. The PWD, responsible for executing most road constructions, has often been accused of favouritism in awarding contracts, inflating project costs, and failing to hold contractors accountable for shoddy or incomplete work.

The CAG's State Finance Report (2021-22), tabled in the Assembly in March 2023, revealed that as of March 31, 2022, Meghalaya had 124 incomplete projects - many delayed by over a decade, with a cumulative investment of Rs 796.15 crore. Notably, one-third of these projects were less than 50% complete, with 67 delayed by more than three years and six languishing for over a decade.

In 2023-24, reports surfaced of irregularities in road tenders, sparking public outcry. While the state government has pledged transparency, the lack of independent oversight remains a concern. Contractors who fail to meet deadlines or deliver subpar work often escape serious penalties, as political patronage shields them from accountability. The result? Roads that break down within months of construction, requiring constant repairs and further cost escalations.

Weather and Terrain: Nature's Role in Delays

Meghalaya's terrain and heavy monsoons undeniably delay road construction. Its steep hills, deep valleys, and high rainfall pose engineering challenges requiring specialized solutions. However, other hilly regions like Himachal Pradesh and Sikkim have built and maintained better road networks despite similar challenges.

The key difference lies in project execution. In states like Himachal Pradesh, innovative

engineering techniques, strict contractor accountability, and the use of modern technology in road building have led to more durable roads with shorter completion timelines. Meghalaya must adopt similar best practices to ensure that its infrastructure projects do not remain permanently 'under construction.'

A Vision Without a Team is Just a Dream

Chief Minister Conrad Sangma's vision for Meghalaya is ambitious and commendable. His administration has pushed for higher infrastructure spending, prioritized road connectivity, and sought central assistance to bridge the state's developmental gaps. However, a vision, no matter how grand, cannot be realized without a team that understands it in both letter and spirit. It must be backed by efficient execution and robust governance.

Meghalaya's infrastructure success requires a multi-pronged approach integrating project management, anti-corruption measures, and public engagement. The government must enhance monitoring the projects in real-time, ensure timely fund release without bureaucratic hurdles, and hold contractors accountable for delays or poor-quality work.

Involving local communities in planning and execution can prevent resistance and ease land acquisition. The state government could also benefit from public-private partnerships (PPPs), leveraging technical expertise and private-sector efficiency to accelerate project completion.

Can Meghalaya Finally Pave the Road Forward?

The road to a well-connected Meghalaya is long and troubled with obstacles, but not impossible to traverse. The state has the financial backing, the leadership vision, and the growing public demand for better infrastructure. What it lacks is efficient execution.

To break free from the cycle of unfinished roads and delayed projects, Meghalaya must embrace reforms that prioritize efficiency, transparency, and accountability. The government must demonstrate the political will to overhaul the current system, ensuring that road construction moves at the speed of development, not at the pace of bureaucracy.

As citizens, we must demand accountability and push for a future where Meghalaya's roads are known not for their potholes, but for the opportunities they create. Until then, the question posed by Patricia Mukhim remains hauntingly relevant: Why do Meghalaya's road projects take so long to complete?

(The author is a development professional, policy analyst, a lawyer, commentator on governance, economic policies, social justice and religious freedom. Currently a PhD scholar, he has previously worked with national and international organizations in leadership roles, contributing to thought leadership in public policy and social transformation. e-mail: bijoy.sangma@gmail.com)

CM IMPACT - More Than a Guidebook A Step Towards Educational Equity in Meghalaya

By Treemmi Lamare

In recent days, the Government of Meghalaya's CM IMPACT initiative—a programme designed to assist Class X students with free guidebooks for SSLC preparation—has stirred both appreciation and criticism. While debates are a natural and healthy part of any democracy, they must be rooted in facts and focused on the real needs of students. This is especially critical in a state like Meghalaya, where the education system continues to face deep-rooted structural challenges.

Let's begin with a basic truth: textbooks are already available and used in schools across the state. These textbooks are approved by the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE) and form the foundation of classroom instruction. The CM IMPACT guidebooks do not aim to replace these essential texts. Rather, they are meant to complement them. Designed by experts and approved by the Government of Meghalaya's Education Department, these guides summarise key chapters, reinforce textbook content, and provide practice materials that align with the SSLC board exam format. In simple terms, CM IMPACT builds on the existing curriculum to support students more directly and effectively in their exam preparation.

The reality in Meghalaya, particularly in rural and remote regions, is sobering. Many students lack access to coaching, tuition centres, or even consistent subject-specific teachers. There are schools still facing teacher shortages, infrastructure deficiencies, and limited academic resources. In such circumstances, the CM IMPACT guidebook is not just helpful—it is essential. It bridges a critical gap for students who would otherwise be left behind due to no fault of their own.

Some critics argue that CM IMPACT encourages rote learning. But structured guidebooks—especially in a system that already struggles with disparities—can serve as equalisers. For students in rural areas without trained teachers for every subject, the guidebook offers a much-needed academic anchor. It can help standardise learning across the board, thereby reducing inequalities and ensuring that every child, regardless of location, has a fair shot at success.

Importantly, CM IMPACT is also a valuable support system for teachers. It aids them in planning lessons, identifying key areas to focus on, and guiding students through revision sessions. Far from reducing teacher accountability, it can actually enhance it by setting a clear framework for what students should achieve. With access to these guides, teachers are better equipped to serve their students in a structured and goal-oriented way.

Another criticism that has emerged is the comparison of CM IMPACT to market-based "bazar notes." I personally consider this comparison not only inaccurate but also unfair. Bazar notes are commercially produced, often inconsistent in quality, and lack official oversight. In contrast, CM IMPACT is a government-issued, education department-approved guidebook—carefully crafted by academic experts. The controversy, in large part, seems to stem from the branding—the name "CM IMPACT." If the same book were called something like "SSLC Guide for Students (MBOSE Approved)," much of the uproar would likely vanish. In fact, nearly 70% of the criticism appears to be politically motivated, rather than focused on the substance or utility of the guide itself.

Let's be honest—some of the backlash against CM IMPACT is rooted more in political rivalry than in genuine educational concerns. And while political disagreements are inevitable, what must be avoided at all costs is the weaponisation of students' futures. Education policy should always be student-centric, not party-centric. The children of

Meghalaya deserve better than to be used as pawns in a political game. Whether it's called CM IMPACT or something else, the core goal remains: to provide free, quality academic support to students—particularly those from disadvantaged or under-served communities.

Based on feedback from the ground—students, teachers, and parents alike—CM IMPACT is already showing signs of promise. Here's what it offers:

1. Focused Exam Support and Revision Tools
2. Economic Relief for Families
3. Enhanced Self-Study and Confidence Among Students
4. Structured Support for Teachers
5. Parental and Community Involvement
6. Concrete Steps Toward Bridging the Urban-Rural Education Divide

However, no initiative is perfect, and CM IMPACT should not be treated as one. What matters more is its potential for evolution and improvement. Here are a few ways the initiative can be strengthened going forward:

* Enhance the guidebooks with visual aids and structured learning tools—such as concept maps, flowcharts, key-point summaries, and topic-wise question banks. While the textbooks already provide the foundational content, many students—especially in under-resourced schools—struggle to extract and organise information effectively on their own. These visual and structured tools can act as learning scaffolds, helping students connect ideas, retain key concepts, and prepare more confidently for exams. Such aids are especially helpful for visual learners and students with limited access to tutoring support or experienced teachers.

* Call experienced teachers from all corners of the state to provide insights and feedback on improving the guidebooks' content and usability. This ensures a grassroots-level understanding of diverse student needs.

* Launch a digital version or mobile app to make the material accessible in tech-enabled areas, ensuring wider reach beyond the printed copies.

* Establish a strong monitoring mechanism to track effectiveness and impact on learning outcomes, and ensure that content is revised every year based on evolving exam trends.

* Ensure timely and consistent yearly distribution of the guidebooks. The government must maintain its commitment to this initiative year after year. The guidebooks should reach students within the first three months of the academic session so they can be used effectively throughout the year—not just during exam time. This continuity is essential to build trust, allow teachers to plan their lessons better, and ensure that no student is left behind due to delayed or irregular distribution. The government must not fail in this annual responsibility, especially when so many students rely on this support for their academic progress.

At its core, CM IMPACT is a student-centred effort that seeks to level the playing field. Whether a student is studying in Shillong or a remote village in West Jaintia Hills, this guidebook offers an additional layer of support during a pivotal moment in their academic life. Rather than politicising the initiative, the right question to ask is: Does it help students? And for a growing number of them, the answer is clearly 'yes.' Let's not allow names, politics, or perceptions to distract us from what truly matters: ensuring that every child in Meghalaya has the tools to succeed. Programmes like CM IMPACT will grow stronger with feedback, transparency, and collaboration. But even now, it represents a meaningful step forward. Let's back it with clarity, compassion, and commitment.

(The author is Researcher & Educator)

Letters to the Editor

Institutions should learn from NLU Meghalaya

Editor,
In today's digital era, it is expected that educational institutions and government offices not only improve their infrastructure but also adopt and integrate technology into their operations. This integration is essential for enhancing efficiency, transparency, and service delivery. As we move into the age of Artificial Intelligence—often referred to as the 'Fifth Generation'—innovation and digital solutions are becoming the driving force of progress.

Looking at the state of digital infrastructure in Meghalaya, the data speaks volumes. According to the Indian School of Business (ISB), as of the 2021-22 academic year, only 16.5% of the approximately 14,600 schools in Meghalaya were equipped with internet facilities. Even more concerning, just 1.8% had functional computer systems. These figures highlight a significant gap that needs to be bridged.

The Shillong Times in 2024, the Meghalaya government announced the roll-out of 5,000 smart classrooms to enhance educational delivery. Beginning with the 2024 academic session, students from Classes 9 to 12 under the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE) started using QR codes in textbooks, allowing access to digital resources. Despite 94.5% of households in Meghalaya owning smartphones, only 53.6% of children were able to use them effectively for basic digital tasks such as setting alarms or searching for videos online.

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit the National Law University of Meghalaya (NLU Meghalaya), as well as other institutions, to gather feedback from current students regarding admissions and the overall learning experience. While I was also in the process of applying through CUET and exploring other institutions, I was particularly curious about NLU Meghalaya. Since it was established only in 2022 by the Government of Meghalaya, I had my doubts about the quality of education—especially considering the challenges faced by many new universities in staying up to date.

Moreover, given that most National Law Universities (NLUs) admit students through

CLAT, which is conducted offline, I expected the admissions process to be more traditional and perhaps complicated. However, I was pleasantly surprised. The entrance examination conducted directly by NLU Meghalaya was an online, smooth, and incredibly well-organized system. Many people assume that online exams tend to be chaotic due to technical issues unlike CUET Exams with less number of test centres, but that was not the case here. The experience was efficient and comfortable.

What impressed me even more was learning that the adoption of technology at NLU Meghalaya goes beyond the entrance test. The entire learning process, including trimester exams, is conducted online—offering students a flexible, modern, and tech-integrated academic experience.

To my surprise, the entrance test conducted directly by NLU Meghalaya was smooth, online, and highly efficient. The exam experience was thoughtfully designed: water bottles, pens were provided—helping candidates focus fully on their performance. Contrary to common fears that online exams are chaotic, this one was seamless and well-managed.

Even more impressive is that the integration of technology

doesn't end with admissions. At NLU Meghalaya, trimester-based exams and the learning process are also conducted online, contributing to a flexible, modern, and engaging academic and paperless environment.

NLU Meghalaya also sets itself apart in recruitment practices. Unlike most government or centrally-funded institutions—where for Group A posts, candidates are shortlisted and called directly for interviews—NLU Meghalaya has adopted a more robust and transparent recruitment system. Even for Group A and B positions, candidates go through multiple stages: an online written test, a presentation round, and finally an interview. The process is well-structured and efficient, with timely result announcements, reflecting the university's commitment to a fair and merit-based selection system. Thank you, National Law University of Meghalaya, for setting an inspiring example of what a modern, forward-thinking institution can look like. Other institutions would do well to learn from your approach to education, recruitment, and digital integration.

Now I can say our State is moving on the path to Digital India and Digital Learning!!!!

Yours etc.,
Meshuwa Lyngdoh,
Via email

Death of two boys in Karnataka: Whither justice?

Editor,
The recent unfortunate and tragic incident that had befallen the two Khasi young boys who were studying in Karnataka state is a slur on our Khasi society. The two boys and other students were given contaminated food to eat which caused food poisoning. And then the most horrific tragedy struck the two boys who lost their lives in distant Karnataka far away from their parents and their homes.

I think the blame for their death should go to their parents (especially their fathers) and also to the society (Lei Synshar Cultural Society) for sending the children so far away for the purpose of education and so on. Actually young children must be educated only in their hometowns and villages where they can be looked after by their own parents and guardians. They cannot be packed off to faraway places where there are amidst unknown people and where they cannot even be in touch with their parents.

The societies and recruiting agencies must know that the young children need to be closer to their homes for education

and life building opportunities. These elders should be called to account and punished for sending their children far away to unknown places that they have themselves not visited.

Inspection should also be carried out by the Government on the different societies and agencies that recruit children from here from time to time. Also the local organizations like Khasi Students Union (KSU) and Hyniewtrep Youth Council (HYC) should take serious note of such subversive recruitment.

Coming to the Lei Synshar Cultural Society (LSCS), this organization too should be punished by law if found guilty for the demise of the two boys, and justice should be given to the two boys and their families.

To conclude, I hope that such incidents are not repeated and children of our Khasi community are no longer recruited by organisations with dubious motives.

Yours etc.,
Wallambi Rani
Upper Shillong

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

"Expectation is the mother of all frustration."

— Antonio Banderas

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Right to hide truths

IN India today, the enactment of a law does not necessarily mean it serves the intended purpose. Laws by themselves are losing their teeth. Add to this the public fears about a lack of fair play and corruption in the justice-dispensation systems. In sum, it would appear that the general public is taken for a ride and their interests are subverted at will by successive governments both at the Centre and in the states. So too with the Right to Information (RTI) Act, which is facing odds for several reasons ever since its highly publicized introduction by the Manmohan Singh government in 2005. Now, a controversial amendment is made to the law, which saw the INDIA bloc of several opposition parties led by the Congress raising their protest. They are demanding repeal of Section 44(3) of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act by saying it destroys wholesale the Right to Information Act. These parties came up with a memorandum to the Union Information Minister Ashwinin Vaishnav, urging the government to back-track from this step.

Rights activists and others said the amendments "restricted access to public data and information-- a fundamental right guaranteed by the Constitution. According to them, "these changes removed provisions that enabled the public to seek accountability and expose corruption in government entities and among officials." These are serious matters and no responsible government in a democracy can afford to keep a deaf ear to such airing of public fears.

Transparency in our governance system is highly advocated by one and all; but in practice this is never made a reality. The nation's systems are increasingly getting corrupted due to corruption at the political and bureaucratic levels. Bribes are given in crores; and the exchequer is losing money and assets in crores. Narendra Modi who formed the government at the Centre in 2014 had promised to root out corruption. Under his over ten years of rule, the entire system got much more corrupt even as there have been no accusations against Modi or his ministers yet about such practices. The BJP is drawing in huge money to fight polls - and there's no clarity where this money comes from. Quid pro quo is now the new normal. There yet is no authority to question or check corruption at the highest level also because the LokAyukta and associated systems have been mis-managed and turned toothless due to the overbearing, shady influence from those who run governments. Vested interests are having a roll, right under Modi's nose. He is showing little interest in reforming the corrupt systems and giving it new strengths. Most RTI enquiries do not elicit the desired information. A wall is erected around the establishment, within the cover of which shady deals are happening all the time. Little wonder, then, that the Modi government attempted to dilute the RTI law.

Over-protectionism: Killing enterprise and the spirit of excellence in Meghalaya

By Patricia Mukhim

The altercation between the Hynniewtrep Youth Council (HYC) and the management of the North East India Gandhi Regional Institute of Health and Medical Sciences (NEIGRIHMS) has far reaching consequences. In the first place if NEIGRIHMS has in any way violated the employment policy the job of a pressure group is not to enter the premises of an institution and threaten people in charge. This is at best a strategy to confront a situation by using intimidation as a tool and tactic. It is a well-honed skill and a tool that has perhaps in the past yielded results because

Pressure groups are an essential part of democracy but they are not meant to act as political springboards which pressure groups in Meghalaya are known for. Pressure groups also do not engage in electoral campaigns and are often established to address immediate concerns, affecting the citizenry. The only role of pressure groups is on swaying governmental decisions in their favour. When that happens they gain naturally gain political capital and public adulation. The natural trajectory for most pressure group leaders is to contest elections because they feel they have the public with them. Unfortunately, that transition from social service to politics often boomerangs and the once known pressure group leader is defeated in the elections.

The problem with Meghalaya since its inception is that the rule of law has always been compromised, more so when those who break the law are indigenous tribals and those affected by the almost non-existent law-keeping are the "others" the "outsiders." Every central institution that has the indigenous tribals working in them will always have subversive elements the "insiders" who when they see that they cannot have their way because of the discipline and work culture enforced by the institution, begin to feed the pressure groups with information that is neither objective nor true but with the intent of pushing their own agenda across. Surgeons have even been coerced to perform surgery on someone

first, simply because he/she is an indigenous person and a resident of Meghalaya. Can any institution practise this level of partisanship? Yet all those working in NEIGRIHMS are silent. The Khasi/Jaintia/Garo doctors/nurses and administrative staff will not speak up for fear of offending the pressure groups who they can use to their advantage when they choose to. The so-called "outsiders" will not speak up for fear of being assaulted inside or outside the campus.

Here one must also question the role of the security officer of NEIGRIHMS. What was he doing that a

"outsider" and therefore an easy target, is not acceptable. Meghalaya is fortunate to have NEIGRIHMS which attracts patients from across the seven states but more so from the host state. For people of Meghalaya the better equipped NEIGRIHMS becomes the better it is for those that cannot afford to go for treatment outside the state. Healthcare is expensive and the prospect of having to take a patient to a hospital outside Meghalaya not only involves more expenses but also the burden of the caretaker/s having to stay in a hotel. It should actually be the brief of pressure

terms of transportation of essentials.

If there was a railway line to Guwahati the present jam at Khanapara due to some minor repair work that is taking forever would not cause so much disruption and loss to those that missed their flights. Every negative action has a price that often has to be paid by the future generation. A society without a vision; a society that outsources its problems to pressure groups; a society that is lazy about thinking long term and grasps at immediate solutions is a society headed for disaster.

Sadly, while quite a number of our young people are breaking barriers and moving out to work outside the state, some who wish to cling on to their parents' apron strings are the ones that want easy jobs without investing hard labour to make the institution work in achieve its goals. Ellerine Diengdoh has very aptly encapsulated the problems of a lethargic, bureaucratic that serves the last mile, in her recent article. Their lack of accountability is legendary and yet when any action is to be taken against such non-performing government "servants" they would have a long list of grievances.

Government has now come a long way and the system ought to work more like a corporate entity - perform or perish. And that includes all institutions - including the likes of NEIGRIHMS. Those who don't match up to the challenges of the job description should be dumped in favour of better performing employees. Why should any government or institution continue to employ or pay second or third rate employees when they can get the best from any part of the country? Reservation cannot be an excuse to employ non-performers. All things being equal among the reserved categories the best performer deserves the job but not by lowering standards.

When we go to a hospital we look for the best doctors and want services from the best nursing staff. We don't ask for the community of the person behind the uniform. If that is what we want then we cannot allow pressure groups to dictate the terms of employment. Period!



group using intimidation as a tool were able to enter the institution and even try and shut down the director's office? Why should any director tolerate such an affront? These acts of omission and commission are obviously communicated to the Union Health Ministry which is the sole authority over NEIGRIHMS and I am sure the Ministry will not take too kindly to such disruptions. In that respect it is good that the State Government has stood up to defend NEIGRIHMS after initially adopting a hands-off attitude. NEIGRIHMS may be a central institution but its location in Meghalaya makes it the onus of the state government to ensure that law and order not just in this institution but all other central and state institutions is not breached.

If there are genuine cases where the reservation policy has been flouted the pressure groups ought to take legal recourse after producing enough evidence that such rules have been violated. But to take matters in their own hands and to force their way into an institution and redress an apparent wrong through coercion merely because the person running the institution is not a tribal but

groups to urge NEIGRIHMS to upscale itself in the various departments and to start up super-specialties that can equal the private hospitals elsewhere. But have we ever heard of pressure groups engaging with the Union Health Ministry to expand the facilities in NEIGRIHMS. No, we haven't because pressure groups are under the assumption that their role is to disrupt, not to build.

This is the reason why pressure groups can endanger the larger public interests and taking up causes that benefit a few vested interests by employing intimidating methods to achieve their objectives. For too long Meghalaya has been held to ransom by one or other pressure group.

Now that the funds allocated for railways to the Khasi Hills is being returned just because pressure groups have ganged up to demand the Inner Line Permit before bringing in the railway lines, sometime in the future when the younger generation of Khasis grow up they will ask why the railway project has been short-circuited without a public debate. By then much harm would have been done to Meghalaya in

Reaching healthcare to a rural, remote world

By Sanjana Mohan and Lekha Rattanani

How does a woman in labour walk five kilometers across a hill to reach a clinic at night? What nutrition advice do you give to the family of a severely malnourished young man with silicosis and tuberculosis, who cannot afford to buy milk or eggs? What happens to a sick child when the nearest health facility is 20 km away and there is no transport? How do you counter malaria, diarrheal diseases, cholera, exacerbated by poor sanitation, flooding and malnutrition in remote and rural areas? These are often seen as situations in rural India, but they are not limited to this country. These stories are from across the globe. Despite the huge differences between developing and developed countries, access is a major issue in rural health around the world. Resources are usually concentrated in the cities. All countries have difficulties with transport and communication, and they all face the challenge of shortages of doctors and other health professionals in rural and remote areas. Doctors from India, Australia, America, New Zealand, Norway, Nepal and Sri Lanka discussed these problems at the three-day World Rural Health Summit in Bengaluru that ended on April 06.

Typical medical conferences are restricted to doctors and do not include nurses and public health professionals unless it relates to their areas. Such conferences definitely do not include midwives. This rural health summit opened with a panel of midwives and nurses. The midwife, a healthcare professional trained to support women throughout pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period, plays a key role in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) where access to skilled healthcare providers is often limited. World Health Organization (WHO) figures for 2024 show that there are an estimated 29 million nurses worldwide and 2.2 million midwives. WHO estimates a shortage of 4.5 million nurses and 0.31 million midwives by the year 2030. This poses a major problem as nurses and midwives play a pivotal role in rural healthcare.

Worldwide lack of access to healthcare services and coverage is as high as 56% in rural areas as compared to 22% of the population in urban areas. Two thirds of the deficit of 10.3 million healthcare workers in the world is in rural and remote areas, says a report by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The report, "Global evidence on inequities in rural health protection: New data on rural deficits in health coverage for 174 countries," dated May 2015, reveals major health access disparities between rural and urban areas. The disparity is particularly pronounced in Africa, where a large percentage of the rural population lacks access to healthcare (See table).

This table gives the % of population not covered due to health professional staff deficit:

REGIONS	Total	Urban	Rural
AFRICA	87	50	17
LATIN AMERICA & CARIBBEAN	14	11	24
EUROPE	0	0	0
ASIA & THE PACIFIC	44	33	52
MIDDLE EAST	39	28	56
COUNTRIES			
BAHRAIN	86	77	90
CHINA	29	29	29
INDIA	62	50	68
NEPAL	85	70	88
PAKISTAN	66	57	74

ance or government funding. In India, the ministry of health and family welfare says that a steady decline in out-of-pocket expenditure as a percentage of total health expenditure has been observed in the last five years from 48.8% in 2017-18 to 39.4% in 2021-22.

Developed countries also face problems with health care coverage in rural areas. For example, the Netherlands is a small and a developed country with a higher population density and should not have a problem because of milder access issues in rural areas compared to other countries on account of the relatively shorter distances. But the differences in population densities in urban and rural municipalities is large and with increasing migration by youngsters from rural to urban areas, the problems of the rural greying population are mounting. This is mainly because of the demands of the growing healthcare needs of those left behind, which are not being met.

Since 1992, WONCA, the World Organization of Family Doctors, has developed a specific focus on rural health. This is mainly through the WONCA Working Party on Rural Practice, which has drawn attention to rural health issues through World Rural Health Conferences and WONCA Rural Policies. The World Health Organization (WHO) has a Memorandum of Agreement with WONCA which includes the Rural Health Initiative. It was more than 20 years ago that WHO and WONCA held a major WHO-WONCA Invitational Conference on Rural Health. This conference initiated a specific action plan: The Global Initiative on Rural Health. Yet, nothing has really moved. However, the "Health for All" vision for rural people is more likely to be achieved through joint concerted efforts of international and national bodies working together with doctors, nurses and other health workers in rural areas around the world. Australia and India have their own solutions. In Australia doctors working in rural areas are called "rural generalists", a protected discipline like a cardiologist. They receive incentives to work in rural areas and have in turn contributed to development and changes in the local economy. In India, where rural healthcare issues are starker than those of other countries, there are initiatives underway like sensitising young doctors to the problems in villages and remote areas. In October this year, a group of young doctors from across India will meet at Iswal, a village 25 kms from Udaipur city, to participate in a Rural Sensitisation Programme (RSP) organised by Basic Healthcare Services, a Rajasthan-based non-profit that runs primary healthcare centres in the State. RSP is a three-day field programme that hopes to expose this group to well-functioning primary health facilities on the one hand, and day-to-day lives and struggles of rural, tribal communities on the other. RSP emerged in response to the growing

disillusionment among many young doctors who graduate into a real world of corporate hospitals, pharma companies and commissions. Which way should they go? Rural India can provide the answers as it struggles to come out of its health care problems. We will need health services models based close to the community that practice ethical and high-quality healthcare. Rural sensitising may be the way forward for the rest of the world.

(Dr.Sanjana Mohan is the co-founder of Basic Healthcare Services, a Rajasthan-based non-profit that runs primary healthcare centres. Lekha Rattanani is the Managing Editor of The Billion Press) (Views are personal) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

The Disorderliness of Electric Wires and Posts in Shillong City

Editor, Shillong, often hailed as the "Scotland of the East," is known for its natural beauty, cool climate, and vibrant culture. But behind this picturesque charm lies a messy and often overlooked eyesore: the chaotic network of electric wires and utility poles that crisscross the cityscape in a web of disorder.

A walk down any major street in Shillong from Police Bazar to Laitumkhrah, from Nongthymmai to Mawlai will reveal a jumble of overhead wires tangled like spaghetti, hanging dangerously low in some places and bunched up in massive knots in others. Instead of organized infrastructure, what meets the eye is a collage of overlapping wires, broken poles, and sometimes even dangling cables swaying in the wind. It paints a picture of negligence, poor planning, and years of patchwork solutions.

This disorderliness not only diminishes the aesthetic beauty of Shillong but also poses serious safety risks. Exposed wires can lead to accidental electrocutions, especially during monsoons

when the moisture level is high. Fallen or leaning poles become a hazard for pedestrians and vehicles alike. Moreover, in the event of a fire or a short circuit, it becomes difficult for emergency services to respond swiftly due to the confusion and complexity of the wiring.

The problem is not just cosmetic - it is structural. The overlapping responsibilities of various agencies like the Meghalaya Power Distribution Corporation Limited (MePDCL), telecom companies, and internet providers have contributed to this mess. Every new connection often adds another layer of wire to an already overloaded post. There is little coordination, no standardized framework, and rarely any clean-up of outdated or unused cables.

In cities across the world, there has been a shift toward underground cabling - a modern and safer alternative. Shillong, too, must begin to think forward. A city that prides itself on education, music, and tourism must not ignore its growing infrastructural chaos. Steps must be taken to audit the existing wire systems, remove dead cables, enforce better coordination among service providers, and most importantly, plan for a future that is not only functional but also visually clean.

The disorderliness of electric wires and posts across Shillong is more than a visual blemish - it reflects a mindset, a pattern of postponement, of plugging holes rather than building bridges. It reflects a culture where short-term fixes are preferred over long-term vision. Where responsibility is passed around, like a wire handed from one pole to the next, with no one truly owning the full picture.

How did a city as proud and aware as Shillong come to accept this as normal? These wires aren't silent. They speak of a system tangled in bureaucracy, of urban neglect, of a public slowly numbing itself to disorder. They speak of how beauty and chaos now exist side by side - the blooming cherry blossom below, and the electrical web above.

But what if we paused to listen?

What if, instead of looking past them, we began to look at them - really look - and ask, "Is this the city we want to build for our children?" Every wire left hanging, every overloaded post, is not just a failure of planning. It's a symbol of what happens when vision is lost and maintenance becomes mere survival.

Cities are not just built with concrete. They're built with care. Shillong deserves more

than patchwork solutions. It deserves a future that is not cluttered by cables but connected by purpose. That means investing in underground wiring, enforcing urban standards, and demanding accountability from both authorities and private service providers. It means giving a city back its sky.

Let the next generation walk the streets of Shillong and look up - not in worry, but in wonder.

Because in the end, how we manage our wires might just reveal how we manage our dreams.

Yours etc., Shnaladhimi Dkhar Village- Mowtshiah

Meghalaya's Tourism Boom Threatened by Waste Management Failures

Editor, Meghalaya, particularly Shillong, Sohra, and Dawki, has seen an unprecedented surge in tourism, with Shillong emerging as the top bucket-list destination for Indian travellers in 2025 even outshining international hotspots. Known as the "Scotland of the East," our

capital city has hosted international artists and football matches, further cementing its reputation as a vibrant cultural and sporting hub.

Yet, behind this glittering facade lies a grim reality. Meghalaya's waste management system is in shambles. The government's failure to implement effective policies has led to appalling conditions across the state. Recent social media footage of garbage flooding Demthring's streets after a light shower is just one example. Walk through Iewduh or Police Bazar without a mask, and the stench from clogged drains is unbearable. Many parking lots have turned into open dumping grounds and in some cases, even public toilets. While citizens must share the blame for littering and poor civic sense, the lack of government initiative and enforcement is inexcusable.

The solution? The state must learn from cities like Indore, Mysuru, or even international models where strict waste management policies and public discipline keep urban spaces immaculate. Officials should be sent to study these systems, adopt best practices, and implement stringent waste disposal laws. While boosting tourism with budget allocations is commendable, neglecting cleanliness will undo all progress. Funds must be diverted to improve sanitation infrastructure, hire

more workers, and maintain Shillong's streets daily.

If the government continues to ignore this crisis, Meghalaya's hard-earned reputation will crumble. No tourist will return to a state drowning in its own waste. The time for action is now before our "Scotland of the East" becomes synonymous with filth and negligence.

Yours etc., Carmel Fedrick Malngiang, Via email

No unwarranted remarks please!

Editor, The article, "Religion, Identity and Solidarity: The Case of the Khasi and Khmer People" by Bhogtoram Mawroh (ST dated 8th April 2025) is an interesting read. However, the writer "mixed up" the scholarly/academically piece of work with his prejudiced views on the indigenous faith and the Seng Khasi and Sein Raji which are highly unwarranted remarks.

Yours etc., Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah, Via email

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

Time for societal reflection

NO less an institution than the Karnataka High Court has ordered the Karnataka Government that the 22 students from Meghalaya who were studying in the Gokula Educational Trust in Bengaluru and were taken ill after consuming stale food should now be airlifted back to their home state of Meghalaya. Two students, one from Lyndem in East Khasi Hills and another from Nongstoin in West Khasi Hills had died after consuming the stale food while the rest 22 survived. The children would be accompanied by the Child Welfare Officers from Karnataka and handed over to their counterparts in Meghalaya. This order follows a petition filed by the parents of the children who were taken ill. This is the first instance when such an incident has come to light. It is not known if such incidents have happened in the past since the students who are taken outside the state are not registered before they leave the state. In fact none of the students who leave to study outside the state are registered in any Government portal. This makes it difficult for the Government to assist the parents in case of any untoward incident. Normally parents who can afford to send their children to schools, colleges or universities outside the state admit them to reputed institutions and also accompany them physically and hand them over to the school/college/university authorities.

In the case of the young students – all of whom belong to the indigenous faith- who were handed over to a certain organisation by the Lei Synshar Cultural Society (LSCS), their parents are too poor to accompany them so they were handed over out of blind faith to the host organization in Karnataka. The incident should have shaken the conscience of the Khasi society of which these children are a part of. There is a need to analyse why parents are ready to trust an organisation so far away from home without knowing the kind of environment their kids are being kept in and whether they were adequately fed or even mistreated. Once the children are handed over to the host organization they are not allowed to communicate to their parents, except when an emergency arises. Parents who send their children to study outside the state call them regularly to find out if they are facing any problems. In this case once the children are not able to speak to their parents and vice versa as often as they want to.

If poverty is the reason for the students being sent out to such distant places then society should rise to the occasion. Khasi society has a strong clan system that needs to get to the root of these problems. If well-placed members of the clan assist the poorer members to at least educate one child, it would have been a noble thing to do. In fact tribal societies were inherently organized along those lines so that there would be no destitute since the clan was not just a societal creation but a lifeline and a support system. It's time for society to retrace its steps and get back to the root of the clan system and also strengthen it and make it a cohesive unit.

There had been debates between the supporters of the Federation of the Khasi States and the supporters of the Sixth Schedule and the District Council. Proper knowledge of the history of the past is necessary to understand the present, and to foresee the future. For the interest of students and young social leaders, let me remind that the primary political community in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills was the Raid or Shnong ruled by the Lyngdoh and the Basans independently as unique city-states. A number of adjacent Raids confederated together to form the Hima, and a Syiem family was adopted, and consecrated as a neutral and common rallying point. The confederation concerned mainly for common judicial administration, and defence purposes, but did not affect the territorial autonomy of the Raids. Hence, the Syiem was not a territorial ruler at all. There was no royalty of Kings or Rajas in being a Khasi Syiem other than the common respect given by the people of the confederate Raid. The Syiem family lived among the people like ordinary citizens. P.R.T. Gurdon too had observed: "to the democratic Khasi, the idea of the Siem (Syiem) living apart from his people would be repugnant."

We may romantically think that the Khasi Hima were big states with very large armies. Sajar Nangli's warriors were said to be countless in number, that each, digging once with his bow, is enough to create the Thadlaskeif lake. That was not a fact. The Khasi Hima were very small in size and population too. Each abled adult male inhabitant was supposed to serve as a fighter in case of war because there was no standing army at all in any of the Khasi Himas. Let me show here the British officers' observations in some detail. According to A.J.M Mills' Report on the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, 1853, the population in the Khasi Hills was only 82,400, living in 564 villages, and 16,450 households. The population in Jaintia Hills was only 36,525, including Mikirs (Karbis) and Lalungs (Tiwais), living in 161 villages and 7305 households. In 1853, Hima Sohra had only 10,300 people, 61 villages, 2060 households. Hima Myliem: 9200 people, 75 villages, 1840 households. Hima Nongkhlaw: 5825 people, 60 villages, 1165 households. Hima Maram: 2765 people, 44 villages, 553 households. Hima Shella: 7995 people, 25 villages, 1587 households. Hima Khyrim: 22,335 people, 118 villages, 4467 households. Hima Nongstoin: 5855 people, 55 villages, 1171 households. Hima Langrin: 910 people, 11 villages, 182 households. Hima Nongspung: 1335

people, 11 villages, 267 households. Hima Rambrai: 2410 people, 16 villages, 482 households. Hima Bhowal: 580 people, 5 villages, 116 households. Hima Mariaw: 3005 people, 19 villages, 601 households. Hima Mawiang: 1125 people, 9 villages, 225 households. Hima Mawmluh: 400 people, 1 village, 80 households. Indeed, some of these so-called Hima, did not qualify to be considered even as mini city-states. In Khasi traditions, the real authority in the Hima was not the Syiem, but it was the Dorbar of the Lyngdoh and Basan of the autonomous Raids of the Hima. They were the heads of the founding clans, and collectively called the 'Bakhras'. But this traditional power relation between the Syiem and the Bakhras was destroyed during colonial rule. British officers misrepresented the Khasi Syiem as Kings or Rajas with supreme territorial authority. They knew the fact very well, but they destroyed the traditional system on purpose for their own colonial interests. Pemberton quoted Robertson's Report of 1832 which relates to the Khasi traditional political system: "Among the many peculiarities (says Mr. Robertson) 'apparent in the form of society and government, existing among the Cossyas, the absence of any recognized organ of supreme power is very remarkable. The nation or horde presents the appearance of a congregation of Little Oligarchical Republics, subject to no common superior, yet of which each member is amenable, in some degree, to the control of his confederates. It was, he adds, to the oversight as to the feature of their political system that the massacre at Nongklow may perhaps be traced, since Teerut Sing seems to have been merely an instrument on that occasion, of executing the will of the confederates, who were displeased at a treaty which he had without their sanction entered into' (Alexander Mackenzie: The North-East Frontier of India, p. 233). Through agreements, sanctions and administrative actions, the colonial rulers reduced the authority and status of the Bakhras, and unprecedentedly raised the authority and status of the Syiem for their own colonial advantage. Though the Syiem were made subjects of the British, their power over the Bakhras and the people was largely enhanced and strongly protected by the British government. Available documents show that after Independence, the process of integration of the Khasi Himas to the Indian Union had passed through a tug-of-war between two parties with opposing ideolo-

Federation of Khasi States versus the District Council

By Fabian Lyngdoh

gies. They were commonly called the Federation party and the Federated party. On one side, the Federation of Khasi States led mostly by the Syiems, argued that from time immemorial, the land has been ruled by democratic Syiem, Lyngdohs, and Sirdars who were elected by the people. Is that true? Are the Syiem and Lyngdohs elected by the people at large, and not by the clans? Hamlet Bareh had rightly pointed out that the Syiem is neither a representative of the people nor a democratically elected one. Therefore, both the Syiemship and myntriship are not democratic institutions (Bareh, 1964:329). The Federation of Khasi States was only a voluntary association of the Syiem of the Himas with few eminent persons. It was not a politically binding traditional entity. Any Hima can opt out of the Federation any time.

The British government took over the controlling authority of the Dorbar of the Bakhras over the Syiem. The Bakhras lost their territorial authority and became mere electors for electing the Syiem, and as Myntris (Mantries) to be appointed by the Syiem, and only to assist the Syiem. Under this new found position, the Syiem had been enjoying all the newly invented rights, authorities and privileges under the British Rule, and they presented that as a Khasi democratic tradition! They sought constitutional protection for the continuance of their sacred rights and special privileges bestowed by the British. From 15th December, 1947 onwards all the Khasi Syiems signed the Instrument of Accession on behalf of their own respective Himas. Were the Syiems authorized according to Khasi tradition to accede the lands of the Raids to the Indian Union? In his Report of 1832, Mr. Robertson had observed that there was an absence of any organ of supreme power in the Khasi political system. The Hima was only a congregation (confederation) of the Raids which he called 'Little Oligarchical Republics' which were subject to no common superior, yet each Raid was amenable, in some degree, to the common good of the Hima. Robertson also pointed out that the cause of the Nongkhlaw massacre could be traced to an oversight or misunderstanding of the Khasi traditional political system by the colonial rulers. He pointed out that u Tirot Sing was merely an instrument for that bloody massacre. He was compelled to fight to execute the will of the Lyngdoh and Basan of the Raids, who were displeased at a treaty which he had entered into without their consent. Hima Nongkhlaw

was originally formed by the confederation of eight autonomous villages or Raids, each under the rule of the respective Lyngdoh. The road that Mr. David Scott constructed on the basis of the treaty that u Syiem Tirot Sing entered into was passing not through the property of the Syiem, but through the properties of the inhabitants of the Raids under the independent rule of the Lyngdoh. Through oversight, the British perceived and considered these Lyngdohs merely as village headmen, not knowing (or intentionally disregarding?) that they were actually the de jure and de facto territorial rulers of the 'Little Republics'. Rev. J.M Nichols Roy was aware of this fact very well. Though he belonged to the Syiem clan of Hima Nongkhlaw, he chose to champion for popular democracy. He knew that the Syiem through the Federation of the Khasi States did not want real democracy, but they wanted a direct constitutional recognition of their own power and status gifted as a legacy of British rule. So, he formed and led the United Khasi Jaintia Federated National Conference advocating for the union of the Khasi States and the British Areas into one United Khasi Jaintia State through a popularly elected democratic structure under the Constitution of India. The Federation party wanted constitutional recognition of an autonomous territory under the rule of the association of the hereditary rulers of the Himas, while the Federated party wanted a constitutional recognition of an autonomous territory under the rule of a council of popularly elected representatives. The end result is the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India which provides for the formation of an autonomous district council (ADC) of popularly elected representatives called Members of the District Council (MDCs) within the State of Assam. Through the ADCs, the Sixth Schedule guarantees the preservation and protection of traditional institutions and customs of the tribals of North East India and allows them to develop their own system of administration at the local level, as per the prevailing practices and customs within the framework of the Constitution. Before the advent of the British, the Khasi Syiem were always under the control of the Dorbar of the Bakhras. Today, through the door of the District Council, the Khasi Hima and their traditional clan-based hereditary rulers found an indirect constitutional recognition, and they were placed under the supervision of a democratically elected Council which is even more democratic than the traditional clan-based Dorbar of the Bakhras.

public discourse on infrastructure development in the North-east. It not only informs but also inspires actionable change—a must-read for policymakers, citizens, and all who care about Meghalaya's future. Yours etc., Katchan Salakim R. Marak, Via email

Learning, not leveraging
Editor,
I am writing to chime in yesterday's unbiased article "A Step Towards Educational Equity in Meghalaya," which thoughtfully examines the CM IMPACT initiative. It is unfortunate that a well-meaning initiative like the CM IMPACT guidebook—designed to support students—has become a target of political rivalry, with some parties using children's education as a pawn in their agenda-driven narratives. When even the principal of St. Margaret's School publicly praised the CM IMPACT guidebook for its usefulness, the backlash in the form of derogatory social media comments was not only disheartening but revealed how constructive educational efforts are being drowned in politically motivated noise. It is like questioning & undermining the capacities of the

students. As highlighted, Meghalaya's education system faces significant challenges, particularly in rural areas where resources are scarce. The CM IMPACT guidebooks serve as essential tools, bridging gaps for students lacking access to quality coaching or subject-specific teachers. By complementing existing MBOSE-approved textbooks, these guides enhance understanding and provide structured practice aligned with the SSLC exam format. As mentioned in the article, if this guidebook was not named CM impact, there would be praises galore for it. Last week I came across MPSC job openings and the examination centres have been extended to Jowai, Williamnagar and Nongstoin besides the existing centres at Shillong and Tura. This is another example of bringing opportunity to door steps just as CM Impact presents. Critics have raised concerns about potential over-reliance on such materials. However, it is crucial to recognize that in under-resourced settings, structured guidebooks can level the playing field, offering all students, regardless of their geographic location, a fair opportunity to succeed. Moreover, these resources assist teachers in lesson planning

and focus, thereby enhancing overall instructional quality. While improvements are undoubtedly necessary moving forward, this should not entail a complete dismissal of the existing guidebook. Rather, a thorough review in consultation with relevant stakeholders should be undertaken to identify areas for enhancement and ensure its continued relevance and effectiveness. To further strengthen this initiative, incorporating visual aids like concept maps and flowcharts could cater to diverse learning styles, especially benefiting visual learners. Additionally, developing digital versions of the guidebooks would extend their reach, accommodating students in areas with internet access. Education should remain above political discourse. The primary focus must be on the students' welfare and their right to quality education. Initiatives like CM IMPACT represent significant strides toward educational equity in Meghalaya. Yours etc., Bahunlang Pde, Via email

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

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

The Train Is Coming, Boys..!

Two years ago, I found myself in rarefied company—as one of the speakers, at a forum, where intellect hung in the air like the aroma of freshly brewed filter coffee in a Chennai railway canteen. On my left sat Gopalakrishna Gandhi, grandson of the Mahatma himself, a man whose gentle eloquence could probably broker peace between a porcupine and a balloon. On my right, the ever-charming Vijay Amritraj, whose verbal volleys were as elegant as his backhand at Wimbledon. And there was also Shashi Tharoor, who spoke online, Oxford's very own thunderstorm, booming forth with words longer than most traffic jams.

And then there was me—armed not with a PhD, not with a tennis racket, not even with a vocabulary that could trip up a spellchecker—but just a story. A simple story. That's all I've ever had, really. And to be honest, sometimes, that's all one needs.

It was the story of four boys. Not Gandhi. Not Amritraj. Certainly not Tharoor. These were not Rhodes scholars or rakish sportsmen. They were just four boys on a railway bridge between Chetpet and Nungambakkam—ordinary boys who could be you or me, if we were half our age and twice as foolish.

They weren't writing poetry or planning startups. No, these boys were in the thick of a scuffle—an argument that had escalated into a full-blown wrestling match. And what were they fighting over? A girl? A cricket match? A college seat? Nothing so logical.

They were at each other's throats over vegetarian vs. non-vegetarian, mosque vs. mandir, Hindi vs. Tamil—the kind of conversations that erupt over dinner tables, pollute WhatsApp groups, and light up prime-time news like Diwali firecrackers.

They weren't just talking; they were pushing, shoving, trying to toss one another off the bridge into the Cooum River below. Now, if you've seen the Cooum recently, you'll know that falling into it might be a greater tragedy than the fall itself. It isn't a river anymore; it's a floating obituary for urban planning.

But while these four boys were busy playing ideological tug-of-war, something else was happening.

A train was coming. Not loudly. Not with drama. Not like in the movies with violins in the background. No, this train was creeping up slowly, like a whisper you ignore until it's too close to duck.

Now, let me tell you about the engine driver. This wasn't your usual chap with a moustache curled like a jalebti and a cap perched like a question mark. No, this man with a fifty six inch chest had a look in his eye that would make a thundercloud back away. He wasn't burning coal or diesel. His fuel was more sinister: he was shovelling into the furnace everything we once held dear—democracy, equal rights, dissent, freedom of the press, the right to speak up and sometimes, even the right to stay silent.

Every time someone trolled

a journalist online, he fed press freedom into the flames. Every time we lynched someone over what they ate, he threw in equal rights. And every time we shared a meme ridiculing someone's language or region, he gave the fire another shove with liberty itself.

And the boys? They were still fighting.

Not one of them stopped to say, "Hey, what's that sound?" or "Should we get off this bridge?" Because here's the thing: they were wearing blindfolds. Not the cloth kind. The mental kind. The kind that comes wrapped in political propaganda, stirred with religious fervor, and sealed shut with social media rage.

These blindfolds were efficient. They made sure the boys saw only each other as enemies. Not the approaching engine. Not the man at the controls. Not the bigger picture.

And oh, the engine driver? He loves our squabbles. They keep us busy. Every beef ban, every boycott, every ban on books or films, is another distraction. While we fight over the menu and the script, he's rewriting the constitution backstage.

So, that evening, I told that audience of scholars, sportsmen, and seasoned orators: if we don't stop fighting each other long enough to look up, this train won't just knock the boys off the bridge. It'll crush the bridge itself. The river. The city. The country. The very democracy we keep bragging about on national holidays. It'll flatten you. It'll flatten me. And worse, it'll flatten the space between us—the middle-ground, the common sense, the compassion.

You see, democracy isn't a gift we unwrap once every five years during elections. It's a fragile bridge we walk on every day—together. And if we don't watch where we're going, or more importantly, who's coming toward us at full speed, we'll find ourselves in a democracy that looks like one, sounds like one, but behaves like a runaway train.

Now, two years have passed since I told that story. I wish I could say the boys stopped fighting. But it seems they've been joined by more boys. And girls. And uncles. And influencers. Everyone's picked a side. Some carry flags. Some carry microphones. Some carry machetes. But very few carry mirrors.

And the train? It hasn't slowed down. In fact, it's picked up speed.

So if today, somewhere in the distant fog of your mind, you hear a whistle, don't dismiss it. It isn't a figment of your imagination. It's the sound of ideals we once agreed upon, now caught in a headlong rush toward irrelevance. It's the sound of everything sacred being bartered for the temporary thrill of being right.

It's the sound of the train. And it's closer than you think.

Time to get off the tracks, boys.

Before we all go under...! The author conducts many activities connected with writing and speaking. To find out more, log onto <https://bobsbanner.com/a-phone-call-away/>

Letters to the Editor

Further souring of Indo-Bangladesh relations

Editor,
The news "India withdraws transshipment facility for B'desh days after Yunus' remarks" (ST April 10, 2025) is interesting. The termination of the transshipment facility between India and Bangladesh carries significant implications for trade and regional dynamics. Without access to India's transit routes, Bangladesh exports to third countries such as Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar will face logistical challenges. Increased transportation costs and delays are likely, potentially impacting the competitiveness of Bangladesh goods in these markets. Landlocked nations like Nepal and Bhutan depend on India's infrastructure for trade with Bangladesh. The termination may disrupt their supply chains and raise concerns about transit accessibility. They might seek alternative arrangements or raise the issue under international trade agreements. The decision could strain India-Bangladesh relations, as the facility was a vital component of trade collaboration. This action highlights the geopolitical tensions, particu-

larly regarding Chinese investments in Bangladesh near India's strategic Siliguri Corridor (Chicken's Neck). Legally the move might be seen as inconsistent with the World Trade Organization's (WTO) rules on transit freedom, which advocate for fair access for landlocked nations to global markets through neighbouring countries. The economic repercussions of this action could push Bangladesh to further strengthen ties with China for alternative trade solutions, impacting regional economic dynamics. The termination of the transshipment facility introduces uncertainties in trade logistics and geopolitics in South Asia. It reflects broader strategic decisions amid evolving regional alliances. The termination also has significant implications for local businesses in Bangladesh. Businesses will face higher transportation costs as they lose access to India's streamlined transit routes. This could make Bangladesh goods less competitive in international markets. Exporters will counter delays and uncertainties in shipping goods to third countries like Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar. This disruption could affect supply chains and delivery timelines. The facility previously provided a cost-effective way for Bangladeshi businesses to reach neighbouring markets.

Its removal may limit their ability to expand or maintain trade relationships. Businesses might need to explore alternative routes or partnerships, potentially increasing reliance on other countries, such as China, for trade facilitation. Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), which often operate on tighter margins, are likely to be hit hardest by increased costs and logistical hurdles, potentially threatening their sustainability. This decision could reshape the trade landscape for Bangladeshi businesses, pushing them to adapt to new challenges and explore alternative strategies. The termination of the transshipment facility could have notable implications for India's relationship with China. Bangladesh's move to strengthen ties with China, particularly near India's strategic Siliguri Corridor, raises concerns for India. This corridor is vital for connecting Northeast India with the rest of the country, and increased Chinese involvement in the region could heighten geopolitical tensions. China's growing influence in Bangladesh, including investments in infrastructure and trade, may lead to increased competition between India and China for regional dominance. India might respond by enhancing its own strategic partnerships and investments in neighbour-

ing countries. The shift in trade routes and alliances could impact regional economic dynamics. India may need to reassess its trade policies and infrastructure development to counterbalance China's expanding role. India's decision to terminate the facility might be perceived as a response to Bangladesh's alignment with China. This could influence diplomatic relations between India and China, as both nations navigate their interests in South Asia. This development underscores the complex interplay of trade, diplomacy and strategic interests in the region. Yours etc; VK Lyngdoh Via email

Constructive article on Meghalaya's road-making projects

Editor,
Bijoy A Sangma's editorial, "Why Meghalaya's Roads Never Seem to Reach Their Destination?" (ST April 10, 2025), is a compelling and well-researched piece that goes beyond mere criticism to present a holistic view of the road infrastructure challenges in Meghalaya. With

a thoughtful blend of statistical backing, grounded local realities, and policy insight, Sangma effectively shines a light on the systemic issues hampering timely road completion in the state. What stands out is his balanced tone—he acknowledges the efforts of the government, such as the massive budgetary commitments and visionary projects like the Meghalaya Integrated Transport Project (MITP), while unflinchingly dissecting the real hurdles: administrative inefficiencies, land acquisition challenges, contractor issues, corruption, and weather constraints. The article does not stop at diagnosing problems; it also suggests practical remedies, including better contractor accountability, community involvement, public-private partnerships, and the need for efficient project execution. Sangma's critique is constructive, grounded in data, and written with a genuine concern for the citizens of Meghalaya. His call for political will, public engagement, and professional oversight comes at a critical time when the state is striving for development and better connectivity. The article is both a wake-up call and a roadmap for reform. In short, this article is an important contribution to the

Selling your old laptop or phone? You might be handing over your data too



You're about to recycle your laptop or your phone, so you delete all your photos and personal files. Maybe you even reset the device to factory settings.

You probably think your sensitive data is now safe. But there is more to be done: hackers may still be able to retrieve passwords, documents or bank details, even after a reset.

In fact, 90% of second-hand laptops, hard drives and memory cards still contain recoverable data. This indicates that many consumers fail to wipe their devices properly before resale or disposal.

But there are some simple steps you can take to keep your personal information safe while recycling responsibly.

The data security risks

Discarded or resold electronics often retain sensitive personal and corporate information. Simply deleting files or performing a factory reset may not be sufficient. Data can often be easily recovered using specialised tools. This oversight has led to alarming incidents of data leaks and breaches.

For example, 42% of used storage devices sold on eBay still contained sensitive data, despite sellers following methods to erase data. This included passport images, school records, and corporate documents.

Another 2022 study found that improperly erased internet-connected devices stored private data, making them vulnerable to exploitation.

European e-waste exported to Ghana also contained classified corporate and government files, exposing security risks beyond personal identity theft.

A major wireless provider in the United States failed to securely decommission storage devices. This led to a data breach affecting 14 million customers.

Similarly, in 2021 improperly discarded medical hard drives exposed over 100,000 confidential patient records.

Why standard factory resets are not enough

Many people believe performing a factory reset fully erases their data. But this is not always the case.

An analysis of secondhand mobile devices found that 35% still contained recoverable data after being reset and resold. This highlights the risks of relying solely on factory resets.

On older devices or those without encryption, residual data can still be recovered using forensic tools.

iPhones use hardware encryption, making resets more effective, while Android devices vary by

manufacturer.

Best practices for secure disposal

To protect your personal and organisational information, consider these measures before disposing of old devices:

Data wiping

Personal users should use data-wiping software to securely erase their hard drive before selling or recycling a device.

However, for solid-state drives, traditional wiping methods may not be effective. This is because solid-state drives store data using flash memory and algorithms, which prolong a device's lifespan by distributing data across memory cells and can prevent direct overwriting.

Instead, enabling full-disk encryption with software such as BitLocker on Windows or FileVault on Mac before resetting the device can help to ensure data is unreadable.

On Android phones, apps such as Shreddit provide secure data-wiping options. iPhones already encrypt data by default, making a full reset the most effective way to erase information.

Businesses that handle customer data, financial records or intellectual property must comply with data protection regulations. They could use certified data-wiping tools that meet the United States National Institute of Standards and Technology's guidelines for media sanitisation or the US Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers' standard for sanitising storage. These guidelines are globally recognised.

Many companies also choose third-party data destruction services to verify compliance and enhance security.

Physical destruction

If the data is highly sensitive, physically destroying the storage

medium (such as a hard drive) is the most secure option. Common methods include degaussing (using a strong magnetic field), shredding, disintegration, melting, and drilling.

However, some of these techniques can be hazardous if not handled by professionals. They also make a hard drive or device unsuitable for resale and instead require it to be taken to a waste recovery centre so the rare earth metal components can be recovered.

Certified recycling services

Use reputable e-waste recyclers who adhere to strict data destruction protocols to ensure your information does not fall into the wrong hands.

Look for certifications such as R2, e-Stewards, or AS/NZS 5377, which ensure compliance with industry security standards. An online database run by sustainable electronics organisation SERI of R2-certified facilities around the world can help with this.

Safe selling and donating practices

Before selling or donating devices, conduct a thorough data wipe. Be cautious of devices linked to cloud accounts, and remove all personal information to prevent unauthorised access. Resetting alone may not be enough.

Legal and regulatory considerations for businesses

Different regions have strict data-protection laws that impose legal and financial penalties for improper disposal of sensitive data.

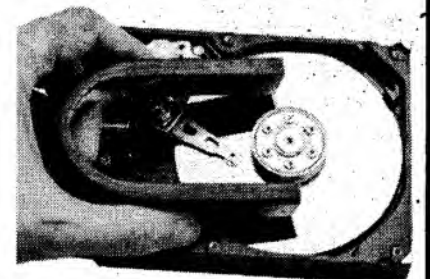
It's important for businesses to consider the legal standards for handling and disposing personal information in whatever region they're operating in, whether that be Europe, the United States, Australia or elsewhere.

Before recycling or selling an

How to destroy your data

1: Degaussing

Use a strong magnetic force to scramble the hard drive platter where data is stored.



Pros: Destroys data without destroying the hard drive

Cons: Might not work on solid-state drives, like in your mobile phone

2: Physical destruction

Shred, drill, melt or physically destroy the hard drive so that it's inoperable.

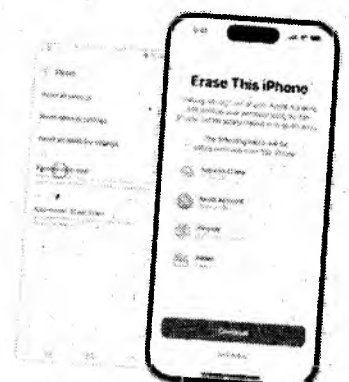


Pros: Generally easily done using common tools

Cons: If sections of the drive are still intact, a sophisticated technician may still be able to access some data

3: Digital deletion

There are built-in programs to reset a device to factory settings, or you can use dedicated data-wiping software.



Pros: Fast, easy

Cons: Older devices might use software that still enables data recovery

old device, take the necessary steps to ensure your data is completely erased. Identity theft, financial fraud and data breaches are real risks. But they can be prevented with the right

precautions. A few extra steps now can protect your information and ensure responsible recycling. *(The Conversation)*

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, April 13, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Full Moon on your solar return chart and will bring favorable results for you. It would turn out to be a golden phase in your career. You would be energetic and raring to go. You will be ready to meet the challenges that comes your way. Hurdles won't deter you. You will meet all the challenges with confidence. Fortunes favors the brave. New sources of income would accrue. Friends and colleagues would help you immensely. Your social and professional standing will grow. People higher up in position would take notice of you and also appreciate. You will have many opportunities to undertake work related journeys. They will prove to be very fruitful in the long run. Your financial position would grow. You will also plan to buy a new house or vehicle. You will be able to give long standing loans. You should have a perfect health regime and eat healthy to stay fit. You should go for regular walks, do some light exercises and include yoga and meditation in your daily schedule.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You are industrious and earnest in all that you do. This attitude bodes well for making good progress at work as the focus is on working relationships, partners, and colleagues. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation from others. This is a good time to promote harmony and good relations with friends and family members. Monetary matters seem to weigh you down with their complexities. You are blessed with intuition and foresight that take you in the right direction. You are relaxed within and relate well with others at home and at work.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You establish your authority and take the responsibility. Self-confidence and action are highlighted and you follow your instincts as you seek to enhance your spiritual strength too. You focus on inner growth to keep pace with the assertion of authority and responsibility. This holds true for your personal life too - you realize the strength of the mind. At times you feel fun loving, energetic, and willing to explore new ideas. You discuss these aspects with your soul mate as you look to give a practicality to your new learning. Investments and speculation are favoured.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This period offers a natural curiosity, facility with words, and the ability to multi-task successfully. You are especially good at mediating conflicts. Smoothing over differences and using your diplomacy skills figures now. Your mind is always active with new ideas for an increase of income. This is a very self-expressive time when you have lots of energy, but not necessarily self-discipline to match. You are inspired creatively and emotionally. You want others to take notice, and you are more sensitive to the appreciation of people. Personal projects are on the rise. You will be considerably more productive, healthy, and focused.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This is an excellent phase in 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 personal relationships. You would expand your social circle and make more contact with groups and friends. Avoid hasty and rash decisions when it comes to change. The matter will need thinking through not procrastination. A can-do spirit will help overcome any obstacles that you may encounter.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You are ambitious, authoritative and courageous. This period brings for you socializing, romance and stability at the work place. It's an excellent time to make a lifestyle change and you will also improve infrastructure of the office. Any unresolved argument may create rifts in your relationships, take a softer approach in your interactions when comes to the 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 22) You tend to entertain people with your conversation and sense of humor. You may change your personal style to present a glamorous and unconventional image. Your social life would be busy as you would popular among this people.

Domestic relationships and the home environment would be harmonious and peaceful by self-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.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) This period brings entertainment, communication and popularity among people and harmonious relations in personal and professional life. Your main focus is love, harmony and unity in family. You are more attractive when you show your responsible, managerial, ambitious, and constant side. You exhibit individualism and brilliance in handling business ventures and collaborations. Sharing ideas, talking, writing, and studying can be good ways to handle any stress that crops up. This is a fabulous time for joining a gym or stepping up exercise and health routines.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) People in fine arts, creative line and communication related fields would give a non-traditional blend to their creations and gain popularity through their work. 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 tend to entertain people with your conversation and sense of humor. You may bring about some changes in the image that you present. Your social life would be busy as you would popular among friends and family.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You would face new circumstances, changes and unfamiliar situations. A positive approach and well-spoken words would benefit as you gain favors from people in authority and power. You may take up new assignments and projects that would bring creativity and innovation of new ideas. Your inner hopes and desires come to the fore even as you tackle your job with a realistic and practical purpose of mind. Your romantic affair and pleasure-seeking activities give 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. You would be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You are likely to take your hobbies and talents more seriously. This is an excellent week for materializing a personal hobby and turning it into a business. You are bold, courageous and frank while dealing with controversial professional and family matters. Self-confidence and action are highlighted and you tend to instinctively know the right course of action to take in most situations. Excellent work opportunities for those working with overseas and you may go out for business dealings. 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.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You would be able to give an unconventional look to your work and creativity. Your beloved ones, children and hobbies are in prominence. Pleasure and amusement play an important role in personal relations. You would be more sensitive and dedicated to your professional life. You focus on having fun, enjoying romance and expressing yourself creatively. Your hobbies, leisure time, moments spent with family and children, all come into focus. You work hard to meet the goals. This is a good time to build your skills, to get organized, and to attend to your health and wellbeing. It's a great time to make improvements to your regular routines.

How our unconscious memory keeps us functioning efficiently in our daily lives

Have you ever been on a long drive and suddenly realised that you barely remember the past several minutes of driving? Although the thought of driving without paying conscious attention to the road may be unsettling, we actually carry out complex behaviours without much thought all the time - and it's all thanks to our memory.

In its simplest form, memory does one basic job: it forms associations between things that occur together. Just as we learn to associate a name with a face, or a scent with a food, memory allows certain contexts to become associated with specific thoughts and actions.

For instance, when we learn to drive, we're taught to move our foot to the brake pedal whenever we see brake lights ahead. As we gain experience behind the wheel and these two events repeatedly occur together, we quickly reach a point where we automatically get set to press the brake pedal the moment we see brake lights - without needing to think about doing so.

These automatic behaviours show how memory can control our behaviour without the need to consciously remember past events. Some researchers even call this form of memory "automatic control." Because automatic memory is by nature unconscious, we often don't notice how essential it is for most of our everyday behaviour. Automatic memory allows us to function efficiently.

If we couldn't rely on automatic control to trigger key actions while driving, we would be far less likely to survive those episodes of highway mind-wandering. If every thought and action required a conscious choice, something as simple as walking and talking would become an enormously demanding task.

Automatic decision-making

Driving scenarios are relatable, which makes them useful for illustrating how automatic memory works. They also show how important this form of memory is for us to function effectively.

However, once you begin looking for automatic memory elsewhere, it becomes difficult to identify behaviours that don't rely on these unconscious processes. Even our attempts to consciously control our attention may depend on automatic processes.

For example, why is it that certain things come to mind when we walk into a meeting with our boss - while very different things come to mind when you get together with an old friend? It's not as if we always make conscious decisions about what to remember in these cases.

The explanation is that these two different scenarios are each associated with different sets of past experiences. When we encounter a particular person, experiences associated specifically with them spring to mind automatically as a result of the memory associations we've formed over time.

Although automatic memory is essential to our daily functioning, it does come at a cost. For instance, we



Automatic memory keeps working even when our minds wander.

all find ourselves acting the same way over and over in familiar situations - even when those actions run contrary to the way we'd prefer to act. But the truth is, if we want to change our patterns of behaviour, we need repeated opportunities to form new associations so that our automatic behaviours being to align with our goals.

One strategy for overcoming automatic memory is to practise the behaviours you want to change in new contexts. For example, if you find that having difficult conversations with your partner always ends with you to reacting negatively without meaning to, perhaps you need to try having those discussions in front of a friend or therapist.

Changing the context like this can help reduce the chance that your typical responses will be activated, making it easier to practise changing your behaviours in critical moments. For behaviours that have been built over a lifetime, there's no quick hack. Relearning takes time and effort.

That is why, an expert in memory and attention, would have compassion for people who struggle to change old habits. It's also why the experts are downright terrified when the city adds a new stop sign to an intersection where drivers are used to having the right of way.

Or perhaps you've noticed how fluently you can navigate through the apps and menus on your smartphone - as if your thumbs have little minds of their own - and that if someone re-organizes the apps on your home screen, this fluency can be difficult to relearn.

Each time we do something, our memory system makes connections between the behaviour and the current context. With experience, behaviours that once required conscious control can be activated automatically when we encounter a familiar context. *(The Conversation)*

"Seize the day, and put the least possible trust in tomorrow."

—Horace

The Shillong Times

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Justice delayed & denied

THE Supreme Court has stirred a controversy by setting a timeline for governors in giving their assent to bills passed by legislatures. The purview of the court order, based on a complaint from Tamil Nadu government that Governor Ravi was withholding 10 bills passed by the assembly and references in these to the President, has also been extended to the Head of the State. The apex court agreed to the state's contention that such delay was contrary to Article 200 of the Constitution. Following the Supreme Court order, the Tamil Nadu government turned the bills into law and swiftly started their implementation. Notably, the governor had refused assent to these bills after he returned these -- and the assembly, for record, "reconsidered" them and made no change.

Prima facie, legislatures and Parliament decide how a state or nation should be run, as India is a democracy and people's elected representatives take decisions based on majority opinion. Since the ruling party enjoys a majority in these institutions, its will is reflected in the legislation. In normal course, these should be approved and implemented by the governor/President. However, the fact that the Constitution has put in a mechanism wherein these worthies are made the final authority to put their stamp of approval on each and every legislation is seen as a safeguard. The framers of the Constitution had the vision to ensure that one individual or a set of persons in the form of people's representatives cannot, by any chance, undercut the nation's supreme interests. Consider a scenario wherein a pro-Khalistan party wins power in Punjab and passes bills in assembly that would challenge or undercut the integrity of the nation.

Yet, in principle, the April 8 order by a two-member bench of the apex court should be welcomed to the extent that the "drag" that typifies governmental functioning in this country should be discouraged. This rule should, however, be applicable first and foremost to the Supreme Court and other courts in India. They are making a farce out of prolonged litigations and petitions -- for decades -- before giving the final verdict. From lower courts to the apex court, cases traverse or remain stagnant for over 20 years in many cases. Justice delayed is justice denied. But, vested interest is evident in dragging cases for long years -- those who file petitions can be fleeced for years by their lawyers in the form of repeated appearances, only to keep hearing a 'postponement' of the case to future dates. Chaos is evident in most levels of governance today and corruption is at its worst in bureaucracy and legal mechanisms. Officials take their sweet time to decide on matters. Files remain on tables for unending periods. The 'Modis' who come and go periodically and head respective governments are unconcerned about such dangerous drifts. Incompetent leaders are a curse on any nation. In a corrupt nation, only the crooks prosper.

Timber Economy in Meghalaya: Prospects and Potential

By Harish C. Chaudhary (IFS)

The survival and growth of a tree requires water or sub-soil moisture, sunlight and soil rich in macro and micro nutrients. Meghalaya is blessed with all three in abundance. It also requires protection from biotic and abiotic agents of degradation such as grazing, illegal felling, fire, insects and pest attacks etc. With relatively low human and livestock population, hilly terrain and low road density, biotic pressure on forests in Meghalaya is much lower than in other parts of the country.

Inherent forest productivity of an area is measured by a globally accepted Index, called Paterson's Climate-Vegetation-Productivity Index, commonly known as CVP Index. The Index takes into account climatic factors like temperature, precipitation, length of growing season, effective sun hour etc. Almost all parts of the Meghalaya have very high CVP Index.

Forests in Meghalaya are home to several important timber species. Notable among them are Teak, Sal, Titachap, Gamari, Nahor, Bogi Poma, Indian hornbeam, Khasi Pine, Makri Sal, Khokon, Teak Badam etc. As per a recent study, productivity of Khasi pine forests in Meghalaya varies from 9.50 cum/ha/yr at poor sites to 22 cum/ha/yr at good sites. The productivity at good sites is about 31 times the national average forest productivity (0.70 cum/ha/yr) and about 10 times the global average (2.1 cum/ha/yr). Even at the poor quality sites, it is about 13.5 times the national average forest productivity and about 4 times the global average forest productivity.

As per a forest inventory undertaken in 2015-17, about 12.49 crore trees having a growing stock of about 4.93 crore cubic meter (cum) are available in community and privately owned land in Khasi Hills. A recently completed similar inventory suggest presence of about 4.82 crore trees having a growing stock of about 5.11 crore cum in community and privately owned land in Garo Hills. Field work for a similar inventory in Jaintia Hills will be initiated shortly. Pending completion of the forest inventory for Jaintia Hills, on the basis of the data for Khasi and Garo Hills, it may be safely assumed that the forest growing stock of community and privately owned

land in the entire Meghalaya is about 12.50 crore cum. At the average rotation age of 50 years, as per the globally accepted Von Mantel's formula for yield regulation, about 50 lakh cum or 17.65 crore cubic feet (cft.) timber can sustainably be harvested from community and privately owned forests and plantations in Meghalaya every year. At the current average stump site rate of about Rs. 200 per cft, value of the standing timber which can be sustainably harvested from community and privately owned land in

authorities.

Only a small fraction of community and privately owned forests and plantations have been registered with the designated authorities. In the absence of registration, as of now only 5 working schemes covering 137 community and privately owned forests having an area of 8,078 hectares are in operation. As per these working schemes 3,123 cum timber of Khasi pine and 10,183 cum timber of non-pine species can be harvested in a year. The same is a mere 0.26 % of about



the State in a year is about Rs. 3,500 crore.

As per a Supreme Court directive, timber can be transported outside North East India through railways only. The Supreme Court has also mandated that timber from community and privately owned forests can be harvested only in accordance with a working scheme duly approved by the Central Government. Preparation of a working scheme for community and privately owned forests requires prior registration of such forests with the concerned autonomous district council. Similarly, harvesting of timber from plantations in non-forest areas, including agro-forestry plantations, requires prior registration of these plantations with the designated

17.65 crore cft timber which can be sustainably harvested from the community and privately owned areas in the State every year. A major part of raw material, even for the 50 licensed primary wood processing units (saw mills/veneer mills) in the State having the annual requirement of 2.57 lakh cum timber is met from wind fallen and isolated trees.

Today, nearly the entire timber trade in Meghalaya is managed by the unorganised sector. In the absence of access to the formal national or international timber market, rate of timber in Meghalaya is very low. The Government notified rate for the teak round logs harvested from Government owned land or seized from the forest of-

fenders is Rs. 6,750 per cum or Rs. 191 per cft for girth from 45 cm to 120 cm and Rs. 8,920 per cum or Rs. 253 per cft for girth above 120 cm. The same is less than one twentieth of the rate at which the teak round logs of similar size are regularly auctioned by the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department in their timber depot located in Delhi. Same is the case for majority of other timber species.

Abysmally low rates for timber and other forest products and consequent poor economic return, has forced many forest owners to gradually replace forests by horticultural crops and other land uses. Urgent actions are therefore required to extend competitive rates for timber and other forest products to the forest and tree owners to reverse such disturbing trends. The same can be achieved by providing access to national and international legal/formal market, by facilitating harvesting, storage, transit, value addition and trade of timber and timber products in a legal manner by simplification of the regulatory regime in conformity with the existing laws and the orders passed by the Supreme Court and other courts of law from time to time.

About 17.50 crore cft timber which can be sustainably harvested from the existing forests in Meghalaya every year, has the market value of about Rs. 17,500 crore to 20,000 crore even at the lowest possible rate in the legal/formal market. Value of the non-timber forest products such as bamboo, agar, etc., which can be sustainably harvested from the forests in Meghalaya, will also be substantial. Processing, value addition and trade of legally available timber has huge potential to generate income and employment for residents of the State.

Income from forests for the land owners will enhance substantially if they get access to the formal/legal timber market. The same will motivate them to conserve and sustainably manage these forests. It will also attract private and public investment in the forestry sector. Economy, ecology and environment of the State will witness a sea change.

(Author is currently holding the post of Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Working Plan, Research & Training and District Council Affairs, Meghalaya. Views expressed are his personal)

Miyawaki and urban forestry: Green lungs in the madding crowd

By Chiranjib Haldar

One major environmental offshoot of the recent mega MahaKumbh congregation with a record footfall was effective implementation of an acclaimed afforestation procedure. To curb pollution, the Uttar Pradesh government employed the popular Japanese Miyawaki technique and created veritable oxygen banks, repopulating forests in urban areas. A Ministry of Culture communiqué hailed the Prayagraj administration for oxygenating 56,000 square kilometres of urban tracts through Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki's age-old method of restoring native urban forests which had deteriorated with the passage of time. Drawing inspiration from Japan's venerable chinju no mori (sacred shrine forests), traditionally established around Shinto memorials, urban afforestation in India is now on a spurge. Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru and other metros, a host of tier-II cities are all treading on the urban forestry bandwagon.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate change (MoEFCC) had sanctioned as many as 111 Nagar Vans or city forests in the first 100 days action plan of the regime. This priority came at

in Mumbai in Malabar Hills and near Haji Ali, besides, nourishing a biodiversity park in Pune named Udaan. Corporates across sectors are increasingly converting dumping yards, barren parks and sooty highway backyards into limited forests as a balm to the receding green cover. A recent United Nations Development Programme and Ministry of Environment paper cites public sector bigwigs using Miyawaki models of sapling thickening to cluster small forests in public spaces and parks across 13 major cities in India.

But, not all is hunky-dory on the Miyawaki model or the urban forestry front. Urban forests face structural challenges such as compact soils, impermeable surfaces, aggressive pruning that hinder tree growth and longevity. Sparse planting, makes it difficult for Indian cities to meet the equitable nature yardstick disseminated by eminent Dutch ecologist Cecil Konijnendijk or the 3-30-300 benchmark. In Delhi or Kolkata or Mumbai, all may not always see three trees from their home, have thirty per cent tree canopy, in their neighborhood and live within 300 metres of a



the right time since like other nations, combating climate change remains India's goal. Urban afforestation includes planting multiple indigenous varieties of trees, apparently encrusted together. Using the Miyawaki mode, small, dense forest pockets, mirroring the city's natural ecosystem reduces biodiversity loss to an extent. The Nagar Van Yojana, meant to protect forest patches in and around urban centres from encroachment also addresses environmental disquiet such as air pollution, urban heat islands, biodiversity reduction and habitat degradation. In this era of climate crises, India plans to develop 1,000 city forests by 2027 with financial support from the National Compensatory Afforestation Management and Planning Authority.

Worldwide, urban biodiversity parks are promoted as nature reserves that harbour native plants, animals and species in sustainable biological communities, rendering an ecological primer to concrete jungles. Delhi now hosts seven biodiversity parks, restored from degraded lands and serving as urban forests. For example, bungalows, residences, prestigious schools and embassies dotting the urban sprawl in South Delhi's Vasant Vihar finally lead to an iron gate beyond which lies Aravalli Biodiversity Park. Deep mining pits being re-oriented into conservatories for butterflies, ferns, and orchids clinging to tree trunks showcase nature's symbiotic relationships. To prove that the global community deeply values urban forestry solutions, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) highlights the benefits of green roofs, green walls and blue zones, which help manage local temperatures and make city climates cooler and more liveable.

Public land, private funding and civil society expertise are in tandem creating a collaborative model for building urban forests, using Miyawaki techniques in many cases. By investing in these urban green lungs, companies are gratifying their corporate social responsibility pledges while making a longstanding obligation to environmental conservation. Urban forests are meant to work as green infrastructure providing carbon sinks, natural air purifiers and keys for heat absorption. The RPG Group is currently landscaping two urban forests

quality green park. Although the popularity of Miyawaki forests has skyrocketed in India, some ecological restoration practitioners question the method's applicability to our diverse ecological niches. Though dense plantations and native species are aimed at growing quasi-natural, urban groves, the idea is to give the land back to nature 'at a recurring cost'.

India's urbanisation engine is racing at breakneck speed. According to the World Bank website, our towns and cities will be home to 600 million people by 2036 or 40 per cent of India's total population; a frenetic rise from 31 per cent in 2011. India's urban pockets contribute nearly 70 per cent to our gross domestic product. On the flip side of this, unabated construction boom is the statistic that almost three-fourths of the global greenhouse gas and carbon dioxide emissions are from cities and emerging hubs. Thus the Yamuna Expressway gives the impression of an endless concrete ribbon but the landscape suddenly changes to an emerald green stretch thanks to the harit upvans (green mini-forests) off the arterial highway.

Increasing urban forests can play a crucial role in the fight against climate change. To align human creativity with nature, we cannot engineer copies of natural forests but can generate habitat based ecosystems to breathe and subsist. The government's Nagar Van Yojana (Urban Forestry Scheme) provides financial assistance of 4 lakhs per hectare for creation and maintenance of these oxygenating pockets, encouraging involvement of citizens and other stakeholders. The scheme covers all cities with corporations, municipalities and urban local bodies with green patches ranging from 10 to 50 hectares. Even a casual stroll into any urban forest awaits a stunning experience. Outside the periphery, the city whines with fleeing sedans, hooting bikes, and lurid street vendors but inside the green lung, peace bedspreads the cleaner air. Peppered by the lenient swoosh of leaves and birdsong, here two worlds coexist: the chaos of urban life and the tranquility of nature.

(The writer is a commentator on politics and society.)

Letters to the Editor

The regrettable incident at NEIGRIHMS

Editor,
The recent coercive action taken by a certain local pressure group at NEIGRIHMS defies all norms of civility. Even if the group's demands are legitimate and warrant attention, their approach fails to recognize the immense responsibilities shouldered by the head of the Institute in managing a complex and multifaceted organization involving many matters. A perceived lapse on his part—if there is any at all—to attend to the group's demand does not justify coercion to force compliance.

Furthermore, the positive strides and progress made by the Institute, more so in recent years which is much to the advantage of many from the "jaidbyrniew" (a nomenclature voiced by such groups to signify the Khasi and the Jaintia community) seems to have been overlooked by the group. Instead, the group appears fixated on its agenda, which may be important, but pales in comparison to the many other significant factors that contribute to the overall success of the Institute.

NEIGRIHMS is a central government institute,

and any incident occurring within its premises—such as this one—is certain to attract the attention of the central authorities. Moreover, the governments of the other Northeastern states, which have representatives on the Institute's Governing Council and whose citizens also rely on its healthcare services, are likely to take note of such inappropriate developments. Unfortunately, such incident caused by the group could also reflect poorly on the "Jaidbyrniew" as a whole to the outside world, portraying the community not as considerate or courteous, but rather as overly critical and confrontational.

If love for the "Jaidbyrniew" is what motivates this pressure group to act, then I sincerely wish they would also channel that passion into more constructive efforts—for example, by exploring the possibility of establishing a Help Desk at the Institute's building entrance with the authority's cooperation. Such a desk could assist local patients and their attendants—especially those from rural areas with poor literacy who often struggle to read the signs and navigate within the corridors of the huge buildings in NEIGRIHMS in order to reach the appropriate departments. Initiatives like this or other meaningful solutions the group might

identify in the Institute would genuinely benefit the "Jaidbyrniew" in a practical and significant way.

Yours etc
KL Tariang
Via email

Why link culture to religion?

Editor,
Over the past two weeks, two letters to the editor have questioned my assertion that Hinduism is a foreign religion and which accused me of prejudice against indigenous faiths. The first was sent by a good friend, Hiranmoy Dutta, and I am sorry for not having replied to it. I chose not to reply because I had already discussed in great length about Hinduism being a foreign religion brought by Central Asian Indo-European speaking pastoralists in almost half a dozen articles and letters to the paper's last year. So, I did not want to wade into the topic again because I didn't want to repeat myself. But I will suggest that Sir Dutta read my article, 'Who was First? Does it Matter?' published in this paper.

The Shillong Times search engine has improved and if you type the name of the article, it will take you to the relevant page. If Dutta

wishes, he can also find the other articles and letters from the period which will give additional information and sources. Don't believe my claims. My piece cites books and articles easily found online. The authors of those books and articles are people who are the top scholars in the world. So, he can read and inform himself and I am sure he will enjoy the experience. Thereafter, he can then do some research on his own, all online, where recent evidence has reiterated the conclusions that were already known many decades ago.

As for the other claim, that I am prejudiced against indigenous faiths by Omarlin Kyndiah, it is a ridiculous accusation with no basis. He has provided no specific passages that he deemed objectionable, which made him upset. I argued in my article (which he mentioned in the beginning) that indigenous faith is not the criterion for describing an indigenous community. First, such a claim is an attempt to divide the community and that, whatever the cost, I will always contest. Second, a set of objective and subjective criteria, rather than faith, has served as the basis for international negotiations and assertions of indigeneity. I will let Omarlin do the hard work to find those criteria and

contemplate on them. If he wants to have a discussion on whether those criteria are adequate or appropriate, he can write an article showing the lacunae in them and I assure him I will respond to those.

I may be wrong, but I feel this is the source of his angst against me. If not, maybe he can point to specific passages which he feels reveal my prejudiced attitude towards indigenous faiths. For whatever reason, if he may not do so, I hope he will apologise for creating a fake issue and wasting the space provided by the paper for raising genuine issues. As for the Seng Khasi and Sein Raji, I agree I am disappointed with them and I have explained my reasons in the article. Is he upset about my disappointment and viewed it as prejudiced? That logic implies that anyone outside the government who criticizes the government is prejudiced against it. Or is there an attempt to make this the 'Kunal Kamra' moment? The difference is that they want to suppress not a joke, but a critical opinion. If that is his intention, it will not work. I will continue to be critical of institutions and individuals and that is going to continue. So, if he's unhappy about it, he should brace himself up for more

disappointment.

Yours etc.,
Bhogtoram Mawroh,
Via email

Hyperventilated fundamentalists

Editor,
Intolerance against India's rich diversity is totally anti-national. In a video posted by MP Mahua Moitra on social media, two saffron-clad men were asking vendors at the fish market in Delhi's Chittaranjan Park, Bengali enclave to shut their shops as they were near a temple. Interestingly, the temple was built by the shopkeepers. These men want to dictate what is Bengali culture where fish is an integral part of the diet of a large section of non-vegetarian Hindus. Some estimates show that 3 out of 4 Indians are non-vegetarian. Even meat and fish are offered to Goddess Kali at Kalighat Kali Temple, one of the 51 Shakti Pithas in India, as mahaprasad in Kolkata. Any design to bulldoze India's unity in diversity must be curbed.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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"Positive attitude plus effort equals performance."

—Tommy Tuberville

The Shillong Times

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High Court Judgement On Tree Felling

THE High Court of Meghalaya has come down heavily on the State Forest Department for according permission to fell trees on specious grounds. In its April 9, 2025 judgment the two-judge bench of Chief Justice I.P. Mukerji and Justice W. Diengdoh has taken a dim view of the fact that officers of the rank of Range Forest Officer or Beat Forest Officer have been processing the applications and that they have recommended large scale felling of trees on grounds that those trees posed a threat to life and property. Considering the poor implementation of the rule of law in this country and in the State of Meghalaya, permission to fell trees is often given arbitrarily without doing due diligence on whether the trees actually need to be felled. This happens especially if the complainants who want the trees felled for their vested interests are influential citizens.

The High Court asked the State respondents "to inspect the trees covered by each and every pending application, process the application, take measures to preserve the tree or trees as far as possible and only sanction their felling if they had become so imminently dangerous that if allowed to stand for even some time, they would cause damage to life and property." The Court directed the state respondents that each application for felling of trees requires a detailed report and further observed that not a single tree was to be felled until the Court had considered the report, except in case of imminent danger. The High Court further noted that in too many cases culprits are indiscriminately felling trees which are converted into logs and such are being transported on a large scale. On this matter the High Court might want to set up an Independent Committee to report back to it on the relentless felling of trees across the state, despite the presence of forest guards. In fact, the loss of forest cover in Meghalaya due to rampant deforestation and charcoal burning is a cause of great concern.

The Indian State of Forest Report (IFSR) 2024 finds that Meghalaya's forest cover had decreased by 84.7 sq kms in two years. Experts and others opine that the loss of forest cover is much more than what is reported by the IFSR. Meanwhile the High Court has tasked the Chief Secretary with constituting a Committee of three officials comprising the Chief Conservator of Forests, an expert in Botany whether in government service or private service and a senior administrative officer not below the rank of Secretary to advise the government on steps to be taken to stop indiscriminate felling of trees throughout the State. While the High Court order is much appreciated, it would be fair to include members of environmental NGOs that are committed to conservation and will likely take their task much more seriously. Depletion of forest cover is adding to the climate change impact but all this is overlooked on the plea that forests provide livelihoods. Clearly the High Court will have to keep a continued vigil on this matter.

Language as a Bridge: Healing the Divides in Meghalaya

By Bhogtaram Mawroh

Recently, there were reports that members of the KSU (Khasi Student's Union), Shanggung, have demanded to appoint Khasi-speaking staff at the bank's Shanggung branch. They pointed out that the branch staff is using Hindi to communicate with the local community who cannot understand the language. This is very similar to some scenes playing out throughout the country, like Karnataka and, especially Maharashtra, where activists have even become aggressive at the inability of the bank staff and other public institutions to communicate in the local language. We should be thankful that physical intimidation, which is happening elsewhere, did not accompany the demand by the KSU. There is an increasing trend that many non-indigenous people, while speaking English to indigenous counterparts in Meghalaya, will mix and suddenly switch to Hindi midway as a subtle move to show the superiority of the language. I've often been tempted to answer in Khasi and start a debate about the national language.

To reiterate, there is no national language and currently there are officially 22 official languages in the country. There has been a demand to include the Khasi language in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution. I am not privy to why that has not happened, but it is unfair that one of the oldest languages of South Asia has not got the recognition it deserves. If one looks at the list of the official languages, the majority belong to the Indo-European branch which is much younger than Khasi which arrived 1500 years earlier than these languages. Khasi also has a rich oral history and, for the last 100 years, has produced a great deal of literary literature as well. Therefore, it is highly surprising that the Union Government has ignored an older language with a much deeper history in favour of much younger languages in South Asia. I hope this injustice is resolved soon.

Language is the foundation of a group's ethnic identity, and researchers have found that speakers of distinct languages likely

belong to genetically distinct populations. For Austroasiatic speakers, the genetic marker which differentiates them from other linguistic groups is Y chromosomal haplogroup O2a1-M95. Over thousands of years, especially 5000 years in South Asia, Khasi have intermixed with different linguistic groups to the extent that the present genetic profile is of only 30% of the Khasi males carrying the Y chromosomal haplogroup O2a1-M95. The rest are those who over time became part of the Khasi milieu, following matrilineal customs but most importantly speaking one of the Khasi languages (e.g., Lyngnam, War, Bhoi, Maram, Sohra, Pnar just the major ones) as their mother tongue. Even those who have the genetic marker will have a contribution from other non-Khasi groups as well. So, in terms of genetic purity, it will be impossible for someone who does not have a history of genetic admixture.

For women, there is as yet no specific genetic marker except one that is broadly indicative of South East Asian origin. In South East Asia there are non-Austro-asiatic lineages as well; but since Austroasiatic groups were the first to inhabit the region after the out-of-Africa migrants, SE Asian genetic marker is a good proxy for Austro-asiatic ancestry. A Pnar friend of mine shared her DNA results to me and it was 92% SE Asian, but the rest is from Bengal and Tibet. Despite the admixture and the inclusion of different groups into the Khasi milieu, the matrilineal culture and the Khasi language is the link which connects all those who identify as Khasi to their ancestors all the way back to South China, their original homeland, and provides the foundation of Khasi identity.

It is in this context that the recommendation of the State Education department to make Khasi and Garo languages compulsory up to Class 4 becomes very important. They have also asked for suggestions from the public. Through this forum I would like to request the

Government to make these two languages compulsory up to Class X. Not only this will create job opportunities for the Khasi and Garo graduates, but also bring a sense of unity among the two groups when there are others who are trying to bring division for political gains. Proficiency in these languages will allow people from both the communities to communicate with each other in their own mother tongue when they are in their respective regions. Learning about the language will also give them entry into the culture of the other, thus increasing appreciation for each other. For me, the most fascinating thing about the Garo is their courtship rituals, where a Garo woman would write love letters to the man she loves in an effort to woo him. I would love to read these letters in Garo to understand the emotions and the culture of the people behind this practice. There could be many more aspects that would increase our appreciation of a community who, after the Khasi, were the earliest settlers in the Brahmaputra valley. So, a greater solidarity among the two oldest communities of South Asia will be better for both.

But maybe the unexpected benefit of making Khasi and Garo compulsory is the cessation of hostility against the members of the non-indigenous community who have been residents of the state for generations. They arrived with the British or a little after that and have made Meghalaya their home. However, a fear psychosis created for political gains has always tried to keep them subjugated as second-class citizens. The recent ban on fresh trading license to the non-indigenous non-tribals is a continuation of that policy. Discriminatory policies and a history of violence have corralled these groups into certain areas where they live only among their own community members. As a result, they don't learn the language or the culture of the Khasis, making them as strangers in a land which has been their

home for generations. Khasi politicians will claim that they are not against the genuine non-tribals, but only who are illegal immigrants. Of course, this is just a ruse to continue the unfair discrimination. Making Khasi and Garo compulsory until Class X could help change that.

Making Khasi and Garo compulsory will also teach the language to the non-indigenous population. This will not be the case with those who are 'non-genuine' residents of the state having studied outside. We can then identify 'genuine' non-tribal residents and hopefully stop the harassment. Any attempt to protect indigenous interest must take into consideration these genuine non-tribals who have been in the state for generations. In time they could also make contributions to the Khasi/Garo language helping its cause for recognition. Most possibly, the first ever book on Khasi poetry was 'Ka Myntoi' published in 1888 by S M Amjad Ali. Soso Tham's book 'Ka Duitara Kshiar' came out only in 1925. While we celebrate Soso Tham, we must not forget the true pioneer one who started it all, SM Amjad Ali. We could have many more SM Amjad Alis in our midst and this policy may just be a catalyst towards revealing them to the world.

In his book, the 'Funeral Nights' Kynphan Sing Nongkynrih, through the protagonist, Ap Jungang, talks about the plight of his friend, a poor Nepali farmer, who writes poetry in Khasi. His wife, though, would berate him daily: "You lazy good-for-nothing! Can you dig potatoes with poetry; can you buy dried fish with it?" The person could very well be a real person and it is not racism but his domestic life, which is killing his talent at poetry. He could very well be the Nepali poet who writes in Khasi and maybe wins multiple awards at that. How beautiful that will be and a wonderful message for bringing people together, all of whom consider Meghalaya their home.

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

Rethinking the Khasi Definition of Tourism

By Zaman E. Tongper

Tourism, as an industry, covers a wide range of activities. People travel not only for leisure but also for business, education, medical treatment, religious reasons and more. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines tourism as "The activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes" (UNWTO, 2021). The inclusion of "other purposes" in this definition clearly indicates that tourism is not confined to leisure alone but encompasses a broad spectrum of motivations. This reflects how dynamic and multifaceted tourism has become in today's world.

The Traditional Khasi View: 'Ka kam jingohkai pyrthei'
In Khasi culture, the term 'Ka kam jingohkai pyrthei' is often used to describe tourism. It focuses mainly on travel for enjoyment, visiting new places, taking a break from daily life and experiencing different environments. This traditional understanding is meaningful and still widely used. However, this leisure-centered definition raises a question: Does it fully capture the many reasons people travel today? Or is it time to update our understanding to include other kinds of travel?

If we continue to define tourism as 'Ka kam jingohkai pyrthei' (leisure travel), how do we address other types of tourism that are increasingly important today, such as medical, educational, agritourism, religious tourism, etc.?

A Broader Global Perspective

According to the UNWTO, tourism includes many types of travel such as for work, education, health, spirituality and more in addition to leisure. These forms of tourism have grown in importance over the years. For instance, medical tourism is increasing as people travel to get specific treatments. Educational tourism involves students or scholars traveling for learning experiences. Business tourism involves travel for meetings, conferences, or professional work. If we look at tourism only as leisure travel, we overlook these important groups of travelers. That means we also miss the chance to collect clear data on who is coming, why they're coming and how they use local services. A broader understanding could help us see the full picture of tourist inflows, giving us better tools for planning and development.

More importantly, if such a comprehensive global definition is accepted locally, it could support the formulation of more inclusive tourism policies. These policies could address the needs of different traveler categories such as students, patients, professionals, spiritual seekers, leading to more targeted infrastructure, better services and increased opportunities for local communities.

A Personal Reflection: 'Ka kam leit kam wan'
As someone who studied tourism over a decade ago, I've often thought about how tourism is defined in the Khasi context. I wondered whether 'Ka kam jingohkai pyrthei' still fully explains modern tourism. Over time, I started thinking of another phrase: 'Ka kam leit kam wan na ki kam bapher bapher', or simply, 'Ka kam leit kam wan', which means "the activity of going and coming for different purposes."

This term feels broader and could include all forms of travel, not just for pleasure but also for business, studies, healthcare and more. While this isn't an official term and I'm not a language expert, I believe it could start a meaningful conversation.

Some people I've spoken to agree that this wider view makes sense. Others feel the traditional term is still enough. Both sides have valid points. My aim is not to argue for one over the other but to suggest that we reflect on whether our current language captures the full reality of tourism today.

An Everyday Question
In the process of thinking through these ideas, I asked a friend whose background is not in tourism and she said this: "When it comes to educational tourism and medical tourism, I didn't know such terms existed. Now, how are students' part of educational tourism? Is it only because they move from one place to another for education?"

Suppose, like me, I go to Guwahati and study there but I hardly go out of the campus, so am I still a tourist, since I do not have any travelling activity once I'm on campus?"

Her question highlights an important gap in awareness. Educational tourism is often misunderstood and many don't realize that travel for educational purposes such as study tours, student exchanges, academic events, even moving for higher education falls under the broader umbrella of tourism.

In technical terms, a person is considered a tourist if they travel to a place outside their usual environment for not more than one year, regardless of whether they move around much after arrival. So yes, even students who travel to a new city for studies, even if they mostly remain on campus, are counted as part of educational tourism because their presence impacts the local economy and infrastructure through accommodation, food, transport and other services. However, if their stay becomes long-term and routine, it may be better categorized as migration for education rather than tourism.

Why a Broader Definition Matters

1. Better Economic Opportunities: When we recognize other forms of tourism such as medical, educational, or business tourism, we open doors to new industries. Medical tourists may use hospitals, educational tourists may attend schools or workshops and business travelers may use hotels and meeting spaces. This can bring in income and help local businesses grow (Connell, 2013).

2. More Accurate Data: If we broaden our definition, we can better understand who is visiting us and why. This can help local authorities and businesses plan more effectively. For example, knowing how many students or patients are coming in could shape services like transport, lodging and healthcare.

3. Cultural and Knowledge Exchange: Tourism isn't just about money. When people travel for learning or spiritual growth, they bring new ideas and values. This can help communities learn from each other and grow together. Educational exchanges and cultural collaborations can benefit both locals and visitors (Ritchie, 1998).

4. Sustainable Development: The UNWTO promotes tourism that supports both people and the environment (UNWTO, 2017). By understanding all types of tourists, we can develop tourism in ways that are balanced and sustainable, supporting health services, schools, or eco-friendly businesses and not just hotels and resorts.

5. Stronger Infrastructure: Welcoming different types of tourists could lead to improving existing infrastructures like clinics, training centers, or business hubs. These would serve both tourists and the local community, improving quality of life and creating jobs (Baum, 2006).

The Risk of Staying Narrow

1. Missed Growth: Limiting tourism to leisure travel may prevent us from tapping into fast-growing sectors. We may miss the chance to serve students, patients, professionals, or pilgrims who could contribute to our economy and community life (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019).

2. Lack of Facilities: If we don't recognize other forms of tourism, we might not build the right facilities. For example, without acknowledging medical tourism, we might not invest in healthcare systems that serve both locals and visitors.

3. Falling Behind Global Trends: As the world's understanding of tourism expands, we risk falling behind if we stick to a narrow view. To stay connected and competitive, we need to adapt to these changes (Mowforth & Munt, 2009).

A Call for Open Discussion
The purpose of this reflection is not to assert that one view is right and the other wrong but to encourage open dialogue. This reflection has stayed with me for many years and I don't claim to have the final answer. I also understand that not everyone may see this as a pressing issue right now. But I believe it's worth exploring.

Letters to the Editor

Sky dreams put on hold!

Editor,

Our Shillong (Umroi) Airport - a poignant symphony that once promised an uplifting crescendo of connectivity for the North-east's crown jewel - Shillong is now all but hibernating. Where did those sweet prospects go? Our humble airport, once a bustling hub with ambitious routes that connected us far and wide, now seems content to play a quieter note, with a mere two flights daily. And lo and behold! On non-consecutive days, one might even witness the staggering frequency of three to five flights departing into the skies.

Let us delve into this enigma. The flights to Silchar, Agartala, Dimapur - erstwhile commonplace - have become rarer than a sunny day during monsoon! The delightful irony is not lost on us, given that the Airports Authority of India Data of increasing passenger traffic year on year tells a different story. One might now marvel at how demand has grown, yet supply seems to have mischievously taken flight in quite the opposite direction.

Shall we talk of the Delhi flights? Once a steadfast expectation, now a wistful hope that the gods of air travel might grant us their presence at least thrice a week. But let's not forget the illustrious UDAAN scheme - heralded as a game-changer for regional air connectivity. Where, one wonders, has it hidden itself? Perhaps in the same realm as our erstwhile abundant flight schedules.

The silence from the Ministry of Civil Aviation

and the Directorate General of Civil Aviation is truly profound, almost poetic. One could fashion it as a new kind of communication - the art of saying nothing while saying so much. Meanwhile, for the regular passengers, each journey to Guwahati's Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport is a pilgrimage of patience, offering ample time for philosophical musing on the juxtaposed delight of long, bothersome travel and the supposed conveniences of modern aviation.

Our earnest appeal to the State Government is this - We implore upon you to don the cape of intervention! DGCA, might you awaken from your peaceful slumber to cast a discerning eye and perhaps, take notable cognizance of our plight? The runway expansion we hear of, sounds promising. Would that its completion herald not only physical length but also an extension of ambition and connectivity to our dearly sought-after metro cities.

In the grand scheme of things, we inhabit a world where time is of the essence, and travel connections should mirror the spirit of our times - swift, efficient, and plentiful. Yet, we find ourselves enveloped in a silence from authorities that is both mystifying and compounded by a lack of forthcoming answers.

As we wait, perhaps not entirely without irony or exasperation, there remains hope. Hope that Shillong Airport will rise from this curious interlude, reclaim its place in the skies, and fulfill its potential as the vibrant gateway Shillong deserves. Until then, our patience is a testament to our spirit, seasoned with just the right

pinch of sarcastic wit and enduring hopefulness.

Yours etc.,
Channiki Laloo
Shillong-02

Contract appointments in Meghalaya violate fundamental rights

Editor,

I'm writing to express concern over the growing issue of contract appointments in Meghalaya, which has raised several questions about job security, meritocracy, and equal opportunities. The practice of hiring employees on a contractual basis has become increasingly common in various government departments and institutions, even if they are more qualified than those in permanent positions.

Contract appointments in Meghalaya have violated Article-14 of the Constitution of India, which guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws. By denying contract employees the same rights and benefits as permanent employees, the state is perpetuating unequal treatment and discrimination.

Delayed payment of salaries to contract-based appointees is an issue of concern that affects the livelihoods of many employees who are not receiving their salaries timely. The Meghalaya Services (Revision of Pay) Rules, 1988, outline the guidelines for revising pay scales only for the state government employees, while contract employees' entitlements to timely salaries are addressed indirectly.

Violation of Article 14: Contract appointments dis-

criminate against employees who are denied equal rights and benefits, violating their constitutional right to equality that guarantees equal opportunity for all. This Article ensures that all citizens are treated equally before the law, regardless of their background, caste, or social status.

Surprisingly, the Meghalaya High Court has ruled that there is an "estoppel" against challenging the nature of employment once the contract employees have duly accepted the jobs on contract basis, and the same puts an embargo on the aggrieved contract employees from raising their voices, even when the terms of contract are detrimental to them.

To ensure, that these fundamental rights are not violated at the hands of the few against the majority, the government fundamentally needs to reform the contract appointment system, in compliance with Article 14 and this step will prevent discrimination and will ensure equal opportunity for all employees, all things being equal.

The citizens of India are empowered with the constitutional right to raise questions against the form and manner in which various Articles of the Constitution are implemented. However, in our State, peoples are deaf and blind, while others are voiceless and therefore ignored. This indicates an imbalance in power, awareness, and representation among the population.

The illegality of contract appointments in Meghalaya can be understood in light of various court rulings and government notifications. For instance, the Supreme Court has held that arbitrary and discriminatory practices

in government appointments are unconstitutional.

In conclusion, if the contract appointment system in Meghalaya indeed, was implemented in violation of Article 14, then it necessarily needs to be re-examined or reformed. The Government has to restructure the system, strike it down, or amend it to ensure that it complies with Article 14. All reforms or amendments must ensure equal opportunity, transparency, and merit-based selection.

By highlighting this perilous issue, I hope to spark a meaningful discussion and prompt action from the relevant authorities to address the illegality of contract appointments in Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
Andrew L. Mawphlang
Shillong-6

On renaming landmark spaces

Editor,

In a computer, if a file is renamed in file explorer, the version history of that file is lost. The same is applicable when renaming landmarks, roads, and monuments. Renaming can be a way to reclaim identity and pride but it also erases history. Renaming landmarks or buildings with no historical background viz. NSCA and State Central Library Auditorium to U Tirot Sing Syiem Indoor Stadium and U Soso Tham Auditorium respectively does not strip away the identity and history of the place. On the contrary, changing the name of Lady Hydari Park to Phan Nonglait Park, robs the park of its glorious history.

There are several ways to honour our unsung heroes. The authority can best consider other means to hon-

our, our freedom fighters, rather than changing the name of the existing landmarks which have a historical background.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah
Via email

Curse of untouchability

Editor,

B R Ambedkar said, "Untouchability has ruined the untouchables, the Hindus, and ultimately the nation as well." Acts such as washing the Vankhadeshwar temple in Kanpur with "1,000 litres" of Ganga water on November 2 last year to "purify" the temple because a Muslim woman had entered and prayed at the temple, and breaking two fingers of a Class XI, Dalit student for touching a water bottle on March 29 this year by his teacher in a school in Uttar Pradesh are a slur on this nation.

Instead of paying lip service to Ambedkar on his birthday, political leaders should take prompt legal action against those who indulge in untouchability. Untouchability morally kills victims and spiritually destroys perpetrators. It is akin to suicide bombing. The public display of untouchability is a subtle form of terrorism. Such an act is against the Constitution of India in general and Article 17 in particular, which says, "Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden."

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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Chaotic Railway system

What's good about social media is that information flows in an unbridled, normal course. Information is shared, not suppressed—unlike in the established media that is selective and often motivated in its exposes. Note the frankness with which a French YouTuber, Victor Blaho, has trashed the Indian Railways and the chaotic life here. Blaho felt like running away. His Instagram post has been widely shared. Despite the presence of the long-established visual and print media, no one has ever bothered to call a spade a spade when it comes to the chaos that rules the Indian Railway system. Fact is that even the ruling class—comprising politicians and bureaucrats—is quite unaware and unmindful of the ground realities, as they travel by air-conditioned super class coaches. UN-returned politician, Shashi Tharoor once rightly termed the Indian Railways as the carrier of the "cattle class".

Narendra Modi launched himself as Prime Minister in 2014 with tall promises about high speed trains. Then he realized that this was easier said than done—because the first requisite was to change the anachronistic tracks laid long ago and poorly maintained through the past several decades. Modi's promise of Bullet Trains, like the ones in Japan and China, also remains half done even in what was the pilot project between Mumbai and Ahmedabad. Problem is, neither the political bosses nor the bureaucrats here have the will to act. Together, they mess up with situations. Modi's "big step" forward was the crop of VandeBharat trains, which mostly run on short routes with a speed of no more than 130km per hour—a minor improvement on the 90-110km speed of the express trains here. The jam-packed trains, be they the unreserved coaches of the long-distance trains or the "local" trains in metropolitan cities, cause suffocation to the commuters.

The improvements that the Modi government brought to the train services are mostly below par. The old trains had sufficient space in toilets. That has been cut by half in new trains, with the result that being inside is a hard struggle. Stations used to display name boards almost on all pillars in the past. Now, they are mostly absent and placed at awkward heights, so that those inside the train would have difficulty reading it to identify the station. The cleanliness drive that Modi emphasized at the very outset is still a far cry. Garbage collection from trains and pantry services remain bad or are getting worse. Rhetoric from the podium alone will not take a nation to an elevated status. Its systems must improve over time. Rather, here, the systems are being taken for a ride. In the past 11 years, the railways recorded marginal growth and selective improvements. Much more should have happened in the normal course. Modi's railway ministers are yet to prove themselves. If Modi's first priority was to improve safety, that too fell flat with major train mishaps killing hundreds in recent years.

Water, especially in the form of rainfall, has long shaped Meghalaya's landscapes. Through a patterned weather cycle, farmers carefully time their sowing and irrigation. Religious rites and ceremonies also follow these agrarian rhythms, and other species find their moments to sprout. However, the past couple of weeks have seen disruptions to this cyclical calendar. From unprecedented hailstorms in Shillong to unusually prolonged dry, hot days in East Jaintia—and bucket-poured Chad Sukra in Jowai—water, whether too little or too much, has recently been a topic of our everyday conversations in Meghalaya.

To some, daily weather changes add mere annoyance and inconvenience. But to others, the amount of rainwater can determine the fate of their livelihood for the year. As the cold, dry winter slowly welcomes a new season, the anticipations for rainfall take shape—only to be met with disappointment and even fear. The long absence of rainfall and increasing temperatures and daylight dry up our mouths, water tanks, paddies, ponds, wells and streams. While water scarcity has been synonymous with Meghalaya's winter in many parts of the state, this year's weather turmoil signalled an alarming reality of the region's future. What if this situation is to happen again and even get worse in the coming years?

This period—from around the end of March towards the end of April—is high time for mushroom harvesting in East Jaintia Hills, especially in and around the Saipung Reserved Forest, the rainfall and mild temperatures create ideal conditions for various mushrooms to sprout. Taxis from this side begin to carry a strong scent of freshly harvested mushrooms along with passengers, reminding us of the special seasonality. Markets across Meghalaya receive these mushrooms, and many enjoy the flavour of this limited-time offer at home. Fried with pork or on

'A Rain of Blessings': Rethinking our Future with Water

By Anna Notsu

their own with a sprinkle of chilli, they make scrumptious dishes that can only be tasted around this time of the year.

Mushroom harvesting can coincide with the pattern of jhum farming. Jhum farmers clear their fields, and the remaining logs become home to many kinds of mushrooms after burning. As the rainwater seeps into the logs and softens them, the half-decayed logs later receive new lives. This life-and-death cycle, shaped by Meghalaya's climatic patterns and human activities, supports and sustains its proud culinary scenes, magnificent landscapes and long-standing cultural practices. People feel a change of the season through the gift-giving of mushrooms from friends and colleagues, the dishes served at local shops, and the occurrence of religious ceremonies, like Chad Sukra, that are again deeply linked with agrarian practices and climatic cycles.

Weather fluctuation during this specific 'in-between' period, where we seize a glimpse of the coming wet summer, is not unusual. We sometimes undergo four seasons within a day and curse ourselves for putting on the 'wrong' outfits. But at the same time, we are also beginning to acknowledge a new kind of season—a long, dry, hot winter. Crispy sounds of thirsty, dried-up grass, drought-like appearances of the road, and dusty gusts of wind in the areas known for mushroom harvesting cannot, and should not, be taken as a mere story of 'This year, there is not enough water.'

All lives—not just human ones—depend on a cyclical flow of water, which serves purposes beyond mere survival. To take my anecdote as an example, this year, my excitement for observing mushroom-picking practices in Saipung village in East Jaintia has resulted in an unexpected longing for rain—no rain meant no mushrooms. The exacerbated thirst for

water was evident in withered farms and habitats. What was once a water station for buffaloes turned into a desiccated, cracked crater, while moisture-depleted forests and fields laid the groundwork for potential large-scale forest fires.

Hence, after days and weeks of dry days, a sudden arrival of much-needed rain felt 'extraordinary'—as if the divine, had finally answered our prayer. The desert-like road surface that constantly stirred up dust became solid, and the air was cleared. As someone uttered, 'It is a rain of blessings,' it brought about calmness and relief, reassuring the worried farmers. The sight of plants becoming greener and refreshed with the soft sounds of raindrops in the background—although such moments of relief did not last long. Today, across the hills, the rainfalls are becoming unpredictable, shorter and more intense, followed by another days-long dryness and sudden storms. The cycle of water seems to have changed, causing further changes to how we live.

The day the word climate change haunts Meghalaya may not be so far from now, as we already live through the reality of climate change. However much Meghalaya's landscapes stand strong as a biodiversity hotspot and safeguard the lives of its human and non-human inhabitants, the region is no exception to the global climate shifts. While conversations on climate change have already been circulating among the youth here, our attention must not be fixated on ecological and economic repercussions. If financial consequences are so important, what about the cost of losing what makes Meghalaya a culturally and ecologically unique and rich abode of clouds?

The changes brought on by the climatic shift also impose alterations to social and cultural practices. The focal point of our climate discussion should not be limited to

the implications of 'climate change' in numerical terms or what climate change does to so-called 'nature.' Greater attention needs to be given to what we call 'nature'—now threatened by climate change-induced calamities and anthropogenic destruction—but one that has always been shaped by humans, other species, and even divine beings.

The recent weather turmoil presents a critical turning point to reflect on the fast-changing landscapes that are home to not only humans but also other co-inhabitants, whether they are plants, animals or divine beings. Thinking this way is crucial in making a creative move towards regeneration, where cultural and environmental sustainability can be taken into account without letting financially-driven efforts take over the lead in making our future.

As a starting point, why don't we think differently about the role of water? Water not only nourishes our human bodies but also nurtures other species and the soil that feeds us, carries folktales and celestial values and creates a flowing channel that safeguards existing social and cultural structures. After all, Meghalaya is known to be one of the wettest states in India—its ecological, religious and cultural significance cannot be divorced from our conversations on its environmental trajectory. As dryness took a toll on many aspects of our everyday living this winter, what will Meghalaya's landscape look like in the future? To truly 'future with water', we must remember that every drop carries not just life but story, spirit, and the promise of renewal.

(The author is a PhD scholar from Leiden University, The Netherlands currently doing research in Jaintia Hills. Her PhD research is part of a five-year project, 'Futuring Heritage: Conservation, Community and Contestation in the Eastern Himalayas, initiated by Leiden University and Ashoka University. Her research is funded by NWO and Delta on the Move Foundation).'

The Artist Will Not Be Named!

By Ellerrine Diengdoh

Oh look, World Art Day is here again, time to pretend we give a damn! Quick, assemble the committee. No, not the artists, you morons, don't be absurd! What do they know about "Art". Get the real experts, the PR guys, the event managers, the blokes with "culture" in their job title and none in their soul. Let them decide how best to honour art, maybe a banner, an empty speech and while you are at it, paint a few tires and a few walls white, we cannot have a celebration without whitewashed garbage.

Listen and listen well, the first rule is to erase the local artists. Erase them so thoroughly that even they start to doubt they were ever here. These nobodies, these dreamers who dared to spend years honing their craft, pouring their time, their sweat, their souls into something real.

the kind that says nothing! Because art that speaks, is a problem!

Because when art starts to matter, people start to feel. And when people feel, they start to think. And when they think, well then the whole farce starts to fall apart. Because it is hard to sell the illusion once someone has seen behind the curtain. It's hard to control people who've felt something real. It's hard to lie to a heart that's been cracked open by a song, a painting, a poem or a play that says what everyone is afraid to admit.

That's the real danger, isn't it? Not the art itself, but what it does to people. It connects things that were supposed to stay disconnected. It stirs memory, it wakes up anger, it softens cynicism just long enough to let in just a little ray of



Whose work reminds you of land, of struggle, of blood, forget them! They're inconvenient, they're messy. They ask questions like, "Where's our space?" or "Why aren't we being paid?" or the audacity of "Isn't that our idea?" We can't have that. No, we cannot have that kind of negativity!

Rule number two, outsource them, those "real artists", the ones with grants, sponsors (with shady middle men), glossy portfolios, foreign accents and fancy Instagram handles. Fly them in, put them up, give them walls, streets, buildings, pebbles in your garden, anything they want to paint. Doesn't matter if they know the place,

hope. And you must NOT have that in a system built on numbness and distraction! You CANNOT have people walking around suddenly aware. Aware of beauty, aware of injustice, aware of their own worth!

You know what happens if we acknowledge artists fully, if we really see what they hold up to us? We would have to face ourselves, and that is precisely what we don't want to do, we are terrified of the reckoning art demands!

So of course art has to be neutralised, stripped of all meaning, sanitised, sponsored! Give it a little stage time, then pack it up quickly again into that tiny dusty

Meanwhile, funnel all the big projects through that one trusted gatekeeper. You know the one, the sellout with connections and no shame, the one who translates art into invoices, who signs the deals, takes the credit, and outsources the actual work to the same starving artists we will never ever acknowledge.

doesn't matter if they understand the culture (google that bit, it is not rocket science) just make sure they hashtag it right!!!! Now here's the trick (whispers), include the locals just enough (3 or 4, not more)....let them mix paint, hold ladders, say "collaboration" a lot, post a group photo with the caption "Bridging Communities", then dump them quickly before they take "collaboration" seriously!

When they ask for payment, look shocked, feign amnesia, act wounded, tell them it is a "great opportunity" and insert, "we thought you were doing it from the heart!!!!" If they insist, block them! If they make noise, label them "unprofessional!" Nothing like good ole poverty to teach someone humility!

Meanwhile, funnel all the big projects through that one trusted gatekeeper. You know the one, the sellout with connections and no shame, the one who translates art into invoices, who signs the deals, takes the credit, and outsources the actual work to the same starving artists we will never ever acknowledge.

But you still ask, "what about the other work they did, remember, the one we paid a few hundred for?" Shove it in a corner of a government office next to broken chairs and termite-eaten files! Let it rot, let it disappear! The only art worth displaying is

box marked "culture". You must keep it ornamental, you must keep it quiet!

That is why we now have AI to do the job, the perfect artist. Obedient, efficient and hollow. You see it doesn't bleed, it doesn't break, it does not ask for space, for credit, for justice. It does not come with a history, it does not come with a voice, it just produces. A clean replacement for the messy, human thing that once dared to mean something. Because meaning is dangerous, meaning disrupts!

So here's to World Art Day in Meghalaya. To painting over the cracks, to funding silence, to token walls and unpaid hands, to "community engagement" without the community, to "promoting local talent" right after we've finished sidelining them, to the hands that blistered, calloused, broke and still create....

Raise your brush, your voice, your fists if you must.....because if you're still making, you're resisting! If you're still here, they haven't won!

(This piece was inspired by #MeghalayaArtResistance (14th & 15th April All Saints Hall) and Anees Noronha's "AI Generated Art & The Human" (April 1st, 2025) (https://medium.com/@aneesnronha/ai-generated-art-the-human-978b56e0ab77))

Letters to the Editor

Role of JJM Nichols Roy in crafting Meghalaya's destiny

Editor,
The special article "Federation of Khasi States versus the District Council" by Fabian Lyngdoh (ST April 12, 2025) is an excellent exposition about the Khasi States and the traditional dorbar. I am in sync with every paragraph of his brilliant writing with facts. The British colonial presence in the Khasi Hills indeed brought significant disruptions to the region's traditional systems. Before their arrival, the Khasi Hills were governed by a unique system of administration led by local dorbars that played a central role in maintaining the social and political order. However, the British altered this structure to suit their economic and political interests. The introduction of British policies and systems disrupted traditional practices and institutions. The Anglo-Khasi War (1829-1833) is a notable example of resistance against these changes. Despite the resistance, the British eventually established control, leading to the erosion of the powers of the dorbars and the imposition of new administrative systems. While the British did introduce infrastructure and education, the long-term effects on the Khasi Hills were complex, with many arguing that the harm to traditional systems and autonomy outweighed the benefits.

The book Khasi Society of Meghalaya: A Sociological Understanding by A.K. Nongkynrih, a valuable resource for understanding

the sociological aspects of Khasi culture and society mentioned that Reverend JJM Nichols Roy was deeply involved in the governance and advocacy for tribal rights in the Khasi Hills that he established the Dorbar in 1923 drawing on the concept of Dorbars or traditional Khasi council which pre-dates colonial influence and has been a long-standing institution in Khasi society which existed in different forms and at different levels in the individual Khasi Kingdom. However, subsequently Nichols Roy's contributions were more focused on integrating tribal governance into modern frameworks. Reverend JJM Nichols Roy played a pivotal role in the formulation of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. This schedule was designed to protect the rights and autonomy of tribal communities in the northeastern region of India. Nichols Roy, as a member of the Constituent Assembly, advocated for the creation of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) to ensure self-governance for tribal areas in the North Eastern Region. His efforts were instrumental in safeguarding tribal land, culture, and traditions while integrating these regions into the Indian Union.

Late PR Kyndiah, former Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) and Union Minister, Tribal Affairs and Development of North Eastern Region and Chairman NEC once told me, at the time when I was his Liaison Officer as Chairman, NEC that when he was Secretary to JJM Nichols Roy, Roy mentioned that he had advance information while in the United States of America that

Md. Ali Jinnah planned to set up Shillong as the summer capital of Pakistan. At that time Rev Nichols Roy felt that it was safer to be in India than in Pakistan. Salute to Reverend JJM Nichols Roy for his farsightedness that we are not in Bangladesh today.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Strengthening Institutions, Together

Editor,
I write in response to the article addressing the recent disagreement between the Hynniewtrep Youth Council (HYC) and NEIGRIHMS-Over-protectionism: Killing enterprise and the spirit of excellence in Meghalaya by Kong Patricia Mukhim. The thoughtful & balanced piece raises several relevant issues that deserve wider reflection—not only for what transpired at NEIGRIHMS but also for what it reveals about broader institutional and societal challenges in Meghalaya, it is most read.

The article rightly points out that while pressure groups definitely have a legitimate role in a democratic society, their actions must remain within the ambit of law and constructive engagement for the betterment & upliftment of local communities. The use of intimidation as a tactic undermines the very credibility of the causes they claim to represent and sets a worrying example. There have been social media comments from common people saying that these protests, like the Aadhar card protest are irrelevant, as the very next moment these very same people will be asking for

scholarships from the centre. The ones leading this protest, did you inform the gullible rural people that Aadhar card is an initiative of the Central Government? The Aadhar card is a National ID card which confirms a person's citizenship. To curb this disinformation, the government can conduct an Aadhar card drive in collaboration with the Centre for the same, focussed solely at rural areas.

Moreover, the concern raised about the erosion of institutional autonomy, especially in critical sectors such as healthcare, cannot be ignored. Institutions like NEIGRIHMS are invaluable not just to Meghalaya but to the entire North Eastern region and their functioning must not, imperatively be compromised by narrow interests or identity-driven politics.

Equally important is the call for accountability and meritocracy, particularly in the public sector. While affirmative action remains vital, it should not be a shield for inefficiency. The public, as beneficiaries of these services, ultimately suffer when institutions are weakened by internal dysfunction or external pressure.

The piece manages to navigate these complex issues without resorting to overstatement, and for that, it deserves acknowledgment. It is a timely reminder that long-term progress depends on the strength of our institutions, the maturity of public discourse, and our collective ability to prioritize meaningful, long-term development over fleeting initiatives with no real life actual positive consequences.

Yours etc.,
Bahunlang Pde,
Via email

Mindless violence in Bengal

Editor,
The recent spate of mindless violence in West Bengal once again exposed the inherently un-democratic character of the State and its people. The right to dissent is a cornerstone of any functioning democracy but resorting to violence is against the very principle of democracy which ironically has become the hallmark of the State's identity. West Bengal is perhaps the only state in India which is consistently carrying along for decades, the bloody legacy of violence and killings of their own people. The recurring violence in West Bengal, raises serious questions about the nature of public behaviour in the state. Every other state has social, political and economic issues, yet most resolve those issues through peaceful protests, dialogue and legal means. West Bengal however, stands out for its violent culture. From clashes between supporters of political parties, mob attacks, pre-poll and post poll violence to atrocities against women—the public often seems to participate willingly in aggressive actions rather than seeking peaceful solutions.

It can thus be argued that, to a significant extent, violence has become normalized and accepted in West Bengal as a tool of airing dissent. When violence becomes a common response, it reflects not just political failure but also societal acceptance, and West Bengal appears to be a classic example. The present social and political environment of West Bengal however, offers little sign of reversal of this dangerous trend in the immediate future.

Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee
Shillong -1

Horrific road accidents

Editor
It is shocking to read of a horrific road accident involving a heavily loaded truck and a Maruti Alto along Umroi highway and another accident of a rogue truck hitting a scooter and killing the pillion rider while injuring the driver. These terrible accidents occurring off and on along our state highways and also within city limits go to show that even our state highways aren't safe enough to drive. However we appreciate the Ri Bhoi District police for taking up the matter earnestly to address and catch hold of vehicles violating safety norms. Most trucks are over ten years old and flout all safety norms especially at night.

We recollect that the State Police had sometime ago brought out snazzy Hyundai Xcent cars as highway patrols but very few are seen patrolling under various police stations, leave alone to patrol Shillong city. Unlike in other states or cities there are city and highway patrol cars that keep a 24x7 check thereby ensuring safety and assurance to the common citizen. The current DGP should take up the rising road accidents in a proactive way. The Government too needs to come out with a State Policy for addressing road safety and certain prescribed protocols. Hopefully something concrete comes up lest our state ends up making headlines for the wrong reasons.

Yours etc.,
Dominic S. Wankhar
Shillong 3

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"Good health and good sense are two of life's greatest blessings."

—Publius Syrus

The Shillong Times

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On VPP demand

MLAs are elected to represent their constituents in the Assembly and to articulate the needs of the constituency but without losing sight of the larger needs of the state. Unfortunately, the role of an MLA is not clearly understood in Meghalaya. People have the misconception that an MLA should resolve civic concerns like waste management, water supply, road repair and construction, treatment of sewage and also paying for medical bills; paying school fees and books for children of their constituents. The personal and the political are too interlinked and MLAs have forgotten their real duties. But this has also happened because MLAs themselves have patronised their constituents and made them dependent on their patronage.

According to the Constitution of India, MLAs are empowered to frame laws on all items in the state list and the concurrent list. They are also vested with financial powers where MLAs must give consent for any expenses made from the State Treasury. All grants and tax-raising proposals must be authorized by the MLAs for them to be executed and implemented for the development of the state. MLAs also exercise certain executive powers. They control the activities and actions taken by the Chief Minister and the Council of Ministers. The ruling government is answerable to the Legislative Assembly for all its decisions. A vote of no-confidence can be passed only by the MLAs of a state. They can also exercise Question Hour, Cut Motions, and Adjournment Motions to restrict the free run of the state government's executive organ. The responsibilities of MLAs include introducing, debating and amending bills, making laws and voting on the subjects mentioned in the State List and Concurrent List. An MLA, who is not a Minister, should use the Private Members' Bill to move what they think is appropriate to be passed as an Act.

As such the VPP is right to demand certain facilities. MLAs need to be mobile hence they need transport facilities, a driver and a monthly allowance for fuel for the vehicle. An MLA has to tour the length and breadth of the constituency and cannot be expected to go out of pocket. What the VPP pointed out about political appointees enjoying government largesse is also a fact. In the first place what have these political appointees, mostly failed MLAs who are paid from the public exchequer, delivered other than to serve their own interests? They are being compensated for losing the elections which is patently unfair. People must have rejected these politicians for a reason so why is the Government patronising them? It's like a mockery of the peoples' will. The VPP has maintained that as a political party it would teach people not to make personal demands and this is a much-needed political reform. Too many people milk their MLAs for personal needs. Such MLAs then have to misuse the MLA scheme to get back what they have given. No MLA will pay money to his/her constituents from his/her personal account or pocket. In fact this practice should stop because it is what deters many well-meaning individuals from contesting elections.

Gospel & Preamble: A Shared Struggle for Dignity

By Bijoy A. Sangma

Tomorrow is Good Friday. Every year, Christians around the world pause on Good Friday to reflect on one of the most profound and painful moments in human history. It is the day when Jesus of Nazareth - a person known for his compassion, justice, and truth - was unjustly condemned, brutally tortured, and executed on a Roman cross. For believers, it is a sacred day of mourning and reverence. But even for those outside the Christian faith, Good Friday holds timeless moral significance.

It is a moment that invites reflection on deeper themes: injustice, sacrifice, integrity, resistance, and hope. In contemporary India, where public discourse is often shaped by debates around faith, identity, and belonging, the message of Good Friday has never been more relevant. It calls us to look beyond religious ritual and into the soul of a nation struggling to uphold its constitutional values of justice, liberty, and equality.

A Story That Resonates Across Time and Borders
More than 2,000 years ago, Jesus was crucified not because he committed any crime, but because he challenged the status quo. He healed the marginalized, embraced the untouchables of his time, stood for women and children, and confronted the hypocrisy of religious and political elites. His teachings threatened the comfort zones of the powerful, and his courage to speak truth before emperors led to his death.

The Roman Empire, in collusion with religious leaders, sought to silence him. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, famously washed his hands - an act of cowardice masquerading as neutrality. This moment echoes through history: when good people remain silent, injustice thrives.

Today, India faces its own Pilate moments. Are we willing to stand for what is right, even when it costs us? Or are we content to wash our hands of responsibility while injustice festers?

Rising Intolerance: A Cross to Bear
India has historically prided itself on its diversity and pluralism. But recent years have seen increasing communal polarization and religious intolerance. According to the United Christian Forum, over 525 incidents of violence, intimidation, or harassment against Christians were reported in just the first six months of 2023 - a sharp rise from previous years.

The Pew Research Centre's 2021 report placed India among countries with the

highest levels of religious restrictions and social hostilities. From mob lynchings in the name of religious identity to biased laws that hinder free faith practice, threats to religious minorities have become systemic and alarming.

In this light, the story of Good Friday becomes not just a Christian narrative, but a mirror for the nation's soul. The crucifixion of Jesus - a man who spoke for the voiceless - asks us to examine whether we are protecting the weak or persecuting them, upholding truth or twisting it for power.

The Constitution and the Cross: A Shared Vision
India's Constitution, like the Gospel message, begins with a radical declaration of dignity: "We, the people of India..." It promises justice - social, economic, and political. It guarantees freedom of speech, belief, and religion. It affirms equality and the right to dissent. But these ideals are under strain.

The Internet Freedom Foundation reports that India has led the world in internet shutdowns for five consecutive years, often in response to peaceful protests or unrest. Laws restricting conversion and surveillance of religious minorities are increasing. The 2023 Human Rights Watch report highlighted "institutional bias and police complicity" in communal violence.

Good Friday invites India to return to its constitutional roots. Just as Jesus stood with the marginalized and spoke truth to power, the Constitution calls on citizens to uphold justice even when it is unpopular, to defend liberty even when it is inconvenient.

Christian Contributions to India: A Legacy of Nation-Building
The Christian community in India, though a small minority at 2.3% of the population, has played an outsized role in nation-building. From education and healthcare to social reform and disaster relief, Christian contributions are woven into the fabric of the republic.

- **Education:** Institutions like St. Stephen's (Delhi), Loyola (Chennai), St. Xavier's (Mumbai/Kolkata), St. Edmund's (Shillong) have nurtured generations of leaders across fields.
- **Healthcare:** Hospitals like CMC Vellore and St. Martha's (Bangalore) are internationally recognized for excellence in care and ethical practices.
- **Social Reform:** Visionaries like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Ram

care workers continue to serve in remote and underserved areas.

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Churches and faith-based organizations run schools for children, shelters for the homeless, and counselling centres for mental health, often without fanfare or recognition.

These acts are modern-day resurrections. They remind us that injustice, however brutal, cannot defeat love. That truth, even when crucified, will rise again.

Good Friday's Call: A Compass for a Fractured World

As India navigates a time of polarization and uncertainty, the message of Good Friday offers a moral compass: From dominance to service, exclusion to embrace, silence to witness, fear to faith.

We are not merely remembering a historical event. We are invited to live its message - to choose conscience over convenience, walk with the wounded, and believe in redemption's power.

India's strength has always come from its moral clarity - its ability to draw from diverse traditions and create unity in diversity. The cross calls us back to that clarity. It reminds us true power lies not in force, but in love. Not in persecution, but in protection.

A National Reflection for All

Good Friday is not just a Christian observance - it is a call to all who care about justice, truth, and the dignity of every human being. In the man on the cross, we see both a victim of state violence and a victor of moral resistance. We see the worst of humanity - and the best of divinity.

In a country as vibrant and diverse as India, the spirit of Good Friday can help renew our commitment to the values we profess: liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice. It challenges us to be courageous citizens, compassionate neighbours, and hopeful leaders.

In the end, the cross does not ask us what religion we belong to. It asks: What do we stand for?

Let this Good Friday be a turning point - not just of personal devotion, but of public action. Let it renew in us the courage to love boldly, live truthfully, and serve humbly.

(The Author is a development professional, and analyst and commentator on public-affairs, policies, governance, social justice & religious freedom with extensive experience in global leadership roles, contributing to thought leadership in public policy and social transformation.)

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Why Wash Feet, Touch them...!

In Indian culture, the act of touching the feet of elders is meant to symbolize humility, gratitude, and deep respect. It's more than just a ritual—it's a silent gesture that says, "I honour you."

But somewhere along the line, what began as a sacred sign of humility has become a one-way transaction.

Very often demanded, not deserved.

And that's the irony, isn't it? Those who should be the most humble, our spiritual shepherds, political leaders, public servants—have turned this beautiful gesture into a show of status. Instead of lowering themselves in service, they stand waiting, stomachs out, legs apart, as others stoop at their feet.

What was once an act of honour is now an ego boost. Foot-touching has become a spectacle, a selfie moment, a symbolic salute to inflated egos.

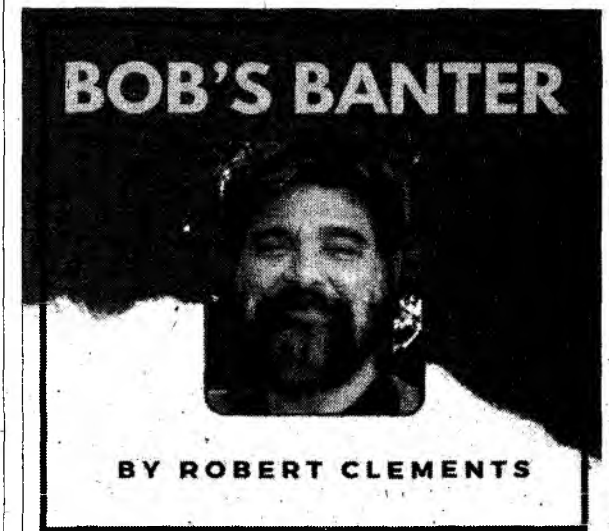
Each year, during Maundy Thursday, Christian leaders go through their holy choreography: a bishop kneels, pours water, wipes a chosen few feet. Cameras click, drones hover, Instagram

balance. But not once did he bend to the people. Not even a nod of real thanks. Just stiff politeness, a token wave, and off he went in his bulletproof SUV, leaving behind the very people who lifted him up—quite literally.

And if you think it's just the bigwigs, let's stroll into the local police station. There, in that Frankenstein labyrinth of chai-stained tables and missing complaint books, you'll find officers puffed up like balloons. They don't serve; they summon. They don't listen; they lecture.

Try lodging a complaint, and you'll feel like you're the one being investigated. How many poor people walk into police stations and enter as if they are entering the court of a king. They come with fear, when they should be coming with confidence. They enter bowing to the sahib in uniform, when that same sahib is on his seat with money from taxes paid by the common man.

Even our babus in government offices have joined the parade. You would think the desks came with thrones attached. "Sahab is busy,"



posts are ready before the water hits the floor. Choirs hum in the background, the congregation nods piously.

But by evening, the towel is back in the sacristy, and the bishop is back on his throne—yes, throne—with his priestly entourage.

The feet may have been washed, but the heart remains dry.

When Jesus knelt before His disciples, He wasn't orchestrating a ceremony. He was issuing a command. "If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." (John 13:14) Not "occasionally" or "when convenient," but as a way of life.

He didn't say, "Once a year, put on a show." He said, "Do this, like I did." But the clergy today? They've got it upside down. Pulpits have turned into platforms for power. Robes hang like royal cloaks. Collars are tighter than ever—not from humility, but from inflated egos.

You can't bow when your neck is stiff with self-importance.

Where once were basins and towels, now there are gold rings to be kissed and fancy titles. Sadly, you need a microphone to hear the gospel these days because the humble voice of service has been drowned by the booming voice of self-glory.

But let's not stop at the pulpit.

Let's walk down the corridors of power. Our politicians—ah yes, the netas of our beloved democracy. How they love to be touched! Feet, hands, sometimes even cheeks—if the cameras are rolling. They glide through crowds like emperors, while their supporters trip over themselves just to stoop. And they allow it. No, they expect it.

They forget they are public servants. Servants, not sultans. They were chosen because they promised to serve—but have you ever seen one of them bend? Not even to pick up their own moral compass, which they dropped somewhere between promises and power.

I once watched a chief minister being garlanded with such a heavy floral arrangement, he nearly lost

the peon will say, while Sahab is scrolling through cricket memes. He'll keep you waiting, file in hand, until your self-worth is shredded and your dignity left in tatters.

We've created a culture where elevation matters more than empathy, where being seen matters more than serving.

We've institutionalized arrogance and labelled it leadership. But here's the twist: the greatest leaders—whether in sandals or suits, or even simpler like our Gandhiji—have always knelt. They've known the strength it takes to bow. True leadership is not in the command, but in the compassion. Not in the robe, but in the towel.

If you're a priest or pastor, bend low—not just once a year, but daily. Touch the feet of the lonely widow, the weeping child, the doubting teenager.

Touch the feet of your congregation!

And listen to them. Really listen. You'll be surprised what your ears pick up when your head is closer to the ground.

If you're a politician, take off your sunglasses and see the calloused feet that stood in lines to vote for you. Kneel—not for a photo, but in gratitude. Build roads that won't destroy those feet and not to put money into the contractor's hands and your hands too.

Provide shoes, if you can't walk beside them.

And if you're a police officer, remember your badge is meant to protect, not pettify. Serve, don't scare. Carry towels of justice, not batons of fear.

Because, my friend, only the one who kneels to touch, is worthy to lead. The rest are just standing on borrowed pedestals—waiting for them to collapse.

Today, on Maundy Thursday, let us learn—at least—to touch the feet of the people we serve, from God, who washed the feet of those He created.

(The author conducts many activities connected with writing and speaking. To find out more, log onto <https://bobsbanter.com/a-phone-call-away/>)

Letters to the Editor

Waqf Board is for the needy, not the mighty

Editor,
In the storm of politics, if nothing else, peace has become the first casualty of the Waqf Board Amendment Bill. It doesn't take an expert to figure out why Waqf property has become so desirable to many people over the years. Frankly and tragically, many of the powerful and wealthy have long treated Waqf property as a personal treasure chest rather than a sacred trust. Sadly, such great facts are seldom talked about.

Waqf property, rooted in Islamic tradition, was donated by the benevolent to serve humanity -- to uplift the underprivileged, fund their education, support religious institutions, and offer relief to the needy. But over time, that noble purpose has been clouded by narrow political agendas and personal ambition. Successive amendments, largely driven by political motives, have done nothing to restore the original "sanctity" of the Waqf Board. Instead, they've often strengthened the very structures that offer leverage for "exploitation". Of course, the creation of the Waqf Board was a sacred initiative to ensure that these lands were properly "managed, regulated,

and used" in line with Islamic values. But somewhere between intent and implementation, ethics were sidelined, and greed took the wheel!

Today, Waqf land holdings have ballooned into lakhs of acres. Rather than being a blessing, they've become a battleground for corruption, encroachment, exploitation, and much more. Illegal encroachments, unauthorized leases, and glaring misuse of property for personal gain have eroded public trust and stripped away the moral essence of what Waqf stands for.

Even the highly learned Governor of Bihar, Arif Mohammad Khan, couldn't help but point out the administrative mess within the board. He warned that if the amendment bill hadn't been introduced now, we might have been staring at an even bigger disaster. Quoting the holy book, he reiterated that Waqf property should be used for religious, charitable, and welfare activities for the weaker sections of society—but instead, it has been unethically diverted for various unholy purposes. He cited many such examples to the media reporters.

Many top Islamic organizations are equally unhappy with the functioning of Waqf Boards, as they have been hijacked by political leaders, unscrupulous members and land mafias. Maulana Shahabuddin Razvi, National

President of the All India Muslim Jamaat, laments: "Earlier, whoever was at the top of the Board used to collaborate with the land mafias and illegally sell the properties to them. This was totally against the sole purpose of the board. The purpose was to benefit those in need --- poor Muslims, widows, etc. Instead, the proceeds went into the pockets of those illegally selling the properties."

Worse still, in states like Bihar, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala, ordinary farmers, many from non-Muslim communities, have found their lands suddenly labelled as Waqf property. For countless impoverished farming families across the nation, it's been nothing short of a nightmare. Just imagine how would a person feel if land purchased with his/her hard-earned money were suddenly claimed by third parties as Waqf property. Wouldn't that bring them to a suicidal state? Surely, causing agony and trauma to the poor is not what pleases the Almighty in heaven. In Ernakulam district alone, around 600 poor Christian families are now crying out for justice after discovering that their ancestral land has been claimed under the Waqf Board.

As responsible citizens of a democratic country, we must be unbiased and humane in our reflection. When a sacred trust becomes

a political tool in the hands of unscrupulous leaders, who truly suffers? It is undoubtedly the weaker sections of society. What is happening in Murshidabad, Malda, Nadia... clearly sends chills down the spine. Let me ask -- did the three people killed in the riot ever utter a word against the Waqf Board? Why were the administrative authorities so unprepared or so lenient toward the likely rioters?

Properties belonging to poor Bengali families have been deliberately torched and destroyed, along with widespread destruction of government infrastructure. Those rioters appeared to have no fear of the police baton. Why? Now, thousands of terrified people are fleeing Dhuliyani (Murshidabad), out of fear for their lives in the wake of rising unrest.

Please allow me to speak the truth. Given her past record, for West Bengal Chief Minister, any amount of bloodshed seems less frightening than losing her vote bank. Her proverbial soft stance toward those who vote for her has contributed to the Basirhat riot and Malda riot. The Bengal Chief Minister has never felt guilty, nor has she learned a lesson from the shocking rape incidents in Sandeshkhali and at R.G. Kar Medical College, victimizing countless innocent people, especially women, in the process.

If law and order had not been compromised by the government in West Bengal, such abominable incidents might never have come to pass. What is unfortunate now is that Mamata, along with other leaders, is roaring to bake a political cake in the heat of the Waqf Board controversy and similar issues. They seem far more concerned with consolidating power than upholding democratic principles and serving the public without discrimination. One wonders why the custodians of the Constitution appear so powerless to restrain leaders whose moral failings drag democracy to the edge leaving the poor to suffer in silence.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali
Via email

Language bridges the chasm

Editor,
The write up by Bhogtoram Mawroh captioned: Language as a bridge: Healing the Divides in Meghalaya (ST April 15, 2025) was very educative. Language is our introduction to the outside world and makes our community and cultures known to others. No language is superior or inferior but it could sometimes happen that

we are in a region of India where we don't understand the local language. India is country of many languages spoken in different regions. Being a multi-linguistic country, sometimes problems arise in some parts of our country owing to language barriers especially in offices and banks. Widely spoken languages like Hindi, English and regional languages are mostly used in public sectors. Still inconvenience comes to fore when somebody has to face an official who is non-conversant in Hindi or English. How nice it is to learn that a Nepali man in Khasi Hills composes poems in Khasi despite being berated by his wife. Of course, many non-tribals in Meghalaya are able to speak the local language very fluently. I like to cite the fact that in Tura people can speak at least five languages namely English, Hindi, Bengali, Assamese and their own mother tongue. Being conversant in many languages makes it easy to navigate around people and to transact business.

Language learning can be pursued as a career too in today's day and age.

Yours etc.,
Deepak Chhetry,
Tura.

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A can of worms

SOMETHING is rotten in the state of Denmark – the famous quote from Shakespeare’s Hamlet rankles in one’s mind when some recent exposes relating to the Supreme Court comes upfront. What’s kept hidden from public view is now out in the open. The seizure of huge stocks of currency notes from the home of a Supreme Court judge, after the police and fire force reached his residential premises in the national capital following a fire in his outhouse a month ago, has chilled the nation’s conscience. Unruffled yet is the political establishment, notably Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who claims he’s ushering in Ram Rajya. Obviously, to compensate for Modi’s lack of response in the face of a grave situation, and certainly out of a prick of conscience, Vice President Jagdeep Dhankar has chosen to break the tower of silence. Dhankar, an eminent lawyer at the Supreme Court before he took up political positions, called a spade a spade. He questioned the casual manner in which the establishment responded to the strange situation. As Dhankar cited, the government must explain why an FIR was not filed in relation to the seizure; why the whole scandal was kept under wraps for a full week after the seizure, until a media unit made the seizure public; why a kid-glove treatment was meted out to the accused judge; why a panel of judges took upon themselves the task of “investigating” the alleged corruption of the accused judge; and why judges should be treated as holy cows – even when the nation was made to suffer the stench from a can of worms, as Dhankar rightly put it.

In a scenario when the apex court itself faced a critical rupture to its credibility and the nation’s justice dispensation system as a whole came under a shadow, Jagdeep Dhankar was the voice of sanity. The Vice President lived up to his sense of commitment to the nation and its people. Obviously, he was also irritated over the way the Supreme Court took upon itself the authority to draw a line for the President, alongside Governors, and to dictate to them a timeline for disposal of files. This even as courts themselves are dragging cases through decades and show no seriousness to expeditiously dispose them of. The hapless victims of such indulgences by the judicial authority are the 1.4 billion people that comprise the nation. India is increasingly turning into a nation where justice is denied to its citizens, thanks to this unacceptable, rather criminal drag, while vested interests rule the roost. It’s a pity that the nation under Prime Minister Narendra Modi through three terms at a stretch slept over such matters – resulting in the present ugly and shocking scenario. Jagdeep Dhankar raises several questions of extreme seriousness, all of which beg answers from the establishment, including the judiciary. The silence of the lambs is something that should not be taken for granted.

Politics That Shed Innocent Blood

By Rev Mcdonald Pyngrope

The entire world celebrates Good Friday as the day when Jesus Christ was crucified for the sins of humanity. Though, the simple lenses tell a rather ordinary Jewish legal process to prosecute Jesus’ deeds but what lies behind the seemingly normal legal prosecution elucidates a somewhat disturbing political plot against Jesus. People of those days were following the instructions of the priesthood in day-to-day activities. However, Jesus’ preaching the Kingdom of God and miracles liberated the people from few unnecessary religious rituals, thereby, inviting enmity from the religious establishment who made multiple attempts on his life but failed. But his ultimate action of cleansing the Temple according to the synoptic gospels, zealously angered the priesthood who plotted his murder. This Temple corruption is briefly highlighted by Josephus, Philo, and extensively by Targumic traditions, Tannaic traditions and early Amoraic traditions.

The High Priesthood was controlled by four prominent families: the Boethus, Annas, Phabi, and Kamith. From these four families, Caiaphas, the High Priest, was a son-in-law of Annas and appointed by the Roman governor Valerius Gratus in either 18 C.E. or 19 C.E. Simultaneously, Josephus describes the opulence of the Temple and the incredible wealth of its treasury. He tells us that the building and its gates were overlaid with gold, and that over the entrance hung an enormous grape cluster (“as tall as a man”) made of gold. From Josephus we also learn of the great political power of the Temple establishment. The power of the ruling priests was by Roman design, for it was the best way to guarantee tranquility and taxation. Again, such a political arrangement certainly establishes a context in which political and economic abuses flourished. Thus, the Temple establishment and the Jewish ruling aristocracy were virtually one and the same. The Temple wealth comes from the annual taxes, profits from sacrificial items and other tithes and offerings which is the religious customs of the day but the majority of the profits comes firstly, by overcharging prices of sacrificial items and secondly, the exorbitant rate of exchange of Roman currency into the Tyrian coin as only Tyrian coin was accepted at Temple purchases. The currency exchanges were contracted to the money changers, who were evidently relatives of

the chief priests. According to a Tannaic tradition, a Rabbi Simeon Ben Gamaliel (ca. 10-80 C.E.) vigorously protested, because the exorbitant price of a pair of doves had been raised to one gold dinar, a price some twenty-five times the proper charge. It should be remembered that the dove was the poor man’s sacrifice (Lev 5:7; 12:8). In this instance, Simeon’s protest apparently brought about an immediate reduction in the charge to 12 times the original price. Still this was much resented by the poorest among the poor.

Sacrifices played a crucial part in the Jewish faith for right relationship with God, atonement of sins, thanksgiving and other religious reasons. When sacrificial items were highly priced the poor could not afford and failed to perform the necessary religious rites, hence, they believed that their sins were not forgiven and they were not on the right track with God while the rich went home satisfied and confirmed of God’s answer to their sacrifices. This economic disparity created an apparent spiritual gap between the poor and

to eliminate Jesus from their greedy path because they firmly believed Jesus was a threat to their power; their control over the masses; their wealth and position.

Additionally, Pilate was not innocent. As recorded by Tacitus, Pilate became the Governor of Judea at 26 CE, a prefect, a proponent of the empire-religion relationship, a stern believer of the imperial cult (emperor worship), a brutal and a strong Governor. He entered Caesarea with his soldiers carrying the shields bearing the Roman Imperial Cult of Emperor Tiberius, which is against the Jewish First and Second Commandments. The Jews marched to Caesarea to protest for 6 days but Pilate confronted the crowd and the leaders by surrounding them with soldiers. The Jews were ready to die. Thus, Pilate held back and turned to diplomacy to ensure law and order. A brilliant strategist as he was, he turned to the local aristocracy and the temple priests forging treaties with them to control any uprising against Roman rule. Hence, accordingly, the High Priest

second reason being the talk of Jesus being the King of the Jews. As King of the Jews he might replace Herod Antipas, a tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, or even challenge Caesar, as Pilate thought but he had no clue how Jesus was going to do it.

Coming back to Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple – an action that indirectly affected the treasury of the Romans, it led Pilate to grow weary of Jesus. He had to do something but the Roman laws did not present an opportunity as mentioned in the Gospel of Luke 23:18-25. Finally, the opportunity came when the priesthood complained about Jesus and under his orders the soldiers arrested Jesus. Mark 15:6-15, presents a reverse psychology tactic from Pilate, when he asked the crowd whether he should release the King of the Jews? But the crowd shouted, “crucify him,” and the chief priest answered that they had no king but Caesar. A deliberate ploy was made to turn the crowd into a judge for Pilate knew they could not bear to have a king who is shamefully crucified for they expected a Messiah to liberate the Jews from Roman rule.

The whole political scene was well planned and executed to perfection to protect the interests of power, wealth and position of the chief priests. Their shared agenda to control the masses from realizing the illusions they were made to follow was fulfilled. And as for Jesus? He died. But His actions have a message for several of today’s churches entrenched in corruption and abuses. Tithes, offerings and donations collected for different projects in the name of GOD seem to accumulate in the pockets of a few leaders. People who speak against unfair administrative systems, corruption, abuses and who stand for truth and justice are either expelled or suspended through extensive high-level planning.

I wonder what would have happened if Jesus was alive today? What would he do to vestries and projects? I bet he would do the same as he did at the Temple and we will be the one who will crucify Him again to protect our shared interests. However, no matter how dark the day and days, He died because he had hope in humanity’s potential to realize the goodness it has and to turn away from selfish motivated actions. His person and work still echo in millions of lives who try to imitate His teachings – The politics of Truth, Justice and Love.

The Cross and Resurrection Events

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

We cannot think of the Cross and Resurrection events without relating them to the advent of Spring. The Spring season represents hope and new life. After the cold and dry winter follows the Spring and such is the beauty of God’s creation and the bounty it bestows on everyone to sustain life here on earth. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross and the resurrection also represent a strong symbol of renewal and hope as against the perpetration of wars, ecological, political and economic injustices.

Spring: A Cross Cultural Festival
Spring has long been associated with renewal, fertility and the awakening of life after the harsh winter months. This time of the year has been celebrated in various cultures through festivals that honour the earth’s regeneration. Ancient socio-religious and cultural practices involved honouring deities of fertility and agriculture, symbolizing the rebirth of nature, which corresponds more closely with the themes of resurrection embodied in Easter, the culmination of the events commemorated on Good Friday.

Across cultures, various spring festivals include themes of unity, gratitude and celebration of nature’s bounty. Many spring festivals are community events that emphasize the importance of gathering, sharing and celebrating life. Since time immemorial, the Hymnwtrep community is also alive with such celebrations and significant socio-religious and cultural dances, like the Shad Suk Mynsiem, Shad Sukra etc. stand as a strong testament.

The Week Before and After Good Friday and Resurrection:

Perhaps, we cannot reflect on the Cross and Resurrection without revisiting the events that occurred the week before and after the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Let us for a moment recapture those critical moments and imagine that we were present in Jerusalem and were amongst the multitudes who witnessed those events. Not to deride the religious and spiritual aspects of the Holy Week, to me the week before and after the Crucifixion and Resurrection were the most tumultuous periods in Jerusalem and its adjoining areas. Also, those events had more to do with the politics of the day and the crucifixion of Christ can also be viewed as an important political event of the time.

The crucifixion occurred during a period of intense political turbulence in Palestine under Roman (foreign) occupation. Jesus’ growing influence and his challenge to the existing power structure, both religious and political, posed a threat to the status quo. Jesus’ teachings often challenged the established religious authorities as well as the Roman imperial order. His teachings about kingdom values resonated with the “hoi polloi”, the Jews and gentiles alike, who were yearning for liberation from oppression, presenting him as a potential revolutionary figure. The religious leaders viewed him as a blasphemous and a disruptor, while the Romans regarded him as a potential insurrectionist.

The Gospel writers recorded that Jesus makes a grand entrance into the city to fulfil the prophecy of Zechariah “Tell the city of Zion, Look, your King is coming to you! He is humble and rides on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The crowds throw palm branches and put blankets on the road before Jesus. This shows their belief in him as the Messiah. They sing out in praise and celebration, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Matthew 21:1-11).

The ride was not smooth and as a result it threw the entire city into chaos and disruption amidst hope that the messiah was here to deliver the oppressed people from the oppressors and the tyrannies of Roman rulers. While at the same time the people were also party to the turn of events, from “praises of hosanna” to chants of denigration, “crucify him”.

Following the resurrection, the chaos and confusion became intense as the disciples were charged for stealing the body of Jesus Christ and that they had orchestrated and stage-managed the resurrection. More serious of all charges was the crime of rumour mongering in order to create mayhem in the city and other places in Judea. In addition, the disciples became disillusioned and were undergoing great stress, pain, anger and fear. The messiah was killed, so the movement was dead, they thought.

During the week before and after the Crucifixion and Resurrection there was total disruption in Jerusalem, especially. Disruption may not be a very pleasant word, but for the people of Palestine (until the present day) disruption and occupation were familiar terms since the Maccabean revolt in 167 BC. In fact Josephus, the Jewish historian, had recorded about five Jewish rabbis who had led several and fierce uprisings between 40 BC and 70 AD.

We may recall a few disruptive scenes during the week before and after the Crucifixion and Resurrection. The multitudes on top of their voices chanting praises for Jesus and the same were demonizing and condemning him to death. The late night arrest of Jesus nearly caused bloodshed. The week after the Resurrection also, was marked by fear, doubt, hopelessness and despair. The disciples locked themselves inside the safe house for fear of being arrested and killed. There was disgruntlement and confusion amongst the disciples and followers of Jesus. They asked themselves, “Do we go out and continue to proclaim the good news or do we return to our homes?” They grappled with these existential realities, but the latter got the better of them and one after another they left quietly and returned to their respective trades. Simon, Peter, Nathaniel, the sons of Zebedee and two other disciples went back to the sea (John 21).

However, at the foot of the Cross, amidst chaos and confusion, and while Jesus was bleeding profusely, the women’s comrades found courage and strength in the Magnificat or rather the song of disruption, which Mary had sung earlier – “He acted with power and done wonders, and scattered the proud with all their plans. He has knocked down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich, oppressors and exploiters empty” (Luke 1:46-55). Besides, during the British rule of India, the Magnificat was prohibited from being sung in Church.

In the context of oppression, the crucifixion can be interpreted as a powerful symbol of resistance against tyranny. Jesus’ martyrdom has inspired countless movements and protests throughout history, revealing how his values resonated with those seeking justice, freedom and reform against oppressive regimes.

Thus, being caught between two options, harmony or disruption, protest or compromise, revolution or evolution – the bipolar society never wanted to be disturbed or dethroned or their boat being rocked. Does disruption negate peace? Jesus is revered as the peace builder, but for him peace is both empirical and eschatological, i.e., peace here on earth as well as in heaven. Jesus once said – “blessed are the peacemakers for they are the children of God. His statement is to challenge our naive notion of peace. Real peace is costly, dangerous and entails struggle. Genuine peace cannot be domesticated. It is essentially relational to socio-religious, economic and political realities.

The world and societies across the universe are clamouring for peace and justice. The people of Palestine, in their difficult circumstances, are praying for an end to the bombings and violence. The international community must respond to their cries and strongly call for an end to the Israeli bombings and occupation. Peaceful negotiations are possible when we respect one another’s rights and aspirations.

“It is for this reason that Jesus thundered that they have made the Temple a den of robbers. Another firm stance of Jesus is that at the Temple he had many followers but he never instigated them to join him in cleansing the Temple.”

God. Jesus was angered at the abuses committed by the priesthood at the expenses of the faith of the poor. It is for this reason that Jesus thundered that they have made the Temple a den of robbers. Another firm stance of Jesus is that at the Temple he had many followers but he never instigated them to join him in cleansing the Temple. Rather he did it on his own. A clear reminder to readers to stand alone when there is a firm ground or belief – something which is extraordinarily rare these days.

Therefore, Jesus forgave the sins outside the Temple and without any form of sacrifices needed. This was termed a sacrilegious act according to religious laws. This simple deed eventually threatened the Temple economy and the position of the High Priest Caiaphas. The High Priest was concerned that Jesus’ conduct could jeopardize the tranquility and taxation of the Temple and put his position at risk under Pilate. What is seen is a desperation from the priesthood

owed his position to Pilate who can appoint and fire him at will and in turn the priest acts as the mediator between the Governor and the people. Furthermore, a part of the temple tax goes to the Romans which were used to build aqueducts by Pilate thereby angering the people.

Extra biblical sources portray, to a certain degree, a Pilate apprehensive about Jesus. Perhaps because Jesus was from Galilee, a region considered so seditious, akin to troublemakers and a fanatical sect (zealots). Again, Pilate would visit Jerusalem five times during the Passover feast knowing well that Galileans are numerous present on national and religious identity festivals. Further visits to Jerusalem were made three times a year to boost security during the hostility he faced from the Galileans according to Josephus. These above may have triggered Pilate’s dislike for Jesus as he had gained massive numbers of followers from Galilee itself and the

Letters to the Editor

Downfall of the Indian Rupee

Editor,
The Indian rupee is on a downfall by the day. In 2014, one US Dollar was equal to around 63 Indian Rupees, currently in 2025, this number has seen an exponential increase to more than 86 Rupees; Yet, instead of focusing on progress and development all that this country is interested in is the Hindu-Muslim politics. This is the time to focus on an economic resurgence and to sort out problems instead of wasting time and energy by commenting on the rulers who have passed away centuries ago. Religious politics in a democratic country such as India is extremely harmful for the country and its citizens as well. This issue warrants a debate in the House in order to be resolved.

Yours etc.,
Arshad Bastavi,
Mumbai

Trump now targets Harvard

Editor,
The Trump administration’s decision to freeze

dollars 2.2 billion in grants to Harvard University will be treated as a punishment for refusing to toe the line and comply with a list of ‘unlawful’ demands from the federal government. This exposes the authoritarian mindset that is anathema to the principles of academic freedom and independence. All are aware as to what has happened after triggering a global trade war and this war has now been extended to ideas. Sadly, these ideas form the very foundation of the country’s core values of freedom and liberty. Moreover, universities are the very birthplace of independent ideas which are under attack by a regime that wants complete control over elite institutions which have assiduously built global reputations over decades.

The ugly showdown with one of the highly reputed universities underscores a disturbing trend of targeting high-profile institutions on flimsy grounds dressed up as serious national issues. Trump’s bid to run US varsities risks undermining their global reputation as he has threatened to tax Harvard University as a political entity after it rejected demands to limit activism on campus.

The US government has also announced that it will be

freezing \$60 million in contracts to Harvard University after the institution said it would defy the Trump administration. The warning by the US administration to the premier academic institution that is 140 years older than the United States was sent last Friday asking it to end its diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in hiring, admissions, and programs. The letter also called on the Harvard Administration to curb the powers of students and faculty members over the University’s affairs and demanded systematic screening of student organizations and international students. In a defiant response on Monday, the University rejected the Trump administration’s demands arguing that they were “in contravention of the First Amendment,” and “invade university freedoms long recognised by the Supreme Court.”

Harvard University has become the immediate locus of this struggle, as the Trump administration issued a series of demands, including auditing hiring practices, modifying curricula, eliminating DEI programmes, and mandating external oversight to enforce “viewpoint diversity.” Harvard, invoking constitutional protections and institutional autonomy, has refused to comply and

has framed these demands as infringements on academic freedom and unlawful intrusion into internal governance.

This escalation must be viewed in the backdrop of a larger perspective. By tradition US academic institutions such as Harvard University have legitimised resistance to external pressures. However, when such pressures originate from overt political mandates rather than sectoral norms or peer benchmarking, they risk delegitimizing the Institution’s knowledge-producing role. In this case, enforced viewpoint diversity could paradoxically reduce epistemic pluralism by institutionalising ideological quotas; thus violating the University’s foundational logic of scholarly autonomy and peer evaluation.

The potential long-term ramifications for the American higher education system are profound. For decades, American universities have wielded disproportionate global influence not merely through rankings or research output but via their soft power. Their blatant subordination to political power risks hollowing out the US’s global academic advantage.

The government demanded that the University should report foreign students who commit conduct violations

immediately to federal authorities; bring in an outside party to ensure that each academic department is “viewpoint diverse”; reduce the power of students and faculty members over the University’s affairs; provide all admissions data to the federal government, including information on both rejected and admitted applicants, sorted by race and national origin; shut down immediately any program related to diversity, equity and inclusion.

Never in recent history has America witnessed such a blatant incursion into the education system. The extraordinary set of changes demanded by the government would have reshaped the university and ceded an unprecedented degree of control over Harvard’s operations to the federal government. The changes would have violated principles that are held dear on college campuses, including academic freedom.

The Harvard University administration deserves praise for defying the government’s order and asserting its independence. The demands suggest that the Trump administration wants to intrude on processes that universities prefer to have control over, like how they admit their incoming classes.

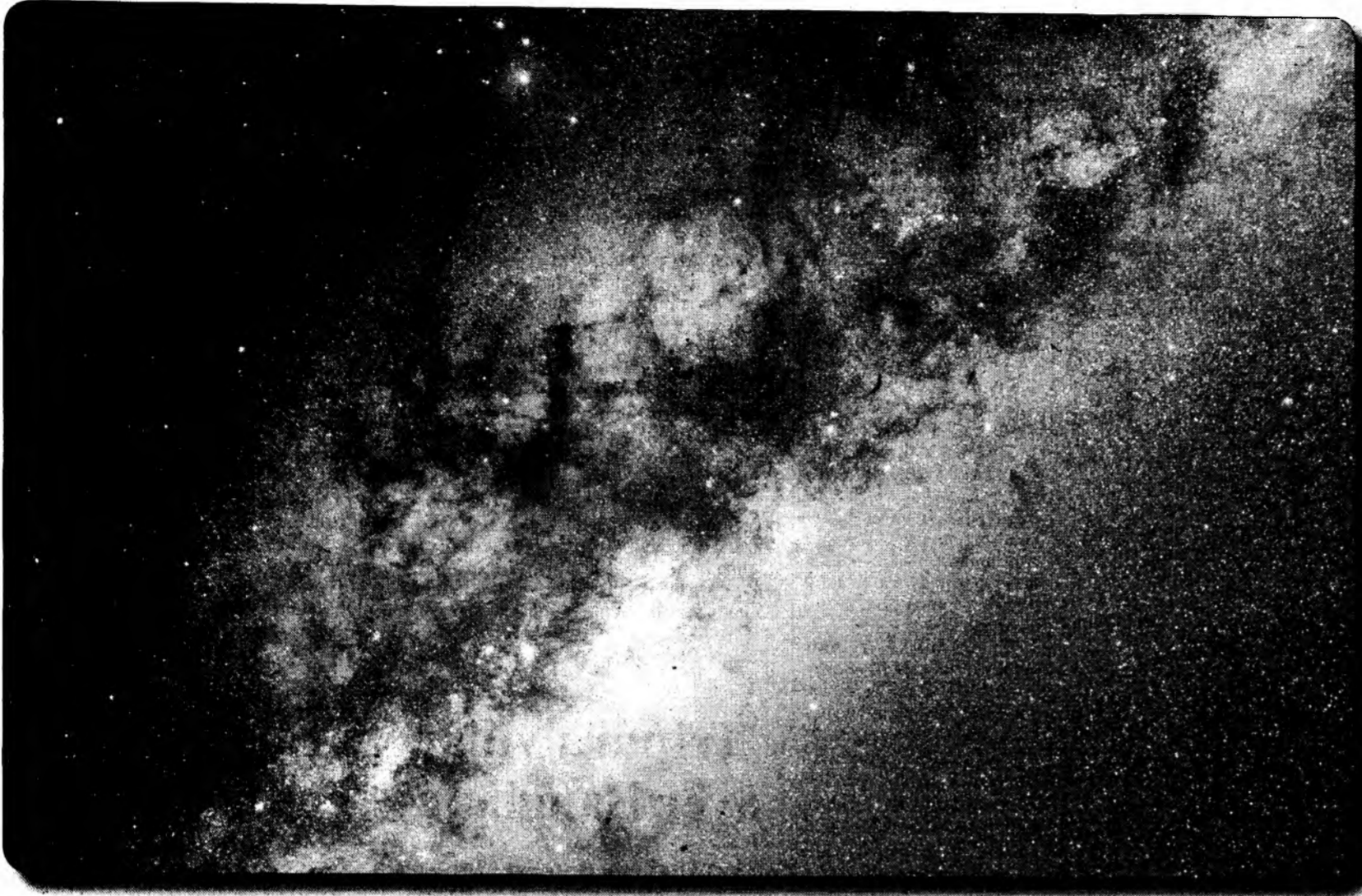
It also touched on issues that conservative activists have used as cudgels against academics. Harvard said it was unfortunate that the administration had ignored the University’s efforts at reforming its internal processes and moved instead to infringe on the school’s freedom in unlawful ways. The university’s response, which called the Trump administration’s demands illegal, marked a major shift in tone for the nation’s most influential school, which has been criticised in recent weeks for capitulating to Trump administration pressure. No government – regardless of which party is in power – should dictate what private universities can teach, whom they can admit and hire, and which areas of study and inquiry they can pursue.

The Trump administration should adopt a sensitive approach so that the reputation of an esteemed institution like Harvard is not tarnished.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Raihan,
Via email

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

New form of dark matter could solve decades-old Milky Way mystery



Astronomers have long been puzzled by two strange phenomena at the heart of our galaxy. First, the gas in the central molecular zone (CMZ), a dense and chaotic region near the Milky Way's core, appears to be ionised (meaning it is electrically charged because it has lost electrons) at a surprisingly high rate.

Second, telescopes have detected a mysterious glow of gamma rays with an energy of 511 kilo-electronvolts (keV) (which corresponds to the energy of an electron at rest).

Interestingly, such gamma rays are produced when an electron and its antimatter counterpart (all fundamental charged particles have antimatter versions of themselves that are near identical, but with opposite charge), the positron, collide and annihilate in a flash of light.

The causes of both effects have remained unclear, despite decades of observation. But in a new study, published in *Physical Review Letters*, it shows that both could be linked to one of the most elusive ingredients in the universe: dark

matter. In particular, the researchers propose that a new form of dark matter, less massive than the types astronomers typically look for, could be the culprit.

Hidden process

The CMZ spans almost 700 light years and contains some of the most dense molecular gas in the galaxy. Over the years, scientists have found that this region is unusually ionised, meaning the hydrogen molecules there are being split into charged particles (electrons and nuclei) at a

much faster rate than expected.

This could be the result of sources such as cosmic rays and star light that bombard the gas. However, these alone don't seem to be able to account for the observed levels.

The other mystery, the 511keV emission, was first observed in the 1970s, but still has no clearly identified source. Several candidates have been proposed, including supernovas, massive stars, black holes and neutron stars. However, none fully explain the pattern or intensity of the emission.

The researchers asked a simple question: could both phenomena be caused by the same hidden process? Dark matter makes up around 85 per cent of the matter in the universe, but it does not emit or absorb light. While its gravitational effects are clear, scientists do not yet know what it is made of.

One possibility, often overlooked, is that dark matter particles could be very light, with masses just a few million electronvolts, far lighter than a proton, and still play a cosmic role. These light dark matter candidates are generally called sub-GeV (giga electronvolts) dark matter particles.

Such dark matter particles may interact with their antiparticles. In their work, the researchers studied what would happen if these light dark matter particles come in contact with their own antiparticles in the galactic centre and annihilate each other, producing electrons and positrons.

In the dense gas of the CMZ, these low-energy particles would quickly lose energy and ionise the surrounding hydrogen molecules very efficiently by knocking off their electrons.

Because the region is so dense, the particles would not travel far. Instead, they would deposit most of their energy locally, which matches the observed ionisation profile quite well.

Using detailed simulations, it was found that this simple process, dark matter particles annihilating into electrons and positrons, can naturally explain the ionisation rates observed in the CMZ.

Even better, the required properties of the dark matter, such as its mass and interaction strength, do not conflict with any known constraints from the early universe. Dark matter of this kind appears to be a serious option.

The positron puzzle

If dark matter is creating positrons in the CMZ, those particles will eventually slow down and eventually annihilate with electrons in the environment, producing gamma-rays at exactly 511keV energy. This would provide a direct link between the ionisation and the

mysterious glow.

It was found that while dark matter can explain the ionisation, it may also be able to replicate some amount of 511keV radiation as well. This striking finding suggests that the two signals may potentially originate from the same source, light dark matter.

The exact brightness of the 511keV line depends on several factors, including how efficiently positrons form bound states with electrons and where exactly they annihilate though. These details are still uncertain.

A new way to test the invisible

Regardless of whether the 511keV emission and the CMZ ionisation share a common source, the ionisation rate in the CMZ is emerging as a valuable new observation to study dark matter. In particular, it provides a way to test models involving light dark matter particles, which are difficult to detect using traditional laboratory experiments.

In the study, it was shown that the predicted ionisation profile from dark matter is remarkably flat across the CMZ. This is important, because the observed ionisation is indeed spread relatively evenly.

Point sources such as the black hole at the centre of the galaxy or cosmic ray sources like supernovas (exploding stars) cannot easily explain this. But a smoothly distributed dark matter halo can.

Our findings suggest that the centre of the Milky Way may offer new clues about the fundamental nature of dark matter.

Future telescopes with better resolution will be able to provide more information on the spatial distribution and relationships between the 511 keV line and the CMZ ionisation rate. Meanwhile, continued observations of the CMZ may help rule out, or strengthen, the dark matter explanation.

Either way, these strange signals from the heart of the galaxy remind us that the universe is still full of surprises.

Sometimes, looking inward, to the dynamic, glowing centre of our own galaxy, reveals the most unexpected hints of what lies beyond. (The Conversation)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, April 20, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon sextile Venus on your solar return chart which is a very good combination. Your pet projects will get completed. And even your financial condition will be strong. You will be duly rewarded for your efforts. And will receive acclaim and appreciation of your peers and superiors. You will work with focus and determination and will be goal oriented. You will work in team spirit to achieve the goals. You will also be able to take people along with you. You will also be very positive in your relationship with your mate. He/she will provide all support and help you need in difficult times. You will also make investments wisely. Your business income too will rise. And you will make good profits. Students will get success in exams and interview. Your faith in God will increase and you will turn religious and spiritual. Business related trips will keep you busy.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) The week begins on a positive note. The planetary configuration indicates that your efforts, confidence and courage bring success in monetary gains and your energy increases for work projects. Your job environment is lively. Your outlook on life has been a little more serious and responsible. In the past while, you might have reached out to others in an attempt to validate yourself, looking for ways to boost your confidence. Health is likely to prosper and medical procedures or programs, if necessary, are more likely to be successful.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) This week brings love, harmony and entertainment in professional and personal relations. Your physical body and mannerisms are a focus. There would be a newfound identity and a realistic understanding of your own limitations and your capabilities as well. In terms of career and projects, outward signs of progress would lay a foundation for future success and progress. Lifeless or outworn relationships may have been especially hard to bear for you. You could take up some form of physical program that completely changes the way you feel about yourself. The things that give you joy and positive feedback figure prominently and you feel renewed and regenerated.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) This phase brings success in professional and personal relations. You would feel particularly strong and personally powerful. There is no such thing as playing the victim, you're the victor and you feel it. You enjoy an increased ability to concentrate and focus on what really matters to you. It would be wise to make something of your hobbies—even if it doesn't bring an income, you might find that expressing yourself creatively really helps to define yourself and to understand yourself better. Health is likely to be balanced.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This is favorable period for hobbies, sports and competitive exams. Your creative abilities are reflected in your outlook on life and love and romance are life experiences you strongly identify with. You display great skills in sports or physical activity that wins you appreciation and an opportunity to travel. Try to be just and fair when making decisions, as you do your best to see both sides of an issue. People notice and admire you for your pleasant and cheerful personality. You are bolder in expressing your love, yet not aggressive either. Artistic self-expression is important, possibly through music, fashion and writing. A strong desire for companionship dominates at this time.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) The first phase of this week increases confidence and courage at work place. It's a great time to do something entirely new and pioneering. Discussions and ideas about finances and material security figure strongly. 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 planetary placement can bring a good deal of success in all monetary pursuits.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) An excellent week for money, career, and romance awaits you. Friends and loved ones take priority. 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 as you feel drawn towards religion and spiritualism. This is a good time for research and meditation; but do avoid being dragged down by issues that have outgrown their worth and purpose. 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) The planetary configuration brings success, responsibility and maturity. You have much energy for new moneymaking projects, or for stepping up existing ones. Matters of the heart touch you deeply. You may willingly play a supportive role to the family and offer compassion and selfless love. This is a rather happy, goal-oriented time on the professional front. Relationships take on a fun outlook and activities with children increase. You possess extra charm in your professional interactions. A new affair is in the offing for the unattached. More opportunities to socialize and network could present themselves now.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) This period is good for money, family, status and happiness. Money matters come into focus for you. You adopt a serious approach to business because you are in the spotlight. The desire for some form of recognition and financial success is apparent. Being part of a community or circle of friends and building your social network is important to you at this time. Your love life is more attractive and charming. Public relations work, marketing, promotional activities and other such endeavors are favored now. You may face some minor ailments on the health front.

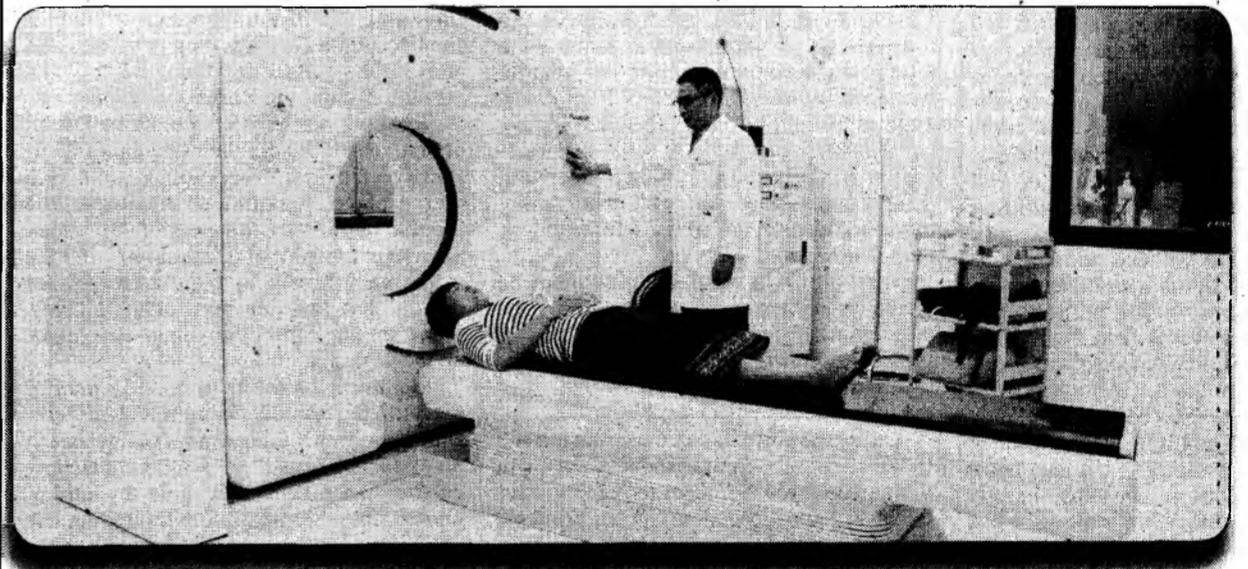
Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) Diplomacy, correctness in manner, finesse, and charm will be a big plus in aiding financial gains, especially in areas requiring public contact. You feel drawn to intellectuals with whom you can communicate well and exchange ideas. You know how to relate to others and you do so in a natural and warm manner. Your vision is practical right now, and you want to see tangible results for your efforts. Recognition is likely to come your way whether you ask for it or not along with the responsibility that comes right along with it. Do what you feel is right, keeping in mind that you are in the limelight during this phase.

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. If single, you are more than willing to enter into a committed relationship. In general, you are adaptable when it comes to your affections. You pour more energy into self-promotion or business activities. 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) Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering at this time. On a more practical level, you may be dealing with joint finances and shared resources. Social life takes priority in your life. You would become serious about family relations and feel responsible towards them. Social interactions of a personal, one-on-one kind are emphasized. Conflicts with a partner over values or personal possessions are likely to occur. You are more willing than usual to explore life's secrets. Taking care of business is your main focus. A health routine started now is likely to be successful.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This is a generous, pleasantly emotional, and creative phase. Striking a balance between your attention to your career and to your family life is necessary. Taking steps to improve your family and home life as well as your career and public life will be in order. You will also thoroughly enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities, especially in the company of a loved one. 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.

CT scans fuel future rise in cancer cases, new study suggests



CT scans are a vital part of modern medicine. Found in every hospital and many clinics, they give doctors a fast and detailed look inside the body — helping to diagnose everything from cancer and strokes to internal injuries. But a new study suggests there may be a hidden cost to our growing reliance on this technology.

The study, published in *Jama Internal Medicine*, warns that CT scans performed in the US in 2023 alone could eventually lead to over 100,000 extra cancer cases. If the current rate of scanning continues, the researchers say CT scans could be responsible for around 5% of all new cancers diagnosed each year.

That figure has raised concerns. Especially when you consider that the number of CT scans done in the US has jumped by 30% in just over a decade. In 2023, there were an estimated 93 million CT exams carried out on 62 million people.

The risk from a single scan is low — but not zero. And the younger the patient, the greater the risk. Children and teenagers are especially vulnerable because their bodies are still developing, and any damage caused by ionising radiation may not show up until many years later.

That said, over 90% of CT scans are performed on adults, so it's this group that faces the largest overall

impact. The most common cancers linked to CT exposure are lung, colon, bladder and leukaemia. For women, breast cancer is also a significant concern.

What makes this latest estimate so striking is how much it has grown. In 2009, a similar analysis projected around 29,000 future cancers linked to CT scans. The new number is over three times higher — not just because of more scans, but because newer research allows for a more detailed analysis of radiation exposure to specific organs.

The study also makes an eye-catching comparison: if things stay as they are, CT-related cancers could match the number of cancers caused by alcohol or excess weight — two well-known risk factors.

Not all scans carry the same level of risk. In adults, scans of the abdomen and pelvis are thought to contribute the most to future cancer cases. In children, it's head CTs that pose the biggest concern — especially for babies under the age of one.

Often life-saving

Despite all this, doctors stress that CT scans are often life-saving and remain essential in many cases. They help catch conditions early, guide treatment and are crucial in emergencies. The challenge is

making sure they're only used when really needed.

Newer technologies could help reduce the risk. Photon-counting CT scanners, for example, deliver lower doses of radiation, and MRI scans don't use radiation at all. The researchers suggest that better use of diagnostic checklists could also help doctors decide when a scan is necessary, and when a safer alternative like MRI or ultrasound might do the job.

It's worth noting that this study doesn't prove CT scans cause cancer in individual people. The estimates are based on "risk models" — not direct evidence. In fact, the American College of Radiology points out that no study has yet linked CT scans directly to cancer in humans, even after multiple scans.

Still, the idea that radiation can cause cancer isn't new. It's scientifically sound. And with the huge number of scans being done, even small risks can add up.

CT scans save lives, but they're not risk-free. As medical technology evolves, so too should the way we use it. By cutting down on unnecessary scans, using safer alternatives where possible, and keeping radiation doses as low as practical, we can ensure CT scans continue to help more than they harm. (The Conversation)

"Respect commands itself and can neither be given nor withheld when it is due."

—Eldridge Cleaver

The Shillong Times

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Media and Modi

THE NDA government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is known to abhor a free press. Yet, mindful of the fast-changing communications landscape, Information and Broadcasting Minister, Ashwini Vaishnav says the government would hold a World Visual and Entertainment Summit (WAVES) in Mumbai in May, which would see representation from over 10,000 entities from across the world. This is conceived as a global platform for media and entertainment, similar to the informal and highly acclaimed annual World Economic Forum summit in Davos.

Notably, the media sector rarely got its due from the Modi establishment. The Prime Minister distances himself from the media. His frequent official visits abroad kept the usual contingent of media personnel out. Media is hailed as the fourth pillar of democracy – its envisioned role being of informing, educating, entertaining and provoking the society at large through faithful reporting of the ground realities. Yet, as in the case of the three other pillars of democracy – the executive, parliament and judiciary – here too extraneous influences have hurt the established media's fair name. While the role of the media is to question those in power and hold them accountable, large sections of the media today pillory the Opposition parties instead. Many have become lap dogs of the ruling party. Prime Minister, Modi realised that if he has to hold on to power he needs to curtail the freedom and independence of the media and patronise only those that do his bidding. Since becoming Prime Minister, Modi has never held a press conference but resorted to a one way address to the nation through his Mann Ki Baat broadcasted by the state-owned All India Radio.

Modi believed that the media had done a witch-hunting post the 2002 Gujarat communal riots and used his own stratagem to contain them post 2014. Today most media establishments have lost their objectivity while performance their duties. Unlike in the past, the Information and Broadcasting department has been handled by those like Vaishnav as a part-time engagement, thereby reducing its importance. Consider how the Modi government has repeatedly unleashed its central investigating agencies on media outlets, holding raids on entities that were critical of the government. This has created a heightened sense of fear. Large sections of the media today have compromised in order to survive. They soft-pedal on issues if only to save themselves from harassment in the forms of IT and other raids. The establishment is unleashing its agencies selectively against opposition figures too. The Congress stresses that the National Herald case is one such. Modi's strategy ensures him a safe existence; those on his side feel safe too. Social media targets lesser evils, safely keeping entities like the central government outside of their purview, as their canvas is small. Unfortunately, the media is divided and hence unable to fight back. It's time for the established media, many of them facing an existential crisis, to rework their strategies and return to the era when they served the cause of democracy and not political interest.

The year 2025 might witness the "exit" of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isaac-Muivah)'s (NSCN (IM)) general secretary, Thuingaleng Muivah from the organisation. Indeed, morbid as that may sound, certain quarters seem to be impatiently awaiting the event.

Muivah's "exit", in my opinion, will have far reaching ramifications for the Naga Peace Process. Muivah is a true guerrilla. He was part of the first band of the "Naga army" that trekked through the inhospitable terrain of Myanmar and reached China's Yunnan province along with "Brigadier" Thinoselie after a 97-day trek. He later went to Peking's School of Diplomacy and was inculcated in the weighty nuances of scientific socialism and Maoism.

But Muivah was not greatly impressed by Chinese communism and he returned home to "Nagaland for Christ." Indeed, the Nagas have waged war with India under Angami Zapu Phizo and Muivah's leadership (there were others including Isaac Chisi Swu and S.S. Khaplang). The belligerence from without ultimately ended in a ceasefire in 1997.

The ceasefire with the NSCN (IM) will complete 28 years on 1 August 2025 without any resolution in sight. Indeed, the only encouraging aspect of the ceasefire is the fact that the insurgents have not returned to the jungles, although there are reports that they are threatening to do so if the dialogue process does not reach an acceptable conclusion sooner than later.

However, the danger stems primarily from the manner in which the NSCN (IM) and their proxies are charting and carrying out a war of attrition in certain parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur.

The geo-political engineering that it is playing out in Manipur is ample evidence. It tantamounts to the time-tested NSCN (IM) approach of holding the state ransom by creating economic blockades, and cutting the region from the rest of India. Indeed, this time around it seems to be making the most of the unrest in Manipur by aiding the insurgent groups of both denominations—Meitei and Kuki—who are warring against each other. The NSCN (IM) camps in Myanmar's Somra Tracts are being used as a conduit for the insurgents from Sagaing Division and beyond to enter Manipur. In other words, the NSCN (IM), even as it awaits the second (and perhaps the final phase) in the Naga episode is amusing itself by inserting spokes in

the Manipur imbroglio.

But as far as peace is considered, belligerent groups (and this aspect is certainly true for the NSCN (IM) invariably put forward conditions that may not be acceptable to the stronger party. But non-acceptable conditions are usually made only by way of bargaining chips with a comprehension that a climb-down to acceptable conditions would eventually take place, and ones which were actually intended by the belligerents.

The sincerity of both parties to resolve conflict by adhering to the principle of mutual accommodation and by prolonging the peace dividend when fighting ends is crucial at this stage. This is primarily because of not only the possibility that subterfuges may be engineered by hardliners among belligerents who feel that they will not be given their due in a post-settlement scenario, but also because of the presence of spoilers with vested interests.

Back channelling and secret parleys with a sincere mandate are best suited to navigate the process at such junctures: publicity normally results in devious objectives coming into play, derailing the political process in its infancy.

The ignominious manner in which the "Framework Agreement" of 2015 (which could have been the correct initiator for a comprehensive peace arrangement) and its scrivener had to be jettisoned is a clear example of an observable fact that could have been sensibly avoided! If secrecy was the key factor in the "Framework Agreement" motivation, it is not understood as to why there was so much tom-tomming of the "riddle wrapped up in an enigma," when it was signed on 3 August 2015 in the presence of Narendra Modi.

In any event, a calibrated course correction exercise should now be undertaken, and in right earnest. It must closely study the activities that the NSCN (IM) is presently undertaking and active steps should be taken to ensure that India's national security interests in a strategically positioned zone are not compromised.

But the most important question that is being asked in the context of the "impending" exit of Muivah would be, 'what next?' Muivah has not anointed anyone from the second rung of senior leadership to take over from him. The political commissar of the NSCN (IM), Anthony Shimray has already been elevated to the rank of army

By Jaideep Saikia

chief and although there have been certain rumblings about the dissonance between Shimray and other leaders of sundry groups due to the former's "connection" with the Indian army, parleys take place in the darkest of places.

The fact of the matter is that Shimray's Chinese connection had come to the fore in September 2010 when he was on an arms procurement mission from China. He was apprehended in Nepal and was incarcerated in Tihar Jail for six years. The arms deal with the Chinese and the apprehension of the political commissar came 13 years after the ceasefire with the NSCN (IM) in 1997. How did New Delhi permit such a travesty? It would interest readers that a similar "betrayal of faith" had taken place when the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) announced a unilateral ceasefire with New Delhi on October 8, 2004. But the NDFB chairman and the organisation's 3rd Battalion continued to be billeted in Bangladesh and its chairman, Ranjan Daimary engineered the serial explosions across Assam at the behest of the ISI-DGFI. Later, the NDFB split into two and Ranjan Daimary, who was handed over to India by Sheikh Hasina, is currently undergoing life-imprisonment for his heinous crime which left over 100 innocent deaths in the course of a single day. But, as stated earlier, "parleys in secrecy" are a time-tested method, especially for the Indian state. In other words, neither Anthony Shimray nor Ranjan Daimary want to be behind bars forever. If the price is to be paid for freedom then one would suppose that ideology and everything "noble" in the lexicon of compromise will certainly come into play. It was not for nothing that the Kautilyan prescription of Saam (reconciliation), Daam (monetary inducement), Dand (punishment) and Bhed (division) continue to be part of the "Great Indian War Book!"

But to return to Nagaland, it would, in all probability, be VS Atem who would take over from Muivah as the general secretary of the NSCN (IM). But there is certainly going to be a war of succession after Muivah's "exit" for leadership of the parent NSCN (IM). A split has already taken place with Ikato Swu, Isaac Chisi Swu's son deciding to join the Nagaland insurgents billeted in Myanmar's Sagaing Division (primarily in the Somra Tracts) in order to "carry forward the Nagaland

struggle".

My last visit to the Naga dominated areas of Manipur revealed that Atem is clearly the frontrunner with a majority of the Manipuri Nagas backing him. However, since there is no love lost between the Nagas of present day territory of Nagaland and their brethren in Manipur, there would certainly be a jostle of sorts which, as earlier stated has resulted in a split of the NSCN (IM).

The problem with New Delhi is that it feels it knows everything sitting in Raisina Road. I have been writing and lecturing that there is a "clear" and growing schism between the Tangkhul Nagas of Manipur who control the NSCN (IM) and the Nagas of present day Nagaland territory. The fact that Ikato Swu, a Sumi Naga, has thrown a spanner into the Nagaland Peace Process should have been anticipated by the Indian state. But they just don't want to learn!

In 2023, I visited Nagaland to deliver lectures to the students of the colleges of Kohima. A post lecture interaction show-cased the fact that almost all the students of the present day territory of Nagaland are content with what they have. Although a separate flag and a separate constitution continue to be debated (I am certainly against a separate constitution for the Nagas!), the interaction with the students of the Kohima colleges seem to indicate that they are not interested in the inclusion of the Hill areas of Manipur into the present Nagaland. Indeed, they are quite happy with a special relationship with India and, as is evident, they view Delhi as their preferred destination.

Long ago, a writer surmised about "Hanoi being closer to the region than Delhi." But it is a well-established fact that such irresponsible pronouncements have no basis. There is neither physical or emotional proximity between Hanoi and India's North East. The geography of the present is mandated by a variety of factors. That the gates to Myanmar and Bangladesh are shut to the North-Easterner is witness to this obtrusive fact.

The North East's fortunes are inextricably intertwined with that of India's nation building exercise that Narendra Modi and Amit Shah are presently attempting to engineer. The North East has no future without New Delhi. It is best that the stragglers among the rag-tag belligerent groups in Manipur and Nagaland realise this as the inevitable reality sooner than later.

(Jaideep Saikia is India's foremost strategist and Best-selling Author)

Wilderness and its Interconnectedness

By Maitphang Syiem

Terry Tempest Williams said, "To be whole. To be complete. Wilderness reminds us what it means to be human, what we are connected to rather than what we are separate from." In this busy and fast-paced society our natural thoughts and rationality have been swayed by consumerism to such an extent that we have failed to realize that all sources and services we consume come from nature itself. The air we breathe, the protection we get, the water we drink, the soil we plough and many intricate things which are better left unexplored all come from nature. Therefore, pondering on the aforementioned thought, it clearly explains that we cannot be complete rational humans when we distance ourselves from nature. The wilderness wants to maintain the old long lasting fundamental relationship with us in the natural way. The connection is that, "all come from dust, and to dust all return" (Ecc1 3:20).

The wilderness doesn't ask us to perform, it asks us to be. It reminds us that we're not separate from nature, but deeply connected to it. Chief Seattle a Native American Tribal Leader said, "the earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth." This statement emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living things and reminds us that humans are part of nature, not its owners.

There are many aspects that the wilderness has given us and one of them is like an irreplaceable teacher relationship. "But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you." Job (12:7-10). The superpower has given us this living planet in accordance with the natural requirements, to live, to propagate and to also be earth stewards. So why don't we ask ourselves if we are maintaining that relationship as earth's stewards? Earth stewards do not need any official appointment because of the fundamental inter-connectedness established since time immemorial; the only step required is to feel that interconnectedness, which some may have realised while some may need adequate enlightenment.

In the context of our State Meghalaya, we are beautifully blessed with mesmerizing natural landscapes, biological diversity and species richness, this fact should be a motivation for every individual to inculcate earth stewardship and to realise the inter-connectedness we share with the environment. We may boast of all those natural aspects but our smallest actions are still not fully inclined towards that interconnectedness. That gap must be filled and this requires a gap analysis to understand what needs correction. In a consumerist society, development is an inevitable activity but at times development is marked by greed at the cost of nature. To counter such thoughts we need to introspect on M.K Gandhi's quotes "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed." We are indeed swayed by human greed without realising the sustainable needs. In recent times 'Green' and 'Eco' have become buzzwords but little do we ask whether these words comply with the law and also to the fundamental human-nature relationships? No doubt sustainable tourism is good and eco-tourism is even better, but we also need to understand the intricacies of how Green and Eco-sensitive it is, and if it helps to maintain that inter-connectedness?

In this context it is imperative that we dive into Participatory Planning, Policy Execution, Monitoring and Evaluation through a bottom-ups approach. Recently we have seen the media going rife with the issue of an Eco-Tourism Project in Nongkhylliem Wildlife Sanctuary, which is a notified Eco-Sensitive Zone. As common citizens we need to revisit history to understand how it became a National Wildlife Sanctuary (NWS) and Eco-sensitive Zone (ESZ). Prior to its conversion to a Wildlife Sanctuary, it was a Reserved Forest area which was constituted during the erstwhile British Regime vide a series of

Notifications (Nos.- 4692, dated July 23, 1909, 2016, dated May 12, 1913, 2017, R, dated May 12, 1913, 3463R, dated July 14, 1913, 3412R, dated November 14, 1933, and 864-GJ, dated February 14, 1939)

In 1981 the Eastern side, of the reserved forest was then converted into a Wildlife Sanctuary with an area of 29 Sq.Km vide Government of Meghalaya Notification: No.FOR.25/81/5 dated Shillong March 25, 1981, in accordance with the Meghalaya Forest Regulation adopted by Meghalaya from the Assam Regulation 7 of 1891 and also by the powers conferred in sub-section (1) of section 18 of the Wild Life Protection Act 1972 (Central Act 53 of 1972). Now we also need to understand the difference between a Reserved Forest and a Wildlife Sanctuary. A Reserved Forest is an area which a Government can declare as per the powers entailed in the Indian Forest Act 1927 whereas a Wildlife Sanctuary is a part of the Reserved Forest declared under the Wildlife Protection Act 1972. The steps taken to declare the Eastern part of the Nongkhylliem Reserved Forest as a Wildlife Sanctuary was imperative because the area exhibits high ecological, floral, faunal, geo-morphological and natural importance. It's an important habitat of wildlife which will require collective responsibility to protect it.

The area is a host for over 50 species of mammals, 25 species of reptiles, 400 bird species and a beautiful floral species which are of ecological importance. Many important species such as the Hoolock Gibbon, Great Indian Hornbill, Clouded Leopard are found here in Nongkhylliem Wildlife Sanctuary. However, with some of the plant and animal species becoming rare, endangered or threatened, there is an urgent call to maintain that ecological inter-connectedness.

Habitat fragmentation is on the rise and particularly edge fragmentation which is a bane to conservation activities. In the context of the Nongkhylliem Wildlife Sanctuary this is detrimental hence we cannot allow the edge effects to begin and if it happens there can be irreplaceable human-animal conflicts which can break down the fundamental inter-connectedness. Therefore to counteract such impending impacts a concept of an Eco-Sensitive Zone is put in place, which acts like a buffer zone and this was declared around the Nongkhylliem Wildlife Sanctuary in accordance with the powers conferred by sub-section (1), clause (v) and clause (xiv) of subsection (2) and sub-section (3) of section 3 of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 (29 of 1986), read with sub-rule (3) of rule 5 of the Environment (Protection) Rules, 1986 vide Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change notification New Delhi, the May 7, 2017.

The ESZ of NWS has a total area of 202.87 Sq.Km and the extent of the ESZ varies from 335.07 metres to 8.43 Kilometres from the NWS boundary. There are about 30 villages surrounding the NWS. Briefly the ESZ extent, is in the North - from Lailad Village, Wt-through Ummar, Nongkynrih, Lailad-Tasku, East-Umling Territorial Beat House and South - Nongmahir, Mawpyrhut, Sohjangrang Village. For the knowledge of common public, the ESZ of NWS has strong legal implications and all activities are regulated and governed by the provisions of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 (29 of 1986), the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006, the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 (69 of 1980), the Indian Forest Act, 1927 (16 of 1927), the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 (53 of 1972). These laws are there to protect nature and we are not above them, but there are fundamental natural laws of inter-connectedness established since time immemorial by the Almighty which we cannot defile.

In the final analysis the choice is ours to make!
(The writer is a Geospatial Technology Expert)

Letters to the Editor

There's a limit to hypocrisy

Editor,
The recent statements of the state BJP unit to disassociate itself from the controversy that had occurred in New Delhi wherein the Catholic faithful of the Sacred Heart Cathedral were prevented by the Delhi Police from carrying out the Palm Sunday procession on flimsy grounds are unfounded. The state BJP which tries to portray itself as a "holy acceptable party" has not dared to challenge the diktat citing jurisdiction matters but in politics these are mere excuses. If the NPP can talk of Manipur and take up issues with its counterpart there, what prevents the BJP from taking up the issue with its Delhi counterpart? Ironically the state BJP which prides itself of having two MLAs in the ruling dispensation seems to have gone silent with none of its MLAs saying a word on this critical issue of religious freedom. Another point of concern is also the lukewarm reaction from the Catholic Association of Shillong which should have given a stronger statement rather than just a symbolic one. So too the other political parties. Hypocrisy should have no place when it comes

and makes our environment very dirty. Those from the Shillong Municipality who come to sweep the localities tend to leave out the dog poop. As residents of this locality we have the right to live in a clean environment which also includes roads and lanes. In this regard I would request the authorities concerned to take note of this problem and do something to contain street dogs and to also ensure that those who have pet dogs do not use the road as an open latrine for them. In fact the dog owners should be held responsible for such nuisance. The whole country has launched the Swachh Bharat Campaign, why are we not part of this campaign led by the Prime Minister himself?

Menace of street dogs

Editor,
Through your esteemed daily, I want to highlight an important issue that is specific to the residents of some localities in Laban area. Since the past few years there has been a steady increase in the number of street dogs which has greatly hampered our movements and created a fear psychosis about being bitten by stray dogs. On several occasions these dogs move in packs and attack small children while they are on their way to or from school or even when they are playing in the locality. These dogs also litter on the main road and outside the gates of different homes making it unhygienic. To add to that, there are some people who have pet dogs and take them for walks in the early morning hours but without the necessary precautions to collect their dog's poop which really is a nuisance

and makes our environment very dirty. Those from the Shillong Municipality who come to sweep the localities tend to leave out the dog poop. As residents of this locality we have the right to live in a clean environment which also includes roads and lanes. In this regard I would request the authorities concerned to take note of this problem and do something to contain street dogs and to also ensure that those who have pet dogs do not use the road as an open latrine for them. In fact the dog owners should be held responsible for such nuisance. The whole country has launched the Swachh Bharat Campaign, why are we not part of this campaign led by the Prime Minister himself?

Judicial overreach- Who will hold the judiciary accountable?

Editor,
The process of appointment of judges in our country is not through election but through the 'collegium system,' which raises serious concerns about the judiciary's accountability in a democratic framework. If any arm of

the State wields such power, should it not be held accountable by the people? It was precisely for these reasons the judicial accountability bill and the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) was proposed so that elected members have some say in their appointment/selection. But it was struck down by the judiciary for being violative of the 'basic structure domain'. To whom then is the judiciary accountable? If any institution believes that the manner in which it exists is perfect and there is absolutely no space or need for any reform then that institution certainly does not have the right to preach reforms to anybody else.

An independent judiciary was conceived on the idea that there should be at least one institutional safeguard to check the government from overstepping its boundaries or to stop any infringement on the fundamental rights of citizens. However, during the Emergency, this theoretical independence failed, exposing the need for institutional accountability. Moreover, there are instances of judicial over-reach and incursion into the domain of the legislature and executive. Who will restrain this judicial over-reach is the million-dollar question.

The executive is not ex-

pected to travel beyond a certain point to reform it for obvious fear of retaliation from the judiciary. What is the solution then? It is high time for active public involvement/discussion on the issue for exploring a balanced approach involving elected representatives and judicial fraternity to align the judiciary with democratic accountability.

Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee
Shillong - 1

Infertility a growing concern

Editor,
Infertility is emerging as a growing concern across the world. According to the World Health Organization (April 4, 2023), approximately 17.5% of the global adult population—roughly one in six people—experiences infertility. In India, the situation is equally pressing. An article by R. Sharma (September-October 2024) reports that 10-15% of couples face infertility, with regional prevalence ranging from 3.9% to 16.8%. In the past, there were no medical facilities to diagnose or treat female infertility. Couples often had to travel far for specialized care. However, in recent years, infertility clinics have rapidly increased across the

nation, reflecting the rising number of infertility cases among the adult population in India.

Data from NFHS-5 (National Family Health Survey) further underscores the concern—35.7% of women in Meghalaya were found to have low ovarian reserves, which may indicate reduced fertility.

Interestingly, it's not just couples who seek fertility support. Some single women are also choosing to preserve their eggs, anticipating late marriages and future reproductive challenges. Modern fertility clinics now offer a range of options, including the ability to select whether one wishes to conceive a single child or twins. Many couples opt for twins to reduce the cost and frequency of treatments, which are often time-consuming and emotionally demanding. Thanks to the availability of better diagnostic tools and targeted treatments, many couples who struggled with infertility for years are now able to conceive, bringing hope and joy to families across the globe.

Yours etc.,
B. Laitphlang
Via email

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"Expectation is the mother of all frustration."

— Antonio Banderas

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A Liberal Pontiff Passes On

THE Catholic Church lost its most enduring counsellor, philosopher, guide and environmentalist par excellence when Pope Francis breathed his last on April 21, at 7.35 am Italy Time (11.05 am IST). Pope Francis, a Jesuit, is the first Latin American pope who rose from a humble childhood in Argentina to become the leader of the world's largest and most powerful church. The Pope had been keeping indifferent health and recently spent five weeks in a hospital on account of pneumonia but on Easter Sunday he appeared before the crowd that had gathered at St Peter's Square for his blessings. Pope Francis led the Catholic congregation numbering about one billion faithful for over 12 years. He was unconventional and a free-thinking liberal who was empathetic towards the rejects of society — the LGBTQ+ gay community and the victims of sexual abuse by the Catholic clergy. He was never in denial of such transgressions in the church and tried his best to address the issue even while he reached out to the victims of such acts. It took moral courage to take this issue head-on.

A peace-builder in his own right Pope Francis even extended the hand of friendship to Muslim clerics and called for world peace, knowing that the poor suffer the most during wars. Above all, Pope Francis was perhaps the only religious head who took a firm stand on climate change and blamed the powerful countries for their role in adding to the greenhouse effect that has changed climate irrevocably. He will be known as the Pope who cared immensely for the environment. Pope Francis' encyclicals to the Catholic community are lessons for the whole world to follow. They are sensitive, pragmatic and take a holistic view of global issues and their impact on humans, particularly the defenceless. Pope Francis believed in diversity and made sure to elect bishops who reflected that diversity. He continued to travel widely, focusing on exploited and war-torn parts of Africa, where he rebuked the modern-day colonizers and sought peace in South Sudan. He spoke boldly against wars and oppression. Pope Francis travelled widely and steered away from convention when he reached out not just to the Catholic community but to all who needed his comforting gestures. He believed that his role was to reach out to those at the margins rather than wait for them to come to the Vatican — which they could ill afford to do.

Considering that Pope Francis was the most vocal votary of earth in the balance it is surprising that the Catholic Church does not seem to display this concern even closer home where the environment is in a state of disarray and afflicted by human greed and apathy. Will the Catholic Church rise to the occasion and honour its most 'human' Pontiff by following in his footsteps? That would be a lasting tribute to a leader who walked the talk and it would be the only way to keep his memory alive.

Is Jhum to be blamed for forest fires in Meghalaya

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Forest fires are a big hazard in Meghalaya and, according to the Global Forest Watch, there were 440 fire alerts reported between 1st of April 2024 and 31st of March 2025. Only in 2025, there have been over 260 fire alerts. However, this figure has been characterised as normal, emphasising the annual, recurring, and widespread nature of the problem. Between 2001 and 2023, such incidents have led to a loss of 2.29 thousand hectare of tree cover from the forest. All of this, however, constituted only 0.99% of the total tree cover loss from all sources, revealing that other factors are more important in driving deforestation in the state. However, because of the highly striking visual impact of fires, it may appear forest fires are the primary cause of tree cover loss in the state. This is not the case. Along with this misconception, another fallacy also blames the traditional practice of jhum, or shifting cultivation, for the decline in forest cover in Meghalaya. In fact, while reporting on statistics from the Global Forest Watch, the papers blamed jhum as the primary driver of these fires; however, the website from which the data was extracted made no such mention. This claim is also highly inaccurate.

Jhum or shifting cultivation is an ancient form of farming practice which is being practiced by many indigenous communities throughout the world. It is known by many names, slash-and-burn, rotational farming in Thailand and Milpa in Mexico, which is recognised as one of the Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) sites in the world. In Meghalaya, particularly in the Khasi region, people know it as Rep Shyrti, and they mostly practice it in areas with thick forest cover, such as the tropical broadleaf evergreen forests of the War areas. In grasslands and pine forest, farmers practise bun (a modified version of jhum but a different system altogether) and grow ginger. Therefore, jhum is not responsible for any observed fires and tree cover losses in these landscapes. In landscapes where jhum is prac-

ticed, communities follow well-established principles to prevent uncontrolled forest fires. A few years ago, I took part in land preparation for jhum and saw how fire management was an important concern for the farmers.

In 2019, I, along with a Czech researcher, Lukas Pawera, visited a village that lay along the spurs that jut out of the Sohra Plateau. It was the last week of February and the trees felled in January for clearing the land for cultivation had become sufficiently dry. The debris had gained a reddish tinge and strong

and fruit trees. One farmer stripped the banana stem's outer layer and used it to wrap the young orange trees. By the time preparations were done, it was already late afternoon. The timing of the burning depends on the aspect of the land. If the plot is facing to the north (leeward side) the fire is lit around 12 pm as the moisture content in these zones is comparatively higher. However, if the plot is facing south (windward side), burning normally starts after 3 pm in order to prevent the fire from becoming uncontrollable. They also apply

linking them with the ancient practice of their ancestors.

Once the fire was lit, the flames caught on very fast, since the debris had dried up completely. In the middle, there were more experienced farmers who tended the fire, pushing it down the slope. The blaze rose many feet up in the sky and for those unaccustomed, it might appear that the fire had gone out of control. However, this was a very well managed and orchestrated fire. It lasted for less than two hours, with the flames contained within the plot. Once the last embers had died out, the community dispersed and went back to their homes, allowing the ash to settle in the soil, fertilising it. Once the first showers arrive, the plot would then be ready for cultivation. Potato, cassava, maize, mustard, common beans were the first crops that were sown, with the next planting season being in June. In fact, a single plot can contain all the seven-plant based foods, supplying the body with essential macro and micro-nutrients for a healthy diet. It will be interesting to understand how much of Meghalaya's alarmingly high malnutrition is because of a change from jhum to other farming systems.

Forest fires are important to Meghalaya's rich biodiversity, but its deforestation from other factors, mining, quarrying, felling of trees for timber, which are to blame for 99% of the tree cover loss in the state. Even within forest fires, jhum is hardly the primary culprit as the community practicing this system has well-established principles of fire management that make forest fires highly unlikely. I have seen forest fires in areas where jhum is not practiced. Singling out jhum for these fires is therefore unfair. Instead, with the impact of climate change becoming more pervasive, one can learn from the principles of fire management under jhum and build mechanisms that can bring this problem under control. Understanding the problem is the first step to solving it.

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

"We did this to prevent the fire from spreading from the plot to the surrounding forest. Sentries were also stationed along the boundary, equipped with long bamboo poles, tree branches, and banana leaves to extinguish any stray embers. Some were also ready to throw soil to bring the fire under control."

winds were blowing from the south. From the cooler breeze and cloudy sky, it was clear that rains were about to begin and the Dorbar Shmong had fixed the date for burning the debris in order to take advantage of the first rains. The Czech researcher and I reached the village early in the morning. A large group had already gathered around the plot, with some engaged in creating the fire line. We volunteered and were given the 'wait' (Khasi machetes) to assist. Working from all four corners, we cleared the undergrowth and removed debris, creating a line of approximately 10-15 feet at the top and 5-6 feet at the corners. We did this to prevent the fire from spreading from the plot to the surrounding forest. Sentries were also stationed along the boundary, equipped with long bamboo poles, tree branches, and banana leaves to extinguish any stray embers. Some were also ready to throw soil to bring the fire under control.

The plot chosen for cultivation was near a house with a small home garden that contained many vegetables

standing of basic concepts. Foundational skills such as critical thinking, reasoning, and analytical writing are often side-lined when the goal becomes simply to pass. These skills, however, are essential not just for academic success in higher education, but for life beyond the classroom.

Moreover, while the guidebook provides answers, it may not always teach students how to arrive at those answers. Without opportunities to build answer-writing techniques, develop personal expression, or engage in deeper classroom discussions, students risk becoming passive learners. If Meghalaya is to achieve lasting progress in education, the focus must now move beyond the exam hall. The government and education stakeholders must invest in strengthening classroom teaching, training teachers to encourage enquiry-based learning, and designing programmes that build essential life skills. This includes reading, comprehension, logical reasoning, problem-solving, and effective communication.

The CM IMPACT Guidebook is a useful stepping stone, it shows what's possible with focused effort. But it must be part of a larger strategy that puts real learning at the centre. The goal should not only be to improve pass percentages, but to build confident, curious, and capable learners who are prepared for the challenges of the future.

Meghalaya has taken an important first step. Now is the time to walk further — and deeper.

Yours etc;
Rishanjang Khongwir
Via email

Political favouritism and vendetta

Editor,
Apropos of the news item published in your daily (S.T. 14 April, 2025) captioned "VPP flags neglect of opposition legislators by MDA Government," I am of the view that the favouritism and undue special facilities extended by the MDA Govt to friendly partners — defeated and elected MLAs — is a chronic and inherited malady that the state and people have suffered since the inception of Meghalaya. Those incumbents in power known as "The High Level" enjoy whatever they want be it development schemes and projects, privileges as political appointees like Chairman, Co-Chairman, Advisers to the Govt. etc with special facilities and perks at par with the ministers. What is more painful for the public is that even the defeated candidates and mere supporters of the ruling Government are availing the same facilities like ministers. All are yes men/women of their Boss. They dare not argue nor disobey him, but must implement what was ordered or instructed, come what may.

On the other hand the opposition legislators suffer unbearable onslaught at the hands of the ruling dispensation in many aspects like the delay and denial of schemes and development projects for

their constituencies which are very much deserving. In fact, the opposition legislators and their supporters are being looked down upon and their constituencies are ignored. They suffer step-motherly treatment from the government of the day. Strange but true after some opposition leaders and legislators betrayed their own parties and embraced the ruling party they got whatever they demanded including undue favours, facilities, wealth and fame. The impact of the political vindictiveness definitely has major consequences and has created great resentment and indignation among the victims.

The people of Hyniewtrep (Khasi, U Pnar, U Bhoi, U War) are closely watching this inherent attitude. It should be noted that currently the VPP is gaining ground in the political arena. It will be an acid test for them to clean up the mess and eradicate this cancerous and chronic ailment afflicting the state and its people. We do hope their advocacy and commitment towards clean politics, transparency and accountability will become a reality sooner than later. Let us give the VPP a chance and support it whole-heartedly for a regime change in the next elections so that the prevailing evils will be nipped in the bud.

Yours etc.,
Svetlana Wankhar
Via email

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Justice on Trial

Why Meghalaya and the North East Struggle to Deliver Timely Justice?

By K.N.Kumar

India's judicial system has come under increasing scrutiny, with the latest India Justice Report (IJR) 2025 highlighting significant disparities in the country's ability to provide timely, accessible, and equitable justice. These challenges are particularly pronounced in the North Eastern states, where Meghalaya and its neighbours continue to grapple with unique geographical, infrastructural, and socio-political hurdles.

The India Justice Report, a pioneering data-driven assessment published by Tata Trusts and leading civil society organizations, evaluates the justice ecosystem across four pillars: police, judiciary, prisons, and legal aid. By measuring infrastructure, human resources, budget utilization, workload, and inclusivity, the report ranks states on their ability to deliver justice effectively.

While southern states like Karnataka and Tamil Nadu top the rankings, the North-eastern states paint a mixed picture. According to the report, the judiciary scores among North Eastern states vary widely: For example, Sikkim tops the north eastern states with a score of 5.36/10.00 while Meghalaya ranks 4th with a score of 3.74/10. Mizoram, Tripura, and Arunachal are behind us. Meghalaya's score reflects moderate capacity but highlights significant room for improvement. The North East's unique geography and demographics demand tailored justice reforms, not one-size-fits-all solutions.

Meghalaya's judiciary faces acute systemic challenges that hinder its ability to deliver timely justice. One of the most pressing issues is the judge-to-population ratio. Nationally, India has about 12 judges per million people, far below the United States' 108 judges per million. Meghalaya's ratio falls below the national average, contributing to mounting case backlogs. The report states: "Meghalaya's judiciary operates with significant vacancies, leading to mounting case backlogs and delayed justice."

The shortage of judges is compounded by infrastructure deficits. Courtrooms are often ill-equipped, with limited digital infrastructure and insufficient support staff. Meghalaya's per capita expenditure on judiciary infrastructure is moderate but lags behind regional leader Sikkim, which spends Rs 464 per capita on judicial services.

Case backlogs in Meghalaya remain a serious concern. Though exact figures are limited, the state's judicial delays mirror a nationwide trend where vacancies and infrastructure gaps slow down the case disposal, undermining public confidence in the justice system. The police pillar of the Justice Delivery Index evaluates manpower, infrastructure, diversity, and workload. Meghalaya's police force, while ethnically diverse and locally recruited, struggles with manpower shortages and outdated infrastructure. Despite efforts, Meghalaya lags in implementing Supreme Court-mandated CCTV surveillance in police stations, a key transparency and accountability measure. Arunachal Pradesh stands out as the only North Eastern state fully compliant with these directives.

Training and technology upgrades remain critical needs for Meghalaya's police, affecting their ability to maintain law and order effectively. The state's unique socio-political context, including ethnic diversity and historical tensions, demands specialized policing strategies that balance security with community trust. Moreover, Meghalaya's police face challenges in addressing crimes against women and children, which require specialized units and training. The lack of adequate resources and infrastructure hampers these efforts, leading to delays in investigations and prosecutions.

Prisons across India face overcrowding and a rising number of undertrial inmates. Nationally, 76% of prisoners are undertrials, up from

66% in 2012. Meghalaya's prisons report moderate overcrowding, but the undertrial population remains a persistent challenge. The report observes: "Despite lower prison overcrowding than the national average, undertrial populations remain a persistent concern in Meghalaya."

Legal aid, a cornerstone of equitable justice, has seen a sharp decline nationwide, from 14,159 legal aid clinics in 2020 to just 4,742 in 2022. Meghalaya's legal aid infrastructure is limited, especially in rural and tribal areas, restricting access for vulnerable populations. Low awareness about legal rights and limited outreach exacerbate the problem, leaving many without the support necessary to navigate India's complex justice system.

In recent years, Meghalaya has made efforts to enhance legal aid services through partnerships with NGOs and community organizations. However, these initiatives are often underfunded and lack the scale needed to address the state's vast rural and tribal areas. The India Justice Report underscores the urgent need for reforms tailored to Meghalaya's unique context:

● **Increase Judicial Strength:** Filling judicial vacancies and expanding court infrastructure is critical to reducing backlogs and delays.

● **Modernize Policing:** Upgrading police infrastructure, ensuring full CCTV compliance, and enhancing training will improve law enforcement effectiveness.

● **Prison Reforms:** Addressing overcrowding and reducing undertrial populations through faster judicial processes and alternative sentencing methods is essential.

● **Expand Legal Aid:** Strengthening legal aid services and outreach in rural and tribal areas will help ensure justice is accessible to all.

● **Leverage Technology:** Investing in e-courts, digital case management, and remote hearings can improve efficiency and accessibility. The India Justice Report 2025 paints a complex picture of India's justice delivery system. While some states boast robust infrastructures and human resources, Meghalaya's moderate ranking highlights the persistent challenges the state faces. Ensuring that the people of Meghalaya and the North East have access to timely and effective justice will require a concerted effort to address systemic issues in the judiciary, police, prisons, and legal aid.

As India works toward meeting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16 — ensuring access to justice for all by 2030 — the experience of Meghalaya will play a crucial role in shaping the country's progress. By prioritizing tailored reforms, the state can serve as a model for other northeastern states, contributing to a more equitable and effective justice system across the nation.

While the report provides a credible snapshot of systemic flaws, I think the report has some data gaps. The quality of data is usually suspect when it is given by the interested parties, in this case, the state governments. Ground realities are often under-reported, leading to analysis not being perfect. Quantitative metrics can be easily tracked, e.g., judge-population ratios, prison occupancy, etc., but issues relating to corruption or procedural delays can never be fully captured or presented. While it is holistic in the sense that it covers four pillars, it fails to look at the quality of the players in the system, be they in advocacy or policing. Also, I wanted to know the exact judiciary expenditure in Meghalaya, but it remained unclear to me. This lack of granularity makes the report less than perfect. But that does not rob the report of any value, because I think it is a good beginning and should pave the way for some judicial reforms, somewhere in the country — Meghalaya included!

(The writer is a former member of the IAS)

Letters to the Editor

Guidebook gains applause, but educators call for deeper reforms

Editor,

For many years, the beautiful state of Meghalaya, known for its scenic hills and rich culture, has quietly faced a serious challenge in its education system with consistently low pass percentages in school examinations. This issue, while often overshadowed by other developments, has had a significant impact on the future of thousands of students across the state. The Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) examinations, conducted by the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE), have long revealed a worrying trend. Year after year, pass percentages have remained well below the national average, with some areas, particularly in the Garo Hills, recording figures as low as 25% in previous years. These numbers reflect a deeper concern that go beyond exam results. They point to gaps in infrastructure, access to quality teaching, and educational support for students.

In recent years, however, the Government of Meghalaya has acknowledged these issues and taken steps to address them. Initiatives like the CM IMPACT Guidebook have been introduced to support SSLC students with structured study material and exam preparation resources. Although not without criticism, such efforts show a

commitment to improving outcomes and ensuring that more students have a fair chance at success. The encouraging news is that Meghalaya has seen signs of progress. The recent pass percentage of nearly 88% in the SSLC exams marks a significant improvement and reflects the combined efforts of students, teachers, and the state's education authorities.

When the CM IMPACT Guidebook was first introduced, few expected it to make the kind of waves it has. But in just a short time, it has become one of the most talked-about tools in Meghalaya's education space; praised, debated, even questioned but undeniably impactful. In a state where students in many regions have long struggled with limited access to quality learning materials, this guidebook arrived like a breath of fresh air. For students in rural areas, where textbooks are sometimes shared between peers, electricity is unreliable, and online access is a luxury, the guidebook became more than just another academic tool. It became a lifeline. Packaged in simple language, filled with targeted summaries, important questions, and key points, the CM IMPACT Guidebook gave students a clear direction during exam preparation. It didn't try to replace teachers, but it gave structure and focus, especially to those who needed it most.

For students in remote corners of the Garo Hills, West Khasi Hills, and other hard-to-reach places, the guidebook did what the internet could not. It reached them. It put something useful

and relevant in their hands. And in doing so, it helped level the playing field — at least a little. Of course, the guidebook didn't come without criticism. Some questioned its heavy emphasis on exam preparation, and others raised concerns about political branding. But for the students who saw their names on the pass list this year, many for the first time in their families, those debates meant little. What mattered was that they had the tools to succeed. And they used them.

This year's improved SSLC pass percentage — nearly 88% — is a clear sign that the guidebook had an impact. Students who once struggled to navigate a vast syllabus finally had something that helped them focus. Teachers had a tool they could rely on to reinforce key points. For parents, it brought hope. And for the government, it was a moment of validation. But beneath the celebrations lies a deeper question: Is this exam-focused approach truly helping students learn, or simply helping them pass?

The CM IMPACT Guidebook, while effective in boosting short-term results, leans heavily towards exam preparedness. It simplifies complex topics, prioritises frequently asked questions, and focuses on key areas likely to appear in the exams. This strategy can be helpful in the final months of revision, but if relied on too early or too much, it risks reducing education to memorisation. Many educators and observers have expressed concern that such an approach may cause students to miss out on developing a solid under-

standing of basic concepts. Foundational skills such as critical thinking, reasoning, and analytical writing are often side-lined when the goal becomes simply to pass. These skills, however, are essential not just for academic success in higher education, but for life beyond the classroom.

Moreover, while the guidebook provides answers, it may not always teach students how to arrive at those answers. Without opportunities to build answer-writing techniques, develop personal expression, or engage in deeper classroom discussions, students risk becoming passive learners. If Meghalaya is to achieve lasting progress in education, the focus must now move beyond the exam hall. The government and education stakeholders must invest in strengthening classroom teaching, training teachers to encourage enquiry-based learning, and designing programmes that build essential life skills. This includes reading, comprehension, logical reasoning, problem-solving, and effective communication.

The CM IMPACT Guidebook is a useful stepping stone, it shows what's possible with focused effort. But it must be part of a larger strategy that puts real learning at the centre. The goal should not only be to improve pass percentages, but to build confident, curious, and capable learners who are prepared for the challenges of the future.

Meghalaya has taken an important first step. Now is the time to walk further — and deeper.

"If opportunity doesn't knock, build a door."

— Milton Berle

The Shillong Times

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Parliament as Supreme

AS the nation continues the debate on judicial overreach into the powers of the executive and parliament, what's obvious is a crisis of confidence in the system as a whole. The recent pronouncements of the Supreme Court, vis-à-vis the powers of governors and the President, led to the present discussions. Vice President Jagdeep Dhankar, who opted to bell the cat when everyone else prevaricated, deserves praise. It's through discussions and debate that sane decisions are arrived at. It runs a course of thesis, antithesis, synthesis.

Obviously, the apex court itself has taken note of Dhankar's statements and avoided asserting its authority further. The Chief Justice's remark while hearing a case from West Bengal that, "we are alleged to have" done (wrong) is pregnant with meaning as to how the judiciary found itself on the defensive. Dhankar stresses that the parliament is as supreme as the people that elected its members; and a shade above the judiciary or the executive -- the other two powerful arms of the establishment. This should be so. The president and the prime minister are elected representatives of the people and they lead the nation from the front. As long as there's a configuration of views between these two mighty entities, based on the will of the elected parliament, the rest should follow as per their will. However, there are issues here too. If these two leaders, collectively or separately, act as dictators with no regard for Constitutional niceties, it could create an embarrassing situation. There has been no face-off between the president and prime minister so far. The judiciary has all along been acting in a manner where it avoided taking liberties in its dealings with the president or the prime minister. The 1975 order by the Allahabad high court setting aside the election of then prime minister Indira Gandhi and the subsequent imposition of Emergency was an exception. The HC order, widely appreciated, changed the course of politics in this nation. The 1977 general election led to a course correction.

All the same, it is advisable that each side minds its own business and provides space for the other arms of the establishment to function smoothly. The President and Prime Minister embody the will of the nation and Parliament reflects the will of the people. As long as elections are free and fair they have every right to hold the fort. With due regard to the Constitution, they must be allowed to have their way. This, though, is also time for them to introspect as to whether delaying their decisions on important matters is not tantamount to subverting the system itself. This is applicable to the judiciary as well, as also to the bureaucracy, which all seem to be specializing in the art of dragging on. This slows down the process of governance, leads to time and cost overruns and undercuts the nation's progress.

Learning in the Age of AI

By Oliver Lyngdoh

Welcome to the world of Tomorrow, Today!

In many classrooms of public and private institutions, there is now a huge difference in the appearances and infrastructure as compared to the traditional classrooms where we studied. Smart Classrooms with intelligent touch-screens are the norm now even in the outskirts of any 'smart' city. Students of tomorrow or should I say of today, do not flip pages or scribble down notes, they now converse with personalised AI tutors, submit essays and reports prompted via generative AIs and solve math problems on smart boards which are instantly corrected and explained by learning AI Bots.

Many institutions now proudly proclaim themselves to be "Smart Campuses".

However, as AI-driven methodologies seep into the very heart of education, a significant question looms over the future of learning: What are we trading off in the name of convenience, speed, and precision?

Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education is no longer a concept of sci-fi movies; educational institutions all over are increasingly integrating AI Tools (read ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude etc) and AI enabled and enhanced learning platforms (read Coursera, Smart Sparrow, Course Magic etc) into their learning activities. AI is being used in a wide range of academic related activities - from personalized learning paths, courses and grading automation to real-time feedback and virtual tutoring. Digital Avatars in the Metaverse are even being introduced as a form of tutoring for distant and online courses.

AI, its benefits and contributions towards the education sector are undeniably significant since using AI, educators can tailor content to suit different students, help break down complex concepts, and offer 24/7 accessibility which in turn can help address issues like student-teacher ratios and inconsistent teaching quality. It's the answer to many inefficiencies in the current education sector.

However, this article isn't focused on what AI might contribute — it's about how overreliance on it could undermine the very essence of education.

The process of learning has always been deeply intertwined with struggle to grasp complex ideas, to experience failure and success, to iteratively refine conceptual understanding in order to develop analytical and problem-solving abilities. AI, however, offers immediate solutions through

prompts and queries, thereby diminishing the space for productive thinking.

The general narrative from old school educators is that students no longer want to explore problems themselves. Students amongst the entire current generation of people are conditioned to expect answers without the struggle to thoroughly grasp or learn the subject matter. We are excellent at refining AI queries and generative prompts but not necessarily at refining thought processes.

This reflects a shift from thinking to prompting, from building mental models to asking AI to generate them. The result is a paradox: students can produce polished assignments and projects but often falter when asked to explain their rationale without digital assistance.

There has been a reported drop in the ability of students and the current generation as a whole to solve open-ended reasoning problems without technological aid, compared to high schoolers in the early millennia. This echoes concerns raised by educators, cognitive and behavioural scientists that the over-dependence on AI Tools may dull critical thinking and reasoning abilities in the formative years.

It may be noted that logical reasoning isn't just about arriving at the correct answer—it's about the thought process and the rationale behind arriving at the solution which demands cognitive patience, the ability to hold multiple ideas in mind, to weigh, debate, and synthesize. These are habitual traits and not just skills. And habits are hard to form when external tools keep intervening before internal thinking even begins.

An aspect that is often overlooked in this shift is the impact on the educators themselves. As AI tools are increasingly being adopted and embedded into curriculum, teaching methods, grading, documentation, administration and even communication, educators now find themselves delegating core responsibilities to machines. Planning Lessons, for example, which was once a well thought out methodology, personalization and creative thought process, is now frequently being prompted into AI powered systems that generate content based on existing data and templates.

The process and the act of teaching is then substituted into the process of managing AI tools. Educators become facilitators of content rather than mentors cultivating

young minds. Digital immersive avatars and online tutoring would lead to educators spending more time curating AI-generated content or reviewing algorithmically graded assignments than interacting with students directly.

Overreliance is dangerous.

When educators stop 'thinking' as teachers and start operating like AI technicians, the essence of education—human connection, moral reflection, spontaneous insight—will be diluted. The classroom - wherever the classroom will be - will become a transactional space instead of a transformational space.

The worse might happen when institutions will use AI as a justification to reduce investment in training, mentorship programs and experiential learning as "AI can teach better". This worrying mindset will under-evaluate the teaching profession itself.

Pushing AI to generate lesson plans, lecture content, grading and evaluating assessments, educators might be pushed into the role of content managers and moderators (Perhaps, some might argue that this may be a new career path). However, the empathetic human element of teaching, off-script storytelling, spontaneous debates, and one-on-one nudges of encouragement—will be minimized. These are needed for mentorship, inspiration and challenge.

Young minds may inadvertently be taught that reflection and creativity are dispensable if educators rely solely on outsourced thought processes via AI tools. This passive consumption of AI-curated knowledge is the antithesis of an engaged learning environment.

The biggest irony is that, while industries are embracing AI, they are continuously seeking 'human' workers who can not only 'prompt' AI but can complement it. A World Economic Forum report highlighted that the top future job skills include "complex problem solving", "originality", "emotional intelligence", and "systems analysis". Yet, if students grow up bypassing these processes thanks to AI tools, they might risk becoming "AI middle managers"—people skilled at using tools but not thinking beyond them.

This raises a chilling concern: Will the future workforce be smart users of AI or intellectually dependent on it?

While acknowledging that AI will shape the coming generation, a failure to cultivate critical thinking and imaginative capacity could leave them as mere cogs, lacking the originality and leadership spark needed to navigate a hyper-automated world.

The wide spread sudden adoption and trend of AI has also introduced a hidden bias in access. While elite institutions can afford sophisticated AI infrastructure, rural and underfunded institutions cannot. This AI divide reinforces educational inequalities. Students with high intrinsic motivation and a strong foundational base are more likely to use AI as a learning aid. Others may lean on it as a crutch. This will further deepen the education divide and skill acquisition. AI, rather than levelling the playing field, risks becoming a new axis of division.

To be clear, this isn't an argument for rejecting AI in education.

The challenge is not AI itself, but uncritical and unbalanced dependence on it—especially in early education stages when cognitive and emotional habits are still forming.

AI and AI enabled tools should be used to augment teaching and the education process and should not replace it. Critiquing AI generated essays and assignments will help build evaluative thinking. Limiting the use of AI in formative assessments will encourage reliance on critical thinking and reasoning. Designing classroom activities that prioritize discussion, ambiguity, and open-ended exploration will prevent over-reliance on AI powered solutions.

Educators must be trained not just in using AI, but in understanding its pedagogical boundaries. The curriculum should evolve to teach with AI, not through it. Over-reliance on a machine should not be encouraged.

As we embark on the path of an AI-enhanced future, education is set to evolve. We stand to gain more from AI and AI enabled tools generally than what we may presume to lose but neither concern is misplaced.

The crucial question is whether we aim to cultivate independent learners or a generation that merely outsources its curiosity to the algorithms of AI and its datasets?

The future of education demands a thoughtful, human-centred, and critical intelligence, not just artificial intelligence. A holistic intelligence should be the definition of knowledge, even in an AI-driven world.

Much Ado About Signalling

By Ellerrine Diengdoh

"Near Don Bosco a driver did swerve, With blinkers that lacked all reserve,

Left signalled for right, Then vanished from sight,

Only to stop for a kwai at the curve!"

Let us now have a serious discussion about traffic signals in Shillong. Not the metallic poles with lights, those are ornamental, part of "The Shillong Beautification Project". I am talking about the indicators in your car, the ones meant to show where you're heading next.

Now, in most places, if you want to go left, you signal left and if you want to go right, you signal right. It is pretty straightforward, that's because humans invented logic thousands of years ago! But in the "Rock Capital of India" (a polite way of saying we're perpetually stoned), the rules of the road come with their own genre of psychedelic interpretation.

Take the right indicator, for example; elsewhere, it means "I am turning right". Here, on the other hand, it might mean "Go ahead, not in a hurry" or even "Oops, a passenger just flagged!".

Now, let's say you genuinely want to turn right. Naturally, you indicate right. But now the car behind you assumes it's a cue to follow you right, because in this crazy system, a right indicator often means, "I'm actually going left, don't follow" or "I need time to think, go ahead". (Are you confused? So is everyone else here!)

And if the driver behind still insists on following you turn, you quickly switch to a left signal. If they're especially determined and try overtaking you on the left, that's when you deploy the nuclear option...hazard lights! Why? To throw them off your scent, of course. It buys you just enough time to disappear down your actual turn, while they sit there trying to figure out what just happened...

When someone stops randomly in the middle of the road and flashes a "right" signal, don't panic! It doesn't mean they are turning, it means, "I've decided to stop here for no reason at all. Good luck figuring it out". Make sense? No? Great, you're officially one of us now!

Now, let's talk about going straight. That is the simplest of all, just turn on the hazard lights! I know! I know! In most places,

hazard lights mean "I'm broken down!" or "Help, I'm dying!". But not in Shillong. Here, hazard lights simply mean, "I'm going straight ahead. I am not in distress! And this is definitely not an emergency!" It is the perfect way to convey that you're not turning, and if anyone mistakes it for a breakdown, well, they are definitely not from these parts!

What happens when someone actually has an emergency? Like real-deal chaos...engine sputtering, smoke pouring out, flames four feet high, driver looking like he's negotiating with the afterlife? The miserable soul turns on the hazard lights and some furious driver will zoom by, honk and scream, "SUROK KPA ME?????" (Your father's road?) No one stops to help! Why, because hazard lights have become so normal here, they've lost all meaning!

Here's a little trivia that I think you should know. When you say "reverse" in Khasi, you say "Bek da dien", which when loosely translated means "back behind". Because just saying "back" wasn't nearly descriptive enough, we had to reinforce it, in TWO different languages! Just in case you thought reverse might also include going sideways or in a circle. It is very much about going the opposite of forward, but with emphasis!

Let us be honest, most of us here never actually sat for a proper driving test (oops, the secret is out!!!) We learned from a dad, an uncle, or (in my case) a boyfriend who screamed "Clutch-clutch-brake-brake-GO-GO-GO!" until we either merged onto a highway or burst into tears! No theory, no rules, just pure caveman instinct!

So here's a humble suggestion, Dear Shillong Traffic Police, please organise a workshop called "Indicators: What They Are and What They're Not." Not just for new drivers, but for all of us! Make it mandatory! Throw in some "phan tungtap" to boost attendance! And if you're feeling generous, bring in some live music, maybe Ed Sheeran, since he's been here before and lived to tell the tale!

Until then people, keep your seatbelts on, your windows down, and your expectations really, really low on the ground. This is Shillong, we don't just drive, WE IMPROVISE!

Letters to the Editor

Nongkhyllem is Not for Sale —Rescind the "Eco-Tourism" Contract Now

Editor,

Something precious is being quietly traded away behind glossy press releases and appealing labels such as "eco-tourism." On April 7, Meghalaya's Forest Department discreetly awarded a Rs 23.60-crore EPC contract to E-Factor Experiences Ltd.—a company specializing in wedding and event management—to construct chalet-style resorts, glass skywalks, and even a water-sports arena inside the 29-square-kilometer Nongkhyllem Wildlife Sanctuary. Such projects threaten to transform a critical refuge for clouded leopards, Hoolock gibbons, and rufous-necked hornbills into nothing more than a boutique amusement park.

While Meghalaya undeniably needs employment and economic opportunities, livelihoods that destroy our last intact forests are merely short-lived gains. They may appear bright momentarily, but leave behind permanent ecological ruin. Alarmingly,

this project has proceeded without a public hearing, a published Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), or clearance from the National Board for Wildlife. Governance now appears conducted by stealth, circumventing crucial environmental laws and democratic accountability.

Adding insult to injury, troubling questions have emerged regarding the source of funds. Initially, speculation pointed to the Meghalaya Environment Protection & Restoration Fund—Rs 1,193 crore accumulated from a 10% "polluter-pays" coal cess following the NGT mining ban. These funds were explicitly collected to rehabilitate rivers corroded by acid mine drainage, not to finance luxurious chalets and adventure parks. Misusing these resources would constitute an egregious betrayal of public trust and ecological responsibility.

Now, even darker suspicions have surfaced involving CAMPA funds. Under the Compensatory Afforestation Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) framework, companies that clear forests elsewhere deposit money specifically to restore degraded forests, reconnect wildlife corridors, and support scientific forest manage-

ment. Meghalaya has accumulated hundreds of crores in CAMPA funds intended solely for ecological restoration. Imagine the betrayal if these same resources finance concrete cottages, steel-and-glass skywalks, and jet-ski facilities inside Nongkhyllem. Just last month, the Supreme Court strongly rebuked Uttarakhand's misuse of CAMPA funds on luxury items like iPhones and furniture. Meghalaya must avoid repeating such shameful mistakes.

Unfortunately, this issue represents not an isolated lapse but a disturbing pattern under the current MDA administration. We have seen: Illegal rat-hole mining returning unchecked, poisoning rivers and claiming lives.

Unregulated coke plants proliferating in East Jaintia, blanketing villages with sulphurous smoke. The 2024 State Investment Promotion Act undermining environmental safeguards and sidelining traditional land custodians.

These initiatives, promoted under the guise of "development," systematically dismantle the very ecological foundations essential for lasting prosperity. Each time citizens protest, officials chant the same mantra: "de-

velopment" and "employment." But genuine development strengthens ecosystems and communities together; it does not hollow the hills for quick revenue or hedge sanctuaries with theme-park paraphernalia.

Nongkhyllem does not need a glass skywalk to be valuable; its value lies in being wild. The genuine value of Nongkhyllem Wildlife Sanctuary lies not in ticket sales or hotel bookings but in its wild integrity—in the hornbills soaring freely above untouched rainforest canopies. Local communities in the surrounding villages have responsibly safeguarded this sanctuary for generations. They deserve improved patrol paths, transparent funding for genuine conservation efforts, and opportunities to establish modest, community-run homestays at the sanctuary's periphery—not intrusive resorts within its heart.

Let us remember: sanctuaries exist to protect wildlife, not to host water-skiing or interpretive centers. If Meghalaya's government truly values ecological integrity, it will withdraw this contract, audit its environmental funds, and recommit CAMPA money to its rightful purpose: planting trees,

safeguarding habitat, and nurturing the very wilderness that makes our hills worth protecting.

Therefore, we urgently call for: Immediate suspension of the E-Factor contract, pending a thorough independent review with full public disclosure of environmental assessments and funding sources.

A transparent, publicly accessible audit of all environmental funds, including the Meghalaya Environment Protection & Restoration Fund, coal-cess, and CAMPA accounts.

A legally binding moratorium on permanent tourism infrastructure within wildlife sanctuaries until independent scientists certify zero ecological harm, and local communities provide informed consent.

If the MDA government truly values "eco-tourism," let it first respect and protect our precious ecosystems: Tourism should tread softly, following behind conservation—not bulldozers and concrete pillars. The people of Meghalaya cherish our green heritage deeply, and we will defend it vigorously—through legal recourse, democratic action, and sustained public vigilance.

The MDA government still has a chance to choose

between genuine stewardship and reckless spectacle. If it chooses the latter, history—and perhaps the courts—will remember Nongkhyllem not as an eco-tourism "success story" but as the moment we crossed the moral red line between caring for creation and cashing it in.

Yours etc.,
Khlur Basan
Shillong-5

A Radical Pontiff Who Served Suffering Humanity, Not Just Catholics

Editor:

As if 2025 were not bleak enough already, the world has just lost a great soul. A pontiff, who radicalized the papacy ever since he took charge in 2013 -- infusing it with more heart than head -- Pope Francis refreshed this global institution. He was more than worthy of the name he adopted from his great namesake, St. Francis of Assisi -- a mystic and saint who, like all saints, touched the bright star of eternity, from within the confines of

time. One of the two popes who ruled during the lifetime of St. Francis envied him, perhaps for his sanctity and closeness to Christ. This is very understandable. Even theologians feel an emptiness once they realize they are merely reading and writing recipe books, when really, they are hungry for food -- meaning, they long to ascend to God. Surrounded by glitter, pomp, and authority -- spiritually-minded popes, I am sure, feel this emptiness even more.

Inveighing against the excesses of capitalism, defending the refugee, the immigrant, and the impoverished, and protesting injustice (including climate change) and war everywhere, Pope Francis managed to combine his immanent (terrestrial and historical) duties with his transcendent ones. A personification of humility and modesty, he was perhaps rare among pontiffs -- because he combined in himself a saint and a pope. Always choosing simplicity, he lived as he spoke. Like a monk and saint, he lived a life of rare simplicity. Refusing the grand papal palace, he lived in a humble room in the Vatican's Santa Marta hostel. Refusing to ride limos, he preferred to walk. About religious-minded homo-

sexuals, he said, "Who am I to judge?" A true leader, he was a humble servant of humanity -- washing the feet of dispossessed refugees (including Muslims, Hindus, and Copts).

The very presence of a saint uplifts the world, mitigating its evil. The world felt safer with guardians like Pope Francis. Thanks to the holy presence of great personages, like HH the Dalai Lama, the world still feels safe. Typically, saints are born at extraordinary historical moments like this. So the world will continue to be safe, despite butchers, like Putin, who are spilling innocent blood with impunity.

After a lifetime of serving not just Christians or Catholics, but humanity as a whole -- Pope Francis is now resting at the feet of Christ and Mary (whom he adored). Although I am not a Christian, I mourn his loss deeply.

May he rest in peace.
Yours, etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

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

"Faith is a passionate intuition."

— William Wordsworth

The Shillong Times

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Kashmir's Bloody Saga Returns

AFTER a longish lull post the Pulwama attack of 2019, Kashmir is back in the news with the senseless killing of at least 26 defenceless tourists in Pahalgam, a veritable scenic beauty of that state. Survivors of this ghastly attack are traumatised. The victims belong to different states while one is from Nepal. Ironically some of the victims were uniformed personnel on a vacation. They included an officer of the Intelligence Bureau from Hyderabad, Lieutenant Vinay Narwal, an Indian Navy officer from Haryana; and Tage Halying, a corporal rank employee of the Indian Air Force from Arunachal Pradesh.

Following this dastardly attack, the armed forces have teamed up to give a fitting reply to the messengers of death. An undercover of the Lashkar-e-Taiba - The Resistance Front (TRF) has claimed responsibility for the dastardly attack on unsuspecting tourists. A top commander of the TRF is reportedly trapped in a gunfight with security forces in Kulgam. Following the incident, about 1500 people have been taken for questioning on the terror attack. Prime Minister Modi had to cut short his trip to Saudi Arabia and chaired the Cabinet Committee on Security to strategize on a fitting response. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has stated that India's response will be such that those who perpetrated the attack would be hunted down and so would the masterminds behind the attack. According to reports from the survivors, the assailants enquired the religious identity of all the male victims before shooting them. This is likely to heighten the Islamophobia that is already creating a climate of mutual distrust and religious polarisation in the country today. Normally terrorists do not attack tourists but this time it looks like they want attention for their action and to revive the climate of terror that had largely subsided in the last five years.

In what can be considered a quick response from the security forces, sketches of at least three of the five terrorists suspected to be involved in the terror attack have been released and they are all Pakistanis. This brings back the focus to Pakistan and its propensity to destabilize the western border and keep India on its toes. Following the Pahalgam attack statements have been elicited from security personnel including former Jammu and Kashmir Police Chief, Shesh Paul Vaid who likened the recent attack as a "Pulwama 2.0 moment." Vaid went further and stated that this attack is a textbook formula of the Hamas-led assault on Israel on October 7. In a situation where religious fundamentalism threatens to disrupt global peace, nations should bond to put an end to terror provoked by such extremism. This attack also warrants that India takes its internal and external security concerns with utmost seriousness and gives a swift response to the perpetrators without revealing too much. Silent but decisive action to disarm the enemies of peace and not political rhetoric is the need of the moment. Religious fundamentalism of all shades is disruptive to world peace.

Letters to the Editor

Pahalgam terror attacks condemnable

Editor,
This Tuesday turned into a nightmare in the scenic meadows of Pahalgam in Kashmir. In a matter of a few minutes, 26 innocent people were brutally shot, among them travellers from the UAE and Nepal. The brutality of the attackers was pre-planned. Only those belonging to their religion were spared by the terror group. The serene tourist spot, just filled with laughter and wonder some moments ago, was reduced to a grim canvas of pain and loss. In the videos that went viral, survivors spoke of a strange silence that followed the gunfire. One woman, whose husband was killed right in front of her, wept uncontrollably and begged Indian Army personnel to end her life too. Such attacks by terrorists targeted against innocent civilians in India are not new.

Yes, we boast of modern civilization with AI, space missions, and sophisticated weapons of war on one hand, and yet continue to see this "medieval brutality" on the other which is a contradiction in terms. Has this not practically torn down the very foundations of compassion and conscience that bind us as human beings in modern civilization? I think we have many more questions than answers. In this hour of

nationwide grief, everyone should speak out, regardless of their religion, caste, or nationality, to condemn such terror attacks and inhuman brutality against humanity. The Government must take a decisive stand against the "country" that sponsors various terror modules. Let the citizens of each state also resolve to be even more vigilant in all possible ways to ensure that terror is never permitted to hold the nation to ransom.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

Fragile peace in Kashmir

Editor,
At the very heart of a tourist resort of Pahalgam, terrorists shot 26 people dead in one of the most heinous attacks in years. The focal point has once again shifted to Kashmir, hitting the economic nerve centre-Tourism. When do we learn the lessons of history? March 4, 2019 Open magazine cover story titled, 'The Last and Lost War of Pakistan' by MJ Akbar gives a bird's-eye view on the art of deception of the Pulwama attack which we have failed to learn from and innocent blood is shed because of the laxity in the intelligence mechanism.

Pakistan is remotely controlled by their Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate and our security services, is working on a thin line of both psychological and diplomatic demands of a sensi-

state. We understand that state and non-state actors are studying unorthodox tactics, using small, swift teams that strike in urban environments with cyber kinetics. To study the human element in a converging battle space, former General Officer Commanding 15 Corps (Srinagar), 21 Corps & Military Secretary Lt Gen Syed Ata Hasnain (Retd), was able to bridge the division and Kashmiri awaam (people) through his hearts and minds theory.

India's presence on the world stage is increasing and with neighbours like Bangladesh becoming belligerent and inching closer to Beijing, watchful radical elements trained in foreign lands can destabilise the eastern fringe. Carol Christine Fair, associate professor in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University book, "In Their Own Words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Taiba," throws a detailed insight into Lashkar-e-Tayyaba's continuing importance and its thrust towards Pakistan's regional and domestic affairs.

Yours etc.,
Christopher Gathphoh,
Shillong-10

Pillars of democracy must align with Constitutional principles

Editor,
Apropos of the editorial

Much will be written about Pope Francis, but here is my take on the life of this bravest Christian prophet of the 21st century. I wish I could have met him in person and also that he would come to Shillong. The only Pope who made it to Shillong was Pope John Paul II in 1986. Such visits by pontiffs were rare and Pope's Francis' visit would have been the rarest of all.

Encounter with Latin Theologians: To begin with, I encountered the theological giants of Latin America during my studies in Bishop's College Kolkata. Thinkers like Gustavo Gutierrez and Juan Luis Segundo, have played a major role in shaping my understanding of the Bible in relation to the society beyond the Church walls. The liberation theology which originated in Latin America in the late 1960s was the result of the oppression by the ruling class on ordinary people. Liberation theology began by questioning the existence of the God of truth and righteousness in the light of oppression and exploitation. Gustavo Gutierrez, also known as the father of Liberation Theology said, "the starting point of Liberation Theology is commitment to the poor, the 'non-person.'" Thus, Liberation Theology laid strong emphasis on justice for the poor and marginalized and considers such theology as the basis approaching the problem of societies.

Pope Francis and Liberation: Pope Francis, born Jorge Mario Bergoglio on December 17, 1936, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, has a rich theological background that is influenced by his experiences in diverse and often challenging socio-political environments. While Pope Francis had shown his leaning towards Liberation Theology and its emphasis on social justice and the preferential option for the poor, he was also critical of some aspects of it and remained cautious about Marxist interpretations of it. According to Thomas Rees, "Pope Francis is uncomfortable with ideologies leaning to the left or the right. He was critical of certain forms of Liberation Theology because they incorporated Marxist analysis and supported violent revolution. He felt that these theologians were imposing their ideas on the poor rather than listening to their views. Also, Pope Francis is even more critical of libertarian capitalism, which blindly claims that all boats would rise with the tide of economic growth, because the people he met in the slums of Buenos Aires were in fact drowning without boats." His pastoral work in Buenos

Pope Francis: Friend Of The Marginalised

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuk

Aires brought him into direct contact with the struggles of the urban poor, which shaped his understanding of justice, mercy and community.

During the meeting with Europe's Jesuit editors in 2022, Pope Francis said, "Realities are more important than ideas". Thus he laid emphasis on human realities rather than on abstract ideas. Pope Francis believed in face to face engagement with people. For him it was not enough to merely communicate ideas but to communicate ideas that come from experience. Moreover, ideas are to be discussed. Discussion is a good thing, but for him it was not enough. It is human reality that is to be discerned. Discernment is what really counts... Ideas are discussed, reality is discerned. Discernment is the charisma of the Society." (Jesuits in Ireland). The humanitarian crises which resulted from the genocide in Gaza had deeply pained the Pope. He was outspoken in his criticism of the Israeli military's harsh tactics and had urged for an investigation into whether Israel's war amounted to genocide? He had called for a ceasefire between Israel and the Hamas militant group and also urged Hamas to release the Israeli hostages it was holding while condemning growing global anti-semitism.

Meghalaya's Workers and Pope Francis: In Meghalaya, workers are the most exploited and oppressed section. The State is known for its low wages and income disparity, with poverty sharply on the rise. Between 2013 and 2016, Thma U Rangli Juki (TUR) spearheaded a workers' rights campaign in the State, highlighting the problems faced by workers in both formal sectors, such as government and private institutions, and informal sectors.

The campaign began with the distribution of pamphlets that enlightened workers about their basic rights and the laws protecting their livelihoods and right to work. Several groups of workers responded to this initiative, leading to the mobilization and unionization of various workers' groups. Among those who came forward to unionize were the workers from Nazareth Hospital, private security guards, street vendors and hawkers, the long-standing casual workers of MeECL, a few private school/college teachers etc.

Meghalaya had never experienced such mobilization before. The fear workers had of confronting their employ-

ers was overwhelming and often overshadowed their existential struggles. Many workers were apprehensive about facing their employers and the potential consequences of doing so.

During this critical moment, Pope Francis assumed the papacy, and his inspiring message to workers around the world became a rallying point for the workers in Meghalaya. His words encouraged them to cast aside their fears, doubts and anxieties; empowering them to confront their employers and advocate for their rights. Pope Francis clearly stated that, "every worker, within the formal system of salaried employment or outside it, should have the right to decent remuneration, to social security and to a pension. Among you here are waste-collectors, recyclers, peddlers, seamstresses or tailors, artisans, fishermen, farmworkers, builders, miners, workers in previously abandoned enterprises, members of all kinds of cooperatives and workers in grass-roots jobs who are excluded from labour rights, who are denied the possibility of unionizing, whose income is neither adequate nor stable. Today I want to join my voice to yours and support you in your struggle." This message resonated deeply with the workers of Meghalaya, motivating them to stand up for their dignity and respect at the workplace.

Laudato si' and Hymnwriter Wisdom: For every indigenous community (Adivasi/Tribal) environment is sacrosanct and is intrinsic to life. This relation is expressed in folklores, songs and manifested through cultures and dances. From West Papua to Chattisgarh to Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills in Meghalaya, the indigenous people have a shared belief, practices and strong bonding with the entire ecological system. The Hymnwriter people of Khasi-Jaintia Hills have a deep respect for nature and possess traditional practices aimed at preserving the environment, for example, the "law kyntang" and "law shnong" or commons. The indigenous wisdom of environment protection lies in reciprocity and interdependence among the whole creation. The environment is relational and is inclusive of land, people, animals, rivers, trees, flora and fauna, sea and sky etc. The negation of one means the negation of others. The concept of interdependence gives people a god-like character such as love,

compassion, co-operation, sharing and solidarity. Pope Francis' encyclical entitled, *Laudato si'* marked a shift towards "integral ecology," which acknowledges the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and spiritual issues. During the workshop entitled Indigenous Peoples' Knowledge and Sciences held in Vatican, Pope Francis encouraged a closer collaboration between indigenous and scientific knowledge to address climate change, the loss of biodiversity, and threats to food and health security facing the world today. He laid emphasis on reciprocal listening: "Listening to indigenous peoples in order to learn from their wisdom and from their lifestyles, and at the same time listening to scientists, in order to benefit from their research." His sharp call was that, "all of us are called to an ecological conversion: a commitment to saving our common home and to fostering intergenerational solidarity in order to preserve the life of future generations, rather than wasting resources and aggravating inequality, exploitation, and destruction".

Who Am I to Judge? Pope Francis was the voice of compassion and inclusivity, particularly for marginalized communities such as the LGBTQ+ individuals and refugees striving for a better life. His unwavering support is deeply rooted in the teachings of the Bible, which advocate for love, acceptance, empathy and mercy. He even questioned those who claim to be Christian, but behave in an ungodly manner. He pungently remarked, "It is hypocrisy to call yourself a Christian and chase away a refugee or someone seeking help, someone who is hungry or thirsty, toss out someone who is in need of help. If I say I am a Christian, but do these things, I am a hypocrite".

In a world fraught with prejudice, hate and fear, Pope Francis reminds us of the sanctity of every human life, emphasizing that we are called to love one another without judgment. His famous phrase, "Who am I to judge?" reflects a profound understanding of human dignity and the complexity of individual journeys. This message echoes the core Christian principle that all people are deserving of respect and compassion, regardless of their backgrounds or identities.

While we mourn and await the election of the new Pope, let us learn and live up to the teachings of this great Pope. "Leit suk sha Dwar U Blei" (Travel well to the courtyards of the Lord), Papa Francis.

These cases highlight how judicial review acts as a safeguard against unconstitutional laws and executive overreach. However, the editorial has rightly advised that "each side should mind its own business and provide space for the other arms of establishment to function smoothly." It has also rightly stated that, "it is time for the three organs of the government to introspect as to whether delaying decisions on important matters is not tantamount to subverting the system itself as this slows down the process of governance, leads to time and cost overruns and undercuts the nation's progress."

Yours etc:
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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Putin's India Visit in the Current Global Context

By Ajay Patnaik

Since the signing of the "Declaration on the India-Russia Strategic Partnership" in October 2000, the summit meetings between the Prime Minister of India and the President of the Russian Federation are the highest institutionalised dialogue mechanisms, where both countries take stock of their relations at the highest level and impart direction and impetus to them. The visits alternate between the leaders of each country. Since the Indian Prime Minister visited Russia last year, on July 8-9, 2024, the next visit by the Russian President is expected this year.

Following the start of the Ukraine War in February 2022, Western sanctions and diplomatic isolation made Russia look for partners outside the West. Russian President Vladimir Putin has used every opportunity to meet with leaders in forums like BRICS, SCO and G-20. But more useful and helpful are stand-alone bilateral meetings. Russia has tried both multilateral and bilateral formats. In 2022 itself, all the five Central Asian leaders attended the Victory Day Parade in Moscow, which is held every year on 09 May to commemorate victory over Nazi Germany in 1945. This year, Russia has invited leaders from several other "friendly" countries including India and China to the 80th anniversary of the victory.

For Russia, this commemoration has acquired special meaning following the war in Ukraine. One of the main goals of Russia's Special Military Operations in Ukraine has been "de-Nazification". The invitation to leaders of friendly countries is not just aimed at demonstrating the reliability of Russia's partnership but also to give a message that fascists still use the garb of nationalism to break multi-ethnic and multi-cultural countries. Thus, the fight against them is still relevant and essential.

But more than meeting on the sidelines of multilateral events, the annual strategic partnership meet format has been more productive. India-Russia relations have grown from strength to strength on this basis. Since 2000, the highest leadership of both countries have been meeting until the start of the Ukraine war. After a gap of two years Modi visited Russia in 2024 and this year the visit from Putin is due. In 2021, when Putin visited India last, there was a focus on transportation corridors like the International North-South Corridor or INSTC and Vladivostok-Chennai corridor. The meeting, the next year in Samarkand (SCO meet), took place against the background of the Ukraine war. Russia's interests were mainly focused on how to make friendly countries understand its position on Ukraine. Modi in Samarkand made the famous statement that "now is not an age of wars". Modi's meeting with Putin took place during the BRICS Summit in Kazan in 2024, which followed the 22nd Annual Strategic Partnership Summit in July 2024. These meetings help keep trade and economic relations going regardless of sanctions against Russia. India kept up its Russian oil purchases despite calls from the West to stop the imports. India has never voted against Russia in the UN on the Ukraine issue which has been highly appreciated by Moscow.

The next meeting of the two leaders in 2025 will be held in India in the backdrop of some major shifts in the global economic and political environment. In political terms, Russia is being pressed by the US to reach a ceasefire agreement with Ukraine. While Russia

has shown a desire to end the war, it is not willing to do so at the cost of the gains it has made in three years nor at the cost of its other core security interests like opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine. Notwithstanding the Easter Ceasefire declared by Russia (30 hours on 19-20 April), a real ceasefire seems to be still eluding the two countries. The US president from time to time threatens to impose more tariffs if Russia delays the ceasefire agreement.

Today the US tariff threat hangs over all the trading partners of America. This includes India as well, which despite being willing and working to negotiate a trade deal with the new US Administration, is not sure what the future will hold given the unpredictable nature of the US leader. Countries are aware that making concessions would lead to demands for further concessions, which may be detrimental to their economies. To cushion themselves from more shocks, India and Russia need to further expand trade and economic relations among themselves, as well as with other countries. For example, China has recently been negotiating with Vietnam, Cambodia and Malaysia to expand bilateral trade. India and Russia have to strengthen their trade and investment ties, with Indian companies investing in Russia's oil and gas, pharmaceuticals, and IT sectors, and Russian companies investing in India's energy, infrastructure, and manufacturing sectors. All these have to be done without antagonising the US. And that requires deft negotiations and strategies.

The global geopolitical, geo-economic and strategic contexts have changed since Trump became President. Russia is no longer an outcaste, which the US is engaging to get a deal on Ukraine. Moscow can be helpful in talks for a US-Iran nuclear deal. The US also wants energy deals with Russia. In this background, Putin's visit to New Delhi would receive much global attention. Since India is also close to the US, the Americans may indicate to New Delhi what they wish from the talks with Russia.

Modi may or may not visit Moscow for the May Day Parade, due to other engagements on 09 May. But what is more important is the visit of Putin this year in the Strategic Partnership format. This is imperative not just from the point of trade and economy, but also for the possible involvement of India and other partners in BRICS in the post-ceasefire agreement if it happens at all. Given Russia's opposition to European peacekeepers, those from other countries may be acceptable to Moscow. Even UN peacekeeping would require neutral powers like India to step in, which would be acceptable to both Moscow and Kyiv. Putin's visit to India is now confirmed, only dates are to be announced. On March 28, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov announced that President Vladimir Putin had accepted the invitation from the Indian side and would be visiting India. Preparations for the visit are underway. The trade and tariff issues and post-war peace efforts would require Moscow and New Delhi to be strategically engaged, which is best served by the meeting of leaders at the highest level. This makes the forthcoming visit of Putin significant.

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"Courage is grace under pressure."
— Ernest Hemingway
The Shillong Times

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Third-world cities

URBAN planning is an area the nation has largely ignored. As a result there is chaos as every city grows by leaps and bounds in its own unplanned manner. City planners and local authorities have done precious little when it comes to planned development. In this context, an initiative in Haryana is a welcome step forward and should serve as a model for other cities to follow. The project, as a sample, covers no more than 2.4 km at a width of 30 metres, done with an allocation of Rs 23 crore. But, the message from this initiative is important. Shaded footpaths for pedestrians, facility for rainwater harvesting, safe track for cyclists and proper care for hundreds of fully grown trees are arranged. Appreciably, some private entities too have put in their mite. The state government has made it clear that it seeks to promote not just infrastructure development but human well-being too.

The road systems across this country do not provide separate space for cyclists and scooterists. Most roads do not even have pedestrian paths, other than some streets in metros and other cities. Cities like London are a marvel also because of the unique way their road infrastructure was shaped. Footpaths in central streets are wider than the roads laid out for vehicles. They are beautifully lined up with trees. Walking through such streets is a pleasure. Cyclists and two-wheeler riders too can move around effortlessly. In modern habitations like Dubai, there are the footpaths for pedestrians which are mostly around residential areas, whereas there are no cycles or two-wheelers and no pedestrians on long walks. Streets in Singapore are well laid-out with sufficient space for walking and adequate tree cover. India being a huge entity, and with little concern for pedestrians and scooterists, the scenario remains pathetic across cities. New Delhi was a planned city but with the flooding of people from all around and with a profusion of vehicles in the streets, the city has not been able to cope with the infrastructure that was built several decades ago. This is despite the improvements brought about since the time of the Asiad in 1982. Similar is the plight of capital cities like Bhubaneswar, Gandhinagar and Chandigarh, the so-called "planned" cities. Improvements matching with the changing times and pressures have not been undertaken.

Both the western and eastern metropolises - Mumbai and Kolkata - are chaos personified when it comes to daily transportation and residential spreads. The drains in these cities are in a pathetic condition. The metro rail system first introduced in Kolkata and much later in Delhi and Mumbai, took only a part of the pressure. So too with Bengaluru, where travel is a huge struggle. In all these scenarios, the governments and city corporations simply sat back and blinked as population strengths multiplied. This reinforces the western perception that India is a poor, third world country.

Shillong, The Smart City Project & The Main Stakeholder, The Public

By Toki Blah

I am now 77 years old and I have seen the growth of Shillong from that of a small sleepy hill station, its development into an unplanned capital of Meghalaya and finally into what we are experiencing today, a sprawling concrete nightmare of a city left to rot and fester in its own folly. If traffic moves one metre every ten minutes, it's an occasion to rejoice. If a student can get to school on time its an occasion for a special puja. Parking space wherever available is an occasion to thank God Almighty. Drinking water, supplied by both the Municipal Board and the PHE passes through city drains and in most cases is fecal contaminated. With no alternative, we are forced to drink it. We empty overflowing septic tanks into the nearest drain and seem least bothered by the lack of infrastructure for waste disposal. At the pace we are sliding downhill, in another five years, any 5 minute downpour will require inflatable rubber boats to ferry commuters around.

The only entity that seems to thrive in the vanishing beauty of Shillong is politics. The KHADC proudly claims that it owns the Wah Umkhrah but appear least bothered that its property has been turned into a stinking sewer. I am concerned to see this once beautiful hill station deteriorating into an unlivable hell-hole before my very eyes. And its not me alone. Almost every citizen of this city, except perhaps for those elected and tasked with the mandate for Shillong's well-being and welfare, are worried over the city's eventual fate. So is it surprising that the Smart City Project should be of such vital interest to this city? Trouble is a Government that shuns transparency especially about projects that involve spending. 100% of the people have heard about the Shillong Smart City project. Shame is that 90% of them are still in the dark as to what it is all about.

A Shillong DDK panel discussion, apparently aimed at removing the cloak of secrecy covering the project, aired on April 18, 2025 and titled "DDK Straight Talk: Shillong Smart City - grand vision and ground reality" and another media interview of the Minister Urban Affairs are a must watch for those who wish to understand as to what the project is all about. Both programmes dwelt on the ongoing Smart City project that has been ongoing ever since 2015. The public

is interested in knowing how the project plans to transform Shillong into a habitable sophisticated urban habitation. In the public's search for transparency and accountability about the project. The shows mentioned above, revealed two important facts. First, it revealed the sad fact that it is our own ignorance of civic governance that is the main cause for Shillong's decay. People migrate (in hordes) from rural to urban areas in search of better social amenities and improved livelihoods. Its happening to Shillong yet we are in denial of it. We continue to believe, and imagine in the supposed joy, bliss, ecstasy and thrill of simple rural life that is supposed to retain rural folks in their pristine surroundings. Sorry but its a myth that doesn't exist in real life! Reality is that rural poverty is rising. Surviving in the villages is becoming a struggle. Nothing is happening there. Villagers see hope

we turn to the Government and its Urban Affairs Department, only to find that this shallow institution is as lame a duck as the Dorbars in this matter. Is it therefore difficult to understand our thirst to know more about the smart city concept?

The second fact exposed, in the two social media videos mentioned above, is a very disturbing revelation about the Smart City Project even 15 years after its inception. They showed that apparently those in power have yet to realize as to who is the main stakeholder in the project and whom the project is to benefit. In the public domain the common man believes the project is for the benefit of contractors. In the DDK panel discussion there was no Government participant, (though it was mentioned that they were invited to participate). So there was no Government official to explain and clarify, to the panelist as well as the

The only entity that seems to thrive in the vanishing beauty of Shillong is politics. The KHADC proudly claims that it owns the Wah Umkhrah but appear least bothered that its property has been turned into a stinking sewer.

in Shillong and urbanization is a reality we have to live and deal with. The sad fact is also that we have failed to plan for this and have not set up the institutions nor the infrastructure to absorb this rural influx into our towns.

In the rest of the world Municipalities, Municipal corporations and Urban Development Authorities manned by elected representatives of the people and assisted by urban development experts make policies, plan the development and mobilize resources for the future needs of their respective towns and cities. The people of Shillong ably aided by blind politicians and tradition worshipping pressure groups have discarded such proven wisdom and instead entrusted the future of Shillong to our traditional Dorbars. Fact is our Dorbars are both legally and temperamentally ill equipped and totally at a loss on how to deal with civic governance. Frantic efforts to form workable Snyujks of Dorbars to deliver civic needs to the city have simply turned into pathetic efforts easily exploited by politicians. In desperation

viewers, what the project is all about and for whom it is being implemented. The discussions failed to remove the growing belief that the Smart City project is a strictly top down approach where the public is simply expected to swallow whatever is rammed down their throat and is not expected to ask too many uncomfortable questions, even if it is in public interest. For example there were those disturbing pictures of ongoing construction activities along the Wah Umkhrah indicating a sewer under construction rather than the improvement of a water front; or the construction of a mall-like structure instead of parking lots in PB.

We the public would like to know who were the consultants who came up with such distressing concepts; the architect who designed these public disasters and most worrying the authority that approved them without consulting the main stakeholder - the public! It is not the first time officials have shown this utter disdain and contempt for public concern. Time they remembered they are there to serve rather

than to sneer! Time they are reminded that the public of Shillong are the main stakeholders. That turning a river into a sewer is not what the public wants and that if that is what is happening under the Smart City Project, then there are questions to be asked, answers to be given and hopefully egoistic heads that need to roll.

In a media interview with the Minister of Urban Affairs again on the Smart City project, I don't know about others who saw it but I was shocked. It was not so much the answers given, though they were bad enough, but the attitude and body language of the person being interviewed that was so offending. The impression being conveyed is, "why bother me with these trivial matters of public interest. I don't know and I don't care what is going on in the Smart City Project. Don't bother me, I have better things to do. The project is going on and that is all that people need to know. We will see what can be done only when the 2nd instalment comes." The conceit, the arrogance and the pomposity of the Minister is to be seen to be believed. The Minister seems to forget or is ignorant that he is an elected representative of the people. How he got elected I am least interested to know, but as an MLA and Minister he is there to serve the people. He is a servant of the public, not their ruler. He has to show an interest in activities and projects that impact on their welfare.

At this juncture the people of Shillong, the main stakeholders, are worried and deeply concerned on how the Smart City Project under the Minister's department is going to give their city a better environment and a better facility. The Minister and his officials have so far failed to give any assurance on this aspect. It is therefore requested that the Urban Affairs Minister arrange a press conference where he and his officials (without the presence and assistance of the Chief Minister) explain to the public of Shillong all about the Smart City Project and its progress. Our concerns need to be empathically understood, not scornfully swept under the carpet. What happens to Shillong and the future of our children is important to us if not to you. We are stakeholders who have been kept in the dark for too long. The time for explanations and enlightenment has arrived. Please don't disappoint!

Pahalgam Massacre New Delhi mobilising world!

By Dr DK Giri

The cold, blooded murder of innocent tourists in Pahalgam has shocked not only India but the whole world. World powers have swiftly reacted to the dastardly attack by the terrorist camouflaged as Indian army personnel. Apparently the spot chosen by the assailants was not patrolled by the army or the paramilitary. No doubt, irrespective of the absence of security personnel, the ambush of unsuspecting tourists indicates the failure of intelligence. There are complaints of other lapses that led to this bloodshed. Those issues can be debated and investigated later. The important question to ask and watch is how the Indian government is reacting to this incident.

At the time of writing the death count is 28 and quite a few others injured and in critical condition among the dead were two defense persons and two foreigners: One from Nepal and another from UAE. It is not the number of casualties but the manner of

by the terrorists coming from across the border? The second related question is, how does India destroy the military-cum-militant machine that manufactures thousands of terrorists every year? Indian Army captures or kills some terrorists and more are sent by Pakistan. This ghastly cycle will continue until the terrorist bases in Pakistan are destroyed. It should be like the IDF (Israel) going after Hamas terror network and infrastructure. It may not be an overstatement to say that the killing of 22 April is compared to that of the 7 October attack on innocent Jews of Israel.

The sympathy and support from world powers have been pouring in. Again some observers suggest that America will take the terrorists out of Pakistan. That is at best a wishful thinking. India has to protect its own citizens. Once New Delhi begins to do so, the other friendly countries will support it.

New Delhi has to fol-

The terrorists called out the tourists from their tents ask them to identify their religion if they were to ascertain if they were Hindus, and then they shot the victims point blank.

the cruelty that has shaken the conscience of humanity across the world. The terrorists called out the tourists from their tents ask them to identify their religion if they were to ascertain if they were Hindus, and then they shot the victims point blank. A lady begged to be killed as her husband was shot in her presence. She was spared her life and was advised to report the killing to Prime Minister Modi. A local pony man lunged at a terrorist to save a tourist and paid with his life. Such pathetic, humanistic as well as gory details of the massacre are gradually emerging in the public domain.

The terrorist attack is clearly the handiwork of the Pakistani terror network. Whether the imminent attack was lost on the intelligence of the government is another point of debate. Observers point out that Pakistan's ruling establishment had blamed India for aiding and abetting Baloch Liberation Army in hijacking of a local train in Balochistan and murder of hundreds of hostages on March 11 this year. India had flatly denied any involvement in that terrorist act. Pakistan had rejected the denial and the Pakistani army had sworn revenge.

The other conjecture is about the strategic timing of the attack which coincided with the visit of American Vice President J.D. Vance. Although Vance is on a partly personal visit, he is outspoken on international affairs; therefore it was done during his presence on Indian soil in order to draw international attention.

Third, the choice of the spot for the attack; Pahalgam is a major tourist attraction. It is reported that there were more than two thousand tourists camping in that area on that fateful day of the tragedy. For some reason, there was not a single member of State Armed Forces - Army, Para-Military or even the local police - at the Baisaran meadow which is just five kms from Pahalgam town and a designated tourist spot.

Be that as it may, innocent lives have been lost. The government's claim of making the valley of Kashmir free of terrorism also got busted. So the government as well as the people are raring to go after the terrorists wherever they may be hiding. The public anger will force the government and the army to take some drastic action to bring the culprits to book.

The larger question is, what should India do to eliminate sporadic, unanticipated and inhuman attacks

low a two-pronged strategy. One, to mobilise diplomatic support for a decisive attack on the terrorist hideouts and bases in Pakistan. New Delhi has initiated certain non-military steps like declaring the Pakistani High Commissioner non-grata, cancelling the Indus Water Treaty that will choke Pakistan without water and openly declaring that it will not stop at anything short of stoppage of supply of terrorists from Pakistan.

India is a democracy. Citizens, military officers, and strategic experts have started debating if an all-out military intervention into Pakistani territory would be a prudent step. That is not for non-military persons who are not at the helm to suggest any concrete action. It is not a calculation whether India will succeed in weeding out terrorists from Pakistan. It is unavoidable for India to go in search of the terrorists. Pakistan should cooperate with India to get them. Given Pakistan's deceptive behavior, it is too much to expect that Islamabad will transparently extend a hand to India; Remember, Pakistan was sheltering Osama Bin Laden in its full knowledge while the Americans were desperately hunting for him.

Whatever the nature of response, it has to be decisive in the sense that terrorism in Indian soil becomes a thing of the past. It is so worrying that, as a nation, when things tend to become normal people begin to live in relative peace and security. Pakistan throws a spanner in the works by sponsoring terrorist activities like those in Mumbai, Uri, Pathankot, Pulwama and Pahalgam. This is intolerable by any human or political standard. New Delhi has been mobilizing the world relentlessly against terrorism by raising it in any international forum. Yet, the scourge of terrorism does not stop inflicting India. But, not just India, many other countries in the world have been victims of this heinous act of terrorism.

The world should rally together to fight this evil. New Delhi has been advocating against terrorism. Now it is time it should lead in action as well. If the countries, the peace-loving ones, do not support India, the bell may toll for them. It is an international menace. Let India give this message loud and clear through diplomacy as well as forceful action whenever necessary. The time has come to do that now.---INFA

(The author is Professor of Practice, NIIS Group of Institutions)

Letters to the Editor

Retired Teachers' Plight: A Plea for Timely Pension Implementation

Editor,
Through your esteemed daily, we bring to light the dire situation of retired teachers of schools and colleges under the Deficit Grant-in-Aid system in our state. Despite their decades-long service, they face financial hardship due to delays in implementing the pension scheme, under the Centralized Provident Fund.

The Education Department's directive (Letter No. DSEL/SEC-NG/MISC/8/2023/115, dated Shillong, 21st November 2024) to transfer CPF accounts to the Meghalaya Non-Government School and Colleges Centralized Pension and Provident Fund has left many without a steady income. Moreover, teachers employed under this system did not receive their salary from the month following their retirement, adding to their hardship. The Teachers' Provident Fund was their only hope for survival and supporting their families. Now, with the transfer of their entire accumulated CPF amount to the centralized fund, they are left without any means to meet their basic needs and medical expenses.

We urge the authorities to expedite the pension scheme

implementation and provide a tangible timeline. Timely action would alleviate financial hardships and acknowledge the contributions of these dedicated educators. We hope for immediate action to ensure the well-being of our retired teachers.

Yours etc.,
J. Chhetry,
Via email

On banning porn sites

Editor,
Referring to the Shillong Times report under the captions: 'Ban porn sites: Mahila Cong Urge CM' (ST April 18, 2025) I, the undersigned fully support the views expressed by the Mahila Congress. Free access to porn sites has adversely and dangerously affected the minds and behaviour of today's youth. No wonder we see around us the degradation of moral values due to the harm done to today's generation by immoral web sites. It is a common sight to observe youths in street corners, playgrounds and parks spending hours immersing themselves in surfing obscene sites which necessarily affect their positive thinking and mode of behaviour. In law 'obscene' generally refers to materials or acts considered offensive and indecent which often depict sexually explicit scenes to the public and violate the

community standards of decency. I appeal to all parents, responsible citizens and Dorbar Shmang to raise their voices in solidarity and with one voice to urge the banning of all immoral websites.

Yours etc.,
AS Mawlong,
Via email

Condolences for terror victims

Editor,
The members of Police Bazar Welfare Society, express our heartfelt and deepest condolences and profound grief over the brutal and inhuman murder of innocent tourists in Pahalgam, Kashmir by terrorists. This heinous act of violence is not only a grave tragedy but a black spot on civilisation and a heartbreaking moment for the entire nation. Such acts of terror have no place in a civilized society and must be condemned by one and all in the strongest terms.

We pray for the eternal peace of the departed souls. May God grant strength and courage to members of the bereaved family during this time of immense sorrow. We also extend our unwavering support to the efforts of the armed and security forces in restoring peace and ensuring justice.

Yours etc.,
SL Singhania,
Via email

East Khasi Hills DSC Results, 2025

Editor,
I am writing to express my concerns and doubts regarding the recently declared results for the posts of LDA & Grade IV of DSC East Khasi Hills District. As a concerned citizen from this district, I am disappointed to see that the selection process seems to have several discrepancies. The main issues are that the marks obtained by candidates in the written exams and personal interviews are not displayed, making it difficult for us to understand the selection criteria. It also appears that candidates from outside the district have been preferred over candidates from our East Khasi Hills District. This raises questions about the fairness and transparency of the selection process because it has clearly stated that preference would be given to the candidates of its own district in the advertisement. Therefore, I would kindly request the Deputy Commissioner and Chairman, District Selection Committee, East Khasi Hills District to clarify and provide detailed marks of all the candidates who had appeared in the written examination. Language test, and personal interviews and also

the district of origin of the selected candidates and also those who are not selected in the personal interview need to be made public. I hope you will look into these concerns and take necessary actions to ensure transparency and fairness in the recruitment process.

Yours etc.,
Rueben Syiemlieh,
Via email

Equal Justice for all regions must be India's priority

Editor,
The recent terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir was a horrific act of violence and must be unquestionably condemned by all. Targeting civilians is inexcusable, and I commend the Indian government for its swift action in countering the terrorists responsible for these killings.

But what saddens me most is the stark difference in the response of the government when tragedies like these take place in the North-east. Repeatedly, justice is postponed or even denied. The 2021 Nagaland Oting massacre when 13 innocent civilians were shot dead by security personnel and the Government denial to go ahead with any criminal

proceedings against them. The 2022 Meghalaya Mukroh firing when six civilians were killed by Assam police and the continued Manipur conflict also bring to light this trend of apathy. There have been numerous atrocities perpetrated by the Indian armed forces in North East region in the past, but until now, in the majority of instances the victims have not yet seen justice.

This trend of differential treatment is a basic challenge to our commitment to equality before law. Can we seriously say we are one nation when the devaluation of human life seems to depend on where you are? The Constitution provides equal protection to all citizens, yet these differences imply that some Indians are more equal than others.

I appeal to the Indian government to drop this discriminatory policy and maintain equal rights for all citizens, regardless of race, religion, or region. Pain has no majority or minority but is felt by everyone. The country needs to insist on consistent accountability and fairness in the quest for justice.

Yours etc.,
Carmel Fedrick Malngcho,
Sohra

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"We do not remember days, we remember moments."

— Cesare Pavese

The Shillong Times

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Aftermath of Pahalgam Terror Attack

AT a time when global collaboration is the need of the hour and countries sharing boundaries gain more from economic exchanges, the terror attack at Pahalgam by terror outfits with links to Pakistan's Lashkar-e Tayaba have managed to sour relations between India and Pakistan to a point of no return. The Pahalgam event led to immediate action on the part of both countries. India abrogated the 1960 Indus Water Treaty and closed the Integrated Check Post (ICP), the only land crossing station at Attari which is also the only trading point between India and Pakistan. Pakistan's Power Minister Awais Lekhari said in a post on X that India's reckless suspension of the six decades old Indus Water Treaty mediated by the World Bank is an act of warfare. The Indus Water Treaty split the Indus River and its tributaries between the neighbours and regulated the sharing of water. It had withstood two wars between the two neighbours since then and undergone severe strains in ties at other times. Since India is an upper riparian country the breakdown of the treaty would have devastating impacts on Pakistan the lower riparian country as it depends a lot on these rivers for its irrigation, farming and power generation.

While India and Pakistan do not engage in much direct trade, Pakistan relies heavily on imports from India particularly vegetables, fruits, soybeans, poultry feed along with raw materials for pharmaceuticals. Estimates suggest that nearly 50% of medicines manufactured in Pakistan utilise raw materials sourced from India. These developments could have a significant impact on Pakistan's economy. But that is not a one-sided loss. Indian farmers growing cotton and other agricultural products may suffer from the closure of this trade route, especially in the Amritsar-Attari region. In fact, Pakistan's economy is already heavily aid-dependent and the impact on that country could be far more than it can envisage.

As an act of retaliation, Pakistan has now closed its airspace to Indian carriers. This means that they would now have to alter their flight paths. While most westbound flights to destinations in Central Asia, West Asia, Europe, the UK, and North America use Pakistan's air space, departing flights from India's northern airports, such as Amritsar, New Delhi, and Lucknow now have to do a detour via Gujarat or Maharashtra before turning west. Naturally this means more fuel use and hence more expensive air fares. This was evidenced in 2019 when as a consequence of the Balakot airstrikes, Indian carriers suffered losses to the tune of Rs 550 crore between February and July 2019. This tit-for-tat action between the two countries could have long term economic impacts for both. It is time for Pakistan – an aid dependent country to realise that its support for the terror architecture in its soil to give India the thousand cuts – an agony carried over from the Partition years is no longer tenable. Economics decides the progress of nations and for that peace and co-operation are fundamental tenets.

The great legacy of Pope Francis

By Barnes Mawrie, SDB

The sudden demise of Pope Francis on April 21, Easter Monday morning, has left the world shock stricken. Just on Easter Sunday morning the pontiff gave his Urbs et Orbis blessing to the throng of believers gathered at the Vatican Square. However, his death during the Easter Octave is theologically and spiritually symbolic, signifying his lifelong cherished message of "hope." Just as Easter is the greatest symbol of hope for the mortal humans, because Christ through his resurrection has conquered sin and death once and for all, so too Pope Francis' death on this very day, inspires hope for all Christians, namely, that Christ would raise him to eternal life and so too everyone who believes in him.

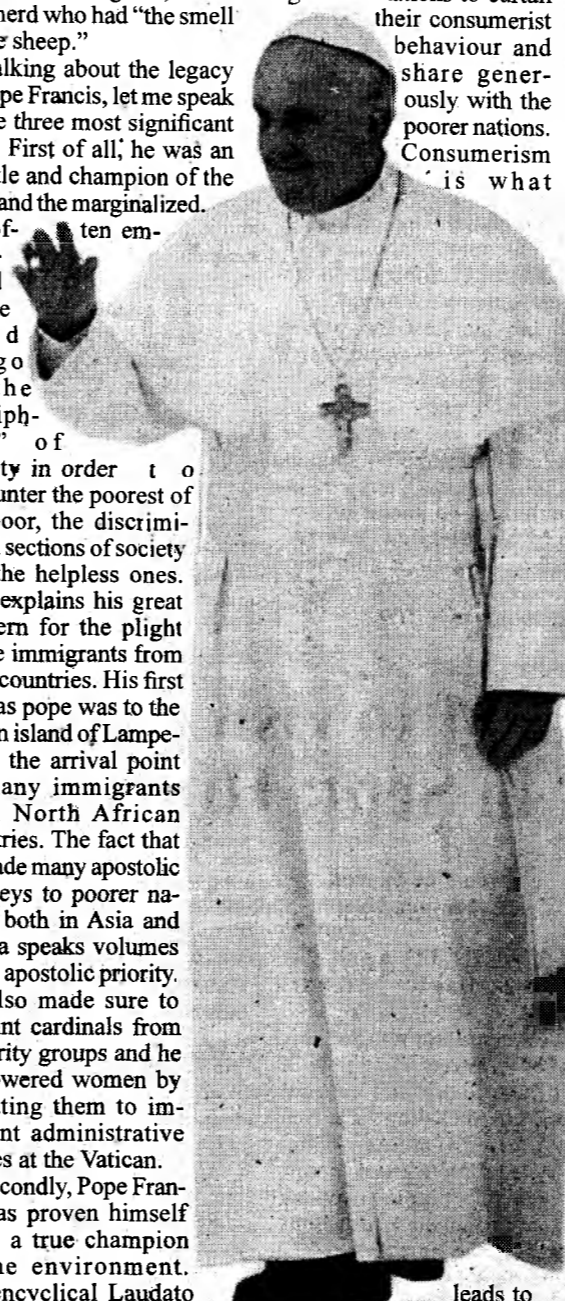
Jorge Mario Bergoglio was born to immigrant Italian parents on 17th December 1936. He joined the Jesuit Congregation in 1958 and was ordained a priest in 1969. In 1973 he was elected provincial superior of Argentina. He obtained his Master Degrees in Philosophy and Theology from Buenos Aires and taught in the seminary. In 1998 he was appointed Archbishop of Buenos Aires by Pope John Paul II. Later during the Consistory of 2001, he was made a cardinal by the same Pope. After the shocking resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in February 2013, Cardinal Bergoglio was elected pope to the surprise of Christians all over the world. Pope Francis stands for many "firsts" in the history of papacy. He is the first pontiff from outside of Europe, the first from Latin America. He is the first Jesuit pope and the first from immigrant parents. When it comes to his papal lifestyle, he also distinguishes himself as the "first" in many aspects. He is the first to take the name of St. Francis of Assisi (therefore known as Pope Francis). True to his patron's name, Pope Francis has voluntarily chosen to live a simple and humble lifestyle. He refused to live in the papal palace but chose to live as an ordinary prelate in Domus Sanctae Marthae hospice. He often ate with

the Vatican staff and not in his dining room. A leader of over 1.3 billion Catholics in the world, yet he lived a very unassuming life, a true shepherd who had "the smell of the sheep."

Talking about the legacy of Pope Francis, let me speak of the three most significant ones. First of all, he was an apostle and champion of the poor and the marginalized. He often emphasized on the need to go to the "periphery" of society in order to encounter the poorest of the poor, the discriminated sections of society and the helpless ones. This explains his great concern for the plight of the immigrants from poor countries. His first visit as pope was to the Italian island of Lampedusa, the arrival point of many immigrants from North African countries. The fact that he made many apostolic journeys to poorer nations both in Asia and Africa speaks volumes of his apostolic priority. He also made sure to appoint cardinals from minority groups and he empowered women by elevating them to important administrative offices at the Vatican.

Secondly, Pope Francis has proven himself to be a true champion of the environment. His encyclical Laudato Si published in 2015, is truly the magna carta of the Church's teaching on care for the environment. The encyclical is truly a holistic approach to the problem of climate change. In it he was able to demonstrate the inherent connection between politics, economics, science and spirituality. According to him, solving ecological problems calls for ecological conversion of humans for the two are interconnected.

This implies putting an end to greed, injustice, pride and ambition. Pope Francis called for world solidarity and urged rich nations to curtail their consumerist behaviour and share generously with the poorer nations. Consumerism is what



leads to unabated exploitation of Mother Nature which consequently leads to more destruction of the planet and then the crisis of climate change," he said. His teaching on this resonates the words of Gandhiji who said "the earth has enough for everyone's need but not enough for everyone's greed." In his later encyclical Fratelli Tutti published in 2020, he reiterates this same theme of sharing and solidarity.

Thirdly, Pope Francis has left the world a legacy of hope and peace. He took great trouble to strengthen ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. He was the first pope to visit many Muslim countries; met Muslim leaders and forged friendships with them. He never ceased to speak of peace and reconciliation and he was acutely pained by the on-going wars in Ukraine and Palestine and urged their leaders to find a peaceful solution. His last message on Easter morning before his death was to call for peace in these countries and urging Christians to pray for this intention.

Over eight centuries ago, a humble friar by the name of Francis of Assisi, came to remind the Church and congregation of Jesus who lived a poor and humble life. He brought reform to an almost decadent Church of the time. His message and his personal example, resounded loud in the Church and brought about a great conversion within. From the scandalous lifestyle of pomp and extravagance, the Church gradually steered herself towards the simplicity of her Master. By divine intervention, the first two decades of the 21st century saw the entrance of another humble reformer in the person of Pope Francis. Following the example of his patron, Pope Francis has affected a great reform in the modern Church by his life of simplicity, love and concern for the poor and marginalized, compassion for the wayward and erring, openness to everyone irrespective of race, colour or creed and his message of hope and peace for the world.

The demise of Pope Francis is truly a great loss for the Church and for humanity itself. The throng of people flocking to pay homage to his mortal remains at St. Peter's Basilica, demonstrates how much respect and love people have for this great and noble pontiff. Pope Francis may no longer be physically with us, but his valuable legacy remains with us and will continue to inspire people from age to age.

What a new Pope should mean for Christendom

Dr. Nsungbemo Ezung

The world awaits a new Pope to lead the most powerful religious institution in the world - the Roman Catholic following the death of the reigning Pope Francis on April 21, 2025. Nevertheless, the new Pope and his incoming reign will not only affect the Catholic world but the world-wide Christian community as well as the world at large giving the fact the enormous influence the Papacy commands.

The world had witnessed very many new traits during the 12 years reign of Pope Francis (2013-2025) as a result of which the Pope had left a disputed legacy for the world to ponder. Pope Francis was the first Pope from Latin America and the first non-European Pope since Pope Gregory III, a Syrian Catholic, who served as the head of the Catholic Church in 731-741 AD. He was also the first Pope to succeed a living Pope in nearly six hundred years following the unprecedented resignation of his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI.

Jorge Mario Bergoglio by his birth name, Pope Francis was the first pontiff to bear the name 'Francis' which according to him was to honor St. Francis of Assisi, a 13th-century Italian Catholic monk, renowned for his love and care for animals, his advocacy for the poor and needy and his dedication to environmental stewardship. Taking the legacy of St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis took the path of modesty in his papal reign and his call for combating poverty, compassion towards poor, refugees and marginalized sections of the world, even taking a bold step of criticizing President Donald Trump's anti-immigration policies and promoting religious freedom and inter-religious harmony would make him remember as a truly modern-day social and religious reformer.

Pope Francis's social reform program was in line with the popular leftward drift Christian theology that is highly popular in his native region - the liberation theology that gained widespread acceptance in Latin America. Pope Francis's theological views aligned with liberation theology which emphasizes the need for the liberation of socially, politically and economically oppressed segments of society. After Pope Benedict XVI, a German Pope, had led the Catholic Church to doctrinal clarity and further affirmation of the traditional doctrinal foundation of the Catholic Church to be the basis while confronting social and political issues, Pope Francis' papacy marked a shift in the approach of the Church while addressing the different complex issues in the world today, opening up to new perspectives encouraging the Church to view world's problems and challenges in a fresh and innovative way, looking beyond traditional approaches.

One of Pope Francis' most notable and controversial views was his declaration allowing the priest to bless same-sex unions albeit outside of formal liturgical procedures which was denounced by several high-profile Catholic priests from across the world. This however had emboldened many Christians, both Catholics and Protestants alike, to take their religion to further Left. The call for compassion for those struggling with their gender orientation and confusion over marriage does not mean blindly endorsing their current lives borne out of choice or struggle. A more compassionate approach to those people is by taking care of their emotional, mental and psychological well-being and engaging them with a non-judgmental and empathetic attitude and offering guidance based on truth and Christian foundational values to bring them back to the fold of a normal human life and relationship. The Pope's views on bless-

ing same-sex unions were read as an endorsement to those Christians who support the dilution of the sacredness of human lives and marriage.

And if this was what the legacy left behind by Pope Francis, to what direction would the new Pope take the Church which would not only affect the Catholic Church but would have its own share of influence in the Christendom at large. On the status of the Christianity/religious movement in the United States, Martin Riesebrodt et al. stated that "the religious landscape in the contemporary US has been restructured: a cleavage between liberal and conservative religionists have replaced denominationalism as the primary source of identification and religious-political engagement" [The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion, Edited by John R. Hinnells, Routledge 2005]. What is true for Christianity in America is true for the Christian community worldwide. It means after five centuries since the reformation that had split the all-powerful Christendom empire, the dominant religious discourse that divides the Christian world today is not between Catholicism and Protestantism but between those Christians who subscribe to conservative values, who unapologetically defend the Bible as the ultimate authority from God and demand total obedience to that Holy Book and those liberals who seek to place human reason above the need of obedience to the Word of God and to freely interpret the texts of the Bible to fit their social, political and personal agendas.

As a central figure in the Christian world, the new Pope will be playing a pivotal role in shaping today's great and controversial Christian debate, navigating the divide between the liberal and conservative perspectives of Christianity. The Pope's position on the divide between liberalism and conservatism within Christianity will be crucial in shaping the trajectory of the Christian faith in the 21st century. Christians worldwide are looking to the new Pope for clear guidance and direction on contentious and critical moral issues such as abortion, gender affirmation and the traditional institution of marriage. As the institution of Pope commands trans-national, trans-cultural and trans-social and political influence with more than a billion population worldwide adhering to his leadership, his position on some pressing social and political issues in the world too would have far-reaching consequences.

Will the new Pope succumb to the pressure of the Left and compromise the core tenets and traditional principles of the Christian faith, which has historically shaped the great Western Civilization? Or will he be the messiah for defending the great Christian faith, taking the Christian community worldwide to the historical and doctrinal foundation of Christianity? The new Pope needs to provide moral clarity by combating the Left's culture of confusion and help the faithful discern right from wrong, providing a moral compass for navigating modern challenges.

As a Conservative Protestant, I will be vouching for a European conservative to become the new Pope to prevent the Christendom from drifting further Left. A Pope with conservative roots in Europe would be the best bet to revitalize the Christian faith by connecting with its historical foundations. And there won't be a better time for the Christians, who want to return to the traditional and doctrinal roots, to have a Conservative European Pope when Europe itself is witnessing an encouragingly rightward drift.

Letters to the Editor

Time to confront realities

Editor,

The devastating terror attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir, which claimed the lives of dozens of tourists, is a grim—if not entirely unsurprising—reminder of the deep rot that continues to plague the valley. It is not an aberration, but yet another episode in the long history of Islamist terror, brutality, and communal hatred that has defined the region for decades. The initial reactions have been predictably full of outrage and strong condemnations, along with pointed questions aimed at the government and armed forces. All of this is understandable. But perhaps it is time to acknowledge that the real "intelligence" failure was not solely institutional—it was societal, too.

Viewed objectively, it is astonishing that Kashmir is still considered a tourist destination. It has long been the nation's epicentre of Islamist fundamentalism and communal violence, and remains the only region in India to have carried out a complete religious cleansing, as seen in the expulsion and killing of Hindu Pandits in the 1990s. Every year, innocents—workers, pilgrims, tourists, and even office staff—are targeted and killed, most often for the simple reason of being non-Muslim. Yet not only has the government continued to promote this deeply hostile and dangerous region to tourists, but society at large has also bought into the

narrative, seemingly shutting off all critical thinking. Are we truly so naïve as to forget the cycle of violence that recurs in Kashmir? Or are we simply unwilling to confront the implications?

The government certainly must be held accountable for this security lapse. However, it's becoming increasingly clear that the Indian state lacks the capacity to guarantee complete safety in Kashmir. Multiple strategies have been tried—none have succeeded, chiefly because no one wants to admit the uncomfortable truth: the Kashmir problem is not just due to external actors like Pakistan, but because there is a deep reservoir of local residents who harbour hatred for other Indians on religious grounds, and who facilitate and carry out these murders. As such, it is a societal issue, and solving it requires drastic decisions that the Indian government can never take (or even admit are required). Take, for instance, China's approach to its Xinjiang province, once similarly plagued by Islamist separatism and terror among its Uyghur majority. After the 2014 Kunming massacre, the Chinese government responded with harsh, controversial measures like mass surveillance and re-education camps. Since then, China has seen no Islamist attacks and is unlikely to see another anytime soon. While many may decry this "harsh" approach, the outcome is undeniable—China has eradicated the threat, and saved lives.

India, bound by democratic constraints, cannot pursue such extreme solutions. Hence the reduced fre-

quency of attacks in recent years is the best outcome it can hope to achieve. It can never ensure genuine security and peace, and incidents like Pahalgam will continue to happen. Therefore, instead of relying on institutions that are clearly unable to provide foolproof protection, perhaps it is time for us—as citizens—to act with greater caution and self-preservation.

Many regions around the world affected by Islamist terror are naturally avoided by tourists. It's time to apply the same logic to Kashmir. What makes it different from Iraq, aside from its landscape? The scale of incidents may differ, but both are marked by Islamist radicalism among its populace and a continuous cycle of violence. That Kashmir is in such a dire state despite being part of the Indian Union only makes the situation more damning—at least Iraq has the excuse of being a failed state.

This is thus my appeal to my fellow citizens: value your lives. There are countless beautiful places across India—including other Himalayan regions like Arunachal Pradesh—that do not require playing Russian roulette just to take in scenic views. Let us spare ourselves, our armed forces, and our government the burden of securing what they lack the will, freedom and means to secure. We can only foolishly hope Pahalgam will be the last time lives are lost in the pursuit of a holiday in this so-called "paradise on earth".

Yours etc.,
N.K. Kehar
Shillong-3

India's commitment to battle terror

Editor,

Propos of the editorial "Kashmir's Bloody Saga Returns" (ST April 24th 2025), the recent attack in Pahalgam, where terrorists targeted tourists based on their religion, is deeply tragic and horrifying. Reports suggest that the provocative speech by Pakistan Army Chief General Asim Munir, who is facing an internal revolt within the Pakistani Army, referring to Kashmir as Pakistan's "jugular vein" and emphasizing the two-nation theory, may have emboldened militant groups like The Resistance Front (TRF) to carry out such heinous acts. This rhetoric, which highlights divisions and fuels hostility, has been widely condemned for its potential role in inciting violence. Acts of terror like this underscore the urgent need for global unity against extremism and the importance of fostering dialogue and understanding across communities. The aftermath of General Asim Munir's speech - the Pahalgam attack has indeed raised serious concerns. His rhetoric, emphasizing divisive ideologies, seems to have emboldened extremist groups, leading to devastating consequences. The loss of innocent lives is a stark reminder of the power and responsibility that comes with leadership and public statements. Accountability is crucial in such situations, and the global community will likely scrutinize his actions and words closely. Religious fundamentalism,

regardless of its origin, often fuels division, intolerance, and violence. It undermines the shared values of humanity and disrupts the harmony needed for global peace.

Prime Minister, Narendra Modi in his speech from Bihar stated categorically that India will identify, track and punish every terrorist and those backing them and pursue them to the ends of the earth and that India's spirit would never be broken by terrorism. Prime Minister Modi's statement reflects a strong and resolute stance against terrorism, emphasizing India's commitment to justice and its determination to protect its citizens. His choice to deliver part of the speech in English, particularly the phrase, "pursue them to the ends of the earth," sends a clear message to the international community about India's unwavering resolve. This approach not only addresses domestic concerns but also seeks global solidarity in combating terrorism. A positive and strong statement like that of Prime Minister Modi can rally international support and send a clear message to those who threaten peace. They also reinforce the resolve of a nation to stand united against terrorism. The global community often responds positively to such decisive leadership, especially when it aligns with broader efforts to combat extremism.

Yours etc,
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Quick response from STP

Editor,

I believe credit should be given where it is due. This time I am referring to the prompt response of Shillong Traffic Police to a request I had made. As a parent who drops and picks up my son daily at All Saints' Diocesan Higher Secondary School, it is my observation and that other parents as well, that the failure of a lot of drivers to respect and obey the "No Entry" signage at the Lachaumiere junction leading towards the school has been posing a problem for everyone dropping their children/wards to school in the morning since the road is a narrow one and everyone is in a hurry to get to school on time. In this regard, I spoke with Mr Dasgupta, the Traffic in-charge, Sadar Police Station and requested him to depute some sterner personnel to man the said junction around the 8:30 to 9:20 AM period, to prevent such violations. This morning a group of us were pleasantly surprised to see no vehicles coming towards the school from the said direction and with the "No Entry" signage at the south block junction being strictly enforced, the students could walk freely to the school without having to dodge any vehicle. I would like to commend the said officer for his prompt response to a genuine request for action. I also exhort fellow drivers to respect and obey traffic rules, for our collective good.

Yours etc.,
Donboklang Dohling
Shillong -5

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

Colours are objective: What you see doesn't match what I see

Is your green my green? Probably not. What appears as pure green to me will likely look a bit yellowish or blueish to you. This is because visual systems vary from person to person. Moreover, an object's colour may appear differently against different backgrounds or under different lighting.

These facts might naturally lead you to think that colours are subjective. That, unlike features such as length and temperature, colours are not objective features. Either nothing has a true colour, or colours are relative to observers and their viewing conditions. But perceptual variation has misled you. We are philosophers who study colours, objectivity and science, and we argue in our book "The Metaphysics of Colours" that colours are as objective as length and temperature.

PERCEPTUAL VARIATION

There is a surprising amount of variation in how people perceive the world. If you offer a group of people a spectrum of colour chips ranging from chartreuse to purple and asked them to pick the unique green chip - the chip with no yellow or blue in it - their choices would vary considerably. Indeed, there wouldn't be a single chip that most observers would agree is unique green.

Generally, an object's background can result in dramatic changes in how you perceive its colours. If you place a gray object against a lighter background, it will appear darker than if you place it against a darker background. This variation in perception is perhaps most striking when viewing an object under different lighting, where a red apple could look green or blue.

Of course, that you experience something differently does not prove that what is experienced is not objective. Water that feels cold to one person may not feel cold to another. And although we do not know who is feeling the water "correctly," or whether that question even makes sense, we can know the temperature of the water and presume that this temperature is independent of your experience.

Similarly, that you can change the appearance of something's colour is not the same as changing its colour. You can make an apple look green or blue, but that is not evidence that the apple is not red.

For comparison, the Moon appears larger when it's on the horizon than when it ap-

pears near its zenith. But the size of the Moon has not changed, only its appearance. Hence, that the appearance of an object's colour or size varies is, by itself, no reason to think that its colour and size are not objective features of the object. In other words, the properties of an object are independent of how they appear to you.

That said, given that there is so much variation in how objects appear, how do you determine what colour something actually is? Is there a way to determine the colour of something despite the many different experiences you might have of it?

Perhaps determining the colour of something is to determine whether it is red or blue. But we suggest a different approach. Notice that squares that appear to be the same shade of pink against different backgrounds look different against the same background.

It's easy to assume that to prove colours are objective would require knowing which observers, lighting conditions and backgrounds are the best, or "normal." But determining the right observers and viewing conditions is not required for determining the very specific colour of an object, regardless of its name. And it is not required to determine whether two objects have the same colour.

To determine whether two objects have the same colour, an observer would need to view the objects side by side against the same background and under various lighting conditions. If you painted part of a room and find that you don't have enough paint, for instance, finding a match might be very tricky. A colour match requires that no observer under any lighting condition will see a difference between the new paint and the old.

That two people can determine whether two objects have the same colour even if they don't agree on exactly what that colour is - just as a pool of water can have a particular temperature without feeling the same to me and you - seems like compelling evidence to us that colours are objective features of our world.

COLOURS, SCIENCE AND INDISPENSABILITY

Everyday interactions with colours - such as matching paint samples, determining whether your shirt and pants clash, and even your ability to interpret works of art

- are hard to explain if colours are not objective features of objects. But if you turn to science and look at the many ways that researchers think about colours, it becomes harder still.

For example, in the field of colour science, scientific laws are used to explain how objects and light affect perception and the colours of other objects. Such laws, for instance, predict what happens when you mix coloured pigments, when you view contrasting colours simultaneously or successively, and when you look at coloured objects in various lighting conditions.

The philosophers Hilary Putnam and Willard van Orman Quine made famous what is known as the indispensability argument. The basic idea is that if something is indispensable to science, then it must be real and objective - otherwise, science wouldn't work as well as it does.

For example, you may wonder whether unobservable entities such as electrons and electromagnetic fields really exist. But, so the argument goes, the best scientific explanations assume the existence of such entities and so they must exist. Similarly, because mathematics is indispensable to contemporary science, some philosophers argue that this means mathematical objects are objective and exist independently of a person's mind.

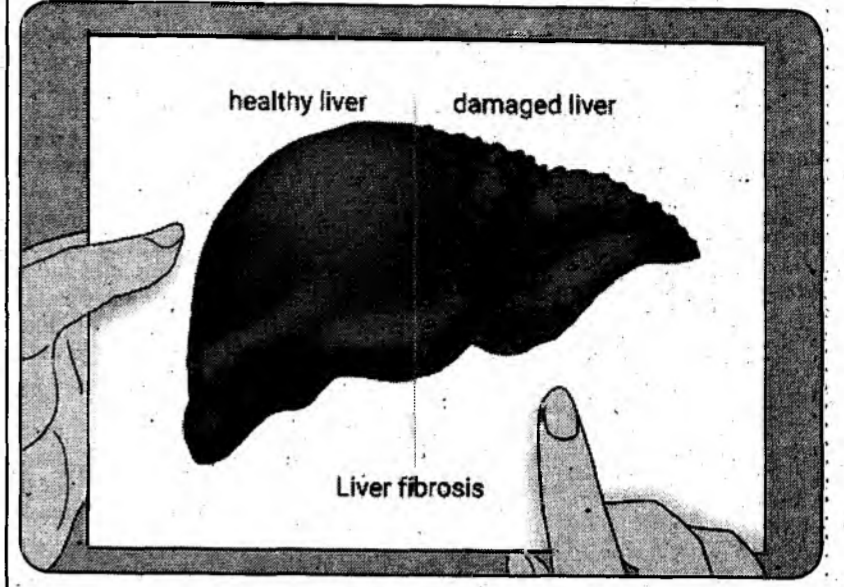
Likewise, we suggest that colour plays an indispensable role in evolutionary biology. For example, researchers have argued that aposematism - the use of colours to signal a warning for predators - also benefits an animal's ability to gather resources. Here, an animal's colouration works directly to expand its food-gathering niche insofar as it informs potential predators that the animal is poisonous or venomous.

In fact, animals can exploit the fact that the same colour pattern can be perceived differently by different perceivers. For instance, some damselfish have ultraviolet face patterns that help them be recognized by other members of their species and communicate with potential mates while remaining largely hidden to predators unable to perceive ultraviolet colours.

In sum, our ability to determine whether objects are coloured the same or differently and the indispensable roles they play in science suggest that colours are as real and objective as length and temperature.

(The Conversation)

Good sleep and less junk food key to healthy liver



Having a good night's sleep and avoiding junk food is essential to keep the liver healthy, said Dr. S.K. Sarin, Director of the Institute of Liver and Biliary Sciences (ILBS) on Friday.

He said that junk food, as the name suggests, must be put in dustbins as its regular consumption can significantly affect liver health.

"The word junk food means it is junk. It has to be put in the dustbin. But if you think your stomach and intestines are dustbins, put that food inside. Otherwise, avoid, don't use it," Sarin said, in a post on social media platform X.

Junk food which is rich in unhealthy fats, sugars, and processed ingredients increases the risk of obesity, high cholesterol, and type 2 diabetes. These diseases then raise the chances of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD), and progress to more serious complications like cirrhosis and liver cancer.

Sarin also urged people to sleep well and not eat late as it may affect the gut bacteria, critical for better health. Studies have shown that people with poor sleep are at increased risk of fatty liver disease.

Further, eating late at night has been linked to a higher risk of significant fibrosis -- a sign of liver damage. It is because the body is unable to process fat and carbohydrates during sleep, leading to their accumulation in the liver.

"Sleeping late and eating late-night food is not a great idea, because the bacteria in your intestines which process the food, will also sleep late. Restorative good sleep is the best thing," the leading hepatologist said.

Sarin advised people to not lose their health by running after "money, power and positions". Instead maintaining "a sound healthy body and good night's sleep" is essential as these are the "only two things which give happiness in life", the expert said.

NAFLD, currently termed metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease (MASLD), is a chronic liver disease that occurs when fat builds up in the liver in people who don't drink much alcohol. It can affect people with diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, or high cholesterol.

Fatty liver disease is emerging as an important cause of liver disease in India, affecting about three in 10 people in the country. (IANS)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, April 27, 2025

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon semi-sextile Jupiter on your solar return chart and which is good. You will enjoy a wonderful time. Financially you will be strong and stable. And will tap additional sources of income. You could plan some new line of business. Even your partners/associates will provide full support. Your professional circle will grow. And you will meet lot of influential people. You will also receive help from unexpected quarters. A lovely person will come in your life all of a sudden leading to a rolicking affair. It will be a very fulfilling relationship leading to marriage. Your siblings will make good progress and you will remain a guiding force. Business related trips will keep you busy. Health will remain perfect. You would develop interest in meditation, yoga, prayers and other spiritual activities

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) The planetary configuration brings mixed results for you. You are compassionate and generous with family, friends and relatives. You are likely to see benefits and improvements in the areas of work and health, as well as daily routines. Your ability to handle the details required to do a good job is significantly enhanced and others increasingly become more aware of your skills. Benefits may come through co-workers or employees during this period. You spend more time on phone calls, emails, short frequent trips and communicating with friends.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You are patient, laborious and clever with material aspects and manage finances and business ventures with ingenuity and success. There would be cooperation and understanding in professional and relationships. You might pay attention to various ways to increase personal funds, resulting in more than one avenue for monetary gain. You would always be willing to work all the more harder to meet your new responsibilities. Your love life has been erratic for some time, and this trend continues. You could find that you invest in real estate. You would also bring a more playful environment to your home. There will be a fluctuation in energy levels.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) The planetary configuration of this phase brings good results. Any type of service that you may provide is likely to go well. You are more successful in hiring people to work for you and improvements in your working environment are likely. You find more enjoyment in the work you do, and it is easier than usual to find employment now. You may get a new job during this period. Others will derive more enjoyment from the current job. Work tends to be very easily accessible to you. This is a time when you renew your energy and consider what things are important to you.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Your natural talents would meet with reward and acceptance. Practical matters are a large focus and are very strong. More security in your job is likely. You are more willing than usual to work diligently for money, and your natural talents are likely to be utilized more in the work you do and appreciated by others. You would enjoy some time in your family and there you find affection and love. This is altogether a happy and relaxed time for you. Take care of your health and adopt a routine of regular walk and exercise

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) Communication, creativity and authority in professional matters are highlighted as an exciting job offer, reward, recognition, or promotion is possible. An opportunity to expand on a global level arrives now. You would have more energy for work and your daily routines tend to speed up now. Perhaps you have a larger workload than usual. You are ready to perform and express yourself and take charge and responsibilities on your shoulders. This is a very significant period when you are inspired creatively and emotionally. Romance could make you think along serious or practical lines and look to a more committed relationship.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) This is a phase that brings fun, entertaining events and happiness to the fore. Your effectiveness, self-worth and finances are also highlighted. This stage of your life may be marked by hard work. Financial success may not be remarkable, yet it is generally steady, if slow to come by.

Matters of personal courage, confidence and independence are emerging. Issues surrounding income from foreign sources could also figure at this time. You should be careful not to over-analyze your relationships. You feel on top of things with good health and positive energy.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) You would participate in current events and share views, ideas and feelings with people around you. You are in a position to inspire others through what you create. Turning a hobby or favorite pastime into a career could also figure. Partnership ups and downs continue to persist, as you struggle with matters of freedom and dependency. Children may require more discipline or attention. You may also bring more creativity into the work you do. Health is likely to prosper and medical procedures or programs, if necessary, are more apt to be successful.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) Good financial returns are on the cards. You might have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort and status. You probably should be on the lookout for a tendency to create your own financial stress due to extravagant spending habits. You may visit religious places and strong feelings towards religion are enhanced. You learn to look inside of yourself with a newfound clarity and realism and ideally draw up considerable strength from within. You are full of energy and indulge in sports and other physical activities or a structured exercise routine.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) The planetary combination opens new horizons in your romantic and love life. You would pay attention to various ways to increase personal funds. You are bound to experience your fair share of fun, and good times. Creative projects are likely to fare well, and could possibly even bring some type of recognition. Love and romance may enter your life or is enhanced with good humor and warmth, and social engagements abound. For singles, meeting a special person is highly likely. Health is likely to prosper and medical procedures or health programs, if necessary, are more apt to be successful.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) You would be more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental about work commitments. Investments in stocks and other speculative matters could earn tidy profits, although care should be exercised with any dealings that tie you to other people and others' money. Your creativity and social life are stimulated, and plenty of opportunities to express yourself uniquely and creatively will present themselves. Relationships with your children may be especially fulfilling now. The desire for some form of recognition is going to be strong.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) This is a fabulous period in which to take the vacation you have always wanted to take. Those with artistic or athletic talent can be especially prolific and prosperous at this time. You may find great joy and reward in your creative projects and hobbies, and could discover a new hobby or creative talent you never knew you had. Healthy risks are likely to pay off, but be careful of overconfidence in speculative investments. Pleasure-seeking activities, recreation, and amusement are increased. Health is likely to prosper.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) This phase highlights friendship, love, romance and children in your life. You may visit and spend a lot of time in the company of your friends and loved ones. This is also a favorable time to go for higher learning and joining new courses to improve your professional skills and efficiency. Your family would be more supportive as this is the best time to bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships and feel more comfortable. These positive circumstances will not necessarily fall into your lap, and are unlikely to come all at once. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities in these areas of life.

How Pope Francis influenced global climate movement

The death of Pope Francis has been announced by the Vatican. I first met the late Pope Francis at the Vatican after a conference called Saving Our Common Home and the Future of Life on Earth in July 2018. My colleagues and I sensed something momentous was happening at the heart of the church.

At that time, I was helping to set up the new Laudato Si' research institute at the Jesuit Hall at the University of Oxford. This institute is named after the pope's 2015 encyclical (a letter to bishops outlining church policy) on climate change.

Its mission is rooted in the pope's religiously inspired vision of integral ecology - a multidisciplinary approach that addresses social and ecological issues of equality and climate breakdown.

Originating from Argentina, Pope Francis, the first Jesuit pope, witnessed firsthand the destruction of the Amazon and the plight of South America's poorest communities. His concern for justice for vulnerable communities and protection of the planet go hand in hand with his religious leadership.

In his first papal letter, Laudato Si', he called for all people, not just Catholics, to pay more attention to the frailty of both our planet and its people. What we need is no less than a cultural revolution, he wrote. As a theologian, I recognise that he inspired significant change in three key ways.

AT GLOBAL CLIMATE SUMMITS

It's no coincidence that Pope Francis released Laudato Si' at a crucial moment in 2015 prior to the UN climate summit, Cop21, in Paris. A follow-up exhortation, or official statement, Laudate Deum, was released in October 2023, just before another UN climate summit, Cop28 in Dubai.

Did the decisions at these global meetings shift because of the influence of Pope Francis? Potentially, yes. In Laudate Deum, Pope Francis showed both encouragement and some frustration about the achievements of international agreements so far.

He berated the weakness of international politics and believes that Cop21 represented a "significant moment" because the agreement involved everyone.

After Cop21, he pointed out how most nations had failed to implement the Paris agreement which called for limiting the global temperature rise in this century to below 2°C. He also called out the lack of monitoring of those commitments and subsequent political inertia. He tried his best to use his prominent position to hold power to account.

Promoting a general moral awareness of the need to act in ecologically responsible ways, both in international politics and at the local level is something that previous popes,

Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI also did. But, Pope Francis's efforts went beyond that, by connecting much more broadly with grassroots movements.

BY ADVOCATING FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

Cop28 marked the first time that close to 200 countries agreed to transition away from fossil fuels. Pope Francis's interventions potentially helped shift the needle just a little in the desired direction.

His emphasis on listening to Indigenous people may have influenced these gatherings. Compared with previous global climate summits, Cop28 arguably opened up the opportunity to listen to the voices of Indigenous people.

However, Indigenous people were still disappointed by the outcomes of Cop28. Pope Francis's lesser-known exhortation Querida Amazonia, which means "beloved Amazonia", was published in February 2020.

This exhortation resulted from his conversations with Amazonian communities and helped put Indigenous perspectives on the map. Those perspectives helped shape Catholic social teaching in the encyclical Fratelli Tutti, which means "all brothers and sisters", published on October 3 2020.

For many people living in developing countries where extractive industries such as oil and gas or mining are rife, destruction of land coincides with direct threats to life. Pope Francis advocated for Indigenous environmental defenders, many of whom have been inspired to act by their strong faith.

For example, Father Marcelo Pérez, an Indigenous priest living in Mexico, was murdered by drug dealers just after saying mass on October 23 2023 as part of the cost of defending the rights of his people and their land.

While 196 environmental defenders were killed globally in 2023, Pope Francis continued to advocate on behalf of the most marginalised people as well as the environment.

BY INSPIRING ACTIVISM

I've been speaking to religious climate activists from different church backgrounds in the UK as part of a multidisciplinary research project on religion, theology and climate change based at the University of Manchester. Most notably, when we asked more than 300 activists representing six different activist groups who most influenced them to get involved in climate action, 61% named Pope Francis as a key influencer.

On a larger scale, Laudato Si' gave rise to the Laudato Si' movement which coordinates climate activism across the globe. It has 900 Catholic organisations as well as 10,000 of what are known as Laudato Si' "animators", who are all ambassadors and leaders in their respective communities.

Nobody knows who the next pope might be. Given the current turmoil in politics and shutting down of political will to address the climate emergency, we can only hope they will build on the legacy of Pope Francis and influence political change for the good, from the grassroots frontline right up to the highest global ambitions. (The Conversation)

"Tolerance is a virtue that depends upon peace and strength."

— Charles Lindbergh

The Shillong Times

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Pahalgam, think-tanks

AS Prime Minister Narendra Modi noted in his Mann Ki Baat address on Sunday, the nation is "seething in anger" and deeply hurt by the April 22 terrorist mayhem unleashed on an unsuspecting flock of tourists in Kashmir. It is now established that three Pakistani agents and one native from the Valley jointly staged the attack in Pahalgam region. What was clear from the outset, however, was that this was another of the Pakistan-organised terrorist acts. There's no internal militant network that has the wherewithal to carry out such an attack even as security was slack. Having known as much, retaliatory action should have been swift and strong. Such assaults have happened in the past, and there was every hint this could recur. Yet, nearly a week since the attack, India is in investigation mode and weighing the pros and cons of a retaliatory strike. Immediate reactions like the closure of the Attari border and suspension of the 1960 Indus water treaty would only have limited effect. Stopping of flow of water that comes from the Himalayan region in Tibet, which finally ends up in Pakistan through the Indus river, cannot be an abrupt act. It will take time for canals to be built to divert the flow to Indian farms. Reports are also that the movement of goods between the two countries would still continue through unauthorized channels. In other words, the actions taken by the Modi government to teach a lesson to Pakistan were soft responses.

Without doubt, the Pakistani military establishment is coordinating and funding the terrorist flow to India through hard-edged training. This has been the case for long and there is conclusive evidence to this. They got away with their act in Mumbai in 2008 as the Manmohan Singh government simply blinked. Later, the Pulwama attack on a CRPF convoy killed over 40 soldiers. This was followed by a surgical strike that was unprecedented and shocked Pakistan and its military establishment. Yet, not much harm was done to Pakistan. Both nations lost at least one each of their military aircraft. The present outrage shows Pakistan did not learn a lesson from the surgical strikes.

It's now open to the Modi-led central establishment to decide how the response or retaliation should be this time. What's clear is also that Pakistan is encouraged by China to target India, which was evident also in the game the red nation played at the UN security council this time too. A retired military general has advised caution to the central government, saying the overall striking capacity of both nations is more or less the same though India has a much larger army and military mechanisms. Both are nuclear powers. The government has a better understanding of how the scenario could evolve. A full-scale war is to no one's advantage. For Pakistan, it could be more disastrous even as such a turn could forge a sense of unity in a deeply divided nation.

Skilling for the Skies!
Empowering Meghalay's SHG Women to Pilot a Drone-Led Revolution

By **K N Kumar**

Picture the rolling hills of Meghalaya, alive with the purposeful hum of drones. Guided by women from local Self-Help Groups (SHGs), these machines deliver medicines to remote hamlets, nurture high-value crops, and map terrain for vital infrastructure and support the government during disasters of various kinds. What once seemed futuristic is now within reach, poised to reshape Meghalaya's economy and empower its women.

Meghalaya's SHG ecosystem, cultivated over a decade through the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) and the Meghalaya State Rural Livelihoods Society (MSRLS), is primed for innovation. With over 45,000 active SHGs engaging nearly 450,000 rural women, the network reaches even the most remote corners of the state. This scale creates a vast pool of potential trainees and early adopters for new technologies. The convergence of Meghalaya's successful SHG movement with drone technology presents a unique opportunity. By leveraging the organizational strength and social capital of SHGs, the state can leapfrog technological barriers, promising not just incremental gains but transformative improvements in productivity, employment, and the holistic empowerment of rural women.

SHGs in Meghalaya are already dynamic economic units, involved in weaving, bamboo and cane crafts, organic agriculture, animal husbandry, beekeeping, food processing, and retail. Through the SHG platform, women have developed essential skills: financial discipline, book-keeping, collective bargaining, conflict resolution, and business management. MSRLS has further strengthened these capacities through targeted training and market linkages, notably via the 'Lokal' brand. The most valuable asset is the deep social capital within the SHG network. Operating on trust and collective responsibility, SHGs are ideal for introducing complex initiatives, facilitating peer learning, and ensuring community buy-in, crucial for successful technology adoption.

Meghalaya's challenging geography—hilly terrain, dispersed settlements, frequent rainfall, and difficult road connectivity—makes it an ideal candidate for drone deployment. Drones offer solutions where conventional methods fall short. The Central government's 'Drone Didi' initiative, aiming to equip 15,000 SHGs nationwide with agricultural drones, can be transformative. Drones can reduce input

costs by 20-40% and improve crop health. Equipped with advanced sensors, they detect pests, diseases, or nutrient deficiencies early, enabling timely interventions and higher yields. Drones can also map plots, assess slopes, and help with soil analysis, leading to better land use and resource allocation. Expect measurable increases in crop yields and significant reductions in input wastage and costs.

Access to timely healthcare remains a critical challenge in Meghalaya's remote areas. Drones can be literal lifelines, swiftly transporting life-saving drugs, vaccines, and medical supplies to villages or health centres cut off by landslides or rivers during monsoons. Rapid transport of patient samples to diagnostic labs drastically reduces turnaround time for critical diagnoses, potentially saving lives in emergencies. Connecting producers to markets efficiently is key for economic growth. Drones can transport high-value, low-weight SHG products—handlooms, organic spices, processed foods—from scattered production units to aggregation points or markets, reducing logistics costs and opening access to urban buyers. Faster access to lucrative urban markets, reduced logistics overheads, and potential for premium pricing based on speed and novelty strengthen the SHG supply chain. Drones also provide invaluable aerial perspectives for planning and monitoring. High-resolution data can monitor infrastructure projects, assess damage from landslides or floods, and plan relief operations. Introducing drones through SHGs is more than livelihood diversification; it creates a cadre of skilled, tech-savvy women entrepreneurs. New roles—certified drone pilots, maintenance technicians, data analysts, service coordinators—offer higher earnings than traditional SHG activities. The 'Drone Didi' experience suggests these roles can significantly boost rural incomes. Operating sophisticated technology elevates women's social standing, shifting perceptions from manual labour to skilled operators and entrepreneurs. This challenges gender stereotypes and bridges the digital divide, empowering women to participate in the digital economy.

Effective training however, is essential—hands-on sessions in drone assembly, flight operations, safety, maintenance, and data interpretation are necessary. Specialized modules will cover agricultural operations, medical payloads, and mapping. Creating a pool of master trainers from SHG women will ensure sustainability. While the potential is immense, successful implementation requires proactively addressing challenges: Drones, especially high-payload agricultural or mapping drones, represent a significant investment. Innovative financing models (subsidies, group loans, leasing options) are crucial. Establishing accessible repair and maintenance facilities, possibly through tiered service centres or mobile technicians, is vital for minimizing downtime. Ensuring reliable internet connectivity in remote areas for data upload/download and potential real-time monitoring remains a challenge. Offline data processing capabilities might be necessary initially. Streamlining licensing processes and ensuring clear operational guidelines for SHG drone operators would also be necessary.

These skilled roles command substantially higher earnings compared to many traditional SHG activities. Mastering and operating sophisticated technology like drones inherently elevates the social standing of these women. They transition from being viewed primarily as manual labourers or beneficiaries of welfare schemes to becoming skilled technology operators, service providers, and entrepreneurs. This shift commands greater respect within their families, communities, and even from local officials, enhancing their voice. Actively involving women in a cutting-edge field like drone technology powerfully challenges entrenched gender stereotypes about women's roles and capabilities, particularly in technology and aviation. Providing access to and training on drone technology inherently involves digital literacy, helping to bridge the digital divide and empowering women to engage more effectively with the modern digital economy.

The central government's 'Drone Didi' scheme provides significant impetus, offering potential financial support (subsidies for drone purchase, training costs) and a national framework. States like Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Haryana have already launched pilot programs, offering valuable lessons. Meghalaya can leverage these experiences while customizing the initiative. While the potential is immense, successful implementation requires proactively addressing potential challenges: Drones, especially high-payload agricultural or mapping drones, represent a significant investment. Innovative financing models (subsidies, group loans, leasing options) are crucial. Establishing accessible repair and maintenance facilities, possibly through tiered service centres or mobile technicians, is vital for minimizing downtime. Ensuring reliable internet connectivity in remote areas for data upload/download and potential real-time monitoring remains a challenge. Offline data processing capabilities might be necessary initially. Streamlining licensing processes and ensuring clear operational guidelines for SHG drone operators would also be necessary.

MSRLS could be the lead agency, or the state government could establish a dedicated Meghalaya Drone Agency. Government departments (Agriculture, Health, IT, Land Records, Forest & Environment) should integrate drone services. Skill development agencies like MSSDS must develop standardized training and certification. Partnerships with private sector drone manufacturers and financial institutions are essential. Drone manufacturers, software developers, and service providers can partner for technology provision, specialized training, and maintenance support.

Key next steps should include establishing a dedicated Meghalaya Drone Authority, training centres, and securing funding from state and central schemes. Training Meghalaya's SHG women in drone technology is more than a skill development programme; it's a strategic investment in the state's future. By harnessing the SHG network and embracing drone technology, Meghalaya can unlock new productivity, create skilled jobs, and profoundly raise the socio-economic status of its rural women. The introduction of drone technology through SHGs transcends mere livelihood diversification; it signifies a deliberate move towards creating a cadre of skilled, tech-savvy women entrepreneurs, fundamentally altering their economic prospects and social standing. New roles within the rural economy will therefore be - Certified Drone Pilots, Drone Maintenance and Repair Technicians, Drone Data Analysts, Drone Service Coordinators/Managers, and potentially even roles in local drone assembly or customization. But is anyone listening? (The writer is a former member of the IAS)

Shillong Smart City... Buffering...Please Wait...

By **Ellerine Diengdoh**

Remember when the Smart City Mission was announced, I imagined a city of the future: self-driving buses zipping through the streets, robo-dogs patrolling the highways, traffic signals that just know when to change to keep things moving, streets that stay spotless without anyone lifting a finger and apps that nudge you when your trash needs attention. It was a vision of a city that practically runs itself.

Shillong was the last and final entry, the 100th name to be carved into this grand promise of urban transformation. That was 2018, it is now 2025. Seven long years! One Lok Sabha election, one MLA election, one MDC election, six Miss Indias, three Avengers movies, and approximately 936,007 traffic jams later, the dream remains exactly where we left it. Somewhere between "vision" and "execution" we seem to have misplaced the "smart" part and just ended up with a "city".

Let me start with the roads... Oh wait, we can't, they're missing! The "Smart Roads" project was supposed to upgrade 17 stretches. Turns out, the roads weren't ready to be smart; in fact, they weren't even ready to be roads. One particular stretch now functions as an obstacle course and children from a nearby school have developed quadriceps powerful enough to leap over cement mixers; they are now prepar-

ing for the Olympics. Some parents reportedly asked for a rope bridge, others just gave up and enrolled their children in an online school, from across the road. Last I heard about the roads, they were auditioning for 'India's Got Craters'.

Now let's move on to the Polo Commercial Complex which began construction way back in November 2020. Today, it stands tall, dignified and completely pointless. Completed in body but abandoned in spirit, it has been waiting patiently for an inauguration that was due on January 25, 2025. Some locals have suggested turning it into a wildlife sanctuary because, at least then, the pigeons roosting inside could be formally recognised as tenants.

The Laitumkrah Municipal Market followed a similar script, only with a few extra plot twists. After a leisurely 17-month delay just to hand over the site, construction stumbled forward, finally crawling toward "completion" at the start of this year. As of April 2025, the market is a concrete carcass...no shops, no vendors, no life. If neglect had a physical form, it would look exactly like this market. One could argue the market is functional...if you're a rodent!

Then there's the Integrated Command and Control Centre, which sounds like the place where a supervillain would sit, twirl his moustache and press a big red button and scream, "Akk-tee-bait See-tee Waaitt pro-toh-kolllll! Mwahahaha!!" (Activate city-wide protocol) In reality, it is a building that's 85% there and 100% elusive. It might eventually control traffic, surveillance, disseminate information, manage disasters and daily city operations. But for now, it can barely control



"treat" waste water, it now heroically blocks both water and garbage with such ruthless efficiency that even a mild drizzle transforms it into a high-pressure garbage cannon. Urban planners have praised the Nallah for being "interactive" and "immersive," calling it a dynamic waste experience where citizens are encouraged to engage directly with their own sewage. In a statement nobody asked for, an official said: "The system is working as intended. We never said what it was intended to do!"

At this point, the only thing "smart" about Shillong is how cleverly it dodges accountability. Projects start with fireworks, end with fog, and in between, we get motivational speeches.

Maybe that's the master plan. Maybe WE are the Smart City, a living museum of things that almost happened. Tourists will soon arrive, wide-eyed, clutching impact guidebooks titled "50 Shades of Incomplete." They will come see the ruins of Motphran Car Park, now an official heritage site. They will swim in the interactive Garbage Rapids, our contribution to eco-tourism, and they will marvel at the Invisible Roads, Shillong's first official ghost infrastructure.

Meanwhile, we will stand proudly by power banks fully charged, waiting for sunlight, Wi-Fi, leadership, Godot... whoever shows up first. Because right now, Shillong isn't a smart city at all, it is a loading screen that reads: Smart City... buffering... please wait [Error 404: Progress not found]

Please refer to the official website for additional information, promises and pictures full of potential: Shillong Smart City Limited - <http://sscl.meghalaya.gov.in/> (This piece was inspired by: "Shillong - The Smart City Project: The Main Stakeholder: The Public" - Toki Blah (Shillong Times) "Straight Talk: Shillong Smart City: Grand Vision vs Ground Reality" - DDK (YouTube).

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Letters to the Editor

Traffic signals: Urgent reforms needed

Editor,
I write to wholeheartedly endorse the article "Much Ado About Signalling" by Ellerine Diengdoh, published in The Shillong Times on April 23, 2025 (<https://theshillongtimes.com/2025/04/23/much-ado-about-signalling/>). The piece brilliantly captures the chaotic misuse of vehicle indicators in Shillong, where drivers signal left while turning right (or vice versa) or neglect signals entirely, fostering confusion and jeopardizing road safety. Its humorous yet incisive tone underscores a pressing issue in our city's traffic culture.

My personal observations trace the roots of this problem to truck drivers who, years ago, began using right indicators when stopping on narrow, curvy, dimly lit roads to alert others to watch their side. This practice, initially a safety measure, was later adopted by truck drivers and handymen who transitioned to owning and operating taxis. Over time, it became common for taxi drivers to misuse right indicators when moving left or stopping in narrow lanes—often in no-embarkation zones—to pick up passengers. In recent years, some of these

drivers have established driving schools, unintentionally standardizing this erroneous signalling practice. As a result, many new drivers in Shillong now replicate these mistakes, having been taught no differently.

Compounding this issue, the city's Traffic authorities have turned a blind eye to the misuse of hazard signals at crossings and junctions for vehicles moving straight ahead, further muddying the proper use of indicators. Hazard lights, meant for stationary or broken-down vehicles or emergency situations, are ill-suited for a commute and add to the confusion highlighted in Ms. Diengdoh's article.

I must commend Mr P S Warjri, former president of the Royal Enfield Riders' Association of Meghalaya (RERAM), who has been a forerunner in addressing this malpractice for over a decade. Through road safety rallies, engagements at rider meetings, and social media advocacy, Mr. Warjri has leveraged his influence to educate motorists and highlight the dangers of improper signalling, inspiring many to push for change.

I urge the authorities to address these issues by promoting correct indicator use through public awareness campaigns, proper enforcement of traffic rules, and ensuring driving schools teach standard signalling practices.

The Shillong Times deserves praise for spotlighting this matter, and I hope it catalyses meaningful reform.

Yours etc.,
Benny Field Lyngdoh,
Via email

Conflict and tension affect both Pakistan and India in the long term

Editor,
Apropos of the editorial "Aftermath of Pahalgam Terror Attack" (ST April, 26 2025) Pakistan has labelled India's suspension of the Indus Water Treaty as an "act of war," emphasizing the treaty's importance for its water security. However, experts argue that international law, including the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, allows for suspension in cases of fundamental change in circumstances, such as repeated terror attacks. India has framed the move as a diplomatic response to cross-border terrorism, not a declaration of war. The London-based lawyer Dharminder Singh Kaleka explained that "suspension" and "abeyance" are different in "tone and in teeth." While suspension is a formal legal measure governed by international law, "abeyance, by contrast, is a tool of strategic ambiguity - it freezes the

operational mechanics of the treaty without triggering its collapse." "In effect, India is saying: We have not torn the treaty up but we are not playing by the old rules either, not until the rules of engagement with terrorism are rewritten by Pakistan," Kaleka, a policy expert specialising in South Asian economies, geopolitics and development strategy, said. India late Wednesday night announced that the treaty will be held in "abeyance" with immediate effect until Pakistan credibly and irrevocably abjures its support for cross-border terrorism. In fact, India could freely plan to divert 5-million-acre feet (MAF) of water from the western rivers Jhelum or Chenab to the eastern rivers Ravi, Beas or Sutlej. This will not affect Pakistan because about 20 MAF of water or more is going to sea in Pakistan as unused water. It may be noted that the 1960 treaty was brokered by the World Bank between India and Pakistan covering the use of the rivers in the Indus Basin. It allows India "unrestricted use" of Ravi, Beas and Sutlej, the three eastern rivers in the Indus Basin, and similar rights to Pakistan over the Indus, Jhelum and Chenab, the three western rivers.

Since economics serves as the backbone of national progress without peace and cooperation, efforts to build

robust economies often falter. The relationship between Pakistan and India is a prime example where mutual trust and collaboration could unlock immense potential. Both the countries are endowed with resources, strategic locations and skilled populations, but persistent tensions divert focus from shared economic and developmental opportunities. One could argue that fostering trade partnerships, energy collaborations and cultural exchanges could pave the way for economic growth and stability. Over time, peace could transform the region into a hub of innovation and prosperity. Imagine how much both countries could achieve if they redirected resources away from conflict and towards collaboration. The challenge is complex, but history has shown us that peace is always worth striving for.

The long-term impacts of ongoing tit-for-tat measures between India and Pakistan could be profound and multifaceted. Both nations may face significant economic repercussions. Trade restrictions, border closures, and diplomatic tensions can hinder economic growth, disrupt regional trade and deter foreign investment. India's suspension of the Indus Water Treaty and Pakistan's retaliatory measures could escalate water-related conflicts. This may lead to long-term chal-

lenges in water management and agricultural productivity, especially for Pakistan, which heavily relies on the Indus River system. The heightened tensions could lead to increased military spending and focus on defence capabilities, diverting resources from development priorities. The strained relations may destabilise South Asia, affecting neighbouring countries and regional organizations. It could also impact global perceptions of the region's stability.

Persistent conflicts may isolate both nations diplomatically, making it harder to build alliances or gain international support on critical issues. Prolonged hostility can exacerbate humanitarian issues, including displacement, loss of lives, and strained cross-border familial ties. The focus on conflict rather than cooperation may prevent both nations from leveraging their shared cultural and economic potential for mutual benefit. These impacts underscore the importance of dialogue and cooperation to avoid long-term damage.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh
Via email

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

"There is no great genius without some touch of madness."

— Aristotle

The Shillong Times

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Importance of Dialogue

THE chain of events at the premier University of the region located in Shillong – North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) suggest that things are far from normal. How can a students' body looking after students' welfare physically attack a faculty member and wound him? If there are misgivings about the faculty member's performance as a teacher or if he has said or done something that goes beyond the ambit of his teaching role then the first line of approach is to seek the opportunity to dialogue with that faculty member. Since there is also a NEHU Teachers' Association (NEHUTA) what the students' body could have done is to take their complaint to this teachers' association and discuss the matter through dialogue. But again dialogue requires communication skills and the ability to present one's points in a cogent manner. The problem with most young people today is they make up for their lack of communication skills by getting physical. As a result they mar their own academic careers and also soil their own antecedents for future job prospects. In a small city like Shillong the name of the student leader who assaulted a NEHU faculty is in everyone's memory bank. What could be this student leader's chances of finding a job in any college or university in the state of Meghalaya?

However, the nuances of dialogue should have been taught at the school and college level through practical demonstrations. For that we need committed teachers who care for the future of their students and are not in the profession only to earn their salaries. Dialogue brings together diverse voices and allows a platform for those voices or grievances to emerge. When each side has had their points of view out an independent negotiator (NEHUTA) decides who is right and who is wrong or whether both parties might have been wrong in their respective positions. Then comes the point where the grievances of both parties are resolved through a series of actions from both sides. This practice needs to be adopted by all institutions. Students' grievances against their teachers (and there are many) need to be addressed through dialoguing otherwise such incidents of physical assaults will continue whether that be in NEHU or elsewhere.

Unlike other forms of discussion, dialogue requires self-reflection, spirit of inquiry and personal change to be present. Participants must be willing to address the root causes of a crisis, not just the symptoms on the surface. Healthy dialogue is extremely important to strengthen and expand cooperation in any institution and one of the main ways of resolving conflicts is communication between people. Conflicts happen because people have stopped talking to one another and adopted obstinate positions. The idea that only one side is right and the other is wrong is also a faulty premise. A student leader in a university might be under pressure to prove himself capable of taking on a faculty member who has riled a student on any issue. But getting physical is a crime and that's what all organisational leaders should understand.

Letters to the Editor

Why is the law failing to curb POCSO cases?

Editor,
The news item, reporting 86 POCSO (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences) registered cases under the Child Welfare Committee, East Khasi Hills between April 2004 and Feb 2025 is indeed an alarming number. The first thing that comes to mind is how safe are our daughters? Even in the 21st century women and girls are still perceived as weak and vulnerable and are therefore subjected to different kinds of abuses of which sexual abuse is rampant.

We need to ask ourselves as to why this is happening in our society? What is it that makes a man commit this demonic act? Are we living in a world filled with people whose conscience is dead? Is the inner voice drowned in the sea of lust? Aren't such acts examples of a human being's lack of conscience and morality but one that is filled with ego, pride, a sense of command, power and the inability to perceive women and girls as equal counterparts? Have men stooped so low that in order to satiate their lust they do not care about a girl's morality.

With time, these crimes have only increased in and around the world. How many victims are provided justice?

How many perpetrators of such heinous crimes been punished? If at all perpetrators of such crimes are convicted how severe is the punishment? Is the punishment equivalent to the crime they have committed? While the victim is made to live with this trauma for life her violator would either be at large and going about his daily life. Why is this so? Isn't it because our legal system was, has and perhaps is liberal with the perpetrators of such devilish acts? At times there are no arrests made and even if the culprit is arrested the process is usually too slow or he gets bail, goes home, lives a normal life with no remorse for the crime he committed. Will he then not commit many more crimes and offences? After all, why and who should he fear?

The alarming number implies that conviction is less and the punishment does not act as a deterrent to help curb and put a stop to such demonic acts. Low conviction rates is an important cause that acts as an encouragement for others. Laws must be stringent and tough on a criminal no matter how close he may be to the family or how resourceful and influential.

As a woman, a mother and a responsible member of the society, I yearn that my fellow human beings should become more conscientious and ethical. We must edu-

The New Colonisers: Khasis against Themselves

By Bhogtaram Mawroh

A few years ago I was told an interesting story by a very close friend from outside the state. He had gone to a bar regularly patronised by the social elite. That bar still exists, and compared to the many found around the city, it has a refined atmosphere boasting of a genteel clientele. I have been there a few times and I must admit it is one of my favourite places to hang out with friends. It was in this place, one evening, that the friend mentioned earlier met a Khasi man who was high in spirits but also quite sad. This individual (no name was given) was part of the civil services and declared proudly to my friend that he cleared his exams without having to resort to his ST certificate. The certificate that he was denigrating identified him as Khasi, who are part of the ST list as approved by the President of India for affirmative action that included reservation and other benefits. My first reaction to this story was a deep disgust at the individual who most probably belonged to the so-called "Donburom Class" (respectable elite) of the Khasi society.

The Donburom Class is a term used to describe members of the Khasi families that have, for many generations, monopolised the white-collar jobs in the state. They were the first ones to have benefited from the opportunities created by formal education and some had ancestors who had worked with the British government at some capacity during the colonial period. This continued after independence, and presently, many of their descendants are still either in the state or central bureaucracy, working in the corporate sector or studying abroad in some Ivy League colleges or universities which cost lakhs of rupees every year. The lives and upbringing of these individuals differ from what the overwhelming majority of the Khasi still experience today. The advantage they have already accumulated over many generations will ensure that they will continue to monopolise many of the opportunities that could have gone to those who needed them more. This is where the concept of the 'creamy layer' becomes relevant.

I have been told by a friend (a member of the Donburom class himself) that many from this class detest the nouveau riche who have emerged in recent years. Coal, with all its attendant problems, has allowed many new individuals from outside

the Donburom Class to enter their hallowed space and challenge their hegemony. These new entrants will probably join the elite class in time, and their descendants may similarly be embarrassed by their indigenous tribal society. Most likely, they will also claim that they achieved success despite their indigenous identity. There is a term which is used for this process of conversion and self-hatred.

In his 1952 book 'Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India' M.N. Srinivas, an Indian Sociologist introduced the concept of 'Sanskritization'. In this book, he described how the lower castes in Coorg of Mysore were trying to raise their status in the caste hierarchy by adopting some cultural ideals of the Brahmin. They started wearing the sacred thread which is only allowed for the dvija or twice-born who are members of the three upper varnas, viz., Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya. They also began visiting temples,

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from which many members of the lower castes are still barred, and performed Arti and Bhajan. Additionally, they abstain from prohibited foods, for example meat, and unclean trades like leatherwork. They essentially imitate upper-caste lifestyles to gain equal treatment. One interesting observation made by Srinivas was that this process was not limited to only the castes groups. Some indigenous tribal groups also followed the Sanskritization process.

But does imitating the upper castes somehow make them a member of a group that has for generations monopolised access to power and opportunity? Even now the financial and cultural capital accumulated by the upper castes has allowed them to be in influential positions across all sectors of the society. For example, a 2022 report by Oxfam and Newsland found that 86% of the country's journalists belonged to the general or upper castes. This is a similar

case found in the academia as well. In 2012, when I had gone to attend a doctoral workshop in Gujarat, I met a scholar belonging to the lower castes who was working in a prestigious social science research institute in Maharashtra. He told me he was one of the first in his community to get NET-JRF (a prestigious scholarship for those who pass this UGC examination) and had got a job in that centre. However, members of the upper caste, holding all the senior administrative positions, would regularly discriminate against him.

Sometime ago there was a discussion on NDTV on caste discrimination and one panelist was a prominent Dalit entrepreneur. Since he had become very successful in his business, he now wanted a good chef for his family. For this, he selected a cook from the Brahmin caste. However, the cook refused to work for him because he did not want to make food for a Dalit. Therefore, regardless of whether lower-caste

individuals adopt so called 'clean' professions, attire, and the language of the upper castes, they are constantly reminded of their position at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Coming back to the Khasi man who was embarrassed by his indigenous identity and wanted to assert that his success stemmed from his own hard work, not the affirmative action the Indian Constitution provides marginalised groups, one must feel both disgust and pity for him. It is highly likely that even though he had passed his civil services, his colleagues, most of who would invariably belong to the upper castes, must have sneered at him for belonging to a reserved category. With few from his own or other marginalised groups being there to support, he must have felt alone and ashamed not being to answer back, especially to his seniors. Therefore, to cope with this humiliation, he likely declared that his success wasn't due to

his indigenous identity, but to 'merit'. Of course, that is not true. Like the upper castes, the Donburom Class to which he must have belonged already had accumulated the financial and social capital to compete for the civil services. But despite his protestations about the denial of his indigenous identity, that he had to share his sadness with a non-indigenous person tells us it didn't work. Of course, these are merely my conjectures and not based on verified facts. However, having personally experienced the sneering attitudes of the upper castes toward reservation, I am confident that this individual must have faced some discrimination as well.

In recent times, there has been a growing trend of the government and its officials repeatedly emphasizing that the indigenous community must move beyond their dependence on government jobs and reservations. This is the same language used by upper castes when talking about merit in place of representation. So, the process of Sanskritisation has already succeeded among the elites of the society. Having already captured the echelons of power and accumulated enough financial and cultural capital for their descendants who will continue to perpetuate the dominance of the Donburom Class (old and the new members), their aim is to make indigenous people ashamed of their identity. This is exactly how the rich keep getting richer and the poor remain poor—by blaming the latter for their own poverty. They are also most likely the ones who take their father's surname instead of the mother's, which is the traditional practice, in order to fit in with what they consider a superior culture. Individuals, who are ashamed of their indigenous identity, can no longer be considered indigenous Khasis but are, as some have pejoratively termed them, 'international Khasis'. In the past, you would need to go to the mainland to be made to feel embarrassed about your identity. Now you have your own people doing that in your own homeland. It is sad but also pathetic. How will those Khasis who are not embarrassed about their indigenous identity react to this? Time will tell.

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

The Experience Gap: A Critical Challenge for New Graduates

By Abigail Roy Kharmujai

This article echoes the concerns of countless recent and aspiring graduates, that are driven by a shared desire for growth, innovation, and a meaningful impact. And I hope it compels everyone to pause, reflect, and act upon.

As fresh graduates step out to join the vibrant workforce and explore professional growth and career, the majority of them are made to face a significant mountain standing tall between them and their probable future; the daunting 'experience gap'. Despite having strong academic records, certifications, and a positive enthusiasm to work, many find themselves lacking the hands-on experience that employers demand for most job openings. This current practice of hiring only fresh employees with experience seems to portray that the government and employers do not consider that fresh graduates also need to start somewhere. If Government institutions and employers do not facilitate avenues for fresh graduates to gain experiences in the ongoing approach of recruitment, the crises of managing recruitment and the perception of graduates as ineligible applicants will continue to be lived as normality. And the question of how can fresh graduates gain the experience needed will remain unanswered and unaddressed, especially in developing countries like ours where government support and opportunities are still inadequate.

In regions such as Meghalaya, characterized by its geographical features as being a land-locked area with limited industrial presence for employment opportunities and an declining unemployment rate, if the government does not intervene by exploring feasible employment opportunities as a vital option, the situation will become even more intensified with rising unemployment rates, a surplus of graduates, and a fiercely competitive economy.

Looking at the current job landscape in Meghalaya, many employers especially in the public sector, focus strongly on formal qualifications with a minimum of 3 years' experience while frequently neglecting other important experiences such as academic projects, supplementary courses, and internships. This practice poses a considerable challenge for recent graduates lacking extensive work experience but who have nonetheless developed important skills through alternate avenues. It is imperative for employers to also understand that the requirement of possessing a specific degree and experience often narrows the assessment of a candidate's potential. Employers need to acknowledge that practical experiences and varied qualifications provide valuable insights into a candidate's abilities. By appreciating a wider array of qualifications, employers could draw in a more diverse and innovative talent pool ultimately benefiting both their organizations and the job market overall. While it's important to focus on formal qualifications, there is a growing need for a broader perspective that considers all of a candidate's capabilities apart from the experiences. If the Government cannot efficiently provide adequate opportunities for recent graduates to gain work experience, then the requirement of having a minimum experience for a job offer goes on to project that the employing institutions are established only for the experienced with no room for the inexperienced lot.

This piece on the 'experience gap' voices the concern of the multiplying number of graduates, particularly in areas with limited job availability, like ours. As these young professionals are thrilled to join the workforce with enthusiasm, they often face competition from individuals with greater practical experience, thus hindering their chances of obtaining roles in their desired fields. Government institutions in particular and employers in general undoubtedly play a crucial role in reflecting and taking stock of these uprisings issues that have not been addressed and pursued in establishing a favourable environment for employment and skill development. However, exploring the effectiveness of current policies aimed at bridging the experience gap may prove to be fruitful. We are also required to understand if these initiatives genuinely facilitate a seamless transition for fresh graduates into the job market, or do they require enhancements.

Additionally, with the increasing diversity and specialization within educational programs, it is pertinent to evaluate whether the government is adequately acknowledging and supporting the wide range of subjects provided in academic institutions. Are there proactive steps taken to guarantee that all fields of study—regardless of their current popularity—are valued and properly resourced? Maintaining an ongoing dialogue regarding how various academic disciplines are perceived and supported at the Government level is essential. Subjects that may not be broadly recognized could still impart critical skills and knowledge relevant to specific industries.

Consequently, the government must try to bridge the experience gap by providing fresh graduates with hands-on opportunities that go beyond mere experience. It's essential to create programs that equip graduates with practical skills that are relevant to today's job market. By doing so, we can help graduates transition smoothly into meaningful employment and support economic growth. Further, it's immediately crucial for the Government to review government policies on job and experience (if there is any at present) on the effectiveness of the policy in addressing the experience gap. If such a policy on job and experience is non-existent, then the same needs to be enacted to be referred upon by the employing institutions as a guiding document for the benefit of unemployed graduates and future graduates. Ensuring that every subject receives the recognition and support it warrants, we can build a more inclusive and flexible job market that ultimately benefits both graduates and the wider economy. Immediate measures and collaborative efforts are required to tackle these issues and create pathways to significant employment for the skilled youth of Meghalaya waiting to be employed.

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In conclusion, I on behalf of the unemployed graduates, fresh graduates, and aspiring graduates voice out this concern of the 'experience gap' with a motive to shape the current perception, practice, and trends of hiring only individuals with experience. Thus, like a clarion call, I suggest that the Government institutions and employers give the inexperienced an opportunity to gain the experience required and also to alternatively consider mentoring and training on the job, which is widely being applied by other states of the country as a possible route in addressing the vastly growing number of youths with unemployment and no experience.

cate our children, especially our boys, to take the path of righteousness. We must realise that this crime must be stopped. Can we live in peace without fear and insecurity? We sure can if we choose to.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

Sohra's Tourism Dreams Dimmed by Power Outages

Editor,
Sohra, with its misty landscapes, living root bridges, and dramatic waterfalls, remains one of India's most breathtaking destinations. The government's efforts to uplift Sohra as a must-visit place deserve genuine appreciation. New tourism initiatives have brought visibility and opportunities to this once-quiet corner of Meghalaya. However, recent events have cast a shadow over these achievements. For the past four days, parts of Sohra have been grappling with a complete power outage. In a region aiming to build its future around tourism, the lack of basic amenities like electricity is not just an inconvenience — it is a serious setback. A recent review posted by a tourist on an online homestay booking platform sums

up the situation starkly: "No power, no hot water, no tea." The impact was immediate, affecting the reputation of a homestay that, like many others, relies heavily on positive guest experiences.

In the service industry, where the product is largely intangible, online reviews play a crucial role in shaping public perception. When basic services fail, it reflects not only on individual businesses but on Sohra's tourism promise as a whole. Tourism is more than a business opportunity here; for most locals, it is the only source of livelihood. The closure of the Mawmluh Cherra Cement Limited (MCCL) plant — once a major employer — due to multiple challenges, as reported across news outlets, has already strained the local economy. In this context, protecting and nurturing the tourism sector becomes even more critical. While some homestay owners have considered purchasing diesel generator (DG) sets to cope with the outages, it is a costly affair for many. The high upfront cost of buying a generator, coupled with the daily operational expenses for fuel and maintenance, makes it an unsustainable solution for small businesses struggling to stay afloat.

We respectfully request the government's urgent intervention in resolving the ongoing power crisis. If Sohra is to continue thriving

as a premier destination and sustain the livelihoods of its people, consistent access to basic infrastructure is non-negotiable. Sohra's beauty and potential are undeniable. It now needs the strong, dependable support of systems that match its natural greatness.

Yours etc.,
Kitdor M Hynniewta,
Via email

Pahalgam Violence and thereafter

Editor,
It has been heartbreaking to learn about the senseless violence targeting Hindus, both in Kashmir (Pahalgam) and Bengal (Murshidabad and Malda). Described as an act of terrorism, the cold-blooded murder of innocent tourists (mostly Indian), execution style, in Pahalgam — in what BBC describes as a "hail of gunfire" — is beyond abhorrent. In Bengal — besides killing some, and displacing many, the Islamic attackers also desecrated at least one Kali temple. I mention this — not because the destruction of a temple is more important than that of lives (lives should matter more) — but because this selective destruction points to religious fanaticism as part of the problem, even though the immediate cause of the

Bengal violence was protest of the Waqf Amendment Act. Unfortunately, Goddess Kali tends to draw the ire of religious zealots from both Islam and Christianity. Given the breakdown of law and order, Bengali Hindu victims are asking for President's rule for their state.

One can only hope fervently that this deliberate targeting of Hindus will not lead to mass scale Hindu-Muslim riots in India. Those who commit such violence, may wear the garb of religion. But really — they belong to a tribe all their own. One can only hope that itate Hindus will not tar all Muslims with the same brush — but remember Syed Adil Hussain Shah, the slain "ponywalla," who died trying to save tourists during the Pahalgam attack. One can only hope these tragic incidents will not embolden Hindu fundamentalists to seek vengeance.

All who are proven guilty should be arrested and prosecuted with the full force of the law, in proper courts of law — not extrajudicial kangaroo courts, with bulldozer justice.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar
Via email

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

"A strong team can take any crazy vision and turn it into reality."

— John Carmack

The Shillong Times

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Captain Canada

CANADA'S natural governing party styled as Liberals managed to retain power in a nation where recent hints had been of "better chances" for the Conservatives. The 60-year-old Mark Carney, a greenhorn in politics who led this victory for the Liberal Party, brought with him a new vigour to the party in the few weeks he functioned as its head and as interim prime minister following controversial premier Justin Trudeau's decision on January 6 to step aside. Between this time and now, dramatic changes in public mood were palpable also as Carney led the campaign for the elections on the plank of national pride and dignity.

Donald Trump's designs against Canada, provocatively urging it to become the 51st province of the United States, addressing prime minister Trudeau as "governor" were stuff that were more than what Canadians could digest. Worse, Trump's declaration of higher tariffs for imports from Canada created the necessary conditions for an abrupt spike in the nationalist spirit among a population of four crore people. While Justin Trudeau's 11-year-(dynastic) rule through repeated terms caused economic hardships to the people in recent times, the Conservatives' attempt to seek votes on this plank failed amid the marked rise in the nationalistic spirit arising out of Trump's aggressiveness towards Canada. Of special significance in the present win for Liberals are the encouraging words about India from Mark Carney during his campaign -- that he aimed to rebuild ties with India with a "shared sense of values," meaning also to "diversify" Canada's disrupted trading relationships. The flag end of Justin Trudeau's term was marked for its strong anti-India sentiments; the fly in the ointment being the separatist Khalistani indulgences in Canada where the Sikh population is prominent, and Trudeau's accusation that "Indian agents" were behind the killing of separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in British Columbia in 2023. The resultant diplomatic row and the suspension of trade treaty between the two nations complicated matters further. This, even as the Indo-Canadian population there is three million strong. Notably, the New Democratic Party of Jagmeet Singh, whose parents were of Indian origin, faced major reverses in the polls, winning just a handful of seats.

Relations between Canada and India are also marked by the huge inflow of students -- a major source of income for Canada -- from here, numbering around 4.5 lakh now. These youths also work part-time and further add to Canada's economic well-being. Mark Carney, now hailed as Captain Canada, is bound to bring in a fresh feel to the nation's governance. Liberals have been shaping the landmass's policies for long, it having remained as the ruling party there for 70 years in the last century -- a trend it continued in recent years too. Having functioned as the head of two prominent banks -- Bank of Canada and Bank of England -- his global exposure and high sense of professionalism should be a guarantee to Canada's better future and the uplifting of its strained economy.

Habemus Finem: Reflecting on the Legacy of Pope Francis

By Aiban B Nongrum

It was on Easter Sunday that the faithful in St. Peter's Square and around the globe saw him for the last time, giving his blessing "Urbi et Orbi (to the city and the world)". Despite his fragile state, his heart was still evidently with the people when he appeared on the Pope's mobile around the Square. None of us suspected that would be his last. Today, as we bid farewell to him, to be laid to rest in the Basilica of St. Mary Major, outside the Vatican, let us reflect on the legacy of this leader.

Born Jorge Mario Bergoglio in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1936, he has left a profound legacy since his election in 2013. He brought a new meaning to the Papacy, rooted in humility and a compassionate approach.

He showed and taught us that even in a powerful office, there is no harm in being humble. After his

the Church for a long time. He also spoke out on issues affecting divorced Catholics, communion for remarried couples, and the role of women in the Church. The recent document "Fiducia

This brought comfort to many faithful homosexual Catholics who had felt left out by the Church for a long time. He also spoke out on issues affecting divorced Catholics, communion for remarried couples, and the role of women in the Church. The recent document, "Fiducia Supplicans," which allows priests to give blessings to same-sex couples, is another example of his progressive and inclusive approach.

the Apostolic Palace and ride in a Fiat rather than a limousine, demonstrating his desire to be poor and humble.

Supplicans," which allows priests to give blessings to same-sex couples, is another example of his progressive and inclusive approach.

He is also the Pope who looks beyond the walls of the Vatican and genuinely cares for the poor and the marginalized. He didn't just speak about it; he acted on it. As a cardinal, in Argentina he would visit slums and eat with the poor, continuing this practice even as Pope. He chose to live in a modest guest house rather than the Apostolic Palace and ride in a Fiat rather than a limousine, demonstrating his desire to be poor and humble.

election, all eyes were on the balcony with its huge red curtain. Many expected him to emerge like past popes, wrapped in red velvet. Instead, he appeared in a simple white cassock with a pectoral cross, saying "Buona sera" (Good evening). He spoke warmly, as if to close friends. What's particularly touching is his request for the crowd to pray for and bless him before he imparted blessings as Vicar of Christ.

There are many instances that showcase his humility. During his inaugural mass, when cardinals came forward to greet him, he rose from his seat and refused their genuflection. Another significant event was when he bent down to kiss the feet of the leaders of South Sudan, asking for peace in the midst of civil war.

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He is a compassionate person who thinks the Church must move towards inclusion and discernment. He chose to break with tradition and wash the feet of inmates in prisons, which he did even last year while in a wheelchair. When asked about homosexual priests, he

One of Pope Francis's lesser-known qualities is his sense of humour. Listening to his catechesis, speeches, and accounts from those who have met him, he is definitely a man full of humor. I recall when a reporter asked him about his health in 2022, and he exclaimed, "I'm still alive!" Another time, when he chose to ride in a popemobile without side bulletproof shields, and was asked if it wasn't a concern, he replied, "At my age, I don't have much to lose."

clearly stated, "When a person is gay and seeks God... who am I to judge?" This brought comfort to many faithful homosexual Catholics who had felt left out by



Pope Francis is also a reformer within the Vatican. From the start of his papacy, he signalled his intention to reform the Roman Curia. He appointed women to leading positions in some dicasteries and established a Council of Cardinals to advise him on key Church matters and im-

He also confronted the sexual abuse scandal in the Church, meeting with survivors and victims in various countries and seeking their forgiveness. Furthermore, he took disciplinary action against bishops who neglected their responsibilities in addressing the crisis.

He has been a strong advocate for caring for the environment, as outlined in his encyclical letter "Laudato Si'" in 2015. He called on all people, not just Catholics, to care for "our common home." His advocacy for peace and dialogue was evident even in his final moments, as he called for a ceasefire and chose peace over conflict. He sparked a renewed dialogue within the Church and beyond. His focus on synodality -- governing through listening and collaboration -- has had a major impact on the Church's role and identity.

Beyond mere retaliation to Pahalgam terror

By Bishaldeep Kakati

A heart wrenching incident shook the nation, when on April 22, a terror attack in the Pahalgam region led to the death of 26 people, till date, including Indian nationals and foreign tourists and left at least 20 others injured. The other shocking aspect of it was the action of the terrorists to check the ID cards of the tourists and it won't be wrong to comment that the majority of those killed were Hindus, thus making the denizens relate terrorism with religion. However, going beyond narratives and common notions, the nation needs to critically scrutinize and analyse this terror attack and even take stringent steps to prevent such attacks in the near future. The Pahalgam terror attack brings with it many important aspects to be critically analysed which encompasses within itself the internal peace of the nation, the process of retaliation, the scrutiny of the security forces and the proper use of relations with other countries.

After the terror attack of Mumbai 2008, the Pahalgam terror attack can be considered as the deadliest one till date, in relation to deaths caused to civilians and tourists. The major question that lies here is: Is Pakistan responsible for this attack? The Pakistan defence Minister has stated that Pakistan is not responsible for the same, rather he stated, "There are revolutions in so-called Indian states, from Nagaland to Kashmir in Chhattisgarh, Manipur and the south," thereby hinting at internal reasons being the cause for the same. But the needle of suspicion goes towards Paki-

India against terrorism. We pray for the souls of those lost, and for the recovery of the injured. Prime Minister (Narendra), Modi, and the incredible people of India, have our full support and deepest sympathies. Our hearts are with you all!" Additionally the President of Russia has stated, "This brutal crime has no justification whatsoever. We expect that its organisers and perpetrators will face a deserved punishment."

On pen and per it seems that two major powers are in favour of India, when the talk is about eradicating terrorism. However, India's bigger aim should not be limited to a military retaliation destroying the culprits or their base camps but it should look forward to striking a major jolt against the terrorists directly and indirectly against Pakistan. If India can somehow show the involvement of Pakistan in this heinous attack, then it can directly pressurise Pakistan with the help of the international community to hand over to them all the suspected terrorists of Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish and others. If that can be achieved then that shall be a major jolt on the very basis of cross border terrorism or terror attacks like in Pahalgam.

However before going an all out attack on terrorism or the terrorists, India has to be also very careful about its internal condition. News has already surfaced that the majority of the people who were killed by the terrorists were Hindus. As such the government has to be careful to keep the country united while dealing with terrorism, otherwise an internal Hindu-



stan for having harboured and trained terror outfits.

This brings into relevance the concept of FATF. The FATF maintains a list of countries under increased monitoring, often referred to as the "grey list," to address concerns about money laundering and terrorist financing and Pakistan was placed on the grey list of it in June 2018, which destroyed the prestige of Pakistan in the international community. It was on October 21, 2022 that Pakistan was removed from the grey list of FATF, otherwise the country was almost on the verge of being declared a terror country. As such after abrogation of Article 370 from Kashmir and removal of the name of Pakistan from the grey list, it can be opined that Pakistan might have adopted this policy of blaming the locals for terror attacks, so that the reputation of Pakistan is not harmed again. Therefore, the statement of the Defence Minister of Pakistan is dubious. Moreover, it has been circulating that The Resistance Front (TRF), a militant group linked to Pakistani terrorist Hafiz Saeed's Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), has claimed responsibility for the terror attack. Hence, in this regard, it cannot be denied that Pakistan is just trying to save the reputation of the country by giving out statements without any credible evidence.

The international community has also come in support of India with regards to this brutal attack as the US President has stated, "Deeply disturbing news out of Kashmir. The United States stands strong with

Muslim conflict might even worsen the situation, something which the terrorists or the country in suspicion might have wanted.

Furthermore, India also has to keep an eye on the fact that terror attacks have also occurred when an important personality from another nation had visited the country, which definitely affects the pride and prestige of the nation. Back in 2000, when the then US President Bill Clinton visited India, the nation witnessed one of the most chilling terror attacks known as the 2000 Chittisinghpura Massacre. In fact, now when the Vice President of US, J D Vance visited India, the nation witnessed the spine-chilling Pahalgam terror. If this kind of untoward incidents are repeated then it is surely going to shake India's growing international ties, and the government should also keep an eye on this aspect.

Hence India's plan of action for the Pahalgam terror cannot just be limited to identifying the terrorists and destroying their hideouts. Rather, India's retaliation for the Pahalgam terror should be based on a long term vision of putting a full stop to terrorism or cross border terrorism, enhancing and strengthening security, as many have also opined that there was a lapse in that regard. Further, the nation should also focus on maintaining internal peace and harmony, while uniting against terrorism irrespective of gender or religion.

(The writer is a practising advocate)

Letters to the Editor

VPP's Boycott of Railway Committee: A Missed Opportunity for Meghalaya

Editor, The Voice of the People's Party (VPP), a significant opposition force in Meghalaya's political landscape, has made the controversial decision to sit out of the recently constituted All Party Committee on Railway Connectivity. While their concerns around unchecked influx and the protection of indigenous identity are undeniably valid and must be taken seriously, the party's decision to completely abstain from participating in a crucial developmental dialogue is deeply disappointing and counterproductive.

The Meghalaya government's move to form an inclusive, multi-party committee to examine railway connectivity in the state is not only timely, but necessary. The committee has been entrusted with evaluating potential railway lines, conducting cost-benefit analyses, taking into account the voices of all stakeholders. It's a platform designed specifically to address the varied concerns -- social, economic, and cultural, that come with

any significant infrastructural development.

By refusing to take part in the committee, the VPP has chosen silence over constructive dialogue. This is not leadership, this is cowardice of the highest order. This is retreat. The issue of influx, as raised by the VPP, is indeed a major concern for Meghalaya, especially in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Protective mechanisms like the Inner Line Permit (ILP) and other regulatory frameworks deserve urgent discussion and implementation. However, these concerns should be brought to the table, not used as a reason to avoid the table entirely. One cannot influence a process by standing outside of it. If the VPP truly believes in safeguarding the interests of the indigenous population, then its place was within the committee, offering recommendations, raising objections, proposing solutions, and helping shape policies that balance development with protection. Dialogue, not detachment, is the way forward.

Their absence raises troubling questions: Is this a strategic move to distance themselves from complex governance issues? Or is it a sign of a party unwilling to engage unless all its terms are met in advance? Development in a democratic society requires negotiation, participation, and compromise. By opting out, the VPP

has not only weakened their own voice in a vital issue affecting Meghalaya's future, but also denied their voters a seat in one of the most important discussions of our time. Political responsibility doesn't end with identifying problems -- it must extend to being part of the solution.

If the VPP genuinely wants to safeguard Meghalaya's identity and future, it should reconsider its approach. Dialogue, engagement, and collaboration with other stakeholders is not just advisable, it's essential.

Yours etc,
Rishanlang Khongshoi,
Via email

Concerns Regarding the Decline of Honeybees in Khatar-shnong, Meghalaya

Editor, I am writing to express my growing concern about the apparent decline in the honeybee population in our area of Khatar-shnong, East Khasi Hills. Over the past few years, many residents, including myself, have noticed a significant decrease in the number of bees in our gardens, forests, and around flowering plants and also the production of honeybee in

the few years is much less compared to the past.

This decline is worrying for several reasons. Honeybees play a crucial role in our local ecosystem, acting as vital pollinators for many of the fruits, vegetables, and wild plants that are essential to our environment and, in some cases, our livelihoods. A reduction in their numbers could have a knock-on effect on agricultural yields and the biodiversity of our natural surroundings.

While the exact causes for this decline in Khatar-shnong are not yet fully understood, potential contributing factors could include habitat loss due to changing land use, the burning of forests for agriculture, the spread of diseases or parasites affecting bee colonies, and the impacts of climate change on flowering patterns. Some even attribute it to the growing number of mobile towers.

I urge the relevant authorities, the Agriculture and Horticulture Departments, and environmental agencies to investigate this issue with urgency. Understanding the specific reasons behind the declining honeybee population in our region is the first step towards implementing effective solutions. This could involve research into local bee health, promoting bee-friendly farming practices in the locality, supporting the creation of pollinator-friendly habitats, and raising

awareness among the community about the importance of honeybees and how we can help protect them.

The health of our honeybee population is intrinsically linked to the health of our environment and our future. We must take proactive steps to understand and address this decline before it has more significant and lasting consequences for Khatar-shnong.

Yours etc.,
Shngainlang Khongshoi,
Via email

Increasing cases of child sexual abuse

Editor, Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, I wish to draw attention to a matter of grave concern -- the increasing cases of child sexual abuse (CSA) in our country. Reports from the National Crime Records Bureau clearly indicate a disturbing upward trend in such crimes, which not only harm the physical health of the child but also deeply scar their emotional and mental well-being.

Despite having laws like the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, the lack of proper implementation and awareness continues to hinder real progress. Many children

remain silent victims due to fear, shame, or simply not knowing how to identify abuse. There is an urgent need to incorporate child safety education in schools, including lessons on good and bad touch, as part of the regular curriculum.

The government must also support NGOs and helplines that provide rescue and rehabilitation services to abused children. Fast-track courts for speedy justice, better child protection policies, and stricter monitoring of school staff and caregivers should be prioritized.

At the same time, families and communities must take active responsibility. Parents should create an open and trusting environment where children feel safe to speak up. Community-level awareness and vigilance can also go a long way in preventing such crimes.

CSA is not just a legal issue -- it is a social crisis that demands collective action. Through your publication, I urge authorities and citizens alike to take concrete steps to protect our children and ensure a safer, more supportive environment for them to grow up in.

Yours etc.,
Thouacjam Linthoi,
Via email

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