

“Rape, mutilation, abuse, and theft are the natural outcome of a world in which force rules, in which human beings are objects.”

—Chris Hedges

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.48 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 1, 2020

India: No country for women

THE gang-rape of a 19 year old Dalit girl from Hathras village, Uttar Pradesh (UP) two weeks ago and her death on Tuesday due to grievous injuries is a grim reminder of the Nirbhaya rape case. The Dalit girl was gang-raped by four upper caste men which brings to the fore the worst case scenario of a caste ridden society in 21st century India. This case and many others that are surfacing even now while the country is battling Covid just goes to show that women as a category are as vulnerable today despite all the laws that this country has passed against rape, from time to time. This incident is also a harsh indictment of the continuing caste discrimination in India even today and how Dalits have borne the harshest brunt of this societal curse.

To add insult to injury, the body of the deceased rape victim was cremated by the UP Police between Tuesday midnight and the wee hours of Wednesday, even while the family were barred from attending the last rites. How much more cruelty can be heaped on a family that has just lost their daughter? And now the UP police even want to bury the fact of the gang rape along with the girl's ashes. Can this poor family now seek justice when they are not even allowed to have a glimpse of her dead body for the last time? That women leaders of the BJP are completely silent on this issue in a state ruled by the same Party shows how politics defines their reaction and not the safety and security of women.

UP Chief Minister, Yogi Aditya Nath has since called for a Special Investigation Team to probe the rape case. Secretary Home, Bhagwan Swarup, will lead the SIT and DIG, Chandraprakash, and commandant PAC Agra, Poonam, will be its members. The SIT has been asked to submit its report in seven days time and Yogi Adityanath has asked for conducting the trial of the case in a fast track court. But the brother of the deceased victim says the family has no faith in the government and that Dalits feel unsafe in Hathras because they are marked. Indeed, the slogan coined by the Modi government, 'beti bachao, beti parhao' (save daughters, educate daughters) has become an empty rhetoric slogan in a country wracked by rape case after rape case.

The Nirbhaya rape case saw a nationwide stir and outrage. Will this case receive similar attention of will it be just another rape case?

The second wave
Non - Covid patients amidst corona pandemic

By Dr Amit Malviya

The novel coronavirus pandemic originated in Wuhan, China and has spread across the globe causing loss of precious lives and livelihoods. The severe social and economic impacts have ridden the people in a manner which has never been witnessed before by the current generation. It is almost a year now and sadly, the beginning of the end is still not in sight. India has seen a tremendous increase in the number of cases as well as mortality in the preceding few months. The sagacious and logically appropriate responses from the Government of India (GoI), the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), various State Governments and other medical organizations have been towards the mitigation of this epidemic by employing certain preventive strategies, public health education and up-lifting of healthcare infrastructure. While all these efforts have resulted in some positive effects in terms of curbing the Covid menace but we must be prepared for the unseen; a second wave of suffering and distress which is just around the corner waiting to stress our health care system and to affect the suffering of people at large.

The second wave of non-Covid patients who are currently not able to access health care services due to restrictions and other factors are discussed below.

The unwanted, unintended and unforeseen indirect effects of this pandemic and subsequent mitigation measures including lockdown on the non-Covid patients' healthcare delivery is going to be very challenging and significant. As of now, most of the resources have been redirected towards waging a war against the corona pandemic but in a country like India with striking health inequities, weak health infrastructure and tremendous dependence on private health sector along with absence of a proper social security system it is almost sure to adversely impact the care of non-Covid patients. I believe

that while it is justified to prioritize the current pandemic, in the same breath the healthcare stakeholders must not turn away from a wider perspective on health.

Patient-centric issues:

There are many reasons as to why non-Covid patients are going to suffer and I apprehend will have worse outcomes if the situation continues. The first and foremost reason is the apprehension of patients in visiting hospitals due to the fear of catching corona virus infection. The amplified message of social distancing on one side and fear of being quarantined or staying alone in hospital on the other, leads these patients to choose to ignore or bear worsening symptoms of the disease, stay at home and avoid the obligatory care they require; they consequently suffer severe complications or come to hospital in advanced stage of the disease. The second reason is the economic impact of the policy responses by GoI (like the lockdown) which has resulted in unavoidable downstream effects, especially economic slowdown with loss of jobs and livelihoods. It is expected that out of pocket expenditure is likely to come down and drug compliance by the patients will be doubtful. Thirdly, the social carnage caused by the Covid19 pandemic has been very heart wrenching. The actual or virtual distancing from care providers, the social stigma associated with Covid19, loneliness and changes in lifestyle have been the forerunning causes of disturbed mental health among the population. "Coronaxiety" is the new phenomena affecting huge number of people. Mental disorders are a well known factor for worse prognosis in patients with chronic health disorders. Another issue which crops up is the promotion of digital healthcare including tele-medicine by GoI but the actual chances of availing such technology by poor and low socio-economic strata (who are the majority sufferers) is not particularly encouraging.

Lastly, the structure of health care delivery in India is largely dependent on private health care providers and with most of the Government resources directed towards Covid mitigation, the patients are forced to go to private health sectors which are more expensive and may be not affordable by the majority of healthcare seekers.

Healthcare delivery issues:

The daunting task of delivering quality health services to patients while maintaining safety for all is a very challenging issue all over the globe. Both doctors and health care workers are under extensive strain and stress because of the physical risk of contracting the infection. The death rate among doctors due to Covid19 is higher than for the general population. With restrictions in non-essential contact, the physical examination (with Personal Protective Suits on) and many routine clinical tests are difficult to perform. The stethoscope seems to be distancing from the patients unintentionally. Along with this, the resource reallocation has burdened the routine care for stable patients including surgeries which more or less are postponed in most of the hospitals. For instance in the United States of America the volume of non-Covid related procedures has gone down roughly by 50%. If we see the example of our hospital (NEIGRIHMS), the number of elective surgeries has also come down drastically. It is notable that incidence of other diseases has not come down but the treatments for them have been deferred. Ultimately, it is the patients who are suffering. The disruptions in the routine health care delivery to patients will finally lead to disruptions in optimizing medical therapies and delay in care of non-Covid acute medical conditions, possibly leading to worse outcomes which cannot be forecasted but surely

the lack of timely treatments will lead to great suffering. Added to this is the shameful and despicable trend of violence against doctors at work places, which, of course, is not new to India. This has resurfaced and is discouraging the health care workers to put their foot forward. Physical violence against healthcare workers who are being thrown out of residential colonies, being termed as corona spreaders and so on and the corona stigma is bound to affect the care of non-Covid patients adversely.

Conclusion:

Although speculative, the issues discussed above are significant in a way which can only be explained through the eyes of a person who is involved in such health care delivery. All three levels of the health care system, the patient, the doctor and the delivery infrastructure have been transformed by the cascading, adverse economic and social impacts of the corona pandemic. In the near future, when the lockdown measures are fully relieved and other restrictions are parted away with, a second wave, which has been accumulating all these days will put an unprecedented stress on hospitals and doctors. More and more patients will be requiring hospitalization and thus overwhelming the capacity of hospitals to deliver elective services. In India there are approximately 0.7 government beds per thousand population and even a marginal increase will exponentially stress the system especially when all resources are being directed towards Covid related cases. Therefore, it should be in our conscious mind that currently a second wave of non-Covid patients is waiting but out of sight and we must be prepared to deal with it and continue providing quality health care.

(Dr Amit Malviya is DM, FACC, FSCAI, Department of Cardiology NEIGRIHMS, Shillong Email: dramitmalviya@rediffmail.com)

After Ayodhya's closure, will BJP play the Mathura card? Sangh Parivar is now emboldened to push for Hindutva the whole hog

By Amulya Ganguli

While the charge of a conspiracy to bring down the Babri masjid on December 6, 1992, has been discredited by the CBI court which considered the issue, its observation that the demolition was the handiwork of anti-socials cannot be a matter of pride for the Sangh parivar.

What it means is that the entire Ramjanmabhoomi movement which paved the way for the BJP's political resurgence, facilitating its transition from the margins of Indian politics to centre-stage, was based on the acts of dubious elements who are outside the pale of decent society.

Considering that large sections of the parivar regard the day when the historical "wrongs" of hundreds of years committed by the Muslim invaders were rectified, it can appear strange that this glorious task was undertaken by people who cannot generally be lauded.

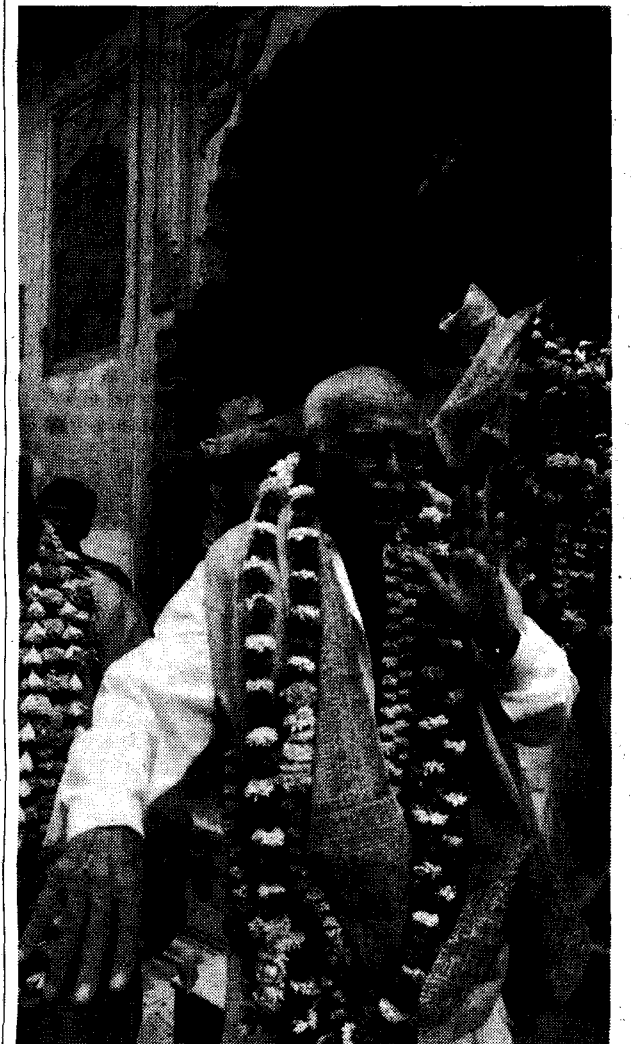
Arguably, the BJP leaders who were present at the site of the Babri masjid on that day did try to pacify the mob and dissuade them

ing together a crowd over which they obviously did not have any control can be justified.

Since the "ocular provocation" had been in danger ever since Advani embarked on his Somath-to-Ayodhya rath yatra in 1990, it is clear enough that the congregation of saffron cadres was a case of playing with fire. Even if there was no direct enticement from those who addressed the crowd and, indeed, asked them not to damage the place of worship, the danger was inherent in the situation. The responsibility of saving it was theirs.

It also has to be remembered that the tragic events of December 6 were only the second time in modern history when a political group belonging to one religious community attacked the place of worship of another community. The other occasion was when the Nazis burnt Jewish synagogues in Germany.

Just as the Nazis had benefited from their acts of desecration, the BJP has also gained. It goes without saying that this entire process



from destroying the structure which L.K. Advani had described as an "ocular provocation". According to Advani himself, who was one of the main accused, he asked his party colleagues, Uma Bharati and Pramod Mahajan, to urge the kar sevaks to come down from the mosque. But the demolishers did not listen.

This was the reason why Advani regarded the day as one of the "saddest" in his life because it signified a breakdown of the discipline which marked the way of functioning of the RSS. Even then, there is little doubt that these views about sadness and the collapse of discipline are virtually meaningless because of the political gains which the BJP has made from the unruly conduct of the mosque-breakers.

The closure of the case - unless there is an appeal - also means that the BJP can continue to benefit from the events of the supposedly "sad" day. The person who said it is now a nonentity in the party and the parivar, as are some of the others like Murli Manohar Joshi who were with him on the dais on the fateful day.

Having played their part in gathering the demolition squad near the targeted mosque, they can now walk into the sunset after having been absolved of the charge of conspiracy although it can be asked whether bring-

is essentially based on the propagation of religious hate - against the Jews in the Germany of the 1930s and against Muslims in India at present.

Moreover, the latest judgment is unlikely to ring the curtains down on the question of targeting mosques. There may well be other instances of alleged conspiracies and of playing with fire, for the Babri masjid was not the parivar's only target. There were, and still are, two others - the Mathura and Varanasi mosques. It is worth noting that as the Ayodhya chapter is drawing to a close, a writ petition has already been filed in a Mathura court for the "liberation" of Krishna janmasthan in the city on the lines of the freeing of Lord Ram's birthplace in Ayodhya. After all, one of the slogans at the time of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement was: yeh toh pehli jhatki hai, Kashi, Mathura baki hai. (This is only the first instalment, there are still Kashi (Varanasi) and Mathura to be freed).

It is no secret that the Ram temple card paid the BJP handsome political dividends. Will the party play the Mathura card if the going gets tough for it before the next general election? Since temple politics is a key feature of the BJP's tactics with its focus on arousing anti-Muslim sentiments, nothing can be ruled out. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Public education on Covid is key!

Editor, Yesterday's Shillong Times (Sep 30, 2020) raised two questions that seem to vex the public mind. The first pertains to plasma therapy. Dr P. Bhattacharya, the Director of NEIGRIHMS has rightly questioned the use of plasma therapy. At best, it can be considered an experimental treatment.

One of the few well-designed trials, which covered 464 patients in 39 hospitals over 14 states in India, was conducted by ICMR during April-July 2020. The results indicated no benefit in reducing deaths. In fact the study deplored questionable practices such as appeals for donors on social media, patients being asked to source their own supply, and sales of Covid plasma in the black market.

Unfortunately early hype raised hopes of Covid plasma being a lifesaver. Leaders like Donald Trump and Arvind Kejriwal heaped premature praise on this form of therapy. This kind of a frantic rush only distracts from real priorities and diverts resources from proven modalities of care. Hats off to Dr Bhattacharya for setting the record straight! We should not pander to unrealistic hopes of magic cures.

"Are Covid protocols actually snag free?" was the other question. The short answer is no. No medical protocol is perfect. They

can only be based on up to date research data, which continuously evolves and adds more precision to the picture.

In this light the answer to the question as to whether Covid positive patients should be tested again after 10 days is a clear 'no'. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, even though the virus may still be present in the blood for up to three months, and gives a positive test result, it is now an inactivated virus which cannot replicate. Therefore the recovered patient is not infective and cannot spread Covid to others. So sending them home is not risky.

These conclusions are based on several studies. In South Korea, a follow up of 285 "persistently positive" persons, which included 126 persons who had developed recurrent symptoms, found no infections among 790 contacts. A comprehensive summary, dated Sep 10, 2020, of recommendations and the studies that they are based on is available on the website of the Center for Disease Control, USA, at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/duration-isolation.html>

Secondly, hospitalization should not be prolonged, as this exposes the patient to other risks and uses precious health resources. Unreasonable testing also uses up the time of health personnel who could be used for other priorities, such as maternal

and child care. A huge fall out of the Covid pandemic is the sharp rise in maternal and infant deaths all over the country because of decreased availability of health services.

Credible and effective education and reassurance in the media and by government spokespersons is the answer to public apprehension, not repeated testing.

Yours etc.,
Dr Glenn C. Kharkongor
Via email

On writing in Khasi

Editor, I read the article, "Challenges of writing in Khasi," (ST Sept.28, 2020) and tend to endorse the suggestions offered by HH Mohrmen on the subject. Yes, the Khasi Sohra dialect in Roman script, painstakingly prepared by Thomas Jones, the Welsh Presbyterian missionary became the written and spoken Khasi language for more than 178 years now. Many Khasis might have questioned how and why should Sohra dialect become the official language of the Khasi race? The answer lies in the history of how painstakingly the Roman alphabets were carefully chosen, blended and used by Thomas Jones to write religious and non-religious books in Khasi language using the Sohra dialect. The UK-J Hills Presbyterian Church and the Khasi race as a whole are grateful to

Thomas Jones, the Welsh Presbyterian Missionary, for his invaluable pioneering contribution in the fields of evangelization through Khasi religious scriptures and also in laying the foundation of Khasi literature. The Khasi literature scripted by Thomas Jones was enriched and widened further in later years by many religious and lay leaders by using the Sohra dialect.

The wider point is that the Sohra dialect has been used for the past 179 years in Khasi literature. It is, therefore, high time to enrich and blend it by incorporating more suitable words with deeper meanings by including the vocabulary and phrases from other dialects of the Hynniewtrep people like the Pnars, the Wars, the Bhois, Marams, Lyngngams and other major communities of the Khasi race because, the Khasi race or u Hynniewtrep does not include people only from Sohra areas but it also includes people from Ri Bhoi, Ri War, Ri Pnar, Ri Lyngngam, Ri Maram etc. Even the English language was enriched by incorporating some Latin, French, Greek, Indian etc vocabularies, idioms and phrases. Another aspect is that more alphabets should be incorporated like "c, ch, chi, etc in the Khasi Alphabets to give the correct spellings and pronunciations of the names, words, phrases and idioms.

Therefore, there is the urgent need for standardization of the Khasi Language in all respects by competent authorities. The attempt to ensure that Khasi language is included in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution of India is a different matter but the pressure must be continuously exerted from all sides, especially, by the ruling MDA dispensation, to ensure early action by the ruling BJP government at the centre.

Yours etc....
Philip Marwein,
Shillong-2

Lest we forget the elderly

Editor, Lest we forget, October 1st is celebrated as "International Day of Older Persons." This year will be the 30th anniversary of this declaration by the UN. The theme for this year is: **Pandemics: Do They Change How We Address Age & Ageing.**

I was reminded of the day by no less than the Police Department that had a special training for all their mid-level officers from across the State on the subject from (26-28) September. Congrats to the Department on raising awareness on this most important issue. All those living today must plan for this part of their future which should focus on economic independence, shelter, health, mental wellbeing, security and acceptance within

family and community.

Just to remind ourselves, "by 2050 there will be 350 million aged people in India" and nearly 70% will be residing in rural areas. Only about 22 million of the nearly 100 million elderly receive pension. 53 million live below the poverty line. 52% are abused by their sons and 35% by daughters in law. Just to highlight that as in child abuse, most often it happens within the family for the aged too.

Are Old Age Homes the solution? Do we continue to fool ourselves by claiming that this is not a problem in tribal communities? Firstly we need to be aware of the various schemes that are available from Central and State Governments, how are they being implemented and whether our elected representatives are seized of the challenges and most importantly are our "Older Persons" aware of this.

Wishing all our "Older Persons"...mental and physical well-being, safety, security, financial independence, and a joyous life..... WE HAVE A MIGHTY CHALLENGE...350 MILLION IN THE NEXT THIRTY YEARS!!!

Yours etc.,
Carmo Noronha,
Via email

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"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is the one that is most adaptable to change."

- Charles Darwin

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.49 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2020

No end to rapes in UP

EVEN before the controversy following the gang-rape and death of the Dalit girl from Hathras and her cremation in the dead of night, could die down, comes the news of another Dalit woman who was also allegedly gang-raped on Tuesday last and died on the way to hospital. In the Hathras case the police is now trying to water down the grievous nature of the case by saying that there is no evidence of rape and no trace of semen. It matters less whether there was rape or not. Even otherwise, the inhuman manner in which she was assaulted, and the equally brutal manner in which the police behaved in its aftermath were by themselves horrendous and barbarous.

The Yogi Adityanath government's response that her family would be provided a good sum as compensation and that a relative from the family would be given a job does not reduce the impunity with which the police dealt with the case. Rather it is an affront on the family and the society. The tragedy that the Dalit family was forced to face at the hands of a set of upper caste men and the unscrupulous cops is a saga in itself. The chief minister seems to take this matter as nothing more than a routine one which his state is used to. Insensitivity of the political class to such acts is most abominable.

So many brutal murders of girls have taken place in the state involving even the high and mighty, including legislators of the ruling BJP. The law, as in most cases in this country, fails to nail the guilty, and such men keep escaping punishment, or are jailed on record but are allowed freedom to carry on with their nefarious activities.

The scenario of landlords wielding guns as a matter of social prestige is a culture rampant in UP and Bihar. Mulayam Singh Yadav was a gun-wielding gangster first before he became a minister. His party, the Samajwadi Party includes a large number of goons. The BJP has its own brand of goons in the form of VHP etc preying on poor Muslims. Mayawati, the Dalit leader who ran the government there for some years, kept goons on a tight leash. Most leaders however, looked the other way. A bifurcation of the large state, on grounds that administration can be better achieved has not helped much. Its bifurcation into two or three more states might help, provided there is also the political will to set things right.

In the present case, what the police or the forensic reports have stated must be taken with a pinch of salt. The police are complicit in the crime, hence the need for the quick cremation.

Adapting to the post Covid life

By Patricia Mukhim

Alvin Toffler the noted thinker who almost saw the future wrote the book, "Future Shock" in 1970. He had foreseen the digital revolution and the communication revolution and their impacts on cultures worldwide. The book - reprinted fifteen times merits serious reading even today. 'Future Shock,' was gifted to me by Peter Lu a friend, who has since moved to Canada and settled there with his kids. Peter has marked in green some of the lines he felt I should be reading with more emphasis. When Toffler wrote 'Future Shock' there was no internet; no worldwide web; no mobile phone and no social media. But Toffler was a futurist and knew would take the world by storm. Toffler speaks of the theory of adaptation and how there has been no such theory in the past that would help explain the human resistance to change.

Normally, we study the past to understand the present and make sense of the future. What Toffler does differently is to give humans a coherent sense of what the future will look like so that we are adequately ready to meet that future. Hence the future is used as an intellectual tool to enable us to anticipate the future without the shock that unpreparedness can bring as it has done today. None of us at this time last year imagined that we would wake up into a situation where physical distancing is a necessary behaviour; where one's mask covers up half the face to the point that one cannot even recognise friends; and then rubbing the hands with loads of disinfectant so that even the skin is beginning to complain! In the coming winter months the skin will protest even louder as it shrivels up, thanks to the repeated application of alcohol-based sanitizers. Covid is that future shock we never anticipated and are still groping for an answer.

In Meghalaya we are already seeing how the change of strategies to better adapt to Covid (such as reducing the quarantine period to 10 days from 14 or 28 days) has created resistance in sections of people because they have internalised permanence. The WHO

then ICMR idea that in 14 or 28 days of quarantine a Covid positive person or even an asymptomatic one would have shed all his viruses and would not infect anyone else. Now the same ICMR says 10 days is enough to stop infecting others. Having read how the Covid virus mutates and reinvents itself, change of strategies is the only way to adapt to the new normal. Those unwilling to change or refusing to see merit in change must accept that "Permanence is lethal," because it will lead to a collision with the future and for which we will have to pay a huge price. There is nothing wrong in changing strategies according to the behaviour of the virus. Those questioning such rapid change in strategy need to look at underlying reasons in their own psyche and ask themselves why they resist change and why permanence is preferable and comfortable.

In the past we looked for durability in a product. Now we quickly move on to newer more improved features in computers, smart phones et al. This is what led Toffler to coin the term, "Economic of Impermanence," which some call the 'throwaway society.' So while we are constantly moving from older to newer gadgets because of efficiency, we don't move equally quickly as far as changing mindsets is concerned.

In this article the focus is on innovation in Education and Tourism:

In the chapter, "Education in the Future Tense," Toffler already foresaw that education need not necessarily happen in a school. He says parents and students might sign short term 'learning contracts' with the nearby schools committing them to teach-learn certain courses or course modules. Students might continue to go to school for social and athletic activities or for subjects they cannot learn on their own or with their parents or family friends. In short home schooling with short bouts of school attendance mainly to learn social skills and group interface might

as Toffler suggests be the new method of education. For nearly eight months this year students have been engaged in distance learning while their parents have been the chief educators. I believe that students have learnt a lot through this method and learnt empathy as they shared screen time with their siblings and also learnt to adapt to a routine of also being helpful in the house doing simple chores; many even learning to cook and bake - skills they would have had to enrol in and pay for.

To quote Toffler, "If learning is to be stretched over a lifetime, there is reduced justification for forcing kids to attend school full time. For many young people part time schooling and part time work at low skills, paid and unpaid community service tasks will prove more satisfying and educational." Haven't we already arrived at this point? Students need to learn from contrived experiences for which we need extremely creative minds to enrol as teachers. Schools as they are being organised and run today - with one adult teaching a number of young people seated in fixed rows, facing front get absolutely no training for role versatility. I find this suggestion even more exciting - Nothing should be included in a required curriculum unless it can be strongly justified in terms of the future. If this means scrapping a substantial part of the curriculum so be it. This, Toffler says is because tens of millions of children today are forced to spend precious hours of their lives grinding away at material whose future utility is highly questionable. How I agree with this! So much of what I and my peers learnt at school, are of no use today, nor were they of any utility then.

Meghalaya has been exploring new directions in tourism. An insightful article in The Economic Times by Sandeep Goyal (ET April 30, 2020) speaks of the future of tourism in these Covid times and lists out what aspects of tourism will work and which features will continue to be in the doghouse for some time. Goyal says as far as tourism is con-

cerned only that which focuses on nature will triumph. He says nature and wildlife will be preferred over monuments and history in the months ahead and that the hills, the sea resorts, wild life reserves and slightly isolated locations will win over crowded favourites of the past. Meghalaya is gifted with plenty of such natural destinations. There are waterfalls and living root bridges to behold; there is caving, kayaking, trekking, camping, zip-lining etc., which are our special attributes.

Chief Minister Conrad Sangma and his team in the Tourism Department have already coined the term, "resilient tourism." True it will take a while for tourists both national and foreign to come to Meghalaya and for the hotel industry to open up but the local population should be allowed to visit the tourist destinations in their own state and stay at the locally built home-stays, resorts etc., after taking due precautions. They too are after all paying for the sights and sounds. Tourist destinations need to open up and the local communities need to learn that they cannot lock themselves in and lock other out forever.

True that too much has happened in too short a time and adjusting to rapid changes is something we were not taught. However, we are all on a learning curve. Fifty years ago Toffler had said 'copability' will be more important in the future than 'capability'. The Covid 19 pandemic too is challenging us to cope with change and adapt to the new normal. We should develop the resilience to slowly start with local tourism and drive out the paranoia. Experts say the travel and tourism business could take between 9 to 24 months to rejuvenate. Those who persist will succeed; some will struggle to come up to their previous peaks and others might even perish. But resilience also means finding other avenues. Change is the only constant thing and one lesson Covid teaches us is to adapt to change and quickly reinvent ourselves and repurpose our lives.

Constitutional morality demands that centre should appeal against Babri verdict

Special CBI court's observations negate Supreme Court's views

By Binoy Viswam

The judgement of the special CBI court on Babri Masjid demolition case poses serious questions over the concept of justice in present day India. Acquitting all the 32 swamy sevakas including L K Advani and Murali Manohar Joshi, the court explained to the nation the real face of judiciary under various compulsions. The 2300-page verdict was an explicit exercise undertaken by the court to justify the illegal act that happened in Ayodhya on December 6th, 1992. The verdict though not unexpected signals a caution of alarm before secular India. The CBI special court behaved in a 'special' manner to tell the people of India that the demolition was spontaneous.

The court was especially eager to reject the charges of criminal conspiracy in the whole episode. The special court may have its own reasons for the drafting of such a judgement. But the country cannot forget the whole history of Babri Masjid demolition. It is a decade long history where communally surcharged ideas played an undeniable role. The Karseva and the 'symbolic shilanyas' was planned as part of a grand design. Thousands of sangh parivar activists were present on the site as pre-planned by the master brain. The court now anxiously called them as "arajhaks (hooligans)" and pleaded innocence from the part of the 32 accused. A spontaneous mobilization and a spontaneous demolition!

The judgement went to the extent of talking about flowers and water in the hands of karsevaks. As the purpose of the organizers was to perform a serene puja there according to the court, the 400-year-old structure was brought down by the puja of flowers and water. The court was particularly committed to depict the happenings on that dark day as nothing but accidental. The honourable court took no notice of the 'innocent' slogans chanted by the karsevaks. One among those slogans was "hum aise banayenge Hindu

rashtra"! Before and after the demolition the sangh parivar forces, including the acquitted, were telling their followers that the Jannabhumi movement was the prelude to the realization of Hindu rashtira. Judiciary in India today sometimes opt to close their eyes towards history and truth. The verdict of the CBI special court stands testimony to it.

The Supreme Court of India in its Ayodhya judgement last year stated, "the destruction of the mosque and the obliteration of the Islamic structure was an egregious violation of the rule of law". The apex court, while giving a verdict in favour of Hindutva claims, termed the demolition as an illegal act. Now the CBI court turns this illegal act into innocent spontaneous action. The egregious violation suddenly becomes the spur of the moment action committed by unidentified anti-social elements. According to its narration, these unidentified persons decided on their own to bring down the structure. All these descriptions speak of the plight of the Indian judiciary today. Judiciary alone cannot be judicious when the whole system of governance adopts a different track. The present path of nation building undertaken by the executives is casting its shadow on the legislature and the judiciary alike.

The coming days are becoming more and more challenging for the people of India. The basic structure of the constitution which is considered to be unquestionable is also facing these challenges. The attack on the peasants and workers is also part of a grand design aimed at the basic structure that is democracy, secularism, sovereignty and socialism. That is why the special court judgement cannot be evaluated in isolation. Constitutional morality and democratic propriety warrants that the government should go for an appeal against this verdict. But why should they do so when the judgment suits their interests? (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Where are our roads?

Editor, The main thoroughfare in Rynjah has seen the worst wear and tear. It has remained so for months together. Then the roads leading to Umpling are also the worst ever in Shillong. The question I want to ask is why do roads have to be repaired every year. What is the shelf life of a road? When so much money is being spent year after year on repairs and maintenance, why are our roads so dilapidated? In fact, Covid19 has shown up the worst aspects of governance in Meghalaya, that is, if there is any governance at all. Why don't the respective Dorbar Shnong hold the contractors accountable by taking a sample of the mixture of fine and coarse aggregates and bituminous materials and getting them tested to check if they meet the standards laid down by the PWD and can withstand the heavy rains that are part and parcel of the climate here?

Why are contractors getting away with sub-standard work? Have we ever heard of a single contractor being blacklisted for poor quality work? Meghalaya is now going from bad to worse in terms of corruption and it seems as if there is no stopping this downward slide. The Government has become like a family business and each minister is treating public money like his own. The re-

spective MLAs who are in the Opposition too don't care about the quality of roads since they are all driving in SUVs. As the elections draw near the MLAs will use all the funds allocated for the MLA Scheme to buy votes and the public too are easily bought.

We really need some watchdog body to nab all those who use money to buy votes and ensure that such people don't win the elections any more. But who will be that watchdog body when even the pressure groups are not free from corruption? Is this the reason why Meghalaya was created? That a few people in politics and business get rich while the rest become poorer and lose out? So much so we don't even have good roads to drive/walk on? Are we people of Meghalaya happy with the present state of affairs? If not why are we not speaking up?

Yours etc., Cornerstone Lyngdoh, Via email

The Khasi alphabet

Editor, Phillip Marwein's letter, 'On writing in Khasi', (ST Oct 1, 2020) takes me back to 1841 when Liverpool Mission field, taking advantage of a much reduced sea voyage fare on board the 'Jamaica' decided to send Rev Thomas Jones to Sylhet to preach to the Khasi people. We Sohra people were fortunate to

have chosen not the Bengalee Script (though rich in Science Vocabulary) but instead encouraged Rev Jones to switch to the Roman Script with fi (ein) 'y' and 'ng' extra at the cost of x and z. On the Motphran epitaph, to remember our great grandfathers who gave their lives as porters of the 22nd Labour Corp in France and Mesopotamia during World War I are engraved these words in Latin. "Doulce et decorum pro patria mori," which translates to, "Sweet and dignified to die for motherland." Then there's the St. Anthony's School badge, "Virtuti et Studio," meaning "Virtue and studies". Lest we forget there is also U Nissor Singh Wahlang's "New English Premier with Khasi" with the Motto "Read and you will know." Let us look at one verse of "Ka jingwai Grammar (Songs of Grammar)": "Lai ki ktien barit phi ju iohi / Ka Artikle a, an bad the; / Ka noun dei kyrteng eiei, / Kum skul, kper, ka Ing ne I Mei (Three little words you see/The articles A, An and The/ A noun is a naming word/Like school, garden, house or mother). By P Wahlang. What a humble start! To remember all initiators of language like U Radhon Singh Berry, Fr H Elias, Soso Tham, Hamlet Ngap Kynta and a host of Khasi writers till date of the Khasi Authors Society let us read this poem, "Your hidden values" ("Ka Matti Barieh jong phi"). Under the oily lamp that struggles to get brighter/ Painstakingly you did pen down more en-

ergetic than ever/ Your writing talents of priceless pieces never in vain / Inch by Inch you did labour, all for us to gain. Works of perfection that devour much time and space/ Publication expenses never did they worry nor hamper your pace/ Writings dispassionately pondered with divine thoughts/ To greater heights of glory our people you have brought. Chorus: Your hidden footprints so sublime/ Got vividly exposed on the sands of time / The shipwrecked friends on their wretched journey / Received new quantum of hope when these they see. Sweat and tears, these rolling drops of value / Long sufferings and pain never did you argue./ Great mighty works that go through adversity/ Bring forth a fruit, ripe with nectar and honey/ Through every age that our people pass by/ your name remains an aroma that rises to the sky./ Exemplary golden lessons you tell us through difficulties/ Become but pearls priceless and everlasting beauties/ Adieu our prolific writers, let's part for a little while/ While the good Lord keeps you safe and we will meet with a SMILE. A BIG THANK YOU.

Yours etc., Manbha Diengdoh, Via email

ment has declared that the penalty for not wearing a mask in public places would be increased to Rs 1000 in urban areas while it is Rs 500 in rural areas. The State Medical Education Minister claimed that people have begun displaying negligence by not wearing masks and failing to maintain social distancing norms. This is a matter of grave concern hence the government is forced to impose a fine. The need of the hour is for all to follow COVID-19 safeguards and support the Government to fight against this pandemic.

Yours etc., Amit Singh Kushwaha, Satna (M.P.)

What ails education in Meghalaya?

Editor, Even though I am a little late in responding, kindly permit me to share some thoughts on Albert Thyrniang's write-up "Is teaching profession losing its prestige?" (ST Sept 2, 2020). Let me thank him for his free and frank dissection of the issue he has raised. To answer his question if the teaching profession is losing its prestige, in my considered opinion, by and large, they have. Compared to the teachers of my time, today's teacher is either a money-making cottage industry or comfortable with fat salaried job and is unwilling to walk the talk. Teachers, barring a small excep-

Enforcing Covid safeguards Editor, The Karnataka Govern-

tion lot, are doing a job. The job of taking classes as is being assigned. The classes are perfunctory in nature and note-based rote learning is the order of the day. But teaching is not a 10-to-5 job. It's a mission. Most teachers are today content at earning. And by the grace of God, the government pays them a fabulous sum every month. But does that make any difference to them?

The problem is that those who land up doing a teaching job, might have strayed in to the profession for the want of anything better. Yes, teaching is a respectable profession and today there is money and prestige both. However, I often wonder if teachers are made or are teachers born? In our days, the teachers were thorough bred. They knew their subject in-depth. They imparted instructions in a manner that used to be easy to fathom. Most teachers used to be a delight in the classroom. Their articulation used to be excellent and they had a natural flair for putting across the message that all the taught would comprehend. Coming to the problem of education in Meghalaya, unfortunately due to politicisation of education system, especially the process of recruitment of teachers, the standard of education has fallen many notches. Today, teachers are recruited on quota and not on merit. That's where the rot begins. It can rightly be argued that shouldn't there be job protection for the local eligible candi-

dates? Of course, there should be fair amount of protection. But not cent per cent! Not only cent per cent reservation is unconstitutional but more importantly the children miss out on quality education. I would have thought that Meghalaya should have attracted teachers from outside on merit to make a perfect match with meritorious and qualified local teachers. The system of recruitment is a political issue. Knowing as I do the mindset of the political class here, they cannot be trusted to take radical measures of open-ended recruitment of teachers. Kindly do not read me wrong; I am not pleading for any particular ethnic or linguistic group. For, teachers have only one identity--- they are teachers and teachers alone. As a retired teacher as I reflect at how the functioning of educational institutions was systematically disrupted during the past four decades or so, I do not have hopes about seeing any change. Not so long ago, east of Calcutta, Shillong used to be the best educational centre. That was primarily because of some outstanding teachers who were recruited without any bias. They served the place with devotion. They are still remembered with respect. But today's teacher? I can't say how many names will be remembered by their students with as much respect. It's a sorry state with little hope of redemption.

Yours etc., Name withheld on request Shillong-3

Post Covid Meghalaya

Editor, Covid19 will end one day like any other pandemic. It may take two years or more but it will end. Hopefully that day comes sooner than later. Meghalaya is fighting this pandemic with all sincerity but economy is really on a downturn and many who rely on daily wages or are in private employment are suffering the worst brunt. They are without food or livelihood. Inflation is on the rise. Most daily labourers have left the state. Even others who are permanent residents of Meghalaya and once felt this place to be their real homeland are now gradually leaving this place for manifold reasons. All this started since 1979. Many of them had to sell their properties for reasons best known to them and migrated to other parts of India. Businesses and job opportunities are under a squeeze. It is my personal opinion and also an assumption that in a few years time at least 25% to 30% more people will leave Meghalaya and Shillong in particular permanently.

Whether this is good or bad is not the point. The point is that people are questioning whether it is worth settling down in a place where they will always feel alienated. Yours etc., Anjan Kr Das, Shillong-6

"My religion is very simple.
My religion is kindness."

— Dalai Lama

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.50 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2020

Cabinet reshuffle — meaning and metaphor

A government like a computer needs to be rebooted. Normally a computer is rebooted when it hangs or crashes. Governments don't usually crash; they only slow down when ministers or bureaucrats don't perform or turn the government into a profit-making entity. Hence there are cabinet reshuffles and transfer of bureaucrats. But are cabinet reshuffles done purely to improve performance or to satisfy the angst of coalition partners? In Meghalaya as in other states and in the centre where coalition governments are the rule more than the exception, cabinet rejigs are done to appease the coalition partners. In this round the only party that has managed to beat the reshuffle game is the BJP. The NPP, PDF, HSPDP and UDP have all seen a shake-up even if some MLAs continue to remain ministers. The axe fell on one HSPDP and one NPP minister.

It is a fact that this Government has a set of young first timers in the ministry with no experience of governance behind them. Others, with previous ministerial experience have taken on new briefs and responsibilities. The effectiveness of each minister has a direct impact on the performance of the government.

The skills needed to win elections are very different from those required to be an effective minister. It is a huge challenge to prepare for the realities of office — the sheer weight of responsibility, the round-the-clock media scrutiny, and the competing demands on a minister's time. And there is remarkably little support in place. Firstly, ministers don't have the luxury of training. They are thrown into the job and have to often learn their responsibilities the hard way. Some succeed and are able to get on top of things; others continue to remain clueless. Bureaucrats on the contrary are exposed to regular training programmes and therefore have an edge over their ministers. To be fair to the ministers they have no supporting structures except to rely on the advice of senior civil servants.

The first few months in office are critical for any new minister. It involves setting the tone, forging relationships, and establishing their credibility. What they really need to build are communication skills for that is the essence of leadership. And while they can avail departmental support, there is no substitute for learning things first hand. The first few months should be spent on meeting frontline staff and external stakeholders.

High-performing ministers signal support for good quality work early on. They welcome constructive challenges from advisers and civil servants; they test out ideas and are open to inputs from delivery specialists, service users, and the public as stakeholders who will determine whether a policy priority works or does not work. At the end of the day, ministers have to deliver the promises in their manifesto. And each government's success is measured by whether those poll promises are fulfilled.

Another discourse on religion

By Deepa Majumdar

Having established (in Part I) that religion is, by nature, the greatest of all conundrums, we must now ask why religion matters. The answer to this question can be as long as one is willing to listen. But before we launch into the many reasons why religion matters, it is important to repeat (see Part I) that religion is no more than a means to an end. It is not an end in itself. Moreover, even as an instrument, religion is not essential to the ultimate purpose it serves, which is the numinous experience of oneness with God, whether in the embodied state or in the afterlife. To reach the highest numinous level of union with God, an aspirant does not have to follow a religion. For, it is not the glamor of religion, but the power of bhakti (devotion) in the human heart that stands as a barometer of true faith. In fact, a human heart overflowing with bhakti (devotion), can be far truer in its religiosity than that bestowed by a historical religion.

Yet, this type of independent mystic, who does not belong to any religion is rare. For, although her numinous experience — understood as contact with God, the Universal of all universals — will transcend religion, which is a mere instrument, the mystic draws her lexicon from a particular tradition — whether religious or not. Indeed, not all traditions of wisdom and God consciousness, are religious. Some are more philosophical, individuated, and personal. Thus Plotinus, said to be the father of western mysticism, admitted to experiencing union with God multiple times in his life. A follower and exegete of Plato, he was more philosophical, than religious. At the same time, his actual experiences — not his learning, or wisdom — cannot be categorized as merely philosophical. A traditional religious tradition is typically broader than a philosophical tradition, accommodating myriad levels — ranging from rituals to techniques and wisdom. Religion, in its highest aspects, is also quieter than philosophy. Given their transcendental nature and innate quietude, Plotinus' mystical experiences, in their pure luminosity, therefore should be understood as more religious than philosophical. Or, better yet, they should be understood as transcending both. They are therefore supra-religious and supra-philosophical in their contents. The same may be said of the movement Plotinus credited with — Neoplatonism, which

emerged in western civilization in late antiquity, in the third century — that despite being merely philosophical, it admitted of supra-religious experiences of the highest order.

Yet, despite its instrumental and inessential nature, religion matters, because it serves many purposes, of which, at least some are uniquely religious. Religion gives us what science simply cannot — a meaning in life, a higher purpose, the power of self-control, and that highest of all loves — namely, Love for the Divine (bhakti), which engenders all valid lower forms of love. It does not make sense to say that conversely, science gives us what religion simply cannot. While this is true, the two are not equal. Religion, which worships at the altar of Truth, thus gaining the power to transcend matter, has to be higher than science, which worships at the altar of external truth, remaining therefore confined to the realm of matter. Religion also gives us, galaxies of saints, and through the insights of its sages, a spiritual cosmology wholly different from the materialistic cosmologies that the natural sciences engender. Thus, the Bhagavadgita tells us that the universe appears, endures, and disappears — repeating this cycle again and again. What science calls the Big Bang Theory perhaps expresses in corporeal terms, the inception of a new cycle when the universe appears after a period of dormancy. The Stoics hold that the universe was never created, but rather, always was, is, and will be. Finally, religion gives us higher forms of faith that surpass and inspire reason. Science, which uses a lower level of reason, may inspire awe in us. It may use the natural world as an indicator of something higher. At best, it can point upward. It cannot lead us there. For science to inspire faith, it must transcend itself and enter religion.

If we reduce religion to its pure essentials, it serves perhaps three basic purposes. On the earthly plane, religion is a gigantic means of sublimation, far more powerful than all lower forms of sublimation — such as art, sports, and political activism. It is religion alone (in its highest aspects), which possesses the power to sublimate the passions. By offering our passions — especially lust — upward, towards God, we reach the safe shores of dispassion and chastity, without which,

no civilization can survive and no ascent to the divine is possible. This unique power belongs to the pursuit of religion alone.

At a more ethereal level, religion gives us something science simply cannot — namely, a portrait of the afterlife drawn from wisdom and spiritual insight. While religion in its lower aspects concocts fanciful portraits of the afterlife, often intellectualized by great intellectuals and even canonized saints — religion in its highest aspects gives us true insight into the graded heavens and hells and the cycles of reincarnation that serve to deliver divine justice, without which, human existence would become merely natural and therefore meaningless. Man would no longer be a middle creature lodged between beasts and gods.

Finally, at the highest level, religion matters because it is religion alone that delivers us to the hallowed state of unio mystica. Through this culminating experience, the human person justifies the highest purpose of his human birth, reaching its pinnacle, by manifesting his innate divinity. Omnipresent, but not equally manifested, God is present in all beings — but manifested most powerfully through the human person. Man alone possesses the power to manifest this omnipresent divinity through the ego-shattering experience of a God consciousness that devours lower levels of consciousness.

Given these three crucial purposes of religion, it becomes difficult to deny religion its proper place in human affairs. Yet, this is not to repudiate the significance of secularism, even in its atheistic expression. For, religion and secularism, although mutually exclusive, can co-exist. Equally, religion and ethics are also two separate spheres, with religion lending deeper meaning to ethics. It is therefore wholly possible to be ethical without being truly religious, even though ethics without religion is a sort of dead end. But the relationship between ethics and religion is asymmetrical. For, while one can be ethical without being religious, one cannot be truly religious without being ethical in the first place. The pseudo-religion we get when we claim religiosity without first being ethical, cannot help but be violent, irrational, and egotistic, thus belying the very purpose of religion, which is to exhume the curtain of the ego, to reveal the Divine within. In short, while ethics

can exist without religion, religion cannot and should not exist without ethics.

What is secularism, in its best form, but an expression of ethics without religion? This seeker's secularism expresses the insouciance of a votary who wants Truth and nothing but the Truth, therefore rejecting all that is fake in what passes as religion in his times. Insofar as Truth is God, such a secular atheist is actually deeply religious, even if unknowingly so. Yet, like religion, secularism too comes in a range, with its share of lower aspects. At the lowest level we have the violent atheistic secularism of historical forms of communism. At the mid-level, we have the atheistic secularism of the body-conscious, socially aware intellectual, who has lost touch with the God within. At the very highest, on par with the seeker's secularism, we have the agnostic, who simply is not sure whether or not God exists.

Adding to all this, we have historical forms of eclipse of the Divine, when whole civilizations deny God over a period of history. The colonizing voice of western civilization drew from centuries of descent from the Truth within, to the external truth sought by the scientific spirit — thus ushering a soul-searing cynicism that culminates in Nietzsche's cry — "God is dead." When I first heard this claim, I was shocked by its hubris. To this day I marvel at the effrontery inherent in Nietzsche's proclamation. How can God, who is eternal, die — at that, by human fiat? Yet, this frank enunciation is better than the clandestine murky atheism of the religious zealot who worships the religious identity and his own ego — instead of Truth. Thus, even the eclipse of God, in its persistent search for external truth, can shower benefits — by honing our powers of discernment, and vanquishing superstition and religious credulity.

Although a conundrum, and sometimes dispensable, religion therefore matters in ways that are crucial. Despite the beauty and truth in the scientific method, religion matters in ways that science simply cannot match. Western civilization, in particular, is perhaps on the cusp of a return, away from science, in the direction of true religiosity. Swami Vivekananda, a universal divine being, is perhaps to be credited for this radical inward turn of western man.

(Email: dmajumda@gmail.com)

Juggernaut BJP reshaping the coalition dharma of NDA

Saffrons will opt for alliance in states on their own terms

By Sagarneel Sinha

After the recent exit of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) from the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the alliance led by BJP is left with only a few major regional parties. Last year, it was the Maharashtra based Shiv Sena, ideologically a strong Hindu nationalist party, that left the NDA and decided to form the state government along with NCP and Congress, the two ideologically opposed parties.

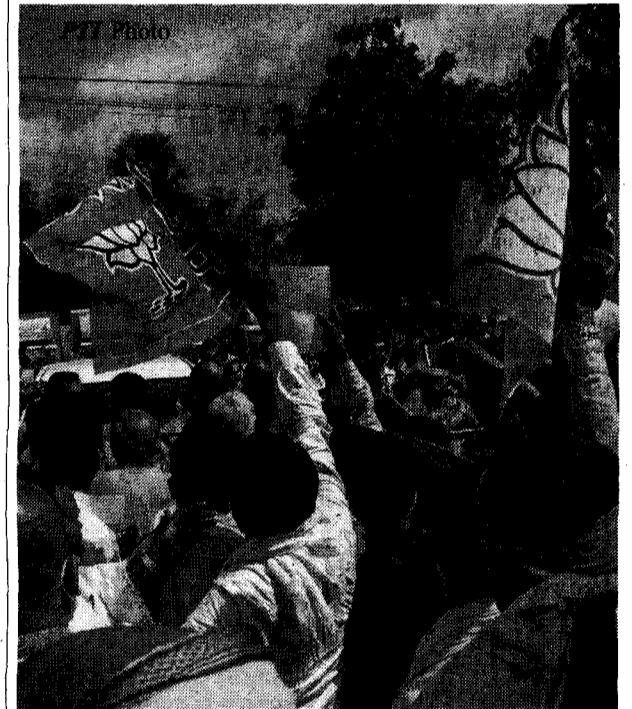
A section of political analysts and also Akali Dal plus Shiv Sena, have blamed the BJP, particularly the Narendra Modi — Amit Shah duo, for not giving value to its own allies. They cite that the present NDA is no more the NDA nurtured by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee — Lal Krishna Advani duo.

It is true that with the passage of time coalition politics of NDA has changed — as the political scenario of the country itself has gone a significant change with the election of Narendra Modi as the prime minister in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Agree that BJP under Modi-Shah duo isn't the same BJP of Vajpayee-Advani duo, which had to depend on its allies too much. Today, BJP is a juggernaut in Indian

its dominance, at least on paper.

The case of Shiromani Akali Dal, another old partner of BJP, is also quite similar. Presently, the regional party of Punjab, which had been in power in the state for multiple times, is not even the main opposition party in the state. In the last state assembly polls held in 2017, Akali Dal not only lost the power to Congress, it even came third after the new player, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). Although, during the last year's Lok Sabha elections, AAP performed badly and SAD also improved a little bit of its vote share. But the Akalis failed to gain much, despite AAP's poor show.

In the present protests led by a section of farmers, particularly in Punjab and also in neighbouring Haryana, against the 3 farm acts brought by the Modi government, the weakened SAD sees a perfect opportunity to regain its lost rural voters and to checkmate both the ruling Congress and the AAP. Also not to forget that BJP had been demanding to increase its limited number of 23 seats allotted by Akalis for the state assembly polls. Given its own weakening base, ally BJP's demand for more seats and the present farm-



politics that has successfully replaced the Congress, India's grand old party, as the centre of politics. Due to this, not only the Congress, BJP's growth even poses a threat to the other members of NDA, including those who were once part of the grouping.

Take the case of Shiv Sena, which was once considered a natural ally of BJP due to the ideological similarity between the two parties. In Maharashtra, one of the most politically significant states, Shiv Sena was the leader of the NDA and BJP used to be the secondary player. But the ground realities changed over the time which was reflected in 2014 when BJP contesting alone emerged as the largest party in the state assembly polls by securing 122 seats, almost double that of Shiv Sena, which managed to grab 63 seats.

In 2019 state assembly polls, Shiv Sena willy-nilly had to even agree to contest less number of seats than BJP in the NDA alliance. Shiv Sena, despite getting almost double seats less than BJP, wanted the sharing of the chief minister's post between the two allies. It was an unrealistic demand that didn't reflect the political reality of the state. In fact, it was adamant Shiv Sena that refused to accept the changed political scenario of Maharashtra and ultimately quit NDA when it saw that NCP and Congress were willing to accept

ers' protests in the state, it was the perfect time for Akalis to leave the NDA to prepare itself for the upcoming 2022 Punjab elections.

Actually, parties like the Shiv Sena, Akali Dal have weakened considerably over the years and have left NDA in search of new political fortunes. Obviously, BJP also has its own mistakes. Nationally NDA isn't that active as it used to be. So, being the largest partner, it is BJP's duty to make it active by creating a national level NDA committee and also creating state level NDA committees too. Such a step will help to erase the prevailing dissatisfaction among the allies of being ignored by BJP.

Notably, BJP gave up 5 seats it won last year to accommodate its Bihar based ally JD(U) — which demanded a 50:50 seat share for the Lok Sabha elections. JD(U) earlier used to be the dominant player in Bihar NDA before it quit the alliance in 2013.

While most of its allies, including the past ones, have either witnessed decline in their political bases, the truth is that BJP's political base has either increased or has been increasing across the different parts of the country. So, it is completely politically incorrect to put the entire blame on BJP for the reducing members in NDA — as political alliances are built based on ground realities. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Congress shooting in the dark

Editor,
Apropos the news report, "Tynsong slams Cong allegations of COVID-19 mismanagement" (ST Sept 24, 2020), while it is the mandate of the Opposition to keep the government on its toes, it doesn't behave a national party like the Congress to make a habit of shooting in the dark. Every time Congress makes an allegation, I note, it is devoid of any details or it is simply vague and confusing. Before they shoot off their mouth, the Opposition should do their homework well. They must be able to convince the people at large that the Government has been caught on the wrong foot. But this seldom happens in our state. The Opposition political leaders and MLAs belonging to their parties, are becoming irrelevant. Except for making occasional noises in the media, they

have no existence whatsoever. Even when former Chief Minister, Mukul Sangma accused Conrad Sangma through your daily, he was bereft of any specific charge. To us observers, inefficiency cannot be a criminal offence. Efficiency is a relative term. Therefore, we don't know as yet whether or not the present government has mismanaged the COVID situation. Looking at the figures and statistics there is no case for raising an alarm. If the charge is about monetary mismanagement, then the Opposition must say so. They should not take a broad swipe and be content that the media has given them space. Therefore, it is a fit case for the Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong to take umbrage over the blank fire of the Opposition. Tynsong is right. "No one is perfect". Not even the Congress was perfect during the days it was in power. And Tynsong should know, having been part of that Government!

Time to return home!

Editor,
A month ago, after you published an article titled "Returning home: My Reconversion Story" by Shimitihun Lyngwa in these columns, the author became a subject of ridicule in Christian circles here but she has also become an internet sensation overnight, praised by thousands across the country for her bold and inspiring move to "return home". Her article has been republished by a dozen RSS-run websites viewed by millions of readers worldwide. Although a devout Christian, I cannot but confess that she is indeed right about how churches in Meghalaya have been lying to their members about a lot of things but more so, about the history of how Christianity came to this land, who we really are and what we should really be following. I know this because I am, my-

Yours etc.,
P. Majaw,
Via email

self the son of a preacher, and preachers in this self-professed "Christian State", regardless of their theological flavour are fblers.

I have known a number of pastors and missionaries in my lifetime. Almost without exception, these men of God, at one time or another have told unfounded stories to their church members. Now, this doesn't mean that they set out to deliberately obfuscate or deceive — though some did — but the fact remains these so-called men of God played loose with the truth.

One way preachers like my father did disservice, is by withholding the truth. On Sundays, pastors stand and preach, giving church members "their version" of truth, but not the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, because they have an unstated agenda. This is sad but true. And make no mistake about it, there's little difference between my father and the preacher down at PotterNet Ministries. Preachers are salesmen with products to sell, and the goal of a well-crafted sermon is to get

hearers to sign on the dotted line.

Christians may not like me (being from a rigidly Christianized family) saying all this. But it's true. And the truth should be told. I have been lied to all my life; so I, like Shimitihun Lyngwa have decided to return home before it's too late.

Yours etc.,
Pascal Lyngdoh,
Jowai

UP most unsafe for women

Editor,
Apropos the editorial captioned "No end to rapes in UP" (ST Oct 2, 2020), even the pandemic has failed to stop criminals from committing heinous crimes, and UP has again managed to grab the spotlight for all the wrong reasons. Be it tackling law and order and crime, agrarian crisis, administration, the current government of Uttar Pradesh has failed terribly. We have witnessed time and again how rape and other forms of sexual violence are used against Dalit women to dehumanize the

community and maintain caste-based hierarchies and power relations. As per the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2019, nearly ten Dalit women are raped every day in the country with Uttar Pradesh recording among the highest numbers.

An examination of cases of sexual assault and violence against Dalit women reveals a pattern of impunity enjoyed by both state and non-state perpetrators. For instance, in the infamous gang-rape of Bhanwari Devi (1992), the perpetrators were acquitted in 1995 and over the course of the trial, judges were inexplicably changed five times and the accused persons were acquitted of rape, on grounds that upper-caste men would not rape a woman from a lower caste due to reasons of 'purity'. The Hathras case has yet again exposed the fragility of accountability mechanisms and the justice system vis-à-vis Dalit women.

Yours etc.,
M Haque, (Advocate)
Via email

By Prasanta Talukdar

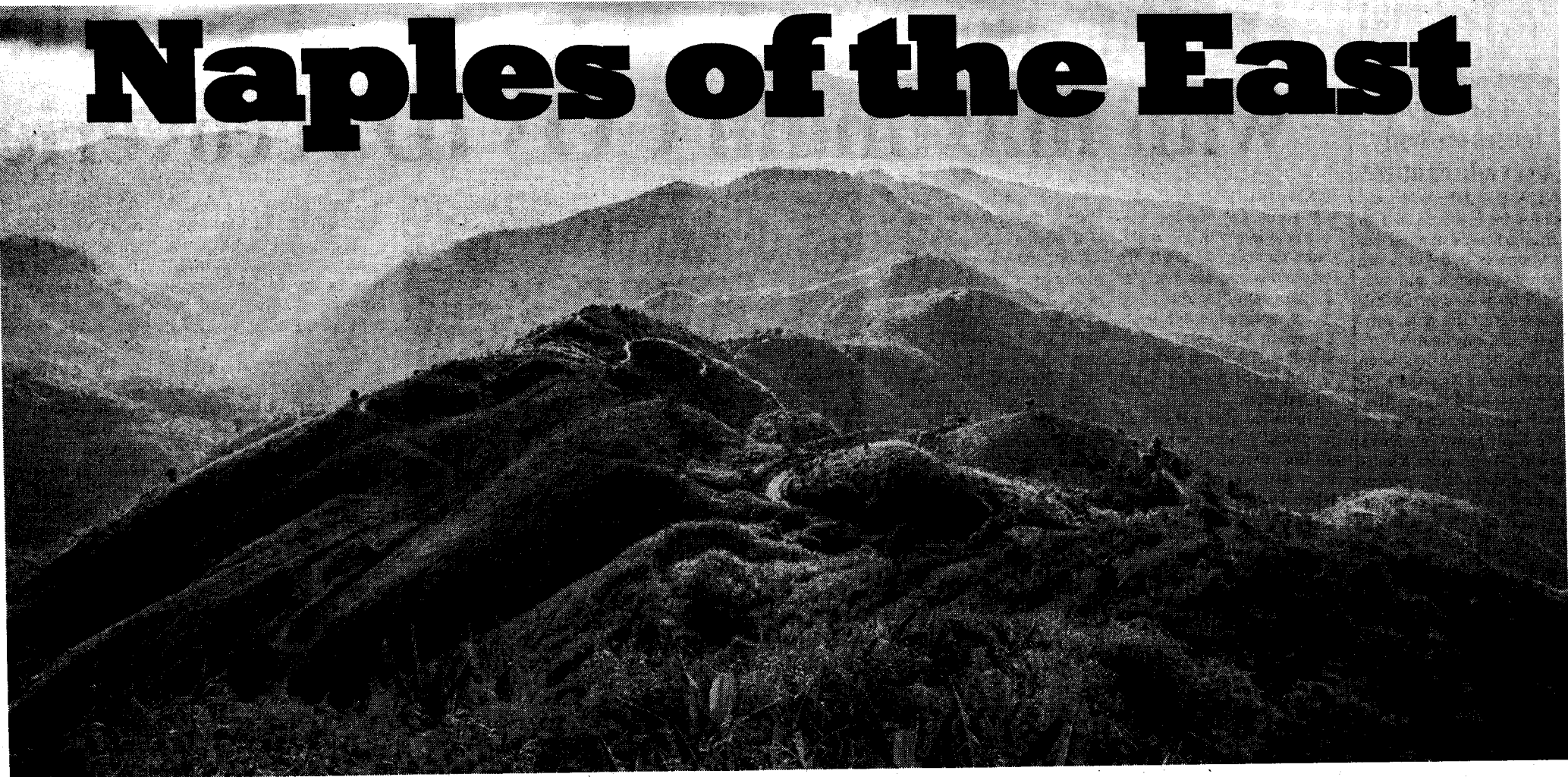
The road to Thenzawl has one of the most spectacular views with rolling green hills covered in clouds that float beneath the ridges like a misty sea. Thenzawl and its surrounding places offer some of the best tourist attractions Mizoram has to offer. Rife with a plethora of historical sites along with nature parks, nurseries and splendid waterfalls, it is also the handloom hub of the state.

Furthermore Thenzawl is likewise called Naples of the East. Thenzawl was all thick timberland where wild creatures were routinely spotted. Thenzawl is one of the most exotic villages in Mizoram that should be in every tourist's itinerary. Falling under the administration of the Serchhip district, Thenzawl was once upon a time only a dense forest.

Thenzawl is located about 90 kms from Aizawl - the capital of Mizoram. Till 1961, Thenzawl was all dense forest where wild animals were regularly spotted. However, after 1961, the forest cover was cleared, cultivated and then inhabited. It is believed that Benghuaia Sailo created the village sometime in 1963. Due to the March 1966 Mizo National Front uprising, Thenzawl was one of the villages where people were grouped together in 1968. The tropic of cancer runs through this picturesque town.

Thenzawl is not the slightest bit the quintessential visitor goal. Thenzawl tourism obliges the individuals who search for odd travel. It is an off the beaten path town that is wealthy in widely ied vegetation. Thenzawl tourism comprises of a couple yet stunning visitor places. It is an out-of-the-way spot that is rich in flora and fauna. Thenzawl is a flat area with beautiful grassy landscape.

The Tuirihiau Falls is located 5 kms south of Thenzawl in Serchhip District. Tuirihiau Falls is the most beautiful of all the waterfalls and cascades in the fast flowing rivers of Mizoram. It is located in Vanva River near Thenzawl. The uniqueness of this waterfall is that one can step inside from behind the fall as it caves like an arc. Of all the waterfalls and cascades in the rough and fast-flowing rivers of Mizoram, Vantawng Khawthla or "Vantawng Fall" is the highest and the most spectacular one. Also located in Vanva River near Thenzawl, it is named after Vantawnga who was said



to be an excellent swimmer. Known for his swimming skills Vantawnga, so the story goes, that he could hover in the cascading water as well as a fish. But unfortunately during one such feat, a drifting log fell from above and killed him.

Hmuifang Tourist Resort is an ideal getaway located at the scenic peak of Hmuifang mountain, 50 kms to the south of Aizawl. With an elevation of 1619 meters, the mountain is still covered with virgin forests preserved since the days of the Sailo Chiefs. The patches of grassy glades on the peak are also suitable for picnics and outdoor camping in the midst of nature. From here one may visit the Hmuifang village situated on the hillock to see the typical rural life of the Mizos.

Thenzawl Golf Course & Resort is one of its kinds in North East India. Canada based Golf Course architectural firm, Graham Cooke and Associates has designed the Golf Course at

Thenzawl, Mizoram with total site area of 105 acres and the play area of 75 acres. It is an 18 hole Golf Course with Sharing Fairway and automated sprinkler irrigation system by Rain Bird, USA, having all the facilities of international standards. The golf resort also has a fully equipped clubhouse, a modern state-of-the-art convention centre, gazebos and a big food court with viewing gallery. One can witness the cultural dances of entertainment including the famous Cheraw dance in the evening. Dance to the tune of traditional songs and enjoy a scrumptious spread of Mizo dinner.

Thenzawl Deer Park is the home to the state animal Serow, and is the only one of its kind in Mizoram. It was established in the year 1994. Thenzawl Deer Park is recognized as a Mini Category Zoo with more than 10 hectare of open area. The Park was created to give a protected home to the deer and is a must visit place in

Thenzawl. They are kept in their natural environment, and only the boundaries are protected. One can visit the park and see these pretty animals quite close. Pony Riding at Thenzawl is an interesting activity, which is set up by Animal Husbandry department, Govt. of Mizoram. The ride takes place in wide open valleys where anyone can enjoy riding these ponies. There is a beautiful lake beside this pony riding facility; boats are available for anyone interested in boat riding. This is a popular picnic spot amongst the locals.

From those initial days of settlement, today Thenzawl is popularly known for its Mizo handloom industry. The weaving products by the Thenzawl town are gaining worldwide popularity. Loin loom or backstrap loom is the main source of income for the people of Mizoram, especially women. 'Puan' which means cloth, is the traditional clothing of the native

people of Mizoram and plays a special role in their life. Out of the many clothes, Puan plays a special role in the social fabric of the Mizo's. The weaving of the Puans is done by women on the loin loom. The loin loom is very versatile in the sense that it supports a range of possibilities that can be woven with intricate designs and motifs.

With its exquisitely rich hand-woven products produced nationally and internationally, the northeast region is widely praised for their indigenous variety and interesting use of colour and motif in their weaving. One such traditional product is the dress of Mizoram known as 'Puans' (Puaan), meaning cloth in Mizo language. Puan is occasionally woven on a frame and is mostly worn by young girls during the festive season.

The weaver sits in front of the loom, fixes the back strap and rests her leg on the footrest. The footrest can be

adjusted to keep the loom in tension. The weaving is done on the loom by a shedding motion, a picking motion, and a beating motion. The length of Puan is normally 60 to 65 inches. It takes a week or more to finish a plain Puan, and a month or more for one with patterns, on a loin loom. With its varieties of floral print, Puan occupies a place of pride in a Mizo woman's wardrobe. These motifs hold traditional and cultural significance to each tribe. The traditional way of wearing Puan is to wrap it around the waist.

Handloom industry plays a crucial role in the socio-economic development of the majority of rural masses in the north eastern region. Women are the sole weavers of Mizoram and through this; they have found a niche in the international markets of handloom and handicraft. This has made them self-reliant financially and helps them lead life with dignity and respect.

Love for Indian Ocean



By Sukant Deepak

In his 30th year with Indian Ocean — one of India's oldest bands, vocalist and bass guitarist Rahul Ram feels that over the past three decades, the band has become the centerpiece of his life. Remembering that in the early days, they hardly managed to get any shows, with only a total of seven in 1991, 1992, 1993 and 1994; and earning a grand total of maybe Rs 95,000, he smiles, "So clearly we were doing it for love, and not money. Anywhere we played, people always asked for more. I think that is what has kept us going — people's admiration and the kind of fun we have been having."

Considering that some very fine independent bands have not been able to survive beyond a few years, Ram says that the reason Indian Ocean has is partly because the members were already adults when they came together.

"Most bands break up because of ego, because the guys just cannot get along with each other anymore. Even those who turn professional after playing together in college rarely make it through more than 10 years. Of course bands like 'Parikrama', 'Euphoria' and a few others are an exception. So I think, the age factor made a lot of difference, and

the fact that we loved what we were doing — experimenting and creating new sounds."

Talk to him how the digital revolution has made albums a thing of the past, and the musician says that the same has ensured that the hold of the music companies over artists has gone. "They have no relevance now. With the advances in technology, you don't need big studios, and can do a lot of stuff yourself at home with SoundCloud and so on. Of course, this has also meant a lot of crowd in this space as anyone can cut an album now. Considering we have longevity on our side in the sense that people already know about us, so we don't have to fight. But even Western musicians say, that to survive the contemporary model, you have to be healthy and touring and performing in order to make money. Downloads just do not make money, considering the fact Indians are used to a diet of paying for nothing. Playing live is essentially our only source of revenue. Apart from that, doing music for a film etc.," says the member of Indian Ocean, which was recently a part of HCL Digital Concerts.

Talking about how very few corporates in India, unlike their counterparts in the west contribute towards art and culture, Ram has an

interesting take, "Of course, as a musician, I will always say that they should do more, but don't you think even we should see what they are getting out of it? It's two-way traffic, no?"

Ram, who is also a part of 'Aisi Taisi Democracy', along with Stand-up comedian Sanjay Rajoura and writer-lyricist Varun Grover remembers that the moment he saw Rajoura's first performance, he started imagining the Hindi songs that could illustrate what he was talking about. "It has been a great ride for six years and we are having loads of fun. It is a part of me that I cannot do in Indian Ocean.. In the band, I am switched on from the time we get on stage till we get off stage, fully. And in Aisi Taisi, the duration of the songs are less, so I can actually sit back and relax and enjoy the whole thing a lot more."

Talking about his experience in Bollywood, with movies like 'Black Friday', 'Peepli Live', and 'Masaan', Ram says that though they have enjoyed being part of these and some other films, he has no desire to become a full-time Bollywood person. "That's a swamp I want to keep away from," he signs off.

(Sukant Deepak can be contacted at sukant.d@ians.in)

'Viruses a crown of thorns borne for centuries'

By Vishnu Makhijani

It began as "panspermia", a hypothesis that life exists throughout the Universe, that was coined by the 5th century BC Greek polymath Anaxagoras. He theorised that the first contaminants - as also other organisms - made their appearance via meteors that had loosened from large stars and plunged down to earth, carrying "seeds everywhere and thus generating life". Aristotle pipped him at the post with the more believable theory of spontaneous generation of life on earth.

Forgotten for nearly 2,000 years, Anaxagoras was revived at the turn of the 19th century when astrobiology became a respectable science. Fred Hoyle and Chandra Wickramasinghe published "Diseases From Space" in 1979 that ascribed the 1918 flu pandemic to an unspecified extraterrestrial source.

"It did not go down well. After the SARS epidemic of 2003, the idea was revived briefly - as it will be now, without doubt," Ishrat Syed and Kalpana Swaminathan, doctors writing as Kalpish Ratna, contend in "A Crown Of Thorns - The Coronavirus And Us" (Context), adding for good measure that in 2009, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), which has for long conducted air-sampling balloon experiments, had recovered three novel strains of bacteria from altitudes of 27 and 41 km.

Today, as Covid-19 sweeps the planet, we are panicked and baffled. Bombarded with disinformation and panic-inducing statistics, we are cowed by the enormity and uncertainty of what's unfolding.

The narrative, so far, has been about a novel coronavirus. But Covid-19 is not just about SARS-CoV-2. It is about the virus and us.

We have coexisted with viruses from the dawn of evolution. What has changed? Is it this 'new virus'? Or, has something changed in us? Have we disrupted something crucial in Nature?

"A Crown of Thorns" is science and history woven into the human story - the long view on a pandemic that's consuming us. Kalpish Ratna, writing in the singular, distil their study of plagues and epidemics into a work packed with ideas that provoke and insights that illuminate. Their previous book, "The Secret Life of Zika Virus (2017) examined the emergence of the Congenital Zika Syndrome. "Synapse" (2019) combines fiction with a heavy dose of facts and deals with crucial breakthroughs in neuroscience, and with cameos from numerous scientific luminaries; the hair-raising stories traverse time, space and the dark underbelly of scientific progress.

Covid-19 was no surprise, the book maintains. "After the 2003 outbreak of SARS and the 2012 outbreak of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), it was only a matter of time before another lethal coronavirus struck us.

"Were we unprepared", or rather, "Why did we let it happen again?"

"We failed to prevent it because we failed to recognise a truth that stares is in the face. "It would be more correct to say we refuse to recognise it," says the book, that attempts to take the reader away from the "Hai Ram, yeh kya go gaya hai" (Oh God, what is happening) syndrome to a more rational line of reasoning.

Be it yellow fever, zika fever, chikungunya, ebola, Nipah virus or what have you, they might be different but "their landscape of origin is the same. And it is a shockingly familiar one no matter where you live. It is a land-

scape without trees".

All these diseases emerged - or reemerged, more virulent and dangerous - as a result of human encroachment on forests.

"Historically, we might trace them to tropical rainforests, but right now we must look closer to home. Because the forest was, till very recently, right here somewhere, in and about your housing colony, around that gated high-rise and its adjacent slum," the book says.

"Disease is driven by capitalism today: the forests of Asia, Africa, Central and South Americas are enslaved to richer nations to produce goods that serve few and bankrupt millions. The use of forests to fuel the greed of capitalism must cease. Else, a landscape without trees may soon become a landscape without people," the book says.

What else can we do?

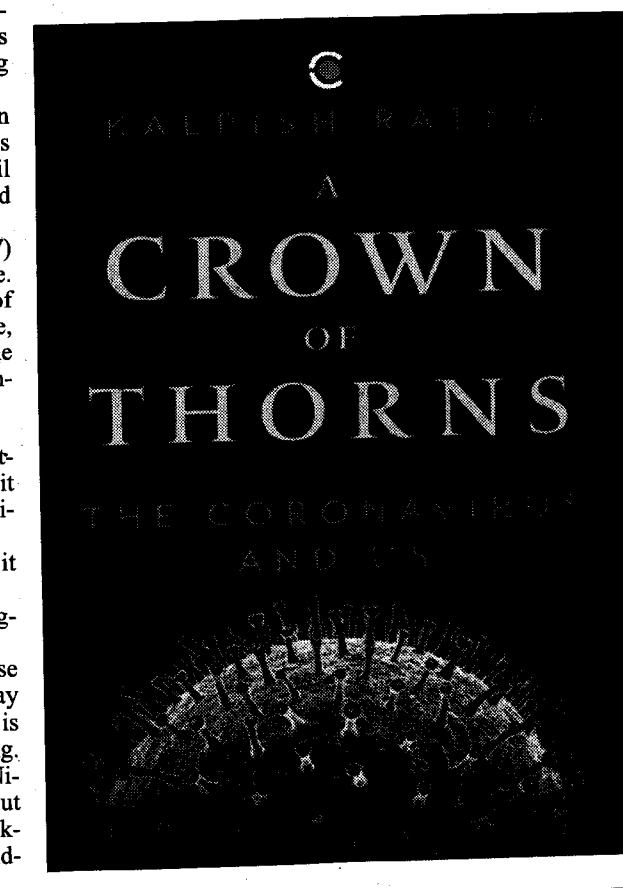
Noting that the standard narrative of Covid-19 is biased - the virus gets all the attention, but Covid-19 isn't about the virus, "it is about us", the book says: "We are a species in an evolutionary cul-de-sac. The virus is much older at this game of survival. Still, we've survived viruses since we emerged, haven't we...History is the narrative of conquest, disease is the narrative of defeat" and the human race today is "poised between these two".

So, "why not reclaim the playbook (all the pieces and parts that make up the go-to approach for getting things done)?"

"Why not reconsider Covid-19 from the human vantage, from our point of view?"

"And while we wait for vaccines and therapies, why not repair health?"

"Whose life is it anyway?" Yours and mine, Kalpish Ratna; so let's get on with it! (IANS)



By Dr Satyan Saurabh

Women in combat roles: Touching the sky

There are examples of female soldiers in combat roles in countries such as Israel, Germany, America, and Australia. In India, gender equality can be achieved by setting professional standards and adhering to them without prejudice. If the workforce of women in India and participation realizes its full potential, then the day is not far when Indian women will be covered all over the world



recent detailed study by researchers in the United States states that female governors have had fewer deaths related to COVID-19, perhaps partly because of female governors. First acted more decisively by issuing domestic orders of stay.

The authors of the study conclude that a female leader is more effective than their male counterparts in times of crisis. There will be many critics who question the reliability of the conclusion that deficiencies in the data are somewhat limited. Many would also indicate that it is dangerous to make broad generalizations based on one study. Of course, studies such as these do not establish the superiority of all female leaders over their male counterparts. But we can say that if women get a chance, they can prove their superiority well.

Recent experience and such studies need to get rid of important implicit biases and assumptions about female effectiveness in leadership roles. This appointment in India is another milestone for women in the Navy, in March this year, the Supreme Court held the Right to Serve Women Officers from the Short Service Commission in the Navy eligible to receive a Permanent Commission (PC). The tenure of the Short Service Commission in the Armed Forces is 10 years, which extends to four years, after which officers may be eligible for a permanent commission.

The battle for gender equality is about facing the battle of the minds. History is replete with examples where women are denied their just rights under the law and the right to fair and equal treatment in the workplace. Over the years, more women have earned worldwide names in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM).

However, as far as employment is concerned, the dropout rate among women is also high especially due to marriage maternity and maternity. There are options like working from home, yet today we need to do a lot more. Women from rural and urban areas have very different issues so there should be different policies for different areas.

If the participation of the women's workforce in India realizes its full potential, then the day is not far when Indian women will be covered all over the world.

(The author is a Research Scholar in Pol Science, Delhi University)

Recently the Indian Navy announced the selection of two women officers Sub Lieutenant Kumudini Tyagi and Sub Lieutenant Riti Singh as helicopter observers, making them the first female airborne warship operators. In March this year, the Supreme Court held that a woman short service commission officer in the Navy is eligible for a permanent commission.

The Navy also inducted the first female pilot in December last year. These incidents have historically meant for women in the Navy, women were not previously allowed to have a permanent commission. Now a Supreme Court decision has allowed permanent commission for women.

Before 1992, women officers were included in the medical stream only from the Armed Forces Medical Services in the Navy. From July 1992, the Navy began to include women, initially through a Special Entry Scheme and later through the Short Service Commission, only in selected branches of the Navy.

One more thing to note is that currently women are included only as commissioned officers and not in other ranks which are in the category of junior commissioned officers and non-commissioned officers. In the early 2000s, female officers from the medical and logistic streams were deployed on naval vessels. While these deployments lasted for only four-five years, they were later discontinued for various reasons.

Last December, the Navy announced the induction of a female officer as the pilot of the Dornier aircraft, which are wing aircraft operated from wing installations. Now, the Navy has included two female officers as observers for the helicopter stream. Announced to do so. Observers are aerial pilots who fly on Navy-operated helicopters or fixed-wing aircraft.

Until now, women had been included as observers for fixed-wing aircraft that take off and land ash. Entry into the helicopter stream means that female officers can now be deployed on frontline warships from where helicopters can operate.

Throughout the flight of women in this way, their critics are also concerned that too much media and public attention on these new entrants may put undue pressure on them. While women officers at a distance appreciate the support of many male

military leaders in these processes.

According to Article 16, gender cannot serve only as a basis for unequal and unequal treatment in any area, including defense forces. Such a women's right to enter this area is a constitutional right, also that the right to equality under Ar-

Article 14 needs to be determined by the right to reasonableness which forbids any "prohibition" and "absolute" prohibition.

There are examples of female soldiers in combat roles in countries such as Israel, Germany, America, and Australia. This gender equality

in us can be achieved by establishing professional standards and adhering to them without prejudice. The roadmap to include women should be included in a policy. For the concern of preserving the decency and dignity of women officers, there should be a detailed code

of conduct for no adverse event.

Germany, Taiwan, and New Zealand are countries whose women run their governments. These are located on three different continents, with three countries managing the epidemic better than their neighbors. Along the same lines, a

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, October 4, 2020

Moon opposite Mercury on your solar return chart will give exceptional results for the whole year ahead. You will get many opportunities to grow in business/job. Financial position too will be stable and strong. You will also meet a special person, and the benefits will be reaped later. You will also make yoga, meditation, walking, exercise etc. a part of your daily routine. You will achieve a lot in your business and work. Your associates/colleagues will help you a lot. The expansion of your business is going to be done on a grand scale. New property like land, building, vehicle, gold, silver etc. might be purchased. You will prepare a new strategy for marketing and business. Take decisions with your mind, rather than your heart.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

Your career, reputation, and public life are influenced by the planetary combination. Increased public recognition and professional success characterizes this period. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. Reliability and creativity will take you places now. The more willing you are to put yourself in the limelight, the more positive the rewards. You are outgoing and your initiative is stronger than ever. You would brilliantly and effectively handle difficult projects at work. Business associates bring good news and lucrative terms and opportunities.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

Friendship, love, romance and children are highlighted. You would have new attitudes towards family, finance, and social relationships. Home and family matters capture your attention and are a strong source of pride. It is a time when worldly matters are not as important to you. Use this energy to find ways to improve your interpersonal relations and your home and work environment. You might be a bit of a showman at this time. This is a favorable time to go for higher learning and for joining new courses to improve your professional skills and efficiency. Your family would be more supportive. It's a great time to make improvements to your regular routines.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

With communication, creativity and judgment you gain money and influence in business ventures. Success brings status and respect as you dominate the professional scene. This is the right time to participate in community events and share views, ideas and feelings with people around you. This phase brings rewards and recognition in your professional life. You would also work hard with an inclination towards more detailed work, and it can get to you at times. Personal projects are on an upswing. You are in a position to inspire others through what you create. Income from foreign sources could also figure this time. You feel on top of things and replete with good health and energy.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

A period of hard work and effort is in your forecast. You would be taking on new responsibilities and will enjoy the challenges. A new set-up in an existing home or a new home altogether may be part of the picture in the coming weeks. There will also be a sense of renewal and reinvigoration with regard to your domestic routines, comfort, and feeling of security. This is a phase when you have an increased awareness of your need for a solid foundation—a place to return to when the rest of the world gets to you. Do not isolate yourself when you are feeling down. Friends and loved ones will support you and listen to you when you air your feelings.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

Practical matters come into strong focus and demand attention. An opportunity to expand on a global level arrives now. You would have more energy for work and your daily routine tend to speed up now. You are required to do a balancing act, and something big is in the pipeline. There may be some confusion about your dreams and ideas regarding your career. Give yourself time to digest everything before you make a move. You will also thoroughly enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities, especially in the company of a loved one. You instinctively know how to place yourself in the best light in order to make a good impression on others. Increased energy for health routines and work is with you.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

There may be debates and discussions in family and you may face some opposition. You are likely to exert your energy and initiative into actively pursuing a rewarding love life, social amusement, and pleasure in general. You have a likeable

and competitive temperament. There is a stronger desire for creative endeavors, athletics and risk-taking pursuits. It might be hard for you to work with others in a harmonious manner and a few conflicts are possible. You especially enjoy games that involve competing with others on a mental level. You have a stronger need than usual for intellectual stimulation.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

This phase brings good-luck for love and romance. Ego confrontations with family members are possible now, but the best way to handle this is to do your best to strengthen your relationship with your family and your home base. This is a time to do what you can to build trust in your family life and a strong foundation within yourself, so that regardless of what you meet in the outside world over the next weeks, you have a secure place to return to. Besides spending more time tending to domestic affairs, the focus can be on cultivating and nourishing your inner foundation that support you and your growth.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

Associates at work might find you less sociable, as you are busier than ever and you focus on your activities and your needs. You might have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you status. You can improve your love life by bringing more understanding and sharing views with each other. You are more inclined to seek a broad understanding of people and of your immediate environment. Concentrating on listening, connecting, communicating, and learning is your best bet now. If health is affected, fevers or infections are more likely.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

This period brings new horizons in your romantic and love life. You explore and search, make new connections, and pay attention to your immediate environment. Give other people a little extra time and attention, notice their efforts on your behalf, and strengthen your connections. You are more curious and alert than usual, and you could be quite busy with work. Much energy is expended in understanding and adapting to your immediate environment. Siblings, neighbours, close relatives, friends, and co-workers may play a more important role than usual in your life. You are eager to investigate new things, whether scientific or technical.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

The planetary configuration promotes your luck in work related areas. You would be especially fond of home and family life. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental now. Loyalty and sensitivity in your relationships are more important to you. There would be a bright opportunity to travel, learning or the publishing of a project. Getting your finances on track will be necessary at this time. Do your best to avoid letting emotions rule over good judgment when it comes to expenses and other financial matters. Share your thoughts and feelings with others and you may be surprised at the support you receive from close friends and loved ones.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

Pay close attention to performance, it will be rewarded and continuity to perform work would be visible to senior colleagues and people in authority. You will have the ability to build up financial and monetary pursuits and can expect good returns from overseas business. Your idealistic nature is stimulated, and you are likely to yearn for a connection to more spiritual or idealistic pursuits. A sense of belonging through connection to something larger than yourself is something that is entering your life now. There may be a development of romance at your work place. You turn your attention on fitness and diet programs.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

There would be happiness and fulfillment through the expansion of your mind, widening of your social circle, travel, and connections to people of a different cultural background. Your dreams and ideas about intimacy come into focus, but could also bring the flaws in this area of your life to light. An income boost is likely in this period. This is a phase when you have an increased awareness of the physical world of the senses, and this is a time to start fresh in terms of how you arrange your life in order to feel a sense of value and worthiness. It is also a wonderful time for taking moments to please yourself through earthy, tactile, and comforting endeavours.

Cloud Computing: Storing for future

By Ranjan K Baruah

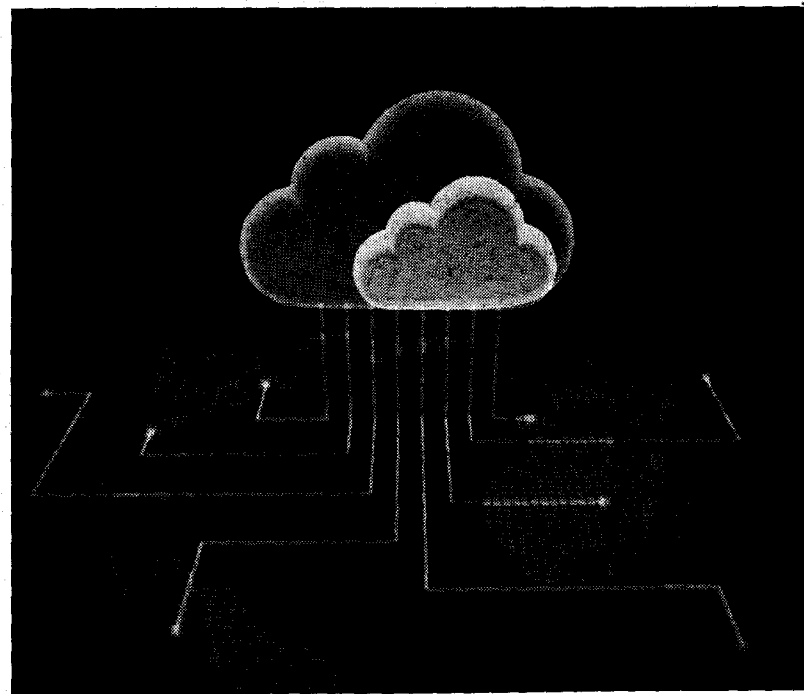
At the time of present pandemic situations, we are bound to think of new career options which might be useful and help us in getting placement easily. We have seen the importance of technology during the crisis time especially when it comes to imparting education. During these days technology has become crucial and most important to continue our learning and attending classes. This situation has enabled us to plan our career related to technology and how best it can be used by us.

Today, we are talking about an option which is known to us but we need to know more about it and learn more about it for sustainable placement and jobs or self employed in the field of computer technology. We are talking about cloud computing and how it can be a career option for us. Cloud computing is the on-demand availability of computer system resources, especially data storage (cloud storage) and computing power, without direct active management by the user.

We might be thinking that all of us do not have any connection with it and it is only connected with a few individuals associated with technology. But the fact is we are probably using cloud computing right now, even if we don't realise it.

When we use an online service to send email, edit documents, watch movies or TV, listen to music, play games or store pictures and other files, it is likely that cloud computing is making it all possible behind the scenes. The first cloud computing services are barely a decade old, but already a variety of organisations from tiny start-ups to global corporations, government agencies to non-profits-are embracing the technology for all sorts of reasons.

The term 'Cloud Computing' is generally used to describe data centres available to many users over the Internet. Large clouds, predominant today, often have functions distributed over multiple locations from central servers. If the connection to the user is relatively close, it may be designated an edge server. In sim-



ple terms, cloud computing is the delivery of computing services-including servers, storage, databases, networking, software, analytics, and intelligence-over the Internet ("the cloud") to offer faster innovation, flexible resources, and economies of scale.

Cloud computing is popular and widely used because there are advantages like cost, speed, global scale, productivity, performance, reliability and security. It eliminates the capital expense of buying hardware and software and setting up and running on-site datacenters-the racks of servers, the round-the-clock electricity for power and cooling, the IT experts for managing the infrastructure.

The benefits of cloud computing services include the ability to scale elastically. There are three different ways to deploy cloud services: on a public cloud, private cloud or hybrid cloud.

Trained young people in India will have more opportunity in cloud computing as it is becoming more prevalent in companies, both large and small. The requirement is also high and it is expected over a million jobs in the sector will be created in

the country by 2022, according to a report. Cloud architects and other specialists with experience can earn more.

In order to utilise and harness the benefits of Cloud Computing, Government of India has embarked upon an ambitious initiative - "GI Cloud" which has been named as "MeghRaj". The focus of this initiative is to accelerate delivery of e-services in the country while optimizing ICT spending of the Government. This will ensure optimum utilization of the infrastructure and speed up the development and deployment of eGov applications.

Aspirants who are interested to learn more about it may join a few basic online courses which provide certificate courses for the beginners. Computer engineers or software experts may choose to master themselves in this field and become cloud architects. There are certificate programmes, post graduate diploma which can be opted by aspirants to make their career in the field of cloud computing.

(The author is a career mentor and can be reached at 8473943734 or bkranjana@gmail.com)

"A talent for drama is not a talent for writing, but is an ability to articulate human relationships."

--- Gore Vidal

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 52 SHILLONG, MONDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2020

Between hope and hopelessness

AMID a scenario of utter hopelessness, some hope emerges in a nation that is set to become the world's top Covid-19-infected landmass. Union Health Minister Dr Harsh Vardhan stated on Sunday that the government aimed to provide some 25 crore people — one-fifth of the total population — the much-needed preventive vaccine by the middle of next year. This is how the vaccine scenario is shaping up; and this also means there is no easy escape from the pandemic. Several vaccines are under trial at various stages, and the final outcomes would be out in another nine months' time. Since India is an active player in the development of a vaccine, the nation can hope to have an added advantage, though big entities like the US, Russia, China, Israel etc are also hard at work. India by now reported over 65 lakh Covid cases, keeping it at the world's second worst-hit level next only to that of the US in terms of infections. A comfort is that some 55 lakh of those tested positive have responded to treatment and recovered; and the deaths are of the order of nearly a lakh. The recovery is of the order of 76,000 against the daily infection rate of 80,000; hence the recovery rate is about 84 per cent.

The entire nation is hit, but the worst-hit as of now are some 10 states and UTs, the worst among them being Maharashtra from the very start, as also Karnataka now. Unlock-5 has eased restrictions on the ongoing lockdown to a large extent. However, what cannot be lost sight of is the fact that the present Covid scenario is also a result of the easing of the lockdown to facilitate economic and public activities to a large extent. The movement of migrant labour added to the nation's plight. The death of a Union minister, the infection to Vice President Venkaiah Naidu, and the scene from the US where President Donald Trump and his family members too falling victim to the pandemic meant that the virus is in no mood to spare even the high and mighty, despite the security that envelopes their lives. That was the message that came from the UK too, where PM Boris Johnson fell ill but recovered. It is in these situations that the Bihar assembly elections have been called for in November. It remains to be seen how the polls would impact the Covid scene in the state. The outpouring of the entire populace to the voting booths could have serious adverse effects. However, democracy too cannot stand paralysed.

TO THE EDITOR

Chaotic exam pressure

Editor,
This letter is not just from my side but this is what thousands of final semester under-graduate students have been tormented with. Our career is being tortured in the most brutal way by none other than the most prestigious university of North East India, the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) and I have no regret in saying this.

Firstly, we were taught nothing in the name of the so-called online classes all these months and only in the last moment, just a few days prior to our exams, most teachers got charged up and rushed to complete their syllabus ignoring the fact that most students could not even cope up with the online classes and "concept and understanding" was brutally murdered by most teachers. Secondly, NEHU decided to conduct online as well as offline exams for the UG students and on September 23 2020 we got our exam routine and therefore some students chose online mode while some chose offline mode. But just days later we all were suggested to opt for online mode by our HODs and if in case we still want to write offline then we must write an application letter to our respective principals and seek their permission. Till here things looked fine

and normal. But the real chaos begins from here.

On September 28, 2020, just 9 days prior to our exams we all received a letter from NEHU about the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) of the UG exams and through this letter we all were informed that our online exam will be held on a website named, "My Placement Perfect". We were also suggested to download the app of the same website from the Google Play Store. The rating of the app was around 1.4 stars on Playstore and this was when most students started panicking. But we still downloaded the app as per the instructions of NEHU.

Again on October 1, 2020 we received another notification from NEHU informing us about a mock test that all students must attempt on the website or on the app on October 3-5 2020. This mock test was actually a mockery for every UG student because the majority of us could not even log on to the app or the website using the credentials that were given to us by our respective colleges. The app continued crashing and the browser was unresponsive. Every time we entered our log in details it showed that our details are incorrect. When we spoke to our respective teachers they also seemed confused about this and told us that perhaps the

The general Hynniewtrep belief about the after-life is that when one dies the person will go to eat betel nut in the corridors of the house of God ('bam kwai ha duar U Blei'). The commonly accepted concept is that the corridors of the house of God is the ultimate dwelling place of the soul after it is separated from the body. The idea of eating betel nut perhaps has some connection with it being the most popular food item in the culture which also has some connection with what people consider to be their definitive leisure.

Perhaps it also has to do with the saying in Pnar 'sadu u chong tae riñ khri-pathi hi eh', which literally means one has all the time of her/his life to just sit in leisure and do nothing but pull and push the areca nut basket or the 'shang kwai'. The saying is often referred to families who are well-off and do not have to go to work or do anything at all in their entire life. Hence the concept of a happy and peaceful life is when one has to do nothing at all but spend the rest of one's life eating betel-nut.

The idea is that the afterlife is a place of eternal rest that man's spirit proceeds to after spending his earthly life by respecting family on both sides (mother and father's clan side), earning righteousness, respecting fellow humans and living life in reverence towards God and the deities. The other question of whether the Hynniewtrep believes in universal salvation or that a benevolent God saves all the souls. This is a subject that needs more study. It is also not clear if they even have a concept of a judgemental God who adjudicates on how humans live their lives. Considering the fact that ours is a tribal community, the world view of the people will be within the community only and hence there does not seem to be a concept of the saved and the damned amongst the people.

The religion of the Khasi Pnar is not a religion of the scriptures like the Abrahamic religion or some eastern or oriental religions which rely on their sacred books. On the other hand traditional religion is rather

server has crashed due to huge traffic. If this website/app couldn't let us attempt a simple mock test then what assurance can NEHU give us that this app won't crash or hang on the day of our actual exams. If this app couldn't control the traffic of a few hundred students then on the day of our exams, how can we expect this website/app to control a traffic of over 22 thousand final year students?

Also, the SOP mentions that we need to write our answers in A4 sheet paper and after completing the paper we must scan our answer sheets, merge it into a single PDF file and upload the same on the website/app and also send the papers to our respective colleges. How does NEHU expect every student to be so technologically advanced when they themselves are dependent on an app with a rating of 1.4 stars on the Play Store?

We hope things get resolved soon because if it doesn't then our sinking career will haunt us for the rest of our lives

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request

New faces, new expectations

Editor,
On October 1, 2020, a new Chairperson was appointed for the Meghalaya Public Service Commission. Mr

Paul R. Marweñ, a former Chief Engineer of the state's Public Works Department, will have the honorary distinction of being the first technocrat to occupy the constitutional post. Besides Mr Marweñ, Ms BT Sangma, another technocrat, has also been appointed as one of MPSC members. Looking at the current setup, with the exception of one member who is due to retire later this month, all the other members have secure tenures for the next few years. I would take this opportunity through this newspaper to urge the MPSC under the new leadership of Mr Marweñ to deeply introspect on the many problems and negative criticisms that plague the Commission, and to take all steps necessary to revamp the organisation and raise it to a standard that meets with approval in the public eye.

It is the duty of the new Commission to imbibe the principles of integrity, transparency and accountability in their functioning. This is an opportune moment for the Commission to adopt new measures which are in line with the current times, and to up the ante by trying to emulate the standards set forth by the Union Public Service Commission.

Another point I wish to mention is on the delay in releasing the Meghalaya Civil Services (Mains)

results, which has been pending for over 7-8 months, despite being allowed to go ahead with the examination by a Division Bench of the High Court last year, subject to the outcome of a Single Bench in a particular pending matter. Even the Supreme Court has refused to interfere as of now.

Furthermore, even the Meghalaya Police Service (Prelims) exam has not been conducted, even after a span of many years since the last recruitment drive. Recruitment to government service is the principal task of the MPSC, and as informed citizens we look forward to certain constructive changes such as scrapping of interviews for certain grades of employment as proposed by PM Modi, videotaped interviews, etc., to be implemented immediately to instill confidence in the masses.

MPSC, as a matter of record, has not always been portrayed in a good light in the past. Hence they should take this opportunity to bring good vibes and changes into an already stagnant public system. MPSC is an autonomous institution under the Constitution of India, and it must remember its mandate. The Commission should insulate itself from any form of political interference, and must strive for the greater good of society. Until MPSC learns to distance itself from any political affiliation, positive change is going to be very

hard to come by.

Yours etc.,
Jeremiah Syngkli,
Via email

Havoc caused by incessant rains

Editor,
Last week incessant rains have created havoc in the entire state. Roads were either washed away or blocked with piles of soil and boulders. Culvert and bridges were damaged or destroyed. Pipelines which supply drinking water to households were either damaged or snapped. All these have created problems not only to villagers but also to city dwellers. The natural calamity has also cost the Government Departments especially PWD and PHE dearly. The PWD must be very busy in restoring road connectivity and the PHE in restoration of water supply. I take this opportunity to thank the PHE for restoring the water supply from Umkhen in little more than a week's time. My request to the Shillong Municipality is to deploy their water tankers so as to minimise the water problems in such times of crisis. I also express my grief and condolences to the families that have lost their dear ones in last week's incident.

Yours etc.,
Elisha Sweetie
Syiemiong,
Via email

Traditional concept of the after-life

By HH Mohrmen

a practicing religion that one can understand only when one studies the traditions that are being practiced by the people. The traditions and stories are not only their covenant with the creator or the divine, but they are also believed to be God's revelations to creation. The tradition of 'choh syiar' which is part of the cremation ceremonies for the deceased person in some area, gives us the idea that the rooster plays the role of a mediator between the living and the creator. The rooster takes the role of a mediator between humans and the creator.

Obviously there is a great difference between the

be on the perpetrator, but misfortune can also befall on one's relatives or even one's descendants. It largely depends on the nature of the sin committed. There are certain sins which one can be forgiven for simply by offering sacrifices to appease the offended deities.

Amongst the Pnar there is also the concept of 'ki Sangia ki Saret' or the spirit of the dead ancestors who visit the family every now and then. The tradition of 'ka Siang ka Pha/ka phor' or the offering of food which is part of the last rites of the deceased person is connected with the spirit of the dead. Ka siang ka pha is



concept of paradise in the Abrahamic religion and the concept of afterlife in Khasi Pnar context, but one distinct feature between the two is in the idea of hell. In fact it is not clear if there is even a concept of hell in the traditional beliefs system.

Although there is a saying like 'ka Nurok ka ksew' or 'ki khyndai pateng niamra' which perhaps is the influence of other cultures, but these sayings are not found among the other tribes of the Hynniewtrep. The reason is because there is no corresponding idea of these concepts amongst the War and the Pnar of Jaintia hills. In fact there is no War or Pnar translation of these two ideas which is only available in Khasi. Because hell is also connected with sin, it is perhaps only right to try and look at how the two communities understand sin. To begin with even the word 'pap or pop' is perhaps the influence from the outside culture but in the War and the Pnar context if a person commits a 'pap' or sin, retribution will

also being offered during Behdienkhlam festival and cremation by both the War and Pnar. This also explains why the Khasi, the Pnar and the War have the tradition of not washing their cooking pots in the evening. After every dinner or evening meal people always keep some portion of food in the utensils. The reason is to leave some food for the spirits to partake from if they come to visit the family during the night.

People also believe that when they their deceased relatives in their dreams it is because the spirits of the dead relatives came to visit them ('wan li jngieh'). There are many stories of the spirits of deceased persons visiting the family and it is believed that the family members see their dead relatives in person ('hei Sarup') albeit not in a living form. If 'sarup' is another influence from the plains which is connected to the Sanskrit word 'swarup' is also another question. In Sanskrit 'swarup' is a combination of two words

'swa' meaning self or own and 'rupa' which means form or nature and 'swarup' is one's own form or nature; hence the word 'sarup'.

And there is also a saying 'ksan nia ksan chang' wherein relatives pray to the gods or God for the welfare and the well-being of the family and relatives. In fact this and 'lai suk cha duar U Blai' is how people bid goodbye to the departed members of the family.

Among the War and Pnar the concept of afterlife is that when a person dies, the spirit lives on. In fact the hills are not only the earthly dwelling place of the living, but it is also a place where the spirit lingers after it has left the body. There is also the tradition that if a person dies in a far off place or 'cha ki ryngkaw para/nongwei' or the domain of the other regional deities, at least the charred bones have to be taken back to one's place of birth where the bones are interred in the 'Mootylleñ Mootymoh' or the clan's ossuary. The point is the person will find eternal solace only when the ceremony is complete and at least the charred bones are kept in the clan's ossuary. A similar ceremony is called 'lum shiyang' among the War Jaintia. If a person disappears for a long period of time and is presumed dead, or if a person dies without his/her last rites being completed, the tradition of 'kaweh sniñ' is performed by the relatives. 'Kaweh sniñ' is a ceremony performed in place of the last rites of the person so that not only the body is presumed to have been disposed but more importantly it is a tradition by which the spirit is set free.

According to D. Lamar (An insight to Behdienkhlam 2015) in the Pnar context the Universe is made up of three layers. The invisible realm ('Ki soo rkep') the abode of the Almighty/heaven ('i bneñ') and the physical world where creation lives ('i pythai') Therefore the idea of hell where the sinners will be punished is a foreign idea as it does not find mention in the tradition.

(Email: hhmohrmen67@gmail.com)

Relevance of Gandhi, today

By KK Muktan

This year we observe Mahatma Gandhi's 151st birth anniversary. On this occasion India is celebrating his birthday with befitting solemnity and paying respectful homage to the Father of the Nation. Prayer meetings are being held at Sabarmati Ashram, religious discourses are organized and Gandhi's philosophy is being propagated across India. It is, however, lamentable that of late, Indian people have been losing their faith and reverence for Bapu and practically departed from his ideals. His birthdays are observed merely for the sake of formality and his great philosophy is discussed in academic institutions only. Many of us tend to hold the view that Gandhian philosophy has become old and obsolete and has no relevance with the present day order of things. While the Gandhian ideology is being revered across the world, it is unfortunate that in his own home country many of his great ideals are gradually fading away.

In 2015 a huge statue of Mahatma Gandhi was erected at the Palace of Westminster, London within the premises of Parliament Square. Gandhian philosophy is gradually gaining ground among people across the world today. Gandhi's beloved prayer song - Vaishnava janato ene kahiye, pir parai janere, is sung with reverence in countries like South Africa, South Korea, Denmark, Germany etc. every day, but rarely in our own country. Universal truth and ideals propounded by great men never fade away; they remain forever, as a great leading force and inspire humanity for peace, love and happiness.

Gandhi's teachings are universal and more relevant today than ever before. However, one has to go deep into the root of the matter to really comprehend his philosophy. For example, Ahimsa (non-violence) literally means non-killing. But the doctrine of Ahimsa propounded by Gandhi takes a world of meaning and takes one into much higher realms that are infinitely deeper than what it appears to be in the literal sense. Ahimsa really means that one must not offend anyone nor harbour uncharitable thoughts even against one's enemy. For Gandhi there is no room for enemy, he denied the very existence of enemy. Gandhi's ahimsa admits no retaliation or a grudge in one's mind. If one returns a blow for blow, he departs from the doctrine of ahimsa. For Gandhi non-violence was a weapon which he used during freedom movement of India against the British and he actually succeeded in his mission, finally.

Gandhi propounded Satyagraha or adherence to truth. Truth, for Gandhi means what the inner voice tells us. Truth is within ourselves. Gandhi says, there is an innermost center within all of us where truth abides in fullness. Every wrongdoer knows within himself that he is doing wrong, but only a few refrain from repeating that wrong. The law of truth is merely understood to mean that we must speak the truth. Truth is the source of our character. Love and truth are two faces of the same coin. A person cannot be true if he does not love God's creation. Truth and love are, therefore the complete sacrifice. Gandhi said, true love is boundless like the ocean and, swelling within one, spreads itself out and, crosses all boundaries and frontiers, envelops the whole world. Love unites while hatred divides.

From the above expositions it is clear that the ideologies of Mahatma Gandhi are extremely relevant to the prevailing situations in the world, especially in India today. The growing hatred and intolerance between man and man, between community and community, class and class prevalent in our country can be assuaged only through

the path shown by Gandhi. Ahimsa, truth and love are the only antidote to the disease that our country suffers today. India has plunged into a deep orgy of hatred and intolerance leading to violence and mindless killing. Every day the front pages of newspapers are hit by news of ghastly acts of lynching and killing innocent people simply on the grounds of differences in faith, belief and culture. People who belong to the minority communities are systematically discriminated against, assaulted and even killed. This state of affairs is sickening the conscience of every sensible Indian.

Sexual violence against women has become one of the biggest social menace in India. According to National Crime Records Bureau, one woman is raped every twenty minutes in India. Statistics reveal that the incidence of rape and murder is on the rise. Within the period of one year from 2011 to 2012, sexual violence against women has increased by 3 percent. This is based on the cases reported while many such cases of violence go unreported because of various reasons.

Violence against children has become widespread and pervasive in India. It has many forms, such as - physical, sexual abuse, negligence, and child labour. Today millions of children across India are victims of all kinds of violence.

Acts of intolerance and hatred against low caste people by higher class Hindus in India is another social menace that has remained a harsh reality for millions of Hindu Dalits. The Dalits are socially humiliated, economically oppressed and physically assaulted. Mahatma Gandhi was against the caste system. He called the low caste people "Harijana" (children of God) and gave equal respect to them. In short the tragedy of India today is the religious and class conflicts that have plagued it since long past. It is against this menace that Mahatma Gandhi fought consistently until he finally lost his life, for this cause. He undertook hunger strike unto death in order to end the human holocaust that was perpetrated by Hindus and Muslims against each other. He looked upon all religions with equal respect and advised others to honour each others' religion. He sang the famous prayer song "Hindu Muslim, Sikh, Isha, hum sab hai bhai bhai" and often held that honesty and ahimsa should be the principle of all religion and social classes.

Mahatma Gandhi was the one person who seemed to comprehend the grave consequences of India's partition. Unfortunately, a wrong message was spread about his having agreed to the partition of India along communal lines. Gandhi neither agreed to the proposal of partition nor was a party to it in any way. Because Gandhi made his position clear by saying - 'let it not be presumed that Gandhi was party to India's vicesion'.

If only Mahatma Gandhi were alive today, the situation of our country would have been different. Let us hope that the India of tomorrow will fulfill the dream of the Mahatma which is reflected in this prayer written by him on January 18, 1948 as he broke his final fast, which he had undertaken to bring an end to the waves of violence between Hindus, Muslims and other religious groups throughout India.

Let me conclude this article with his famous prayer which he wrote in January, 1948, just seven days before he was assassinated by a Hindu fundamentalist, as he was about to begin a public prayer meeting. "From untruth lead me unto truth/ From darkness lead me unto light/ From death lead me unto life everlasting....."

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"There really can be no peace without justice. There can be no justice without truth. And there can be no truth, unless someone rises up to tell you the truth."

— Louis Farrakhan

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.54 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2020

Bihar: Risky ride for Nitish

THE battle lines in Bihar are being drawn by rival political formations, with the ruling JDU and the BJP arriving at a seat-sharing formula, which has serious political implications for the future. The post-poll scene is bound to be more challenging than it is today due to a variety of newly emerging factors. For one, while the JDU will contest 122 seats, the BJP will field candidates in 121 seats. They are rather on an equal footing as of now in terms of constituency-sharing.

There is curiosity as to what the final outcome will be, especially as to whether the JDU leader Nitish Kumar will be able to retain the CM's post even if this alliance manages to win the polls with a majority in the state assembly. If the BJP wins more seats than the JDU, it will spell the end of the Nitish Kumar rule in the state. Nitish started his innings as CM since 2005, and except for brief disruptions, remained in the saddle all along.

The BJP is bent on grabbing power in more states, and neutralizing its allies. Its come-what-may stand in Punjab, for instance, where no attempt was made to soothe the hurt feelings of the Shiromani Akali Dal on the farmers' bill issue, and allowing SAD to go its way with no olive branch being extended to it was noteworthy. This, despite the fact that SAD has been an ally of the BJP for long.

The scene in Bihar is far from clear though. In the absence of jailed Lalu Prasad from the campaign this time, his family will run the show and provide a youthful face to the contest. By contrast, Nitish has a tired face due to his long innings in governance. If the BJP steals the wind out of the sails of Nitish Kumar, the prospects of some Union ministers being airlifted to become the CM in the state are high.

There is every possibility that the people could vote for change this time. The positive factor that could still help Nitish is the infrastructure development work he has undertaken in the state, changing the face of Bihar from its past hopeless levels, in terms of road access, drinking water facility to villages etc. His unassuming nature is to his advantage even after his long innings as chief minister. What would be of interest this time is whether the Congress party can revive its fortunes in association with the RJD, and where the LJP of Ramvilas Pawan—in a lone fight would finally end up with.

Justice eludes Babri Masjid demolition

By Albert Thyriang

It was around 6 pm on December 6, 1992 during the evening recess in a residential facility that this writer and his fellow inmates heard of the demolition of Babri Masjid on All India Radio. As we listened with rapt attention we could sense a heavy pall of gloom descending, matched only by the assassination of Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984. Later that evening in the 8 o'clock news, images of the destruction of the 470 year old mosque was shown by Doordarshan Kendra. It was a horrific act of hooliganism and the most shameful desecration of a religious place.

My innocent mind thought that those who scaled atop the sacred structure and razed it to the ground would be immediately arrested to face the full force of the law. Alas, this expectation came to naught even after almost 28 years. On October 30 the Special CBI Court's verdict acquitted all the surviving 32 accused in the Babri Masjid demolition case. It was an absolute shocker. To know that all the accused went scot free after a clean chit by the designated court is hard to come to terms with. Naturally a sense of disbelief enveloped the whole nation as soon as the judgement was pronounced which merely stated that the sixteenth century mosque was razed to the ground by thousands of armed "hooligan kar sevaks".

Reactions on Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms ranged from, "What! So no one brought down the mosque?", "How did the masjid come down?" "Did the structure crumble on its own?" "Was it magic that the mosque disappeared into thin air?" "No one is responsible for the demolition?" "Was the mosque demolished legally?" Responses in the electronic and print media were also similar. Stunned by the verdict many called the 'judgement day' a 'sad and black day' and termed it a travesty of justice. A political party saw the CBI court's ruling contrary to the Supreme Court's verdict which had declared that the demolition of the mosque in the disputed site was illegal. Opinion makers viewed the judgement as yet another example of the judiciary losing its credibility while indicting the CBI for its shoddy work. They called for an immediate appeal against the disappointing order.

Those celebrating were the BJP, RSS, VHP, Bajrang Dal and of course the acquitted accused who belong

mainly to the Sangh Parivar. Prominent among them are the architects of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, LK Advani, ideologue Murli Manohar Joshi, former Uttar Pradesh CM, Kalyan Singh and firebrand leader Uma Bharti. The 92-year-old Advani and Joshi chanted 'Jai Shri Ram' in celebration on hearing the favourable judgement.

Not just the common man but lawyers consider the demolition of Babri Masjid an open and shut case. The nearly half a million kar sevaks who had already assembled in Ayodhya in the first days of December 1992, were armed with pickaxes, spades, shovels, and other tools. Leading to the nightmarish spectacle was the inflammatory build-up for several months in full public view. True to the anticipation and fear of many, the commitment made in Parliament and before the Supreme Court was violated and the unthinkable happened.

The demolition dealt a lethal blow to the image of a secular India. But not for the demolishers! All the while BJP, VHP and Bajrang Dal leaders were present in large numbers amid unprecedented security measures and the presence of national and international media. Reportedly, after the 'accomplishment' photographs and videos captured the smiles of the leaders on the spot, the hugs, the distribution of sweets and the raising of slogans before and after the criminal act that the Supreme Court called a 'national shame'. In spite of these 'evidences' not one of the accused is brought to justice for conspiracy to bring down Babur-built mosque.

The Justice Liberhan Commission, set up to probe the sequence of events that led to the demolition, in its report submitted on June 30, 2009, found that the demolition was pre-planned. The longest running inquiry commissions in the country that saw 399 sittings and 48 extensions concluded that the purpose of conducting the 'temple movement' was to demolish the mosque.

According to the commission the Sangh Parivar organisations like the RSS, VHP and the BJP raised several crores of rupees which were utilised for effecting the events of December 6, 1992. The mobilisation of kar sevaks that converged at Ayodhya was neither spontaneous nor voluntary. 'It was well orchestrated and planned'. The Commission

said that the actual demolition was not carried out spontaneously out of sheer anger or emotions. The removal of the idols and the cash box from under the dome; the subsequent reinstallation in the make-shift temple; the construction of the makeshift temple, were painstakingly prepared and pre-planned. Needless to say the Commission heavily indicted the aforementioned BJP, RSS, VHP leaders. The findings of the commission have been reduced to naught.

It is questionable how the special court could not find sufficient evidence or that the prosecutors could not present adequate proof to convict the accused. "All evidence in the charge sheet was examined. The crime alleged against the accused could not be proven," summarised the court in its 2,300-page judgement. It is astonishing that newspaper clippings, video cassettes, tapes, printed material, speeches, and witness testimonies could not convince the court to nail the accused. According to law, photographs, video recording, newspapers reports, etc, are compelling evidences in court, but not for the judge of the special court who asserted that the video chips and images were edited and tampered with rendering them all not credible. The judge also rejected the testimony of witnesses who saw the accused exhorting kar sevaks to demolish the mosque because there was a lot of dust inside the complex packed with lakhs of kar sevaks. It bewilders how those responsible for barbaric savagery have managed to evade justice.

Our faith in the judiciary has taken a beating yet again. The incident took place in broad day light. The whole world witnessed it. Those who ascended the dome of the mosque with pickaxe, spades, shovels can be easily identified. The right wing leaders of a political party and militant organisations who mobilised the crowd and deliberately took the mob to the level of religious frenzy, not only on that fateful day but over a period of time, are well known. Nothing is left to the imagination. If such an obvious crime is without criminals, then what about other lesser crimes? If no one is punished for this beastly act then there is little hope for justice in this country to triumph. The judiciary has once again failed the nation miserably. Equally responsible is the CBI and the prosecuting team for this utter failure to

convince the court to punish the guilty.

Once again the nation has let down a section of its citizens - the Muslims. A hostile political and social atmosphere towards the community is compounded by the judiciary which is perceived to have repeatedly pronounced unfavourable judgements. This is a cause of worry for this multi-religious nation. The present judgement came less than a year after the 'landmark' verdict of the Supreme Court in November last ordering the construction of Ram Mandir at the very spot of the demolished Babri Masjid without proving that the demolished mosque was in fact built atop a razed Hindu temple by the Muslim rulers.

After Babri Masjid fell victim to religious fanatics this was one of the leading editorials. "A first step would be to rebuild the destroyed Babri Masjid as a gesture towards the minority community and as a reaffirmation of an unwavering commitment to the vision of a democratic India, free of any kind of bigotry". Our only hope of rebuilding the mosque is gone forever; its destroyers have evaded justice.

All right thinking citizens are hurt but more so the minority community. Grave injustice is done. All citizens who believe in secularism and pluralism and want to preserve the inclusive character of this country are disillusioned. Hope the wrong will be corrected via an appeal against the verdict and a fresh verdict delivers justice to this nation. The 15% of our population has every reason to be aggrieved amidst a majoritarian atmosphere.

Speaking of justice the nation is aghast by the horror in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh. For the last four years UP has been in the news for shameful reasons. But the gang-rape of the Dalit girl, her murder and the hurried disposal of her body tops all crimes. The case has seen political dramas. Though protests have picked up at least initially, they are nowhere close to the outrage triggered by the Nirbhaya rape case though the cruelty of the acts were similar. Even in inflicted misfortunes, caste matters in India. At the moment the incident is still a developing story. Will there be justice for the 19 year old and her family?

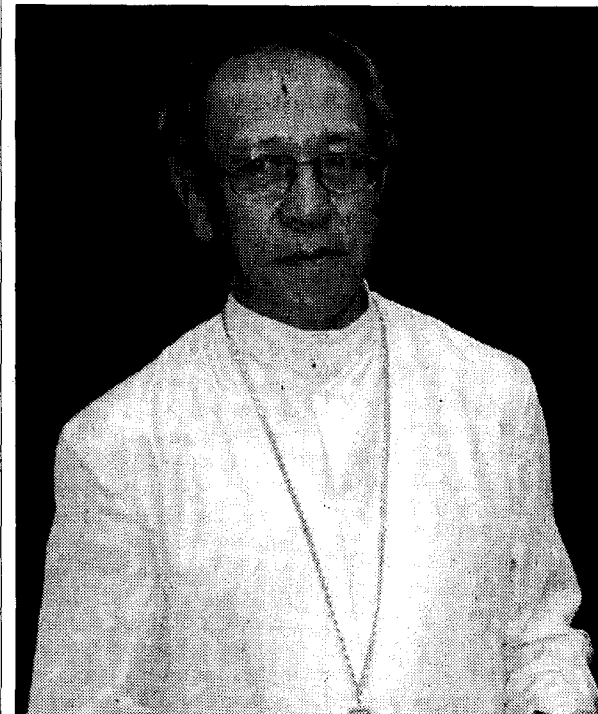
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A tribute to Late Archbishop Dominic Jala

By Barnes Mawrie

A year has gone by since the sudden demise of His Grace Archbishop Dominic Jala in a road accident in the US. The news came to us like a bolt from the blue leaving everyone aghast and shock stricken. Most people especially his family members and close friends, found it unacceptable. When the news first arrived, none wanted to believe it considering it as a bad rumour or a misinformation. Unfortunately, it all turned out to be true. The 10th of October 2019 marked as the saddest day for the faithful of the Shillong Archdiocese and for all people in the country who knew the Archbishop. Today is the first death anniversary and it is fitting that we should re-

He was a great intellectual in his own right. He had a PhD in Sacred Liturgy from San Anselmo University (Rome) and he proved to be a great authority in his field. It was precisely because of his expertise in Liturgy that he was elected as the President of the Liturgical Commission of the CCB for a number of years. He was also elected as the Secretary of the International Commission for English Liturgy (ICEL) which is based in the US, an office which he held till his death. A few years ago before his death, Pope Francis also nominated him as a member of the Congregation for Divine Worship. His contribution to the preparation of the revised English Missal is well



member him and his legacy. The mammoth gathering on the day of his funeral and the unbelievable reception of his mortal remains all along the GS road, still remain as unparalleled events in the history of the Church in Northeast India. The air of sadness and gloom which hung over the whole city of Shillong demonstrated the loss of a great person who was much loved and respected by all and sundry. Archbishop Dominic Jala could simply be described as "a pastor who had the smell of his sheep and felt

known. He was also committed to liturgical discipline in the Archdiocese and was able to inculcate a high degree of liturgical sense in the local church. He was an ardent promoter of interreligious dialogue and ecumenism. In fact he was still holding office as the president of the Shillong Khasi-Jaintia Church Leaders' Forum (SKJCLF) when he died. He was well respected and looked up to for advice in these matters. His passion for reading was well known and his collection of books was admirable. Dur-

"He never did great and spectacular things in his life to earn vain glory for himself, but his greatness and distinction lay in his simplicity, his down-to-earth approach and his ability to connect with ordinary people."

the pulses of his flock." He never did great and spectacular things in his life to earn vain glory for himself, but his greatness and distinction lay in his simplicity, his down-to-earth approach and his ability to connect with ordinary people. He was the first bishop in the country to have abandoned the paraphernalia of episcopacy. He gave up using the traditional episcopal cassock, the skull cap or even the episcopal ring and he seldom put on the mitre. He loved to appear as an ordinary pastor among his people. This gesture of humility and detachment from the glory and pomp associated with the office, has been emulated by other bishops of the region. Unlike other dignitaries who are so inaccessible to people, Archbishop Dominic Jala was always accessible to people whenever he was in station. Often people would see him walking on foot from the Archbishop's House to Nazareth Hospital to and fro. On the way he would converse with people. He had absolutely no air about himself. In fact, people who did not know him would mistake him for any ordinary priest and they would be pleasantly shocked to know that he was the Archbishop of Shillong.

ing his long journeys for meetings in India and abroad he would always have books as his companions. The impact of such extensive reading would be revealed in his broadminded attitude and his vast knowledge on various disciplines and topics. It was always enlightening to converse with him.

Archbishop Dominic was an ardent lover of the sick and suffering. He would always make a visit on foot to Nazareth Hospital in order to visit sick people and to pray and bless them. Whenever possible he would even visit sick relatives of his priests and religious in far away villages. He had a tremendous stamina for travelling and would never make any fuss about inconveniences.

In the untimely death of Archbishop Dominic Jala, the Church of Northeast India has lost a dynamic and visionary leader and a loving and caring shepherd. His greatness lay not in "doing" but more in "being." He commanded respect not by his position and authority, but more by his simplicity of life. He really lived the Gospel criterion of greatness "the greatest among you must be the servant of all" (Mk 10:43). May God rest his soul in peace.

Email: barnesmawrie@gmail.com

TO THE EDITOR

High expectations from revamped MPSC

Editor, Apropos the letter "New faces, new expectations" by Jeremiah Syngkli (ST Oct 5), is timely. The change of guard rekindles hopes of better performance be it in MPSC or the state cabinet. I think the letter's first part talks about the general expectations of the public at large. But can we really expect the Commission to suddenly pull a rabbit out of the hat? No magic wand can do the trick. Yes, the newly appointed Chairperson and the members will be morally obligated to deliver what the author suggests: "raise it to the standard that meets with approval in the public eye."

While I cannot prejudge how effective the reconstituted MPSC will prove to be, I can certainly point out some of the challenges that would come their way—both internally and externally. Let me point at what might be encountered by the new team internally. First and foremost is the lack of integrity of the underlings and subordinate staff. There is a lackadaisical attitude in the office establishment. They must rise above

their comfort zones and extend a helping hand. I know for a fact, that the attitude of the staff sometimes is a cause of concern. The way questions are leaked from inside is a case in point. There has to be strict vigil in the office and if need be an officer be deputed for reporting suspicious activities in the confidential section.

There are black sheep who would fall for a few bucks or out of affection simply try to help somebody dear. Everybody should know that by one such irresponsible act they are going to do incalculable harm to the future of so many others who have merit and deserve the post they may be vying for, but do not know how to manipulate their way through.

Among the external challenges, I know for a fact that candidates in their fierce desire to grab a post would go any lengths. They befriended the staff of the MPSC and solicit their help in all possible manner. Besides, there are candidates who are capable of influencing the Board members. And then, there is the suspicion of members themselves playing hanky-panky. There are unbelievable stories about the questions being asked at the viva

voce. When a Member at the interview Board has made up his/her mind for helping a particular candidate, unashamedly there would be a simple and easy question. Otherwise, the interview would be replete with silly and irrelevant questions because the interview is a formality since the chosen ones have already made it to the approved list beforehand.

The letter writer has already mentioned the other scourge—string pulling by the influential and the powerful, mostly ministers and legislators. This has been the biggest drawback of MPSC. How they will go about their job in the next few years will be watched with great interest. After all, in having a fair MPSC we have big stakes in ensuring that our children do not fall victim to internal machinations. We wish the new team luck!

Yours etc.,
Alasdair Rynthiang,
Shillong - 3

On evolution of Dorbar Shnong

Editor, The article, "Evolution of Dorbar Shnong in Shillong Region," by Aristotle Lyngdoh (ST Oct 6, 2020) makes for very interesting

reading. This is the first time that someone has contested the claims of 'traditionalism' and pointed out that the Dorbar Shnong is not more than 200 years old and is a replica of the Dorbar Hima which has more claims to being traditional. Such write-ups are important for a society to come off its shell and to move ahead with the times. Today most Dorbar Shnong follow a constitution which they have put together as a code of conduct. Aristotle Lyngdoh has pointed to the need for the Dorbar Shnong to be accountable so that it earns credibility.

Most importantly, Lyngdoh questions if the Dorbar Shnong should continue to function in an ad-hoc manner and be subject to criticisms and to court rulings simply because it is outside the ambit of the Indian Constitution. Perhaps it is high time for those heading different Dorbar Shnong to also sit together and discuss these emerging realities. They should themselves decide whether they want to be under the District Councils or under the State Government.

In this Pandemic the Dorbar Shnong have been working in a coordinated manner with the various

district administrations. The Dorbars have been able to deliver services to the people in their respective jurisdictions. This arrangement made life so much easier for people in every locality. What is making it difficult for Dorbar Shnong to function effectively is the lack of funds. Most Dorbar rely on the annual collection from the residents to carry out minor repair and maintenance works. If they become part of the government they will be funded for carrying out various developmental activities such as starting a garbage composting unit in every Dorbar, wherever space is available. This can become a livelihood for many young people. Right now all the solid organic and inorganic waste is dumped into only landfill at Marten. Now Marten has reached breaking point. Its important to democratize garbage collection and treatment. This is just one of the many things that the Dorbar Shnong can do to add to good governance.

One other important point that has not been mentioned by Lyngdoh is that the different officer bearers cannot continue to work pro-bono. They have to be remunerated for their effort in running the affairs of the shnong. As of today they

have no funds and the Rangbah Shnong and his team have also never felt the need to be compensated. But this is a modern system and we cannot have people working only part time. A full time worker must be paid for the service rendered. The Dorbar Shnong needs to mull over this point too. A time will come when a Dorbar Shnong cannot function only on certain days but has to be available to its people every day. Also a time will come when retired people may not be around to run the show as Rangbah Shnong and only a full time worker is available. What then? Every institution must brainstorm on how to evolve and meet the challenges of the future otherwise it will not be able to survive. I am glad that Lyngdoh also brought in the gender factor. For a very long time 'tradition' was the excuse for not allowing women to hold office of Rangbah Shnong, even when there are capable women to do so. This is no longer tenable in a world where gender equity has become the new norm. And don't forget this is a matrilineal society!

Yours etc.,
NS Warji,
Via email

"Those who fight corruption should be clean themselves."

— Vladimir Putin

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.56 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2020

Channels and their TRPs

THE facts are now clear on how television news channels earn their television rating points (TRPs). The modus-operandi include creating fake social media handles. The Mumbai Police stated on Thursday that it is zeroing in on three television channels for adopting foul means to gain more advertisement revenue for themselves. One of them is Republic TV which had recently gone hammer and tongs on the hashtag campaign #JusticeForSushant#. Allegations are that these channels resorted to "false narratives" and also bribed households to keep their channels on for the days together so that the TRP ratings would soar.

The Mumbai Police is already having a running battle with some media channels in relation to the Sushant Singh Rajput death case as also in other aspects and Maharashtra's Shiv Sena-led government has been targeting Republic TV in particular in recent months, which in truth has been targeting Bollywood stars. Its been a virtual tug-of-war. Be that as may, the games that visual media channels play to be one-up on others are getting exposed; and this is bound to affect the credibility of the visual media as a whole.

Notably, the Supreme Court had recently taken a serious note of the manner in which TV channels resort to sensationalism to increase their TRP ratings and ad revenues, and asked the Union Government recently to come up with proposals to set matters right. The Centre's response was that a bigger problem of sensationalism and objectionable circulation of news and visuals arose from social media, and these needed to be tackled first. This was argued also on the ground that established media are already guided by sets of rules and regulations.

Notably, the apex court has taken up the issue of irresponsible TV journalism again, when it spoke out against some TV channels that had allegedly sensationalized the Tablighi Jamaat congregation in Delhi earlier this year and "communalized" the Markaz to the extent that the organisers were blamed for spreading the pandemic in Delhi and beyond. By contrast, the print media are conducting themselves in a mature manner, for the most part. There are also occasions when the establishment goes out of its way to effect control on the media but this too is not a healthy trend.

The visual media in India, mainly the news TV channels, have progressively been acquiring a bad name also for the kind of poor content that they air. At the same time, it must be appreciated that TV channels have been doing a good job in exposing social evils like the Hathras gang-rape and killing incident as also the police high-handedness there.

Public institutions are accountable to public

By Patricia Mukhim

There are several institutions created by governments from time to time and all paid for from the public exchequer. These institutions are erroneously perceived to "belong" to government and those working in such institutions believe they are accountable to politicians and bureaucrats running the day to day administration. This is a fallacious understanding of what a public institution is. Governments create institutions to enable the public to have better access to facilities. The reason why the North East India Research Institute for Health and Medical Sciences (NEIGRIHMS), modeled along the lines of AIIMS, New Delhi was created was to enable better access to health facilities for the people of the region.

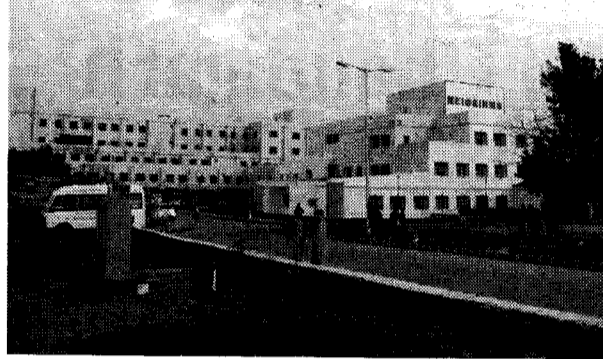
However, as the name implies, NEIGRIHMS is also a medical research institution. This means that apart from treating patients, specialist doctors also owe it to the public to share their considered views on health issues with the public through the media from time to time. But it is the experience of many that doctors and specialists working in these institutions almost believe they owe their loyalty to the Government and weigh their words so that they do not somehow get on the wrong side of their bosses. We don't see much scholarly work or even articles for imparting better health education to the public, emanating from this Institute. True, the specialist doctors there take part in several seminars and flaunt those on their social media platforms but when it comes to sharing wisdom with the public in a language devoid of jargon and easily understood by the average reader we find that only a drought of ideas. It's also true that doctors may be contributing to medical journals to build their career graphs but these are mostly read by other doctors. The common public hardly has access to these journals, especially as most of them are accessible only on payment.

The normal practice is for doctors to give a one-off write-up on a particular theme because there is a designated day for a particular disease. On other days it is as if the disease does not exist or take a rough turn. Recently Dr Amit Malviya gave a write-up "Non-Covid

patients amidst the Corona pandemic." (Oct 1, 2020). This article is quite an eye opener on how non-Covid patients suffer because every other ailment has been subsumed by Covid. While Covid infected patients receive attention, others are neglected. Dr Malviya suggested how the health system should respond better.

For most other practitioners though, NEIGRIHMS is like an impenetrable fortress — an ivory tower of ideas where nothing gets out unless mandated by the Director of the Institute. In Institutions like AIIMS and NEIGRIHMS, the Director is only the first among equals. Other specialist doctors

ST File Photo



writing about a disease or an issue such as the pandemic should not necessarily have to get it vetted by him. After all, doctors serving in such public funded institutions owe their allegiance to the public — not to a director or the health bureaucracy. Alas! Most doctors in NEIGRIHMS go about their work only within the Institution attending to patients but don't believe it is their duty to share nuggets of wisdom with the general public especially during this pandemic when both physical and mental health issues have come to the fore. A good example of a doctor with a social responsibility is Dr Randeep Gulleria, Director, AIIMS. He comes on national television frequently and answers questions on different aspects of the pandemic; clears doubts of callers and generally reassures the public and calms their fears. He also informs about the latest developments on combating the virus and what challenges are being encountered in the battle against the pandemic. We don't get this type of clear messaging; this reassurance

and counseling? Many don't even know how to get help and where to go for help. Mental health illness is still a taboo here and most people don't yet understand that they need to seek help when depressed and not seek refuge in gadgets or drinks or drugs or in self harm.

If we are seeking transparency in the functioning of governments then we should put all public institutions through the same scrutiny. As media persons we get to hear of all kinds of experiences that Covid patients in our state are going through. Some are released from hospitals before being tested negative. When they go home and their symptoms return they are again asked to report to the hospital and make their own arrangements to come there. This has happened primarily because there are not enough beds now and the more serious patients have to be provided care while those who are thought to have recovered are sent home without a negative test and they wonder why. They are confused and distressed and this adds to their depressive state.

What governments and government-funded institutions need to take note of is that the media is doing a duty when it asks questions. We are asking questions on behalf of the public. That's our primary duty. We don't ask questions out of pique or personal curiosity and we don't wish to embarrass anyone or needle anyone in particular so it's ridiculous for people who are paid from public funds to imagine they don't owe answers to the public. Of course we can do an RTI but not on every issue where an answer from those public authorities are enough to clear doubts. We are asking questions from public officials, including those heading public institutions because if we don't do that we are not discharging our duties.

The duties of those in medical research institutions do not end only with research that fulfills the criteria of funding agencies. Every research must be in the larger public good hence it also involves public engagement. Any institution that becomes an ivory tower must be shaken from its isolation.

October 10, being World Mental Health Day, we can expect an article or two from some psychiatrists/psychologists and that's all there is to it. The well-heeled know where to get their treatment privately but what about those whose very existence hangs by a thread? Which is the institution they can access for mental health care

complained of chronic fatigue myalgia (pain in a muscle or group of muscles) and feeling disoriented. Still others who have survived Covid say they are affected by post-traumatic stress syndrome, depression and anxiety.

In Meghalaya we have gone silent on the mental health impacts of Covid19. No one asks questions and none seek to answer them; not even the leading psychiatrists of the city here. Everyone seems to have gone into a shell as if mental health problems don't exist. Either that or they are treating people who come to them but will not speak publicly about mental health problems caused by the pandemic. This is nothing short of an institutional failure towards the public.

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pass judgment on what's in store under this new Chairperson. Certainly, being a technocrat is not a disqualification. He might perhaps do an excellent job, if he can withstand pressure and remain loyal to the trust reposed on him. My worry is not about the new incumbent; it's about the long wait to find a replacement for another retired bureaucrat who held the same office before completing his term. My concern is the non-availability of persons who can be trusted with this responsibility of running the MPSC impartially and efficiently.

It seems obvious therefore, that in Meghalaya there is a paucity of men and women worthy of such trust. My agony is that if Meghalaya could produce two personalities fit to hold the office of Chairperson of UPSC (Kong Rose Millian Bathew and Prof David Syiemlieh), why is it that we can't find able people to run the MPSC to everybody's satisfaction? Come to think of it, if Meghalaya could find two able politicians to become Lok Sabha Speaker (Purno Sangma) and Deputy Speaker (G.G.Swell), why should there be such dearth of rich talents to run the state today? Remember, both Sangma and Swell were also considered worthy of becoming President of India?

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

Empire of high technology thrives on monopoly Amazon, Apple, Google, Facebook abuse power

By C.J. Atkins

In the middle of the last century, Marxist economist Victor Perlo described the U.S. economy as an "empire of high finance." If he were writing today, he'd probably update his assessment to say U.S. capitalism has also become an "empire of high technology."

The U.S. House Judiciary subcommittee on anti-trust essentially dances around that conclusion in a new 450-page report released on Oct. 6, which declares that the digital giants Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Alphabet (Google) have achieved "monopoly power" in a variety of sectors. The report recommends a range of reforms, including breaking up the tech conglomerates.

The indictment of Big Tech is the product of a 16-month-long investigation that surveyed over a million documents, conducted dozens of interviews, and held seven hearings. The report presents extensive evidence concerning the extent to which the companies "have exploited, entrenched, and expanded their power over digital markets in anticompetitive and abusive ways."

Testimony from CEOs Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook), Tim Cook (Apple), and Sundar Pichai (Alphabet/Google) was characterized as "evasive and non-responsive," which the subcommittee said raised fresh questions about whether the tech titans "believe they are beyond the reach of democratic oversight."

Taken together, the four online platforms had a combined valuation of more than \$5 trillion as of September this year. A stunning 30% of the entire world's gross economic output flows through or is controlled by just these four firms and a small handful of others. They account for more than a third of the S&P 100 stock index.

Each of the four companies was analyzed in detail separately, but there were a number of common monopolistic behaviours highlighted in the report. Having consolidated control over market access by achieving "gatekeeper" status in their individual areas, the platforms were said to now possess the ability to "pick winners and losers throughout our economy." This gives the companies power that even banks, which control lending, would be jealous of have.

This gatekeeper power is used not only to crush competing businesses, but also to abuse consumers (businesses and individuals) as well as workers through the charging of exorbitant fees for services, "oppressive" contract terms, piece-rate warehouse and delivery work, and the extraction of data from users which is then monetized for further profit. The digital economy is no longer defined by the Wild West atmosphere that characterized the dot.com boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s when literally thousands of platforms and companies meteorically rose and disastrously fell. Concentration and centralization of capital have been the rule in recent years, with competition between capitalist tech firms rapidly narrowing. The big four masters have bought out or otherwise absorbed hundreds of other firms, then shut down or discontinued their business in so-called "killer acquisitions."

Facebook was singled out for monopoly control over social networking and online communications. In documents, the company admitted its various divisions — Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Messenger — compete more

with each other internally than with any outside platform.

When it comes to general online search and search advertising, Google was criticized for abusing both advertisers and the public. It often "misappropriates third party content" to boost its own business, fills users' search results with ads that generate profit for the company while pushing more relevant results further down the queue, and "extorts users for access to its critical distribution channel." Essentially, if anyone wants to reach people through search results, they have to pay up, but even then they are shuffled further down the search page in favor of higher-paying clients or Google's own content and services.

Amazon is king of e-commerce in the U.S., controlling an estimated 50% or more of the market. But this very public aspect of the company's business has actually been a money-loser, generally. The free shipping and discounted pricing that puts its competitors out of business are possible only because of the company's expansive Amazon Web Services division and cloud computing.

These lucrative businesses provide the cash to prop up the hemorrhaging retail wing of the firm—a source of money that brick-and-mortar retailers like department stores can't possibly compete with. In essence, the profits of Amazon's computing business acts as a bottomless bank for the monopolization of retail by its e-commerce partner.

Among the four, Apple is the only one whose primary business is still the production of actual material goods — iPhones, Macbooks, iPads, Apple Watches, and more. Its products overshadow all others in the hardware segment of the market. But the company's power also comes from the edge it has in the mobile operating system sector.

The Congressional report highlighted the fact that the tech monopolies were collectively killing innovation and entrepreneurship in the U.S. economy, contrary to the image they paint of themselves being constantly on the cutting edge. With nearly total market domination, the four monopolies now control what Congressional staffers called "the infrastructure of the digital age," which they use to squeeze out competitors and become even more dominant. Antitrust regulators, meanwhile, were criticized for failing to properly vet mergers and acquisitions as required under U.S. anti-monopoly law, according to the report. The reforms recommended by the committee included structurally separating (i.e. breaking up) the companies and prohibiting them from operating in adjacent lines of business—such as Amazon being both the host of the primary e-commerce portal for third-party sellers as well a seller itself, or Apple being both a hardware and software monopolist. If implemented, these kinds of rearrangements could mean also that Google has to divest from its video platform YouTube, or Facebook could be forced to spin off Instagram and WhatsApp into separate companies.

To protect consumers' data from being monopolized, the report suggests that companies be required to make their services compatible with one another, allowing users to take their data with them when they leave a platform. It also calls for the budgets of the Federal Trade Commission and the Antitrust Division at the Department of Justice to be beefed up. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Govt in disarray

Editor,
As the health risks rise in our country and the world, the scenario in our state is none the worse, fueled as it is by the mismanagement of funds and resources by the Government. One can't help but wonder as to whether human lives really matter or have we all become just pawns in the games which those in power play around with.

We can all agree that the pandemic has brought unprecedented levels of chaos into our lives but as the human spirit is indomitable, we have fought back and have risen albeit slowly, to come to terms with the new normal. It's therefore sad to see that those at the helm of affairs have failed our citizens. The blatant misuse of Government funds and also the citizen's monetary contributions have all dried up without proper accounting. As reported, the vehicles which ferried people to and fro and the hotels which were used as quarantine places have not been paid their remuneration. These are some of the points that the Government is answerable for.

The press briefing given by those in power aimed at clarifying matters has created more confusion, with one contradicting the other by a matter of a few crores of rupees. The recent announcement that citizens have to pay for tests at an exorbitant rate and the self pat on the back by our Deputy CM that Meghalaya is one of the states that has handled the Covid situation in the best manner, are contradictory and insult the intelligence of the people, who are witness to the dismal ground realities.

However, despite all the gloom and doom those working round the clock like the health workers and other frontline workers must be lauded for their exemplary services. We hope that the Government rewards their hard work. At a time when the Government and the citizenry need to work together to tide over this tumultuous situation, it should behave those in power to rise above their personal gratification and work towards the common good so that we can all come out of this despondency towards some sense of normalcy.

Yours etc.,
Angela Lyngdoh,
Shillong -14

Why the sudden anti-Christian stance?

Editor,
I am appalled, perturbed, and ashamed by the contents of the letter "Time to return home" (ST Oct 5,2020) by Pascal Lyngdoh. This is the second letter of a similar kind announcing "ghar wapsi" by Christian Khasis to their indigenous belief system. My worry is not because there are two Christians less in the State today. My concern is not about their change of "heart". They are completely entitled to their own decision about which belief system they feel close to. The letter writer claims that his father is a preacher in church and calls the likes of his father "fabler". And that's where my sense of shame comes from. How shameless people can be to disown and publicly defame their own parents. This is unbecoming of anybody who tries to pass nasty comments about another religion. To me it's like giving the proverbial dog a bad name before hanging it.

But the deeper issue to me is: Why all of a sudden has this trend begun? Where is it coming from? Christianity has been here with us for 150 years or more.

Nobody ever raised a little finger all these years. How can we explain this dangerous development now? Some of my friends tell me that Hindu right wing frontal organisations have fanned out in the tribal milieu and have begun to poison people's minds. I don't know this for a fact. If it is true, it is a dangerous game they are playing. I don't know, how our church elders are viewing these disturbing developments that have the potential to create chasm in the community on religious lines. It would perhaps be a good idea to come up with a proper action plan to nip this silly business in the bud.

Yours etc.,
Pynsngain Jyrwa,
Shillong-2

Of MPSC affairs

Editor,
Having read the recent reports in your esteemed daily regarding appointment of a technocrat as MPSC chairman and subsequent letters published in these columns, I am provoked to unburden myself. For the first time we have a technocrat as Chairperson who had to relinquish his office responsibility prematurely and assume the new assignment. Can't really

"Some girls cannot go to school because of the child labor and child trafficking."

— Malala Yousafzai

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.57 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2020

Paying for Covid tests

THERE is much hue and cry over the Government's recent decision to make Covid tests payable. But the Health Department has now clarified that all high risk and primary contacts would be tested free of cost as this is the responsibility of the state, as laid out by the Supreme Court in April this year. What the Government is trying to do is to stop making testing at the entry points free since people who enter Meghalaya for purposes of business or are central government employees are capable of paying for their tests. At 4,500 rupees for an RT-PCR test it is quite a steep ask. The Supreme Court in a new order dated April 13, said that government would reimburse private labs for testing the 500 million people covered by a flagship public health insurance scheme while the rest would have to pay. But the bigger question is whether India can scale up testing for Covid-19 if it's not free, especially now that the numbers are going up?

But scaling up is a challenge. The sheer size of India's population, and the resources needed to reach every corner of the country, is daunting. All of this has made testing expensive. It's free at government hospitals and labs - and for months they were the only ones permitted to even test for coronavirus. But soon private players were roped in to support India's underfunded and struggling public health system.

In the case of Meghalaya and of other states too if testing were to be made payable then the number of people who would come for voluntary testing after having been in contact with a primary or secondary source would drop down and such people could become silent carriers. This should be the biggest worry for the government. As of now those being asked to be tested because they are high risk contacts don't have to pay for the tests.

Economist Jayati Ghosh says if a country needs to contain a pandemic the testing cannot be determined by cost. Other economists are of the view that making the test free only for the poorest Indians doesn't help either because there's a big chunk of people just above the poverty line that are also struggling and there are middle-class workers who have been laid off and can't afford to pay for their families to get tested. More importantly, the asymptomatic nature of the virus in many people means that India may soon have no choice but to begin mass testing. And if India needs to push up testing rates it cannot expect everyone to pay from their pockets, especially if they are asymptomatic.

It is on these lines that the Government of Meghalaya needs to proceed.

Pope calls for replacement of neo-liberal capitalism

By Nitya Chakraborty

Pope Francis, the head of the Vatican based Roman Catholic Church made history on October 4, when in his sermon he passionately called for the replacement of neo liberal capitalism with a more just and human system. Earlier also, Pope Francis showed his free thinking and innovative approach by taking bold positions on some urgent issues of the day including the gender gap. He also recently refused to meet the US secretary of state Pompeo since the Vatican head is opposed to the military-industrial empire. But his encyclical issued two days ago was something unprecedented in the history of the Vatican.

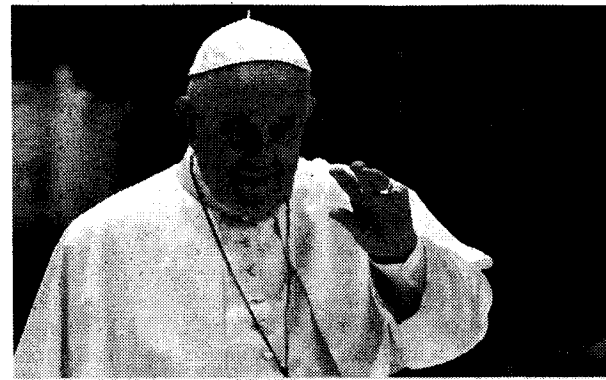
Encyclicals are the rare but important documents issued by popes when they want to confirm, revise, or initiate new Church policy. That way this was a major revision and if this is the collective policy of the religious leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, then that is going to have big impact on the crisis ridden capitalist west which comprises mostly catholic population among the Christians and right now, this may impact the election campaign in USA just less than a month before the polls on November 3. Francis declared in his encyclical that the current coronavirus pandemic underlines the stark reality that capitalism is unable to meet the most basic needs of the vast majority of the world's people and that is in fact responsible for massive suffering of the people and also war.

In fact, the left including the left wing Democrats like Bernie Sanders have been saying the same thing in the current election campaign in US while President Trump is defending the extreme neo liberal position and passing on the burden of Corona sufferings to the poor, especially the blacks and the Hispanic population of the US. The observation of pope is a direct attack on the policies of trump and his Republican Party and this is sure to be capitalized by the Democrats in the present election campaign.

Pope Francis wrote that the coronavirus pandemic has proven that the "magic theories" of market capitalism have failed and that the world needs a new type of politics that "promotes dialogue and solidarity and rejects war at all costs." In the encyclical, titled Fratelli Tutti which means Brothers ALL, Pope warns that the neoliberal capitalist global economy has caused a dark cloud of injustices to cover

the world that is destroying the planet. This is a major policy shift on behalf of the Vatican head since this shift goes fully against the Trump line on climate change. The Sanders supporters have always been making the point that Trump's policies will destroy the planet and now the same view is being aired by Pope Francis.

Even the Catholic Church itself was not out of bounds for criticism from the Pope, who said certain Church doctrine was also part of the problem the world faces and that it should be overhauled. In the encyclical, Francis also rejected the centuries-old Catholic Church's own doctrine justifying war as a means of legitimate defense,



saying it had been too broadly applied in history and was no longer viable.

"It is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a 'just war,'" Francis wrote in one of the many controversial new elements of the encyclical. The rejection of the doctrine of just war is in line with a growing movement against nuclear weapons, particularly in Europe. Anti-nuclear war advocates who have been constantly demonstrating at a U.S. nuclear missile base in Ramstein, Germany, have said for years that in this modern era, war itself is the main enemy.

Their movement has increasingly forged ties with the environmental movement, decrying the spoiling of the earth itself by capitalist profit-making fossil fuel companies. The refusal by the Pope to meet with Pompeo is consistent with his condemnation of the military-industrial complex and the dangerous and militaristic approach to world problems. Pompeo, who has been a cheerleader for Trumpian threats to countries around the world, has attacked the Pope too, calling him "soft" on China.

The encyclical also

warned politicians that they must heed the mass "popular movements" around the world that are fighting not just the virus but for economic and social justice. He said it was particularly important to listen to what those movements have to say about combating the worldwide joblessness that has resulted from the pandemic. He said support must be given to solutions put forward by these movements, by labor unions, and by marginalized groups. He said these groups must be involved in the construction of a more just society.

"The fragility of world systems in the face of the pandemic has demonstrated that not everything can be

resolved by market freedom," he wrote. "It is imperative to have a proactive economic policy directed at 'promoting an economy that favors productive diversity and business creativity' and makes it possible for jobs to be created, and not cut."

In a barely veiled condemnation of Donald Trump and other right-wing world leaders, Francis denounced "populist politics that seek to demonize and isolate" and called for a "culture of encounter" that promotes dialogue, solidarity, and a sincere effort at working for the common good. The encyclical struck at the heart of a traditional ideological defense of capitalism by tacking the sacrosanct concept of "the absolute right" of private property.

Francis rejected that concept, stressing instead the "social purpose" and common good that must come from sharing the Earth's resources. He called neoliberal capitalism a "perverse" global economic system, which he said consistently keeps the poor on the margins while enriching the one percent. This was essentially a repeat of what he said in his historic environmental encyclical, Laudato Sii, (Praised Be) in 2015. He also doubled down on his opposition to other

theories used to justify the capitalist system. He firmly rejected, for example, the theory of "trickle-down" economics popularized in the U.S. during the years that Ronald Reagan was president.

"It simply doesn't work that way," the Pope wrote. "Neo-liberalism simply reproduces itself by resorting to magic theories of 'spillover' or 'trickle'—without using the name—as the only solution to societal problems," he wrote. "There is little appreciation of the fact that the alleged 'spillover' does not resolve the inequality that gives rise to new forms of violence threatening the fabric of society."

Another area where Francis hit Trump administration policy was in the area of immigrant rights. He said the welcoming of immigrants was necessary for a society to remain healthy, and he strongly condemned the nationalistic and isolationist policies pursued by Trump and other world leaders. The encyclical employs biblical references to justify the progressive political and economic views it expresses. Francis made use of the story of the Good Samaritan, declaring that kindness and looking out for strangers are both things we must do today and that those things must be features of the new world that has to be created. In the encyclical, Francis further codified his opposition to demonization of Muslims and the Islamic faith.

A section on "human fraternity" and world peace is derived from his 2019 joint appeal with the grand imam of Egypt's Al-Azhar, the revered 1,000-year-old seat of Sunni Islam. Their "Human Fraternity" document established the relationship between Catholics and Muslims as "brothers," with a common mission to promote peace.

This may turn out to be as controversial as his condemnation of capitalism and his call for it to be replaced. The first Catholic-Muslim joint document in history is now part of a papal encyclical. Some conservative Catholics and conservative Church leaders have attacked the Pope for signing that document in the first place, calling it "heretical." The document says that a diversity of religions and beliefs is "the will of God." This directly contradicts the centuries-old doctrine that the Catholic Church is the one and only true Church. (IPA Service)

Mental well-being and online workplaces

Dr Samhita Barooah

On the occasion of World Mental Health Day on October 10, 2020 mental well-being at online workplaces have become a huge concern. With Covid 19, workplaces have turned online from physical platforms. I have observed the conditions of working professionals whose lives have suddenly turned topsyturvy with this tech savvy lifestyle. During pre-covid days work timings were fixed and people could differentiate between work timings, off days, weekends, holidays and family time during festivals, family functions and other emergency situations. With covid 19 everything has become different for better or for worse.

But the most critical impact has been the mental well-being of people whose lives are entwined between webinars, zoom and webex calls, online marketing sites and their children's Whatsapp chats and PTA meetings etc. Very recently my 70 year old mother was paranoid as her parent teacher meeting went off track. She is still learning technology to conduct her Whatsapp classes and attend Google meets to discuss the progress of her set of 20 odd 5 year old kids. One parent wanted more of her time online for his son as he only listens to what my mother has to teach. While the earlier protocol was to lessen the screen time for children but now the

switched off is a distant luxury for me these days. My anxiety levels rise if I need to attend or make phone calls which don't concern my work. The other problem I find is that mental well-being has taken a toll on everyone who has to self quarantine or have gone through the trauma of attending to a death due to covid 19. Some people ventilate their thoughts on social media, chat up with counselors while others are seeking the help of mental health professionals during this period. I try to check on friends and family everyday whether they like it or not either through a message, ping or Whatsapp forward just to know if they are fine irrespective of whether they respond or not.

We tend to worry more about the consequences and post trauma disorders of mental health conditions but we forget about our own mental well-being at the preventive stages. Mental well-being, mental health and hygiene and mental illness are all different aspects of the mental conditioning of a human being. We are oblivious to the fact that all these conditions can impact the physical health, social stigma and institutional frictions which might occur due to such concerns.

Workplaces are no longer the same. There is hardly any time for the occasional leisure chats, office grapevines and the professional



parents demand more time for their children.

My mother spends around 4 hours every day in engaging with the teaching learning activities directly with the children, their parents and her colleagues but the preparations and pre class activities and communications take almost 12 to 15 hours of constant onscreen engagement. She doesn't like to talk to any of her family and friends as she gets worried that the data pack and phone memory will fall short of her school activities. She wakes up in the middle of the night to check the Whatsapp updates and the online forwards which keep on flowing in her work groups. Her anxiety levels increase when the network gets slow and the messages takes time to get delivered or doesn't reach her on time. She has never been so regular on Whatsapp calls with her immediate family members or children. Her interests in anything other than her school activities have disappeared during this lockdown period. She is constantly engaged in making online videos, action songs, activities even during the weekends and any off days which she manages to get once in a while. Her mental wellbeing is better when she is occupied with the school activities but with this non-stop online engagement, I get worried how as to how she can cope with such hyper online activity. She has become a recluse, stopped all personal communication and lost interest in anything other than her school related work.

While at work I too being an online educator would remain glued to the screen getting paranoid about all online work. With the current pressures of being an online startup founder, my work is practically 24x7. Putting my phone on charge or keeping it

parties for people to socialize and loosen up at work. People are constantly running after deadlines which remain constant while salaries are shrinking everyday and layoffs are rising with overworked staff in every work setting. Mental wellbeing is seriously at stake in this uncertain world where people are finding futile reasons to set themselves free and stress free. Some are resorting to lifestyle shifts while others are ending up in confinement paranoia. Overall mental health seems to be the most adverse impact of corona pandemic.

Post pandemic workplace structures will involve some other forms of norms which might affect the mental well-being of people in another way. Such concerns need a lot of awareness, support and sensitivity in dealing with a post traumatic condition. Even within the household the quarantine norms, isolation practices and safety precautions can lead to severe domestic discords and affect the children and elderly differently.

On this day I appeal to all working people going through minor or major stresses of not being heard, of not being able to share your work load or those who lost their work due to mental wellbeing conditions as a fall out of covid19 please reach out to your friends, families and well wishers for your own and their mental well being. It is also clearly mentioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that the right to leisure is also a human right. Being online is no longer leisure, it has become a necessity in today's digital world. Let's get offline too for mental well-being and exercise our right to leisure whether at home or at work.

(The writer is Founder, QueerUp India. Email: samhita.world@gmail.com)

TO THE EDITOR

Whither inclusive governance

Editor,

I refer to the thought provoking letter "On good governance and Meghalaya" by DS Singh (ST Sept 30, 2020). Personally I am indebted to the writer for bringing home what it means to have "good governance". I endorse all of what he said and would like to dwell on the term "inclusive". The word "inclusive" is the adjective of "inclusion"(noun). The dictionary meaning of the word "inclusion" is, "the action of including or the state of being included." The antonym of "inclusion" is "exclusion." I Google-checked to find this explanation and it says, "the practice or policy of including people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalised such as those that have physical and mental disabilities and members of minority groups." Now, in the context of good governance in Meghalaya the moot question is: Does the government follow an inclusive policy? Or is it becoming increasingly exclusive? To answer this question honestly, we

need to delve into the past.

When Meghalaya was born, we had 80 per cent tribals and 20 per cent non-tribal Meghalayans. The governments in the formative years would pronounce in their official policies and documents that there would be inclusiveness in all respects. In the Governor's Address (which is a policy statement of the government of the day) placed in the Assembly year after year, the government would categorically state that "the legitimate interest of all sections (meaning non-tribals) would be safeguarded". This was the practice until the late nineties when this policy statement was suddenly dropped. Not that it mattered practically to the non-tribals. In any case, they were being denied their basic rights. It is also an undeniable fact that non-tribal population today has fallen to below 10 per cent because Meghalaya Government had long back decided to jettison the inclusive policies signalling that it was not prepared to treat the non-tribals fairly and equally. When you have so much of policy discrimination against ethnic groups and make them feel like pariahs, it would lead

to disharmony and even racial hatred. These words may sound harsh but then there is another way, I can tell the Meghalaya Government that your governance is so abysmal that you will find "India Today" magazine place you at the bottom of the table.

Yours etc.,
Suraj Sarma
Via email

A subdued Puja this time

Editor,
Durga Puja festival is a fortnight away. This is one of the biggest annual public events of the town. Since 1872, this is the first time the festival will be held amid the scourge of COVID-19 pandemic. Since April last, there are already a whole lot of official restrictions in place. Going by the number of incidents of virus infection in the state, it doesn't look like it is going to be a normal, crowded, if also somewhat noisy Durga Puja.

From what I can see, this Puja will be sans all the glitz and fanfare. Obviously, economy is in a shambles. Raising large donations will be near impossible. And on top of that there will be additional health protocols in

place. Therefore, from all accounts available, it is going to be a much truncated Puja this year. Regardless of what the administration decides, I would appeal to the Puja revelers to abstain from any revelry this time. Let there not be a large movement of people on the streets. Let the celebrations be given a miss this time. Let us only perform the bare minimum rituals and prayers without attracting large presence of devotees. I appeal to the Puja committees to keep in mind the safety and security of the people at large and not just those observing Puja. Let everybody seek the blessings of the Goddess to bless all of us for a COVID-free world.

Yours etc.,
SK Das,
Via email

Problem of stray dogs

Editor,
I would like to draw the attention of all concerned to the menace of stray dogs. As one enters Jhalupura area one finds huge numbers of stray dogs barking and attacking people who are passing by. These stray dogs openly

defecate in the lanes and roads of Jhalupura and Barapathar. Besides these stray dogs are some rich dog owners who while they portray their passion to keep dogs in their homes, ironically take their dogs to defecate in the public lanes, probably because they want to keep their homes litter free. Where is the education of these dog lovers?

These dog owners have raised their so-called standards to transform their kutcha houses into more sophisticated and cleaner buildings but this cleaner and hygienic lifestyle is limited to their premises. They do not bother about the dirt and filth outside their gates.

The people of the area are already facing problems of garbage and open drains and this irresponsible attitude of dog owners of the area has aggravated the problems. Dog defecation creates a foul stench all over the place. The common scenario of Jhalupura is that street dogs are found everywhere but I have hardly seen this happening in other areas of Shillong which are much cleaner and calmer with a serene atmosphere. It speaks volumes about the sensitivity of the people of those areas. It doesn't mean that I am maligning the image of the people of

Jhalupura and Barapathar. I belong to this place but because of some highly insensitive and irresponsible so-called dog lovers we all are suffering. It's high time for them to realize this nuisance and not repeat it in the future.

During this period many people have suffered from dog bites due to the proliferation of stray dogs in the area. Moreover walking on the road has become difficult in the early morning and evening hours. There is also the danger that people might be prone to accidents while they avoid the stray dogs.

Through your esteemed daily I would like to draw the attention of the Ward Members and Village Heads of Jhalupura and Barapathar to take stringent action against these people and I further request them to approach the Shillong Municipal Board asking them to take some measures to make the areas free of stray dogs.

Yours etc.,
Zaki Siddiqui,
Via email

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By Vishal Gulati

The serenity and tranquility prevailing in Himachal Pradesh's resort town of Manali is haunting tourists ever since the Covid-19 outbreak in March, with the much-preferred tourist destination turning virtually into a ghost town, literally.

Estimates say no less than 1,500 hotels, lodges and home-stay accommodations in and around Manali are yet to pull up the shutters giving the town a tranquil, yet forlorn look.

"There is an eerie emptiness everywhere in Manali, be it the streets, the shops or the selfie points," remarked Abhishek Dubey, a tourist from New Delhi.

His wife Nikita added: "The local transportation for sight-seeing is mostly devoid of commuters and tourists. You can see only mountain goats roaming the quiet streets of Manali."

Members of the hospitality industry say 20-25 per cent hotels, mainly high-end and those who have taken the units on high lease, have opened their doors for the guests.

They say in their lifetimes they have never seen such a stillness of public spaces with the footfall of tourists almost abysmal and the bookings almost nil, impacting their livelihoods.

"The hotel industry is suffering catastrophic losses," Manali Hotelier Association President Anoop Thakur told IANS.

He said from tour guides to adventure tour and travel operators, everyone who depends on visitor spending is feeling the pain.

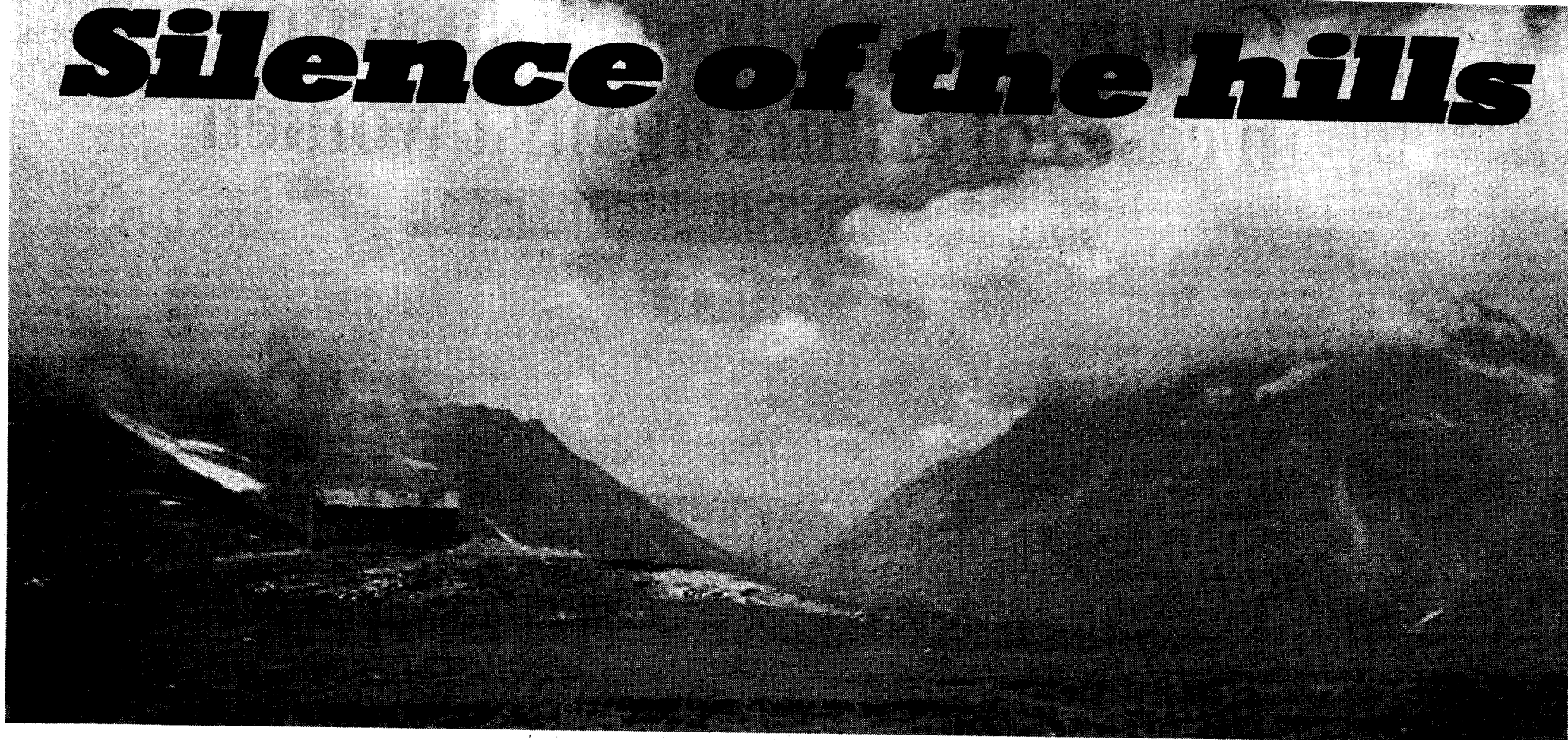
Thakur, whose association has 650 plus members, blamed the state for adopting discriminatory standard operating procedures (SOPs) framed by the Central government mainly for the hotels located in cities and metros.

Also lack of Covid-19 care facility in Manali is a major hindrance.

"In Manali, almost 90 per cent of the hotels are operating on the periphery where the existing SOPs are practically not possible to implement," he said.

"These SOPs are basically for high-end hotels and restaurants operating in major cities. Since most of the hospitality units are budget and located in villages, there is a lot of anxiety, fear and apprehensions amongst the owners, who are largely locals. So they prefer to keep their units shut till a separate SOP keep-

Silence of the hills



ing in mind the local requirements is reframed," he said.

Also, there is no Covid-19 rapid testing facility for the tourists.

"One has to visit Kullu town to get the Covid test and that is 40 km away from here. Time and again we are requesting the government to provide the testing facility within Manali itself to boost the confidence of the locals, but nobody is paying the heed," he said.

According to him, the association has also been demanding to set up a rapid testing lab in Bajaura town, the entry point to Manali, to cater to the tourists only so that the hoteliers could get confidence that their guests are virus-free.

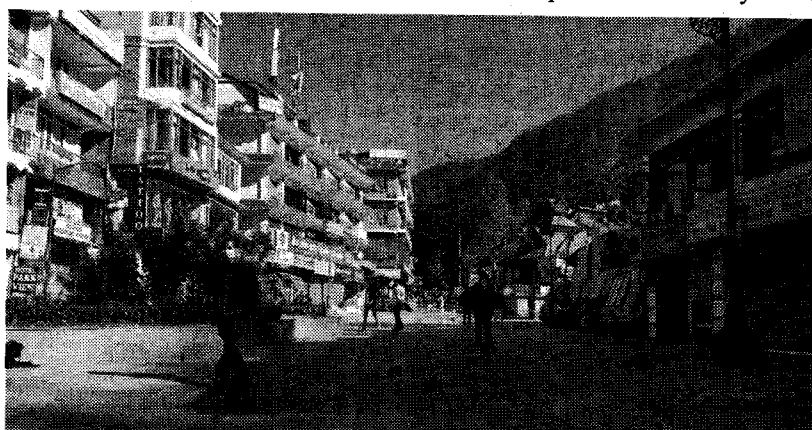
Himachal Pradesh is a major tourism destination. The contribution of the tourism sector to the state GDP is about seven per cent, a significant one.

The worst affected by the virus is the home-stay units that is promoted with an aim to drive tourists to the interiors.

Under this scheme any house owner in a village could let out a maximum of three rooms for guests.

Currently, some 800 home-stay units have been registered in the state. Out of these, 250 are in the Kullu-Manali region. Shimla district has 211 units, followed by Kangra 111.

Officials of the state-run



Himachal Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation (HPTDC) say the occupancy in most of their hotels in all tourist destinations is almost negligible.

Varun Malhotra, owner of Grace Resort and Spa, said, "In the past

weekend, there was a noticeable arrival of the tourists for the first time since the March shutdown. We are hopeful that their arrival will pick up pace slowly and slowly and it might take two-three months."

Lack of public connectivity is the



major bottleneck for the tourist arrival, he said.

"The state has still kept its borders closed for the plying of interstate buses. A major chunk of tourists prefer to come to Manali via Volvo buses from Delhi and

Chandigarh owing to long-distance travel. Since the state has not allowed them, the arrival of the guests is low," said Malhotra, also the Manali Super Luxury Volvo Owners Association President.

On an average nearly 90 luxury Volvo buses ply to and fro daily between this tourist resort and Delhi via Chandigarh.

As per estimates of the local hospitality industry, the current occupancy rate on normal days in five per cent and on weekends it spikes to 15-20 per cent.

The winter tourist season in Manali starts from Dussehra holidays and lasts till New Year's Eve.

Corporate executive Deepali Sood from Chandigarh said she was earlier planning to visit Manali during the week-long Kullu Dussehra festivity.

"I have postponed my visit with friends as tourists are still facing restrictions amid fears of coronavirus spikes," she said.

Contrary to state's trends, OYO's consumer survey says with state borders opening up and relaxation of restrictions across the country,

travellers are back into action.

It says 57 per cent of respondents said their next trip would be for leisure, while 61 per cent have already decided the destination for their coming vacation.

"OYO's booking trends for the long weekend between October 2 and 4 clearly reflect India's travel aspirations and confidence to hit the roads once again. We saw a whopping 72 per cent surge in bookings for leisure destinations during this period," Rohit Kapoor, CEO, India and South Asia, OYO, told IANS.

Himachal Pradesh's economy is highly dependent on tourism, besides hydroelectric power generation and horticulture.

The other hill destinations in the state like Shimla, Kufri, Narkanda, Kasauli, Chail, Dharamsala and Palampur also reel under virus fears.

State's tourist footfall in 2019 increased to 172.12 lakh, which included 3.83 lakh foreigners, from 164.50 lakh in 2018.

The highest arrival in 14 years was at 196.02 lakh in 2017.

(Vishal Gulati can be contacted at vishal.g@ians.in)

Education in yellow rooms

At a time when the pandemic has forced students to go for digital class, and many underprivileged children do not have that option, Kshama Hastak's Sarthak Foundation in Lucknow provides free-of-cost education to children from economically disadvantaged sections of society, reports Paromita Pain

Young children from economically weaker sections become vulnerable to being recruited as child labour when they are unable to access educational opportunities. According to UNICEF, "There are close to six million out-of-school children in India. Out of 100 students, 29 percent of girls and boys drop out of school before completing the full cycle of elementary education, and often they are the most marginalized children."

Kshama Hastak decided to make a difference. Her efforts resulted in the formation of Sarthak Foundation in Lucknow. Started in 2013 with six children, it now serves about 1,000 children in seven centers and a primary rural school.

Dedicated to bringing education to the doorstep of the poor and traditionally marginalised, the seeds for Sarthak Foundation were laid when Hastak used to travel to teach at Amity University, Lucknow. "I used to see these children from nearby slums and would often give them something to eat," she says. "One day, all I could offer was sweetened fennel." The children were very excited and watching the joy on their faces made Hastak ponder on how these children were deprived of basic opportunities because their families were too poor to send them to school. She started visiting these children and teaching them. Hastak thought she would work with them as long as she stayed in Lucknow. "But they shared their plans for the future with me," she says, "and I realised that they were depending on me to fulfill their dreams."

Within the next four months, Hastak created the Sarthak Foundation project. "Initially, my students from Amity University helped set up classes and reach out to children," says Hastak. The foundation works through "Yellow Rooms" located in different areas where children are taught, free of cost, school lessons as well as life skills. Classes run for five to six hours daily. "When we started, we would teach in the basic rooms available in the slums," says Hastak. "The children told us that their favourite colour was yellow." So, each room



Kshama Hastak (right) with the young learners

was painted bright yellow, and equipped with computers and television sets.

The programme starts with a seven-day orientation, after which the children are divided into three sections based on their learning levels. Those who have had access to no learning are called Tenderfeet, the second group is called Learners and the third are the Advancers. "Our students are mainly beggars, ragpickers or those who work menial jobs in shops," says Hastak.

The programme lays a great deal of emphasis on gender equality and ethics and runs programmes like *Bachon Ki Panchayat* (children's government), which are predominantly led by girls. "We ensure that girls, too, have access to education because they bear the brunt of poverty," says Hastak. When Sarthak educators reach out to people, they say that without the girls, they cannot start the classes. This helps ensure that families send their daughters too to these classes.

An essential element of the foundation's programme is school inclusion, through which these children are admitted to private and government schools, where they have maintained

an almost negligible dropout rate. Sarthak Foundation sponsors their high school education and plans to enrol them in skill-building courses after graduation, with the aim of making them educated as well as employable. The organization has a record of 95 percent enrolment into formal schools within two years of setting up a Yellow Room. They have also increased regular school attendance of children from 20 percent to an average of 80 per cent.

Sarthak Foundation has also established Gurukul, a low-fee primary school in Sonari village in Uttar Pradesh, catering to children in the area. The aim is to ensure that these children do not have to move out of their villages to search for education and employment.

When the government's COVID-19 prevention measures came into effect, the foundation started organising sessions on life skills for children from economically disadvantaged and rural families through YouTube and WhatsApp. It also collaborated with community kitchens and local government officials in Lucknow to provide food items regularly to almost 300 families.

Hastak quit her job in 2016 and has since been working full time with the foundation. In 2018, she participated in the All-India Roadshow on Women's Economic Empowerment through Entrepreneurship (AIRSWEEE), a Public Affairs New Delhi grants program implemented by the U.S.-based nonprofit organization The Indus Entrepreneurs (TiE Inc.) and its India partners.

Hastak says that Project AIRSWEEE helped her enhance her leadership skills. "I created a special module of what I had learnt for our teachers and volunteers," she says. "Project AIRSWEEE has been a tremendous support for me in a lot of ways." While there's been "tangible benefits" like improved financial management, marketing plans and donor engagement, the project has also had "a lot of intangible benefits," she continues. "I've been connected to wonderful people, and the association has continued after the workshop. A lot of them have got involved with my foundation, and they have been helping me, connecting me to new people. I've also learned lessons on leadership, team management, ethics and integrity." (SPAN-TWF)

Working with the elderly

By Ranjan K Baruah

These days we could see many old age homes in different areas where elders stay or are kept by others. Like crèche for kids, old age homes are also becoming crucial these days. The year 2020 marks the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations and the 30th Anniversary of the International Day of Older Persons which is observed around the world on October 1. This year 2020 has seen an emergence of COVID-19 that has caused an upheaval across the world. Considering the higher risks confronted by older persons during the outbreak of pandemics such as COVID-19, policy and programmatic interventions must be targeted towards raising awareness of their special needs.

The importance of older people are felt everywhere. On December 14, 1990, the United Nations General Assembly designated October 1 as the International Day of Older Persons (resolution 45/106). This was preceded by initiatives such as the Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing, which was adopted by the 1982 World Assembly on Ageing and endorsed later that year by the UN General Assembly.

Gerontology is the study of the social, psychological, cognitive, and biological aspects of aging. It is distinguished from geriatrics, which is the branch of medicine that specialises in the treatment of existing disease in older adults. Gerontologists include researchers and practitioners in the fields of biology, nursing, medicine, criminology, dentistry, social work, physical and occupational therapy, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, economics, political science, architecture, geography, pharmacy, public health, housing, and anthropology.

It encompasses studying physical, mental, and social changes in people as they age investigating the biological aging process, effects and mechanisms investigating the social and psycho-social impacts of aging investigating the psychological effects on aging, investigating the interface of biological aging with aging-related diseases, investigating

the effects of an ageing population on society applying this knowledge to policies and programs, including the macroscopic (for example, government planning) and microscopic (for example, running a nursing home) perspectives.

The multidisciplinary nature of gerontology means that there are a number of sub-fields, as well as associated fields such as physiology, psychology and sociology that overlap with gerontology. Gerontologists view aging in terms of four distinct processes: chronological aging, biological aging, psychological aging, and social aging. Chronological aging is the definition of aging based on a person's years lived from birth. Biological aging refers to the physical changes that reduce the efficiency of organ systems. Psychological aging includes the changes that occur in sensory and perceptual processes, cognitive abilities, adaptive capacity, and personality. Social aging refers to an individual's changing roles and relationships with family, friends, and other informal supports, productive roles and within organisations.

In simple it is multidisciplinary and is concerned with physical, mental, and social aspects and implications of aging. Geriatrics is a medical specialty focused on care and treatment of older persons. Although gerontology and geriatrics have differing emphases, they both have the goal of understanding aging so that people can maximise their functioning and achieve a high quality of life.

Considering the rising elderly population in India, there is acute need for individuals who can provide quality care to the elderly. Now when most of the families are going nuclear, the elders are left alone to take care of themselves. This also brings opportunity for individuals to build their careers. Careers related to this may be purely medical or social and other support. There are diploma courses like Diploma in Geriatric Care which will produce quality individuals who will provide appropriate service to the elderly population.

(The author can be reached at 84739453734 or bkrnanjan@gmail.com)

e-Reading made easy

By Vishnu Makhijani

With love for reading augmented during the Covid-induced lockdown, here's an "immersive fiction" platform that marries the written word with multimedia elements to give one a real-life simulation on your smartphone — an average 15-minute read that has fast overtaken ebooks and has clocked up over 500 writers, more than 1,000 stories and one lakh users in the past six months.

The four main genres of romance, horror, thriller and drama on the Plop Stories platform "bring you immersive fiction that goes beyond written content and merges with visual content, bypassing traditional book distributors. Writers can publish their interactive stories directly on Plop. Because Plop is mobile-first it provides writers a multitude of options to create highly immersive content," its cofounder Vineet Shetty, who has a degree in software engineering and is also an alumnus of the Indian School of Business, told IANS in an interview.

"The stories marry the written word with multimedia elements and give readers a real-life simulation on smartphones. Readers can take decisions and interact with the characters of the stories, making it an extremely immersive experience," Shetty added.

Thus, not only does Plop produce its own stories — Plop Originals — "but it also enables creators to dabble with interactive content gaming and create their own masterpieces. We have a platform. So people create the stories based on the capabilities and once it gets approved it's shown in the app."

"They come and freely produce content of their choice. Based on the number of stories unlocked the writers get paid. As of now there are writers who are making 400 dollars (Rs. 29,000) a month from Plop," Shetty explained.

Q: How does it work?

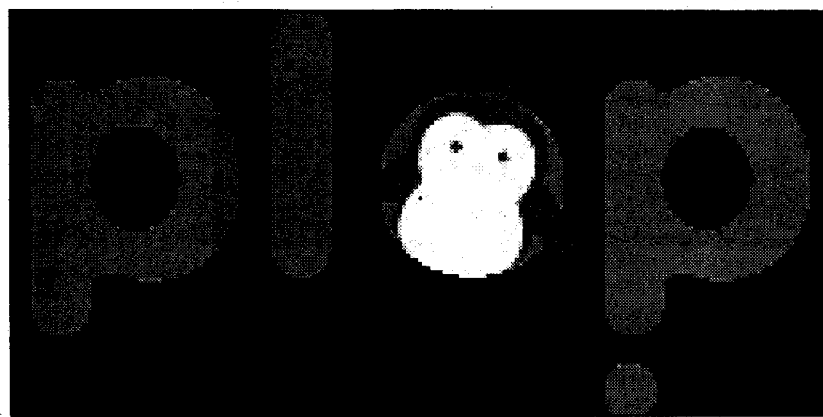
A: Plop has a tool where anybody can log in and create their "own adventure" kind of stories.

"Initially the first few writers we had to speak to them to guide them.



Plop co-founders Vineet Shetty and Anushka Shetty.

Since we were just born and quality is important. So it was important for us to do the primary check. But now we have a tool named writers' panel. So the first part tells them how to use the feature. And the mandate is the second part. The mandate gives them the framework like how can



they make their stories stand out," Shetty said.

With the lockdown, as has been noticed with OTT players like Netflix.

"We have seen over a 400 per cent rise in user activity especially from the United States and United Kingdom. And almost 800 per cent increase in in-app purchases. Simi-

larly, there has been a massive growth in the number of writers/creators who have been on-boarded to the platform", he said.

Over 60 per cent of the users are from North America, and rest from Europe and Asia including India.

While it takes an average of 15

minutes to read a story, "power users are active for almost 45 minutes a day" Shetty noted, adding that "over 20 million minutes of engagement time" had been recorded till date.

Publishers can explore Plop as another way to adapt their existing books. Publishers sell the film rights of a book to a film production company, audio book rights to an audio publisher like Audible or Storytel, they could now sell the interactive fiction adaptation rights to Plop," Shetty said.

The platform has also seen a rather interesting fallout "We have emerged as a platform for Europeans, especially from Germany, Netherlands, and France, as also from countries like Russia and the Philippines, to learn conversational English. This is something very interesting and unexpected. I guess it's because of our focus on the quality of our content — and because most of the stories are written in a conversational style, which makes it easier for readers to relate to them," Shetty concluded.

(Vishnu Makhijani can be reached at vishnu.makhijani@ians.in)

The ballad of struggle

His laughter races in the dimly-lit courtyard. There are chickens of different sizes strolling all over. Two goats, staring into nothingness are also tied on a tree. He had later said that we could choose our dinner.

Bant Singh is lying on a hand-spun cot at his home in Mansa in Punjab. He is not moving. The small television set is turned on but no one is watching it. He has been busy lately. "I have been travelling all over Punjab to protest against the farm bills, sitting on dharnas and singing revolutionary songs at gatherings in Ludhiana, Mansa, Jalandhar and Amritsar," he says.

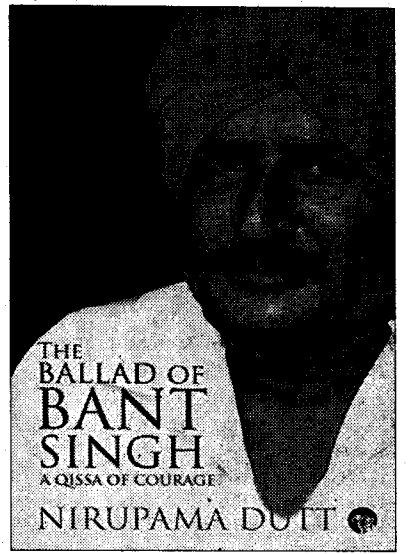
Singh, a Dalit activist singer and a cult figure in his region, who was attacked on January 7, 2006 by upper-caste Jats that cost him both of his lower arms and left leg after he went to court against the rape of minor daughter by some powerful men in the village, is smiling today.

After all, a Hindi film is being made on his life by One Life Studios — based on the book *Ballad of Bant Singh* written by author and critic Nirupama Dutt.

He may not be able to feed himself, may need assistance in going to the washroom, but Singh says that as long as social inequalities exist, it is important for him to raise his voice.

"Nothing has changed ever since I was attacked. Look at the recent Hathras rape case. I just hope the film on my life inspires people to understand that it is important to fight. That giving up is never an option, especially for people like us. Yes, the times are dark, but that should not mean we should stop resisting. My daughter roared against her culprits in front of the judge. She looked straight into the judge's eyes while answering every question asked by the defence counsel. They tried to embarrass her with details. She shamed them with her stare," says Singh, who has performed from his wheel-chair at venues like the Jaipur Literature Festival, Tata Literature Festival and Prithvi Festival, said.

Meanwhile Nirupama Dutt, who has ensured that Singh received a decent amount for the film, recalls that



before the current offer, several studios had approached her, but nothing materialised. "Most production houses seem inclined to cast a Punjabi in Bant's role. I am not sure if that is really important, all you need is a sensitive actor," she says.

Remembering that post the attack on him in 2006, he had become a cult figure in the region, with journalists from across the world visiting Mansa to cover his story, a publishing house called her, requesting her to write a book on him. "I was already writing one on poet Lal Singh Dil, so I was not really sure. But the moment I called him asking how he was recovering, he said — 'I am smiling like a mustard field in full bloom.' That moment I knew I would do it."

Adding that her encounter with Singh's daughter who was raped helped her shape the narrative of the book, Dutt says, "I was scared to talk to her, there was a strange apprehension, but her bravado stunned me. I was to realise later that my hesitation arose from the comfort of my own relatively privileged existence. Those who are pushed to the wall find the courage to tell their tale of woe over and over again."

Currently working on her next book *Making Mocktales*, Dutt says that while most qissas (ballads) end in tragedy, the one on Bant leads to struggle — and hence, important. (IANS)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajal Bhambi

Sunday, October 11, 2020

Venus trine Uranus on your solar return chart will ensure a wonderful year for you. You will have confidence in your abilities and will be able to achieve impossible targets. You will have the gift of the gab and will be able to impress one and all by your irrepressible charm and impeccable manners. You will make best use of your communication skills and will be able to get your work done. You will win high praise and acclaim for your efforts at workplace. You will be implementing new ideas with fair amount of success. Your colleagues will support you. Relations with superiors and higher officials would be wonderful. You need not worry on financial front. Students will get success in exams and interview. Those looking for job change will get success. Your personal life will remain tension free. And new romantic relations are possible.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

You are likely to swing to extremes in this period, sometimes happy, celebratory and at other times heavy, serious and even low. Professional situations and personal relations are sensitive and tend to go through ups and downs. Finances and material effects need to be evaluated; do not make investments or speculate heavily. This would be the right time to concentrate on your career prospects and professional skills. A healthy body holds a healthy and positive mind - work towards this.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

The planetary configuration brings to the fore activities related to communications, competition and examinations. You feel touchy and sensitive but would be more accommodating and compassionate in relationships. You would create a work of art in your field of activity. This brings success and good fortune at work and opens new horizons for expansion. This is the right time to participate in current events and share views, ideas and feelings with people around you. Sports and physical activities keep you fit and energetic.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

This week highlights friendship, love, romance, spirituality and children in your life. There would be positive results from written and oral communication. Short trips, shopping, and journey are on your agenda. This is a good time to promote harmony and good relations with people around you. You are also dealing with issues that force you to rid yourself of guilt about under-performing, and to develop faith and trust in a larger more spiritual plan. It's time to let go of some of your fears that you are not doing enough; to develop more compassion and understanding of others, and to be humble, feeling content in the knowledge that you are putting in your best.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

This week brings mixed results for you. After dealing with tough people and complicated issues you feel much stronger and clearer about your priorities. You are compassionate and generous with family, friends and relatives, drawing respect from them. It's also important to let go of some of your obsessions with rules, details, and fears of not doing things perfectly. The movement is towards a more balanced approach to dealing with practical, worldly matters and your own spiritual growth. Health needs extra care and old habits detrimental to your health need to be discarded.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

Mixed results are indicated this week. If you feel especially angry, frustrated or restless, it would be great to find a little more work and things to do so that you can channel excess energy constructively. Your heart and head pull you in different directions when domestic and family related decisions are to be addressed. Communications and business associates from overseas bring good news and offer lucrative opportunities. A marriage proposal is worth considering. Children may be a stronger focus as well. Sponsoring or supporting other people would be rewarding. New or changed responsibilities around the home or towards family also figure at this time.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

This phase indicates income and gain from investments and speculations. This is a time of increased psychological understanding, intimacy, and perhaps accumulation of wealth if you manage your resources well. You are more

capable of helping friends and loved ones who are dealing with a crisis-you can be leaned upon. Any type of in-depth study or research is likely to go well. Be careful when expressing feelings and emotions as others can misunderstand you. You might spend a lot of time in short frequent trips, communicating with people.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

An intimate relationship develops or figures strongly in this period. Learning to share on a personal level brings you some measure of joy. Money matters make big headlines. A bigger drive for security is with you and re-organizing your home and domestic life comes into play. Other people's money may come your way or you might secure some real estate. You adopt new styles and invest in clothes, jewelry, perfumes and this brings color and glamour in your life. Your thoughts turn to children, pleasure and romance. You focus on having fun, enjoying sports and expressing yourself efficiently. You maintain a fitness routine and a healthy diet program.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

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

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

This phase brings new associations and beginnings in work areas as new opportunities and changes may come about. You are likely to see benefits in the areas of finances, shared resources, personal transformation, research, investigation and emotional matters. An insurance settlement, tax rebate, could come your way, and this is an excellent time to work on financial planning and strategy. Financial gains may come through a partnership or there may be an increase in income. Benefit can come through jointly held resources, loans, or taxes. You need to be aware of the areas that could add value.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

You would enjoy making things that are beautiful and you succeed in areas that require an aesthetic sense as well as technical ability. You would compromise and adjust and take a softer approach while dealing with people at work and home. It's a passionate time, although you are unlikely to be displaying a whole lot of self-discipline. This is a time when you could get a mortgage or other property- and home-related financial backing. You would get serious about home, family, and domestic concerns. Health food, yoga and meditation would help to overcome from health problems.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

The ability to build up financial and monetary pursuits and good returns from overseas business are on the cards. Sharing your interests and communication with your loved one may be especially appealing to you. Family obligations may get in the way of your experience of pleasure and of the achievement of your personal goals. There may be some emotional distancing as well in your home. Your current living conditions may feel restrictive, limiting, too small or cramped (physically and/or emotionally). Delays and slowdowns may be experienced in the areas of health, mobility, and career.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

This period brings wisdom, knowledge and creativity in your behavior and cooperation and harmony in personal relationships. Your drive for personal freedom and insistence on your rights is pressing, and a confrontation in which you have to stand up for yourself is likely. You certainly don't like to follow orders. Do your best to avoid impulsive decision-making that is built upon your desire to be a free spirit. You may recognize talents that you never knew you had, and this can be a sudden, exciting discovery. A health program finds favour with you.

Perks of being on lockdown: Sarcastic student edition

By Athira Saji

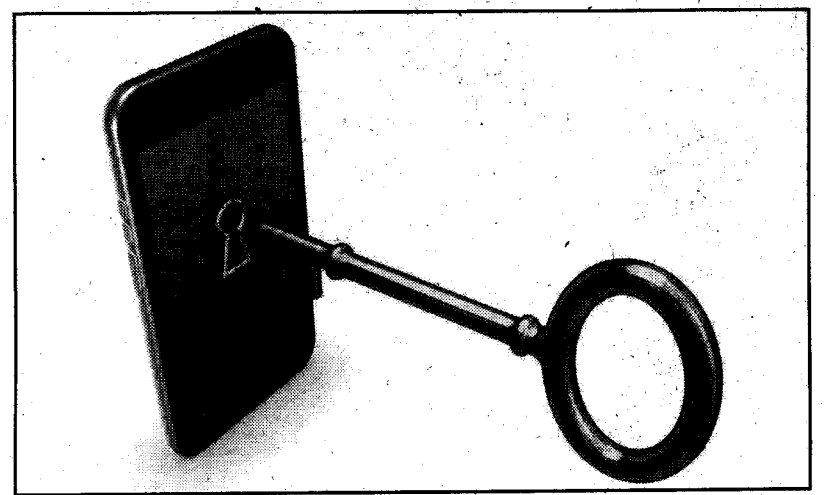
Remember how life was back in February? Ah, sweet memories! It all started going downhill mid-March, when board exams got interrupted and when that started as a 21-day lockdown led to a lazed out lifestyle which, now, seems like it's here to stay. Six months (of Netflix, pseudo Masterchef sessions, pretend cardio-workouts, Dalgona coffee, cutting your own hair, black and white photo challenges, intense social media activism and entrance exam tension) later, here we are; left to listen to 'Unlock' strategies every time we make a phone call (which, let's admit, very often, takes up more time than the actual phone conversation), watching spicy drama unravel in the world of Bollywood (which, again, let's admit, is a tad bit more interesting than actual Hindi movies).

God bless Arnab Goswami for lighting up our 9pm and convincing ourselves that 2021 is going to be so much better because, after all, it's evil twin year, 2020, to be blamed for everything gone wrong.

Speaking of things gone wrong (cue nervous laughter), how many of us were naive enough to think that there would be no exams conducted this year, whatsoever? JEE and NEET 2020 aspirants sure had their work cut out for them, didn't they? It went from mass tweeting to emailing the PMO and NTA office to virtual hunger strikes to prime time debates on news channels, and then, of course, from making the Union Education Minister a meme celebrity to praying for that one beautiful repose that is 'postponement' to grumbling while downloading admit cards to, for a few of us, grumbling some more while loading exam centres situated 100 kms away.

All in all, these few weeks prior to exams taught us that students, with enough unity, can move court but will still be told off by adults.

Anyway, now that some of us are done with exams, this superficial relief that is currently in the air needs to be made the most of. It won't be long before results come crashing down and make a mess of all the



sense of calm that's on our faces right now. Watch all the movies and be done with all the unproductivity before D-day.

Speaking of unproductivity, isn't it awesome how night life has taken on a whole new meaning during the lockdown? Before exams, it was all about the grind, staying up till 3am studying with everything you've got. A good six months and damaged circadian rhythm later, you still end up sleeping at 3am, but after watching a whole season of Friends.

Come to think of it, the Class of 2020 might just have a whole section of heaven reserved for it; the things we've endured! As if two years of toiling in high school wasn't enough, the year everyone was supposed to finally attain pure liberalism, people get masked and locked up.

And while we're on the subject, don't you think it's wonderful how coronavirus gets blamed for everything that doesn't go our way? This means that the next time someone asks why you're not in college already, you could easily get away with a 'Oh no travelling for me this year' instead of admitting that you didn't surpass the cut-off marks. Glass half full, people, we can use this to our advantage.

Another rather interesting observation I've had the honour of making is the fact that my mental health has improved ten times since the lockdown started. This is definitely contradictory to what psychologists say about the global population but

I just might be the lone exception here because as it turns out, all I needed to become happy was to stay away from my relatives for a few months! (There are still phone conversations, I'm not dead inside okay) But seriously, the social pressure that comes along with explaining every life decision you've ever made to nosy relatives may be enough to make even Dwayne Johnson cry.

But oh well, as they say, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Along with the collective wish that each of us have to do away with the virus, it's also my personal wish that we never forget this time (not that doing nothing important for months is something easy to forget).

If you think about it, this will be a time that future generations will talk about (provided that climate change doesn't get inspired by the famous 2020 chain of disasters) and this is our chance to build a solid bed time story/ history chapter for them. Again, glass half full, my friends.

On a serious note, we've come a long way and still, have miles to go. We got through six whole months of being around a virus; that's a pretty great achievement, if you ask me. It hasn't just been six months of 'nothingness', we've witnessed more compassion, more prayers, more humanity in these six months than we ever would've noticed in the past. We're human. And we're human for a reason. I hope we never forget that.

And with that, I shall get back to my 2 am Friends binging session.

"Courage consists in equality to the problem before us."

--- Alice S. Rossi

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 59 SHILLONG, MONDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2020

Gen-X in Bihar Polls

THE Bihar assembly polls will be quite different this time for the reason that three stalwarts will be missing from the scene that is currently building up there. A new generation of leaders are entering the fray and leading campaigns as well. With the demise of Ram Vilas Paswan, a vacuum has been created in state politics where he reigned as the principal voice of the Dalits through the Lok Janshakti Party. Bihar strongman and RJD leader Lalu Prasad is in jail since 2017 over the fodder scam and other cases, while Loktantrik Janata Dal leader Sharad Yadav, who broke ranks with Nitish in JDU, is not keeping good health. As the campaign shapes up, the JDU and BJP entered into a seat-sharing formula in which the former will contest 122 seats and the latter 121 seats. Once the results are out, the CM's post could be open to bargaining by the two sides. The BJP won more seats than the JDU in the Lok Sabha polls in the state last year; but regional equations will be different. Lalu Prasad in jail means his family will run the campaign; and Paswan's son Chirag who is an MP from the state is leading the LJP campaign. His acceptability as the party's central command might be open to question also as his mother hails from Punjab and hence a dilution of the local Dalit identity.

However, at the moment there is no other strong leader for the party. It will be keenly watched as to how Chirag's popularity as a former Bollywood actor will impact his campaign in a positive manner, likely drawing support from non-Dalit voter bases too. In the RJD-Congress alliance, the former will contest 144 seats and the latter 70; showing the weak positioning of the national party. However, the stepping in of actor-turned-politician Shatrughan Sinha to help power this alliance's campaign on behalf of the Congress leadership could be of some help to the anti-Nitish-BJP alliance in the state. In between these two formidable alliances will fall the LJP that is fighting the polls alone. It might be waiting for a split verdict to assert its bargaining power. From the RJD, Lalu's two sons - Tej Pratap and Tejashwi Prasad - are entering the fray and could lead the campaign from the front. In the caste-riven state politics, how the two young faces together with LJP's Chirag could promise or thwart a generational change in Bihar politics will be worth watching. Looks like Bihar might witness a many-sided battle of dynasties.

Government's battle against COVID-19

By HH Mohrmen

The impact of the pandemic on the country and the world at large is beyond one's understanding and no doubt Meghalaya too has to bear the same brunt. The tragedy is that the pandemic is not likely to end soon and the state and its people have to prepare for a long drawn battle against COVID-19. Not only that the magnitude of the impact is inexplicable; it is also sad that there is no aspect of human lives that the pandemic has not touched. The question that is in the minds of the citizens of the state is how is the MDA government doing in the fight against the pandemic? The battle has been more than six months now, people would find comfort in knowing, whether we are on a winning stride or whether we are up against a wall in the fight against the pandemic.

Right now quite a sizable chunk of the population in the state is also asking and rightly so, if the state is fighting a losing battle. The first major indication that made people doubt the Government's position in the battle has to do with the Chief Minister. The fact that the Chief Minister is doing a vanishing act from the frontline in the fight against the pandemic makes people question if the CM is tired or he has already foreseen the impending defeat which looms large over the horizon.

All of a sudden the Chief Minister is no longer seen briefing the media on the state of affairs with regards to the fight against COVID-19 in the state. The Deputy Chief Minister too who all along supported the Chief Minister also gradually disappearing from the scene and the important task of briefing the people of the state about the development in the battle against the pandemic is left to the Director of Health Services (MI) Government of Meghalaya. The irony is that when the state is witnessing a spike in cases of people getting affected by the virus, the spokespersons of the Government

are doing a vanishing act and it is left to the poor doctor to handle the difficult situation.

The decision of the Government to make citizens pay for their own test for COVID-19, also gave a confusing message to the public. The immediate message that the public is getting is that the Government is in a difficult situation, otherwise how would it abandon its responsibility to the people. Is this because the public exchequer is empty now or that the Government is giving up and is washing its hands off the issue and indirectly forcing the citizens to fend for themselves? It is said that people are expected to pay the cost of the test because the Government cannot handle the cost anymore. But one can also question the wisdom of those in the decision making of prioritising the purchase of used ambulances from the Uttar Pradesh government over getting the citizen of the State tested for COVID-19. In a pandemic situation which is more important? To get people tested for the virus or to buy the used ambulance? Or is there something else that people are not aware of behind the urgency of purchasing the used ambulance in lieu of getting citizens tested which is the need of the hour?

The irony is also that just when the State is experiencing a rise in Covid cases the Government makes this insensitive announcement that the citizens will now have to pay for the cost of the test. One may also ask, in a situation like this, what percentage of the population would find it comfortable to shell out Rs 3000 plus rupees for one test. The pandemic has already dealt a severe blow on the economic life of the middle income group of people and now they are expected to pay for getting tested for RAT or RT-PCR test. People will now also become a milking cow for those in the health sector because they will have to

pay for another test every time they visit a hospital or a clinic. This will be an extra cost that every patient and perhaps even their attendants will have to incur. Until the vaccination for the ailment is found, COVID-19 test will be made mandatory for patients and people will have to prepare to pay an extra three thousand rupees every time they visit a hospital or a doctor's clinic.

The other pertinent question is how many tests has the State conducted? There are reports which say that Meghalaya has done much less testing when compared to the other states in the region. Despite conducting fewer tests, the Government is giving up on the tests and leaving the people high and dry. The other pertinent question is, if the government cannot pay for the tests now, how can we expect this same Government to pay for vaccinating us citizens if and when the vaccine is available? Is the government abandoning its duty to provide health services to the people of the state? This question needs an answer?

The other major concern is that the Government is still in denial mode and is not admitting if the virus has taken turn to become a community spread now. How else can one explain the spike in cases? The other indication that the Government is gradually discarding its duty in the fight is the decision to reduce the quarantine period to ten days. There are also reports that not only is the quarantine period reduced to ten days but now even Covid positive patients who are asymptomatic or patients with mild symptoms are allowed to stay and get treated at home. It is understandable that the Government is trying to cut costs and this is also as per guidelines of the Union Health Ministry, but the question is what will happen if the patient all of a sudden develops complications, reaches a critical stage and requires a ventilator?

The other indication which makes people

question the performance of the Government is the statements made by the Chief Minister and his Deputy with regards to the expenditure incurred by Government in fighting the pandemic. The two heads of the same government gave contradicting statements which has also raised many questions that they answered. It is therefore not surprising that individuals or institutions would resort to using the Right to Information provisions to seek information on how the Government has spent the Covid funds. The Government is now obviously caught in its own trap and this provides more ammunition not only to the Opposition but even the public to raise questions.

Criticism against the Government's way of spending the State's meagre resources in the fight against COVID-19 gained momentum when the Government of Manipur made public how much it had spent in tackling COVID-19 pandemic. The Manipur Government's report that was made public shows an expenditure of only Rs 60 crore whereas the Government of Meghalaya had spent almost Rs 400 crore for a similar number of patients and doing pretty much the same thing. The public has the right to question how come there is this huge difference of over three hundred percent in the expenditures incurred by the two states in tackling the same pandemic?

The Government of Meghalaya is obviously not doing itself a favour in how it tackles the COVID-19 pandemic. It remains to be seen how this fight will end. But from what is available in the public domain it is safe to say that the performance of the MDA government leaves much to be desired. Hopefully the Government will not abandon its sacred duty to ensure that every citizen, especially the poor and the needy, are provided health care service that they most need.

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Other viruses at play in the country more dangerous than Coronavirus

Bureaucrats, politicians contributing to the social chaos

By Sushil Kutty

The circus continues to rock. From deep inside Mumbai, it's like the Centre's nowhere in the picture. But push aside the facade like you do a curtain and the door opens to a vista wide open. You'll spot the footprints of the Centre as clearly as fish in un-muddied waters. The Centre's representative in Mumbai is the CBI and while the CBI isn't doing anything that's apparent, worth its reputation or mandate, that's exactly what it's doing: Coolly sitting and watching and not moving a finger or a toe. It's not investigating. The top investigating agency was brought in to investigate Sushant Singh Rajput's death and get to the bottom of it: Was Sushant Singh Rajput murdered or did he kill himself, a little matter of suicide?

But what's on view? A seemingly comatose CBI laid out in the attic! Hidden from the eye, out of sight except to the few who sent the CBI to the concrete jungle to sift through the debris and ferret out the secret of a mystery death. Has the CBI arrived at a conclusion? No. Definitely not. Confirming the view that there's something amiss! What could be that, and why; will somebody care to tell? The CBI, the MHA -- Amit Shah?

The silence is weird. Deafening would be the cliché. But it does not stick. The CBI is playing a game and it's got to do with a game-plan of the Centre. Of course, that means the BJP, which has quite a few chestnuts in the fire. From the Bihar assembly elections to putting the Maharashtra government of the day in all sorts of trouble by fishing in muddied waters, see what it lands! If luck favours a big fish, the small fries already in the net, catch that won't sell.

The fact is amidst all the rancour and squabbling and fighting in TV studios, Devendra Fadnis and Sanjay Raut met, not to gawk at each other but to hobnob, something which comes second nature to politicians of all hues. The former chief minister of Maharashtra and Shiv Sena's gadfly did not disclose what they hobbled about though the grapevine is full of hints it has to do with the SSR death and the Disha Salian deaths and talk of the involvement neck-deep of a top Sena operative in the deaths; a Sena blue-eyed boy who is also a minister in the MVA Government.

It's all twisted. Messed up. The plot is so thick it's impossible to know what's in the stew. Opaque. And because that's how it is, speculation and rumour mongering have taken over the narrative. There is a bunch of what's called "SSRians" spearheading the "Justice for Sushant" movement that has taken hold and has roots all over India with the media taking sides for TRP and more. So much so, the media war intensified and has turned into a spectacle!

That's presenting it mildly. Actually, the media war has become cannibalistic, with rival TV channels feeding on each other's crimes laid bare. There's the Republic against India Today and there's lots of Zee for Zing and 18 news items all at once. All that's lacking is an item number though there's enough of Bollywood and its top divas giving masala to the 24/7 pay per view spectacle. Besides, to swoon the Aam Aadmi, there's enough marijuana and hash to stone a rapacious dinosaur if one stepped out of the Jurassic Park!

That doesn't mean

everybody is stoned. The Mumbai Police is actively in the game; 'playing, some say, a murky game which Scotland Yard will refuse to participate in for all the bobbies in London! The Mumbai Police, say police historians, is but a shadow of its glorious past. Sushant Singh Rajput's death has killed honesty and left a void in the force.

The Mumbai Police, it is alleged, is in MVA's pocket and it's not for small change. The 24 Carat reality is that Mumbai Police's reputation is in tatters, the torn pieces not big enough to make even a handkerchief! To say that the police force anywhere is a force of unity is to fool oneself. Police everywhere is in political camps and if the current Mumbai Police chief is said to be in cahoots with MVA, there are officers who owe allegiance to the BJP and the Congress, another section of cops solidly in the NCP camp. What's glaringly obvious is that the Mumbai Police is piling up its mistakes and non-performance, losing the perception battle. Led by the lacklustre Commissioner of Police Parambir Singh, the police force has been pulled into murky politics, blatantly and brazenly and neglecting its core duties.

Till up to Sushant's death, Mumbai Police was doing a great job in battling the Covid-19 pandemic. But after Sushant's death, the police soft-peddled and aligned with those declaring the death a suicide. In fact, it was the Mumbai Police which first christened it "suicide" and tried everything in dubious book thereafter to write its final chapter. One that spelled complete and total surrender to the powers that be. So much so, Mumbai Police's cloak of confidence was torn every time a media channel questioned its motives and its affiliation.

Today, as we stand, sit or squat, the Mumbai Police is in an endgame that will leave it no choice but to go for a complete and total overhaul. The Mumbai Police has inveigled itself into a no-holds-barred media war, targeting one television channel while openly aligning with another. It's a sad place. The average Mumbai denizen has lost confidence and trust in Mumbai Police.

Whether it's about drugs in Bollywood, 'murder' investigations, or dirty media wars, the Mumbai Police is seen to be playing dirty, neglecting its core duties of maintaining law and order and upholding the law, ensuring that the rule of law prevails. As this piece is being written, the Mumbai Police is sinking more and more in the quicksand that it has willy-nilly walked into. When another chapter is added to the History of Mumbai Police Commissioner of Police, Parambir Singh will not be able to hold his own with his illustrious predecessors.

But, to be transparent and real, let's confess that police and bureaucracy are not paragons of justice and uprightness. Whether it's the Mumbai Police or the Uttar Pradesh Police, which enacted a midnight cremation coup for which several policemen were suspended all are in it together. As for the bureaucracy, the Brihan Mumbai Municipal Corporation tore down the residence of an actress for political reasons and the district magistrate of Hathras did everything in his power to destroy evidence in the case of alleged gangrape and murder of a 19-year-old. We live in troubled times, and it's got nothing to do with Covid-19. There are other virulent viruses at play, more dangerous than the coronavirus. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

We demand protection!

Editor,
The sex worker community in Shillong is extremely grateful to you for publishing a letter, "We are humans too!" from one of our sisters in distress a month ago on Sep 2, 2020. You stood up for us when nobody else did; but it's time we stand up for ourselves. Through this letter, we as an Association would like to remind our State Government that criminalization of sex work is a human rights issue. At the same time, we would also like to suggest to our respected leaders how decriminalizing sex work would help protect us as this would maximize our legal protection and also our ability to exercise other key rights, including rights to justice and health care. Our legal recognition and occupation maximizes our protection, dignity, and equality. This is an important step toward destigmatizing sex work.

So, what exactly do we want the Meghalaya government to do? What we want is for you to fully decriminalize sex work and ensure that we do not face discrimination in law or practice. You, our respected leaders should also strengthen services for sex workers and ensure that we have safe working conditions (as compared to secretly operating in rented houses and abandoned government buildings) and

access to public benefits and social safety nets.

Moreover, any regulation and control on us and our activities need to be non-discriminatory and to comply with international human rights laws. For example, restrictions that would prevent us who engage in sex work from organizing collectively, or working in a safe environment, are not legitimate restrictions. This pandemic has been tough for me and many other sex workers in Shillong, and the end of the lockdown has brought new challenges. Covid-19 has really shed light on the various ways in which the pandemic has affected our health and rights, with respect to inadequate or non-existent access to labour rights, exclusion from government relief and protection measures, and as targets of intensified law enforcement. It's time the government hear us out. Sex Work is Real Work, and it's time to treat it that way!

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

A case of contrasting brothers!

Editor,
I read with great interest the most unexpected and unusual statement from Revenue Minister Kyrmen Shylla, "Minister ready for action against brother 'if

found guilty" (ST Oct 10, 2020). In fact, I was in so much disbelief that I read the story twice, thrice to make sure that I comprehended the message correctly.

To tell you frankly, my first reaction was that the young first time minister is either naive or too honest. Even in the worst case scenario, if it is a case of rivalry among siblings that has led to such a stand-out statement, still Shylla needs to be complimented for his no holds barred stand. Nobody in public life in Meghalaya has come out openly against wrong doings by a close relation. Shylla is exceptional. He said, "Just because I am a minister, I am not going to spare anyone who is involved in illegalities." I initially thought that he might retract saying he has been misquoted. Since there is no clarification to the contrary so far, it will be safe to assume that he has owned up this bold statement. For all I know, the minister's older sibling is the alleged guilty party in coal scam.

While congratulating the minister for his outrage against corruption and refusal to shield his own brother, I am wondering why others in active politics today whose near ones also have been caught on the wrong foot, are being protected so brazenly. The other "big brother" has

continued to get protection from the younger brother. This is the contrast. Maybe, it is time for the other younger sibling to take a leaf out of Kyrmen Shylla. Will he or won't he? That's the question.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Is it justified to deny pension?

Editor,
It is regretful to know that some staff of the Directorate of Agriculture occupying low grade posts, or, for that matter in other state departments who have since recently retired from service have been denied their due pension entitlements. This action of the Government against the retirees has placed the victims and their family in a dilemma especially since some retirees also happen to be the sole bread earners of the house-hold. The background for withholding such pensionary benefits is ostensibly because the staff in question had been appointed in an irregular procedure by the former directors without the joint approval of the Department Selection Committee (DSC). However, the moot question is can those retirees who had been continuously serving the Department for not less than 40 (forty) years and while in service they had availed all the monetary

facilities like house building advance, festival advance, children's education and other advances etc., contributed GPF and had a good service record but at the end of their entire service period have been denied the right to a pension.

Incidentally, in Haryana a few decades ago, the EX-Director General of Police (DGP), SPS Rathore was allegedly accused of being an abettor in the suicide of a 14 years young woman tennis player R. Girihorla in 1993 and there was a purported move by the Govt. to withhold his pension. However on December 17, 2011, the Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT) disapproved the proposal outright by asserting that: "The pension of a person is not a bounty. It is a legal entitlement."

Yours etc.,
Jerome K. Diengdoh
Shillong -2

Tackling Covid in Sweden

Editor,
I came across an article in the Sun, UK by Christy Cooney, (Sept 10, 2020) with some very interesting facts and figures. Sweden has just 13 patients in intensive care and only one death per day. Sweden is probably the only country not to impose any lock-down at the start of the pandemic (so called). Sweden opted to stick with

the "herd immunity" strategy and allowed the virus to partially spread through the population. People in Sweden have not had to wear masks at all. Many doctors and scientists have been saying all along, that face masks only makes matters worse because we are ingesting back the carbon dioxide which our bodies are supposed to exhale out, thus lowering our immunity levels and making us more prone to catching viral diseases such as Covid. And in any case the virus size can easily pass through most if not all the materials of which masks are made.

Now the question which arises is whether we are blindly following the world in their mistakes. Or is there a huge agenda in testing of vaccines in third world countries such as India and eventually making billions by marketing them. When any vaccine worth its name takes many years to be developed, will such hurried concoctions be safe and then again are they really going to be useful?

I have no answers but the questions keep arising.
Yours etc.,
Dr. Tridib Kakoty
Veterinarian
Animal Concern
Via email

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

"Fear is the main source of superstition, and one of the main sources of cruelty. To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom."

— Bertrand Russell

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.60 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 13, 2020

Superstition in 21st century Meghalaya

IT is shocking that a person who is over eighty years of age should be accused of black magic practised on his own niece and is therefore buried alive by his own clan members. This horrific crime suggests that superstition still rules the roost and neither education nor religious teachings have been able to address the faultlines between superstition and science. In Meghalaya, the notion of the "nongshohnoh" still persists. Until a few years ago some people in Smit who were accused of being 'nongshohnoh' were lynched. The nongshohnoh is one who kills so that the blood of the victims is fed to a python nurtured by some families. The python, it is believed by the Khasi people, creates wealth for the family that nurtures it. The python however will feed on nothing but human blood in specific seasons.

In the tribal belts of India it is still common to hear of women being burnt alive after they are accused of practising witchcraft. No one is sure if witchcraft is really the reason that someone falls ill but any illness that is not easily explained of which mental health is one, is attributed to witchcraft or black magic. People afflicted by mental illness do not respond to medicines unless properly diagnosed. But their family members who generally are in denial about mental health ailments need a scapegoat to pile their anger and frustration on. Widowed women are usual scapegoats although a careful prising of the matter would reveal that the person accused of witchcraft owned land and property that the sons covet.

Recent incidents of killings in the name of superstition show the dark side of India's progressive society. And all is being done in the name of bringing peace, harmony and prosperity to those involved. When all efforts fail to keep hopes alive and life on a steady keel, then many in India still turn to black magic and superstitious practices for quick-fix solutions.

Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh have enacted laws to restrict witchcraft. But these legislations have not helped to curb irrational beliefs and practices. A Dehradun-based organisation, Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra (RLEK), had filed a public interest petition in the Supreme Court in 2010 for proper implementation of these Acts. The petition claimed that more than 2,500 Indian women have been killed in the name of witchcraft in 15 years.

Kerala, which has also witnessed an alarming spurt in the number of black magic cases, now proposes to bring in a legislation to curb "inhuman" practices and exploitation in the name of superstition. Kerala has borrowed from the Anti-Superstition and Black Magic Bill, passed by Maharashtra and Karnataka. It is time that Meghalaya too passes stringent laws against such superstitions that militate against science and reason and violate human rights.

The caste genie unleashed by our polity nearly three decades ago has bared its poisonous fangs once again in UP and Bihar threatening to consume the States and have ramifications for the BJP at the Centre. Already it has reignited the flames of hatred among Dalits and Thakurs in the former and Upper castes vs Dalit in the latter, whereby casteism is the cause celebre this week. No matter, it gives further impetus and widens the caste divide. Who cares?

Clearly, in the Kafkaesque world where caste vs caste fight and decide one's fate no Party wants to jeopardise caste vote banks which have become the most luscious mistress to be measured through the prism of power glass politics. Wherein, the fight for getting the upper hand and votes has been reduced to politics of optics and perception, underscores present reality and exposes the socio-political undercurrents at play.

Take UP. The rape of 19-year old Dalit girl by four Thakur boys in Hathras has pitted the two castes against each other. Caught in the crosshairs is Chief Minister 'Thakur' Yogi Adityanath and the BJP. Adding to the dichotomy both the Thakurs and Dalits constitute 20% of the population. In the 2017 State election the upper castes representation jumped from 32.7% in 2012 to 44.4%.

Undeniably, under Yogi, the State with its history of violent caste-based fault lines, has witnessed a spike in attacks on Dalits. Be it Gorakhpur, Saharanpur, Jaunpur, Agra, Ayodhya etc. Primarily because when Thakurs flex their muscle and Dalits fight for their rights, violence against them increases. Alongside, the zamindars who are mostly Thakurs own large land banks further oppress Dalits.

With the Supreme Court dubbing Hathras "horrible, it has snowballed into a full-blown controversy with the BJP worried over how it should balance the Dalit-Thakur implosion and its political fallout countrywide with Bihar going to polls later this month. Threatening to strike at the all-castes edifice assiduously built by Modi's outreach to the oppressed community resulting in BJP's stupendous victory in UP in 2017.

Caste cauldron

I am a Dalit, who are you?

By Poonam I Kaushish

Moreso, as since assuming power, Yogi has nominated Thakurs in various institutional domains, zilla parishads, civil servants, SHO nominations etc. Consequently, a perception of 'Thakurvad' across the Hindi belt has fuelled resentment among the non-upper-caste allies of the BJP and among pro-BJP Brahmins in general.

The infamous 'shoe incident' in which a BJP Brahmin MP clashed with a BJP Thakur MLA last March was seen as an act of cathartic retribution by Brahmins. This blatant favouritism of the BJP towards traditional elites goes directly against its promise to do away with the kind of caste-based preferentialism usually associated with its regional opponents.

Clearly, contradicting the BJP's claim it has become an inclusive social rainbow platform. In the 2017 UP Assembly, the Party distributed half of its tickets to upper-caste candidates (48.2%) against 31.2% to OBC and Jat candidates with the Dalits-non-Jatavs receiving token representation.

The episode has upped Congress's limp sails and if it succeeds in recovering some of its lost ground among Dalits, the BJP would be in a quandary since the community was among its latest acquisitions. To lose them could be a disaster for the Saffron camp not only in UP but pan India.

In Bihar even as Chief Minister and JD(U) Chief Nitish Kumar emerges as a leader with no challenger, with ally BJP alienating Dalits on Hathras rape and RJDs friend-turned-foe 'Bade Bhai' Lalu Yadav politically a spent force and in jail, it is not going to be a cakewalk for him as he has lost some of his popularity among the masses thanks to his Covid mismanagement and migrant issue.

Besides, his plank of sushashan has mislaid its sheen because development has come to a standstill and corruption charges are snapping at his heels. Like the Srijan scam, involving a fraudulent withdrawal of over Rs 1,500 crore from the Bhagalpur treasury now being investigated by the CBI.

Yet, despite Nitish not having a formidable caste

base of his own, he has carved out a solid, non-Yadav OBC and EBC constituency for himself. The caste break up: Upper castes 17% of which Brahmin are 5.7% and Rajput 5.2%, Dalits including Mahadalits stand at 16% and Yadav 14.4%. A sizeable section of upper castes who hoot for the BJP will go along with JD(U). In the 2015 polls 54% of the BJP MLAs belonged to upper caste, against 21% in the overall Assembly.

Alongside, the death of Ram Vilas Paswan who was the quintessential Dalit face of the BJP-led NDA at the Centre and State has not only queered the pitch, opened the race in the forthcoming poll matrix but also introduced an element of uncertainty after his LJP led by son and heir Chirag has decided to fight independently, thereby making things trickier for the BJP and JD(U).

Till yesterday both saw the RJD-Congress-Left Opposition Mahagathbandhan as their main (non) challenger in the polls what with many of its regional allies quitting. Today, Nitish is wary of any impact Paswan's death will have on his Party's fortune which was already in the line of LJP's fire over many issues. Also post Paswan's death, the JD(U) is handicapped that it will not be able to attack the LJP strongly.

True, Chirag who failed in Bollywood does not have any young rival Dalit leader with State-wide visibility barring Mahadalit Nitish and could trigger sympathy post his father's death yet it remains to be seen how LJP's core Dalit voters relate to him and whether he can muster his father's grassroots appeal among the masses to make a dent. Either way, the LP Chief will be a thorn in Nitish's flesh even post Assembly polls.

The BJP is ostensibly playing a balancing act and role of a 'firefighter' between its two allies, JD(U) in the State and both JD(U) and LJP as part of the NDA at the Centre. But rumour has it that it is propping up Chirag who is an ardent pro-Modi voice, from behind the scenes, so that he keeps the heat up on the Bihar Chief Minister to keep him in check and ensure that he does not get strong enough to break away from the

NDA, as it did in 2013. When queried, senior BJP leaders refuse to openly speak on the Chirag-Nitish tussle except parroting "Nitish will be the combine's Chief Ministerial candidate."

This will be the first election where RJD Chief Lalu Yadav will be missing. Sitting in jail he reminisces, "I am the original secularist, baaki sab nautanki hai." Recall, Lalu inverted Bihar's caste pyramid, creating a new power structure that broke the stranglehold of the Brahmin-Bhumihar-Kayastha leadership. The State's 16% Yadavs were supported by an 18% Muslim vote, making MY an almost unbeatable combination. Will his political heir and son Tejashvi carry the family mantle to be counted remains to be seen?

In a milieu where caste has cast a long shadow, the tragedy is that our leaders refuse to see the Frankenstein they have unleashed. Woefully, our polity is unwilling to learn from history. The past tells us that all clashes in India have been based on caste. From Bihar's Thakur-Dalit violence in Belchi 1976, Punjab's Jat-Sikh insurgency 1980-1990's and Kashmir's two-decades of continuing Hindu-Pandits ethnic cleansing by pro-Pak militants.

Clearly, if political consciousness terminates at the caste level, divisive caste combinations will continue to dominate politics. True, it will be suicidal not to take cognizance of the backward castes new found political aspirations. At the same time, it is equally dangerous to indulge in politics of brinkmanship and political power games based on caste considerations.

Clearly, our leaders are either unable or unwilling to break out of the caste mould. In the long run, this is bound to increase dissatisfaction all around. By making noises and finding a scapegoat, our polity runs the risk of changing major political alignments on caste lines. Time now for our petty power-at-all cost polity to think beyond vote-bank politics and look at the long-term implications. Which, if not arrested, could well boomerang on them and spell danger to our democracy. What gives? — INFA

Disaster risk governance

By KK Muktan

The International Day of Disaster Reduction is observed on October 13, across the world in order to create awareness among people about the dangers of natural disasters like earthquakes, tsunami, flood, cyclone etc. and to reduce the risk of destruction of life and property. This day of natural disaster was first observed in 1989 after a call by the United Nations General Assembly for a day to promote a global culture of risk-awareness and disaster reduction. Since then the world observes the day to educate people across the globe, as to how to reduce exposure to natural disasters and to abort the risks. The theme for this year is "Disaster Risk Governance". The objective is to sensitize government agencies and stakeholders to renew their pledge and put more efforts to make the campaign for disaster reduction a success.

Under this programme in every state there is a State Disaster Management Authority under the Chairmanship of the Chief Minister and a full-fledged Department of Revenue and Disaster Management equipped with trained personnel at the state and dis-

continent. The geographical statistics has shown that almost 54% of India's geographical area is vulnerable to earthquakes, out of which the Northeast, Zone No. 5 has been identified to be the highest active zone. During the last 122 years we have had two great earthquakes in the Northeast - one occurred on June 12, 1897, with 8.7 magnitude which took a toll of 1500 souls, primarily inhabiting Khasi Hills district, and the other earthquake occurred on 15 August, 1950, with 8.5 on the Richter scale killing 1530 people. The normal span of time between two seismic occurrences being about 50 years, as stated by scientists and seismologists, the Northeast is heading for the third earthquake any time from now.

According to Geological Survey of India, frequent tremors in the Northeast and other parts of the country, even if mild ones, could be precursors to major earthquakes in the highly sensitive Himalayan zone. Dr Sandip Some, the Deputy Director General of GSI said, fore-shocks, mild tremors preceding earthquakes or swarm activities, series of earthquakes indicate release of tectonic stress and strain.



tribut levels. The idea behind the campaign is that natural disasters cannot be stopped but their effects on human beings can definitely be reduced if we promote proper advanced planning and management and take adequate precautionary measures against such occurrences. Hence on the one hand, there is a need for peoples' awareness of possible natural disasters, and on the other Government's plan of action to render necessary technical help to reduce the disaster risks and loss of life and property.

The observation of this day has a special relevance with our state of Meghalaya, as we are frequently experiencing heavy landslides and loss of lives and property. Only, in September last, there occurred a series of landslides due to incessant rain for more than a week in which many houses were buried under debris and about a dozen people were killed in and around Shillong. In one of the incidents that occurred at Lumpurang, Dohobighat, five members of a single family were buried alive, one of them, named Regia, was a talented footballer-turned-cricketer of Meghalaya.

These incidents happen every year during monsoons because people build houses haphazardly in nooks and corners of Shillong without any plan or technical knowhow. With the growing urbanization and rapidly increasing population, Shillong is facing an acute problem of housing. Dwelling houses are built precariously hanging on the hill slopes; buildings are raised beyond the permissible height, ostensibly, for more accommodation. Steep hill cuttings, by the side of the houses are left open without making concrete retaining walls.

In the hill areas roads are frequently blocked by heavy landslides disrupting transport communication for several days. The Shillong-Guwahati road is the only means of outlet to Guwahati for the entire Khasi and Jaintia Hills. In case of blockade by landslide or earthquake, people will have to go without food and essential commodities for several weeks.

Earthquakes cause the most devastating natural disasters in the Indian sub-

During recent times we have been witnessing frequent earthquakes of mild intensity occurring in different places in Northeast. Earthquakes measuring between 4.2 and 5.5 on the Richter scale have jolted two districts of Mizoram alone for more than 100 times during the past three months. A couple of days before Arunachal Pradesh had a tremor of substantial intensity. On October 10, evening Shillong experienced a sudden jolt. Experts fear that this might just be a prelude to a major disaster in the Northeast.

Now the million dollar question is, are we adequately prepared to face the catastrophe? In absence of proper earthquake management plans and effective implementation of all necessary measures, the disaster is sure to become a man made tragedy. There is a saying - earthquake does not kill but buildings do. They are the veritable human traps. Illegal construction of high-rise buildings, unplanned urbanization, rampant growth of slums, environmental degradation, climate change, all have combined together to build up a situation for potential human tragedy. We have never been serious about anything even though they have a vital bearing on our lives and properties.

Japan and New Zealand are the two most earthquake prone countries where building codes are strictly enforced and each building is rated according to its earthquake-resistance capability. We should follow their examples. The state Government should strictly enforce building bye-laws according to the earthquake prone zones prepared by the Bureau of Indian Standard (BIS) and in case of failure should impose heavy punishment. The Government and people should be more serious in implementing preventive measures. Precaution is the best policy; if the experiences of the past human tragedies are taken as any wisdom for us and the ongoing signals of mild tremors are seriously heeded as warnings and due steps are taken to avert the situations, we can surely reduce the upcoming disasters to a great extent in the days to come. (Email: muktank@yahoo.co.in)

TO THE EDITOR

Misleading information

Editor,
I am concerned with the letter captioned, "Tackling Covid in Sweden" (ST October 12, 2020) from Dr Tridib Kakoty, a veterinarian, reporting about an article which he read in the Sun, UK.

The facts are that Sweden adopted a strategy of allowing 'herd immunity' to build up. However, on June 3, 2020 The Guardian and the BBC carried news items that Anders Tegnell, Sweden's state epidemiologist had admitted that Sweden may have got it wrong. Asked whether too many people in Sweden had died, he replied: "Yes, absolutely."

As Denmark and Norway began opening up again, there was growing criticism of Sweden's response, both inside the country and among its neighbours. Sweden presently has 9,731 cases per million population and 583 deaths. Comparative figures for Norway are: 2,857 & 51; for Denmark: 5,512 & 115; for Finland: 2,164 & 62. Among the major western European countries only Spain and Belgium have a higher ratio on both counts than Sweden - Spain: 19,041 and 704; Belgium: 13,983 & 978.

Some others are better on one or the other parameter. For France it is 11,253 &

500; Netherlands 10,186 & 384; UK 8,880 & 630; Italy 5,873 & 598; while others like Germany (3,891 & 116), Switzerland (6,961 & 241) and Austria (6,132 & 94) are far better on both counts.

Sweden adopted its open policy having a population known for its discipline. We can ask ourselves if we can be as disciplined. We would still have to see if Sweden's strategy proves successful in the long run. As for now it has taken a high toll.

As for masks the East Asian nations have learnt from SARS, bird flu and other epidemics. Masks are normal in these countries. All of them have substantially lower case as well as death ratios than the countries which have derided or initially rejected masks. Japan (704 & 13); China (59 & 3); Singapore (9,872 & 5); S Korea (482 & 8).

On September 16, 2020, Dr Robert Redfield, Director of CDC, in his statement before a Senate sub-committee, stated, "I am going to comment as the CDC director that face masks, these face masks, are the most important powerful public health tool we have." He further said, "I might even go so far as to say that this face mask is more guaranteed to protect me against COVID than when I don't get an immune re-

sponse, the vaccine is not going to protect me, this face mask will."

Claims that masks deprive the body of oxygen have been debunked repeatedly. As an example, The Times of India in its May 29 report (and the BBC on 24 July) had clearly stated, quoting research, that this is not true.

Yours etc.,
Barkos Warjri, IAS (Retd)
Via email

Problem of stray dogs

Editor,
Apropos the letter to the editor dated October 10, 2020 in your esteemed newspaper regarding stray dogs, it is an undeniable fact that many localities in Shillong are facing nuisance caused by the increasing number of stray dogs. Finding a solution to it is the need of the hour and Human United For Animal and Nature (HUFAN) is willing to extend all the help and support that is needed to curb this issue. HUFAN is an organization dedicated to serving animals, humans and nature, with the motto, "Humans for animals; and animals for humans", believing that survival of mankind depends on the survival of animals and vice versa.

We would like to appeal to the government and the general public as well to help us in helping you. If not otherwise restricted by the gov-

ernment and if we get a permanent land/place for keeping the stray dogs, HUFAN would like to adopt/relocate/foster such stray animals and do our part in making Shillong a better place for both humans and animals.

Yours etc.,
Farooq Nongrum
President, HUFAN
Via email

Restricted Puja celebration

Editor,
Durga Puja will be a restrained and staggered affair in Meghalaya this year. In an attempt to curb the Covid-19 spread during Durga Puja, the Meghalaya government has adopted strict measures. Government has curbed movement of devotees from one place to another and encouraged them not to venture out of localities. This is a huge responsibility to be shouldered by all Puja committees and will result in restrictions on inter-locality movement. Government is repeatedly urging all the Puja committees to appeal to devotees and visitors to remain in their respective localities and not to visit too many Puja pandals. Government seems to be extremely concerned about the movement of devotees and visitors and has reiterated that guidelines be strictly followed for movement of visitors during

Durga puja.

Senior citizens aged above 65 years with morbidity conditions, children below 10 years and pregnant ladies have been advised to stay home. The Government is taking these precautionary measures to avoid the spread of COVID-19 during the celebration of the biggest festival in our country after due consultations with Central Puja Committee, Meghalaya. The Puja committee does not mind performing only the rituals as per Hindu almanac (Pangika) schedule. It is decided that all idols should be in one frame with maximum height of five feet. Devotees will not be allowed to touch the idols. Puja offerings, Anjali and other rituals will be regulated by individual Puja committees. Dry prasad only will be distributed among the devotees and visitors. No lunch or cooked food is allowed to be distributed among devotees and visitors.

The Government has also directed all organisers to ensure that puja pandals are spacious and are open from all sides, with separate entry and exit points for visitors. The organisers will have to ensure that all visitors wear masks at all times and use hand sanitisers and thermal scanners before entering the puja pandal. The organisers will have to distribute masks and sanitisers in the vicinity of the pandal

for people who might have come to puja without one.

Puja organisers have been asked to stagger rituals so that people can attend in smaller groups. The priests will use microphones while reciting prayers to ensure people can hear them while maintaining social distancing. Visitors have also been encouraged to bring their offerings like flowers from home to avoid crowds at stalls near pandals.

Organisers are advised that names and mobile number of all visitors should be kept by the puja committees for future requirement if necessary.

The government has banned cultural festivals, fairs or carnivals near the pandals. As far as immersions are concerned the organisers will have to follow strict instructions of the Government and CPC. Durga idols will have to be taken directly to ghats without any stopover and no foot processions will be allowed at the time of immersion of idols. The State Government has also decided that road side stranded visitors are not allowed during immersion.

With such strong restrictions in place it remains to be seen how Puja will be observed this year and if the word 'celebration' is appropriate during this pandemic.

Yours etc.,
Tapan Palit,
Via email

"When buying and selling are controlled by legislation, the first things to be bought and sold are legislators."

— Ernest Benn

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.61 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2020

Mission Ladakh

FINALLY, the cat is out of China's bag. China stated on Tuesday that it does not recognize the Union Territory status that India bestowed on its Ladakh territory. This comes close on the heels of a statement from National Conference leader Farooq Abdullah that the special status for Jammu and Kashmir, which India abolished a year ago, will be restored with Chinese help. A denial came, but this was what he was quoted as saying. Alongside, Pakistan is sounding the world fora against the status change.

Notable is Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh's statement two days ago that China created a border stand-off in Ladakh as part of a "mission" in cahoots with Pakistan. He was speaking at the opening of 44 newly built bridges in border regions, which are mainly meant to ensure speedier troop movement. The way things are shaping up along the northern and western borders, of late, it is clear that China wants to interject in the continued Pakistani provocations against India. There again was unprovoked firing from Pakistani troops along the western border, while India was focusing its attention on the Ladakh region in the north, where China is battle-ready.

China is cut-up with India also over the close eye New Delhi is keeping on the border regions, which is reflected in the infra-development like road and bridge constructions. Also, Rafale fighter jets have arrived and are deployed alongside Bishma tanks, close to Ladakh. China is Pakistan's all-weather friend. But, it would be a lesson for China's dictator Xi Jinping if he chooses to rub India the wrong way. In any war between China and India, damage will be swift, and lethal to both sides and to Pakistan too. India is not lacking in its resolve to take on China or Pakistan, or both together, should a situation so arise.

Pakistan is taken to the cleaners by a weak political establishment which is dictated to at every step by an overbearing military, and the nation's wealth is open to loot by both these entities. China gains from the present scenario by way of economic co-operation, providing huge funds for infra development at high rates of interest, and bleeding Pakistan. Browbeating India is what China can do now to keep such engagements too in good form. The situation in Kashmir is well under control. The entire landmass will be safeguarded by the battery of Indian soldiers in good form. The Abdullahs in Kashmir have only added to the mess in Jammu and Kashmir through three generations.

Normative economics and Covid-19

By Bhagirathi Panda

There is no doubt that Covid-19 has compressed life and shattered livelihoods. As month after month passes by and the fiend does not show any signs of going away, hope is fading and despondency is creeping in. We mortals are now deeply worried about the nature and duration of its shaking economic impacts. This small write up is to appraise the readers of the nature of the economic impact it entails, what it means to us as individuals and societies and what is the way out to overcome it or minimise some of its negative impacts.

When it comes to economic shocks, this pandemic is one of the worst in the last nine decades, after the great depression of 1929. We can analyse the impact of it with respect to some important facets of economic activities such as the GDP (Gross domestic product), employment, trade, investment, consumption demand, remittances and supply chain disruption. We start with the GDP. When we examine the world GDP scenario particularly of the G-20 countries for the second quarter (Q2: April-June) of the current year i.e. 2020 and compare it with the corresponding Quarter in the previous year i.e. 2019, we find except China, the rest of the countries have experienced negative rates of growth.

In this regard, India's growth has been -23.9%, followed by Britain's -21.7% and France's -19%. All it implies is that we as a country have become poorer when it comes to creation of wealth in the form of goods and services. This has its implications also for creation of income for the factors of production engaged in the production process like labour and capital and therefore reduction in employment of labour hours and capital. Decomposing the GDP by the standard sectors of the economic activities for our country gives us a comprehensive picture of the impact of the pandemic.

The sector that has experienced the highest fall is 'construction' (-50.3%), followed by Trade, Hotels, Transport Communications (-47%), Manufacturing (-39.3%), and Public Administration, Defence and Other Services (-10.3%). The only silver lining here is Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing Sector that has experienced a positive growth of 3.4%. Let us be reminded here of the fact that during the post liberalisation period of 1990-

91 to 2015-16, it was the construction sector which had created the largest share of non-agricultural employment (35.74%) in our economy followed by the Trade sector (KLEMS India database, 2019). The sharp decline in Gross Value addition (GVA) in both the sectors has its obvious negative impact on the employment aspect of workers.

Let us examine the world macro employment (unemployment) scenario. USA's current unemployment rate stands at 8.4% (September 5th 2020), European Union's 7.2% and India's 6.7% (CMIE, September 2020). India's unemployment rose to its peak of 24 percent on May 17, 2020. This to come down to 6.7% is reassuring. World Investment is forecast to fall from 4.7% to 2.3% (OECD). World Bank explains that the economic impact of the global recession will fall most heavily on developing and emerging economies that rely on global trade, tourism, or remittances from abroad. Global trade is projected to fall in 2020 by 18.5% (WTO).

In India, tourism contributes approximately 8% of the employment. As per an estimate of the Federation of Associations in Indian Tourism & Hospitality (FAITH), about 3.8 crore people have lost their jobs due to the pandemic. At the world level, remittances have decreased to 14891.13 million USD in the first quarter of 2020 from 15185.47 million USD in the fourth quarter of 2019. When it comes to the country, income from remittances constituted about 3% of our GDP last year. Dillip Ratha, the World Bank lead economist of migration and remittances, mentions that remittances from abroad to India may decline by at least 20% this year, compared to last year. On the supply side, the wheels of Indian economy have been severely compromised because of disruptions in supply chain due to unavailability of raw materials, exodus of migrant workers, travel restrictions, social distancing norms; slowing down of global trade etc. The initial reaction of the central government was to strengthen the supply side and accordingly the FM had declared a Rs 20.97 lakh crore economic package. However, subsequently it is being realised that the demand side is more important to revive the distressed economy.

In the next couple of sen-

tences let me simplify our understanding of the demand side of the economy. Total demand for goods and services or as it is called in the language of an economist 'Aggregate Demand' of an economy consists of Consumption Demand (C), Investment Demand (I), Government Demand (G) and External Demand (Net of Exports) (NX). Consumption demand basically comes from private individuals and households in the form of their purchase of various goods and services. Investment demand comes from the industrial and business units when they purchase raw materials, labour, capital and different services etc., for producing goods and services. Government demand manifests in different forms of its expenditures undertaken in the economy. External Demand is the net of our exports of goods and services after adjusting for imports.

With this conceptual understanding of Aggregate Demand, let us see how has the pandemic affected it and its different components. Data provided by Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), GOI shows that Private Consumption Demand (C) and Business Investment Demand (I), in the first quarter of the financial year 2020-21 compared to 2019-20 have declined by 27% and 47% respectively on year on year basis. These are gigantic falls not witnessed in recent times. Government spending has risen by 16% during the same period. However, this small rise by 16% in Government demand could not offset the huge fall in C+I taken together. The increase in NX although positive, in absolute figures the amount is meagre at Rs.1,92,917 crore to compensate for the massive fall of Rs1064806 crore in Consumption (C) and Investment (I) taken together.

In the current situation, private consumption is falling because the income of the majority of people (particularly the 90% ones in the unorganised sector) has fallen. In the absence of efficient health insurance for the majority of the people and in a situation of inadequate public health infrastructure, sizeable numbers of Covid-19 infected people are compelled to go for costly private sector healthcare provisions. This compromises their capability to spend more on non-health

consumptions. Investment Consumption is a derived demand of private consumption. Investment Consumption, thus, has declined because private consumption has significantly fallen.

In such a scenario, how can the economy be brought back on track? The only visible and possible way out is to increase significantly Government spending both on the supply and demand fronts, but more aggressively on the demand front, so as to revive the animal spirit of high consumption in all of us. The Government should spend more on programmes like MGNREGA and other rural and urban welfare schemes, construct more of public physical infrastructures like roads, bridges, airports, railway lines, public hospitals, warehouses, shipyards etc. It has to live now on borrowed future expenditure.

In the initial days of the pandemic, the Government gave importance to the supply side measures and was not convinced of the immediacy of measures on the demand front. However, it is good that it has now realised the imperative of immediate scaled expenditure to boost consumption demand. Few of the measures that it has announced yesterday with respect to Government employees (LTC voucher, festival advance) are based on sound economics. Apparently, it gives the impression that the Government is pampering its employees and rolling out extras. But in reality, it is all about calling off future entitlements and consumptions of employees for the sake up boosting present consumption, at no extras. That said, these are short term measures. In the medium and long term, the country needs to create a viable and enduring public health care system and emerge as a manufacturing and services hub of the world by significantly reducing its high transaction costs.

In conclusion, in the short-run therefore, along with the Government, 'let us come You and I, when the evening of the pandemic is spread against the Sky and spend & spend & spend all the way'. That can bring some economic and social amelioration in this uncertain living present.

(The author teaches at the Department of Economics, NEHU, Shillong and can be reached at bhagirathi2@yahoo.co.in)

Essence of true feminism

By Deepa Majumdar

I read with interest the article, "An Open Letter," by Adelia Nongri (ST version Oct9, 2020). It refers to an article with a "ghastly title 'KUMNO KI KYNTHI KIN PHIKIR BAN IADA IA LADE?'" published by a vernacular daily, on the October 7, 2020. Since I have not read the original article deemed offensive by this author, I can only guess that it was puritanical and misogynistic. The author mentions Spivak, who really represents a certain strand of western thought.

I cannot comment on the situation in Shillong or Meghalaya, as I am not there in person, and do not know of the local situation. But I can assure this well meaning writer that given the devastation I see around me, here in the US, it is high time we women reviewed and reassessed what passes for "feminism" in the west and now in India (via neo-colonialism).

In his wonderful work on ethics, Aristotle defines each moral virtue as flanked by two matching vices -- one, an excess, the other a deficit. If we apply this to the virtue of true chastity (a universal virtue) or voluntary self-control, the excess vice is the promiscuity (sexual immorality, hedonism, and adultery) one sees in western society as a result of the so-called sexual revolution. The deficit vice should be puritanism, which caricatures chastity, but comes with great violence against the object of a hidden lust. India, in particular, has a long history of puritanical violence against women -- to the point of committing Sati (burning the widow on the funeral pyre of her husband).

But beyond these two extremes and transcending both, is the true virtue of chastity, which cannot be policed, but must be chosen. The biggest mistake of western feminism has been its reactive embrace of so-called sexual freedom (an oxymoron), without stopping to ask this question first: how can an appetite ever free us -- at that, one that involves another person and maybe a third (if a child is born)?

All around me I see the devastation caused by the so-called sexual revolution (SR). I see young people with empty eyes and hearts parched with sorrow. Many suffer from what is called "Daddy blues," or the pain of a fatherless America. Yes the problem of absconding Dads is one result of SR.

Another result is the incapacity of the young to sustain relationships. A third is decline in standards of civility and the vanishing of the virtue of respect. There are many other terrible results of the breakdown of the traditional family. The two greatest perhaps are the plight of the unwanted child and the tragedy of abortion.

This kind of appetitive feminism has harmed women more than anybody else. It has degraded them through modes of self-objectification. It has made them lose self-respect. At least some modern women are terrified of being deemed sexually incorrect, and therefore unlovable. The very word "consent" degrades the sexual act to something contractual -- instead of elevating this act above the animal level. For, the only proper context for human sexuality should be deep abiding friendship, mutual respect, and lifelong mutual responsibility and unselfishness towards one another. Here in the US, young women today are rejecting feminism, as a result of its unthinking embrace of so-called sexual liberty. To be called a "feminist" is no longer respectable among the young.

And yet, feminism is VERY important and will always be relevant. So long as even a single woman is raped or violated, feminism is relevant. But what should feminism be? Surely it should rise above patriarchy and inspire better behavior? Just as fire cannot be fought with fire, so also, masculine carnality and its violence towards women cannot be fought with a reactive feminine carnality. Only true chastity can ward off lust. This, I think, is what SR is leading us to in a historical sense -- a voluntary inspired return to true self-control. As for Puritanism, women should be as wary of puritanical sexism, as they are of lustful sexism. Nobody should control our bodies but ourselves. But with this right to our bodies, comes the enormous responsibility to neither degrade ourselves, nor others -- especially the child who is not to blame for how it comes into the world. A higher feminism would advocate pride in our capacity for motherhood (to be distinguished entirely from patriarchal versions of motherhood) -- understood as the capacity for unselfish and tender, nurturing love.

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TO THE EDITOR

Politicians are not experts

serves a thorough investigation.

Yours etc.,
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar
Shillong-3

Editor,

The recent site visit by local groups of South West Khasi Hills and from Shillong, led by Wambantei Bremley and his team has yet again exposed the hypocrisy of the authorities in the government and the district administration for not believing the facts on the dangers of a uranium waste seeping into the environment. For one, Wambantei Bremley isn't an apprentice in the field of environmental studies and research and his findings along with the group's has exposed that politicians in the ruling government aren't comfortable with the truth. They love the four walls of the Secretariat and have floor managers who would do the dirty work of a cover-up. The District Administration is no expert as rightly pointed by the Chief Minister himself but at least he should visit the area with experts and judge for himself if he is really concerned about this matter. The UDP has rightly raised the matter with the NPP and this issue de-

Why is Govt on denial mode

Editor,
As a citizen of Meghalaya, I wish to express my concern at the lackadaisical response by the government on three key issues raised across sections of the media and by private citizens of the state.

The first is the issue of the radiation levels detected at Nongbah Jynrin by a delegation of the KSU along with Bremley WB Lyngdoh - whose findings were shared with the public on Youtube and social media, and have also been reported across leading news publications. The levels of radiation detected are a cause of concern for the people of this state. I urge my fellow citizens to refer to credible online sources that explain the bone-chilling consequences of the detected levels of 200 to 300 CPM (and even a report of 1000

CPM) on humans and the environment. Surprisingly, the Chief Minister's response indicates a complete lack of urgency on the matter. Terming the delegation itself as 'non-expert NGOs' indicates a denial of the facts and an attempt at discrediting the brave and selfless work done by our fellow citizens. There are enough citizens in the state who are intelligent and highly educated and who are capable of interpreting facts.

The measurements were conducted with a standard instrument for measuring radiation - A 'Geiger Counter'. As long as the instrument used is of an accepted international standards, one need not be an expert to simply take a reading and interpret the facts. I salute our fellow citizens who brought these facts to the public domain at great risk to their personal health. I would request the government to immediately set up an independent committee to verify the alarming findings by the recent delegation and take steps to contain any further nuclear contamination. There is no time to waste when it comes to nuclear consequences. The people of Meghalaya

have lived in peace with nature since time immemorial. For most of us who do not have the option, or do not want to move out of this beautiful land - it is imperative that we strongly defend our right to a safe environment for us, as well as for our future generations.

The second issue is the various allegations and arrests centred around the illegal mining that has plagued the state for the past 6-7 years. While making no claims on who is responsible for illegal mining, it is an undeniable fact that this has been going on continuously since the NGT ruling. The ultimate losers of this entire illegal supply chain are the people of the state. As the saying goes, "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children." There are strong reasons for the NGT ruling, and I request my fellow citizens to accept it and to earn their livelihoods through legal means that do not harm their fellow citizens, current and future. If most of the state's population can earn their livelihood without mining, then so can those who still indulge in illegal mining.

Let us not be fooled by the few dozen rich and land-owning class of miners who selfishly exploit the earth for their selfish financial gains without any useful contribution to society.

It is a travesty to honest work when such people earn more than teachers and doctors by illegally digging up coal that belongs to all generations and to the earth; not just to them. However, it is understandable that many continue to flout the law since the mining ban has completely removed a major section of the state's economy. I would urge the government to focus on the development of future income sources for the people of the state so that each of us can earn a dignified living. Regarding the role of the government in this web of illegal mining that persists, there are only two plausible conclusions - either the government is incompetent and is unable to discharge its basic duties even with the immense powers and resources at its command or the government is aiding and abetting the mining activities. Both of these conclusions reflect poorly on the current government as representatives of the people of Meghalaya.

(Let us forget, our MLAs exercise their power on behalf of the citizens, and are not kings or rulers of any sort).

The last issue is linked to the Covid-19 pandemic that has been ravaging the world since the start of 2020. While I appreciate the work done by countless government servants and health workers in containing the disease in Meghalaya, the cause for concern is the amount of public money spent. An amount of 399 crore rupees is a rather large amount given the number of cases in the state. The vague manner in which this amount has been presented to the public is also worrisome. Does the government believe that the public comprise of unsuspecting sheep who will be satisfied with a rough accounting under major heads? Is a detailed report of expenditure too much to ask? We should not need to file an RTI for information that every citizen of the state is entitled to. It is public money that is being spent here, and at the very least, the government should publicly release all details about the expenditures on its own initiative. Else, the

public will respond in the next assembly elections.

Looking at the current state of things in our state, I can understand why 40% of the people do not even care to vote. The ruling party and the opposition seem to be playing games with the common citizen who ultimately pays for these games. I strongly request our MLAs to introspect and utilise the power of their constitutional office to make a positive difference for the people of the state.

In the words of the Stoic Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius, "Just that you do the right thing. The rest doesn't matter." We, the citizens have entrusted you with our lives and that of our children as well. We hope you find the humanity in your heart to rise above the futile pursuit of power or money, and instead work to the best of your ability to improve the lives of the people of Meghalaya as per the oath that you have sworn.

Lastly, to the ruling party, the NPP, perhaps you can start focusing on the second word of your party's name, and do what is RIGHT for the PEOPLE.

Yours etc.,
Joe Lyngdoh
Via email

Transparent recruitment

Editor,
Union Minister of State Dr Jitendra Singh has disclosed that interview for jobs has been abolished in 23 States and 8 Union Territories of India. The abolition of interviews for Group-B (Non-Gazetted) and Group-C posts in the Central Government has happened since 2016. The step was initiated after the suggestion of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on August 15, 2015. This is a historic achievement and ensures a free and fair recruitment process. However, cases of manipulations have also been reported in writing examinations and online tests conducted for recruitment in some states. The need of the hour is that the center and all state governments must build up a strong mechanism for a transparent recruitment process and offer jobs only to the eligible candidates.

Yours etc.,
Amit Singh Kushwaha,
Satna (M.P.)

"We do not see nature with our eyes, but with our understandings and our hearts."

— William Hazlitt

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.62 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2020

Meghalaya's Covid expenses

CHIEF Minister Conrad Sangma has a lot to defend. He has to defend the Garo Hills District Council scam, the illegal mining and transportation of coal and now the Covid expense of Rs 399 crore. About the Covid expense, the CM has rightly stated that it is easy to sit on the sidelines and find fault with everything that Government does. Indeed, only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches. And those in Government know exactly how the Covid funds have been invested. Sometimes it is easy to forget that Government made remittances to those that were stranded in different parts of the country so that they keep body and soul together until there was a possibility for them to return. This is where the problem arises. While it is agreed that migrant workers with pitiable salaries and needing to sustain themselves after they have lost their jobs should be legitimately assisted, what is not understood is why those who have left the state to study outside and are mostly the children of government employees have to be paid stipends by the State Government or why they had to be provided transport free of cost between Guwahati and Shillong and also stay at quarantine centres free of cost. It's almost like the state was encouraging freeloading.

Granted that Covid tests should be done free of charge because that is a duty of the state. But why should people in quarantine centres who have the capability to pay for their food and stay at a nominal price not be charged? The coronavirus is a new phenomenon and no one had a readymade action plan for tackling the virus. It was mostly trial and error. The Government has learnt on hindsight how it could have handled things better; what it should have done; what went wrong and what needs course correction.

The comparison between the expenses incurred by the Government of Manipur and that of the Meghalaya Government is absurd because the details of how the former managed its Covid funds are not known. The Chief Minister claims that facilities at CHCs and PHCs have been strengthened and testing centres increased. If this has happened it is a much needed reinforcement because the status of most CHCs, PHCs and Sub-centres is abysmal. In fact strengthening rural health care facilities and investments in public healthcare is urgently needed. Meghalaya's high maternal and infant mortality are mainly due to lack of facilities in the PHCs and CHCs which do not have basic diagnostic and other equipment needed for complicated deliveries. As a result most women in labour have to come to Shillong, thereby resulting in overcrowding of hospitals. Hence any investment in health infrastructure is money well spent.

Citizens who need detailed information on Covid spending can get it via RTI but why can the Government not make public the expenditure breakdown? That's called transparency!

The BJP seems to have found new zest in uncovering corruption in the state. First, it exposed the multi crore scams in the three ADCs causing a major embarrassment to the NPP, the leader in the MDA government. The saffron party has now pounded on the latest revelation of the alleged involvement of James Sangma, brother of Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma and Power minister, in the racket of illegal transportation of coal. Allegations levelled at the former Home Minister were 'confirmed' by Assam police when truckloads of coal were detained in the neighbouring state and arrests made, thereby forcing names to crop up in the process.

Claiming to have "Zero" tolerance against corruption the party that is yet to take roots in the state has demanded the immediate arrest of the elder Sangma, if he is involved in illegal activities. Attempting to sell its heroic and proactive role the BJP informed that it had raised the flag of corruption in the coalition's forum. Dissatisfied with the Government's repeated denial, the BJP protested against its own government and accused Home Minister, Lakmen Rymbui of shielding the tainted, while threatening that the faith in the NPP-led MDA Government is fast evaporating. The matter could reach the PMO. The chasm between the party with two MLAs and the largest partner in the coalition appears to be widening.

The BJP's target of its close ally is to be read deeper. It is unlikely that the Meghalaya unit of the party acted on its own accord. It must have received the green signal from the higher ups in Delhi. The 'High Command' might be in possession of credible feedback that corruption is rampant first in the ADCs and then in the blatant violation of the Supreme Court's ban on coal mining in the state. To preserve its 'clean image' (though it has to be taken with a pinch of salt as many graft accused politicians from other parties have joined the BJP perceptibly to be let off the hook), the BJP top leadership has given the green signal to highlight corruption in the NPP. So far the right noises have been made. It needs to be seen whether the BJP will relentlessly pursue the agenda and take it to its logical conclusion. We need to wait and watch whether the party which is viewed as anti-Christians for its right wing

need to have CCTV? Incidentally, if I remember correctly, this proposal was mooted by the previous MUA government but conveniently not implemented by anybody.

To conclude I would like to see the issue discussed in the forthcoming Assembly session in a responsible and dispassionate manner without having to score brownie point. Can we trust our MLAs---both ruling and opposition---to rise as one against this silent haemorrhage that Meghalaya has been suffering?

Yours etc.,
Pynshngain Jyrwa,
Via email

Outdated Information

Editor,
A day after my letter, 'Where's the transparency' (ST Oct, 08, 2020) was published in your esteemed daily, another news item, 'Why persons testing positive are not given their results?' (ST Oct, 09, 2020) came as a response to my doubts and the doubts of a large number of people as well. Upon this, the aforementioned news item states that it is not only the state of Meghalaya that does not disburse the reports to those testing positive, but also cites the case of the state of

policies is accepted as the alternative to the decrepit Congress and the disenchanted NPP.

The NPP-led MDA coalition began its tenure with much promise. Its catchy slogan of change, its pledge for good governance, its assertion for better roads, better health, better education have now fallen flat and far short of expectations. A report card has little to cheer about. Even if there are achievements to be claimed, corruption allegations will overshadow everything else. Coronavirus might have derailed some plans but without the disease too illegal shipping and the racketeering by alleged 'beneficiaries' would have come to light anyway. Illegality cannot go unnoticed interminably.

The Chief Minister must be at a loss. He has gone the extra mile in befriending the BJP, ignoring accusations of his cohesiveness with the 'communal' party thus sacrificing his party's secular credentials. Now the BJP is a thorn in his side. He cannot take any action against his 'tiny' ally. He cannot throw the BJP minister out of the alliance. The BJP may boast of only two legislators in this North Eastern corner but it is the most powerful in the centre. If Conrad challenges the BJP unit here harder obstacles will be thrown in quite mercilessly. Conrad Sangma is caught between the devil and the deep sea. Hence if the BJP is sincere in its efforts it has unlimited power to derail the NPP on corruption charges.

The government's apathetic attitude towards corruption is clear from the fact that it challenged in the High Court the Lokayukta's order for a CBI inquiry into the allegations of interstate smuggling of coal to beyond the country's borders, to Bangladesh. Even now the Chief Minister is in denial mode; he defends his older sibling who was earlier removed from the Home Ministry precisely on the same issue and dismisses the demand for a CBI probe. Sore but helpless the Lokayukta can only accuse the state government of indulging in dilatory tactics to escape the law. If the government is clean why oppose the investigation directed by anti-corruption ombudsmen? The least it could have done was to cooperate with the watchdog.

The ban on coal mining in April 2014, during the Con-

Maharashtra to be doing the same thing. It states, "The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) has also changed its testing protocols and prohibited laboratories from sharing COVID-19 positive reports directly with patients." This statement corresponds to a notification issued by the BMC on June 13, 2020 to all testing labs, within the jurisdiction of its operation. However, it is here that we have to do some fact checking so that the people will not be blinded or misguided by outdated information by the concerned people who make the daily press briefings with regards to information on the status of COVID-19 in the state.

I would like to state that the aforementioned statement of the BMC vide a notification on the above said date, saw a backdrop, as it had to roll back its stand to not disburse reports of those testing positive, when the Supreme Court of India, on June 19, 2020, which is a week after the BMC's order to testing laboratories, ordered the Government of Maharashtra that irrespective of one being positive or negative, the state shall provide Covid-19 test reports directly to patients or relatives.

On equating the state of

Too lucrative to resist

Illegal transportation of black diamond

By Albert Thyrniang

gress rule was a huge issue in the February 2018 Assembly elections. Wooing coal miners BJP and NPP promised to lift the ban if power was handed to them. The BJP even included the assurance in its manifesto called 'Vision Document'. 'The party will promote mining of mineral resources with a sense of responsibility towards the protection of the environment and regeneration of forests', states the manifesto among other gargantuan promises. Knowing fully well that lifting of the ban depended entirely on the Apex Court and not political decisions, the BJP too is guilty of giving false promises to woo voters. With legal mining nowhere in sight, illegal activities are the alternative. Are makers of flashy manifestos not responsible then?

Likewise the NPP chief, Conrad Sangma too enthusiastically pledged to resume coal mining if his party was voted to power. On campaign trails he repeatedly accused his predecessor of snatching away the livelihoods of people. When eventually the dream of forming a government was fulfilled, the MDA could do nothing to persuade the NGT to withdraw the ban without a stringent mining policy that can ensure high safety standards and minimum environmental effects. Having failed to convince the NGT to reverse its judgment the only alternative is to clandestinely permit illegal mining and transportation of coal to its destinations in Assam and Bangladesh. The black diamond trade is too lucrative to resist for ministers, politicians, bureaucrats and the numerous racketeers, to care about the illegality.

That illegal transportation of coal had to be busted by the Assam police in their territory is a slap in the face of the Home Minister of Meghalaya and our cops. The plying of hundreds of coal trucks has carried on unabated despite the blanket embargo imposed by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in 2014. The following year a Sub Inspector was suspiciously killed by coal mafia after the police officer detained coal laden trucks in Patharkham, Ri-Bhoi District. Two activists were almost fatally attacked by the mining mafia in November 2018 in East Jaintia Hills while on a visit to gather evidence of illegal mining in the coal rich district. The same year the tribunal had to levy a fine

of Rs 100 crores on Meghalaya for violation of its order.

Hence it is not as if illegal mining and transportation of coal is unknown. The police must be either benefitting from the clandestine, profitable business or they are told to close their eyes by the political bosses. Otherwise how do these trucks pass through the national highways and outposts? The operation 'via Whatsapp' must be true.

That the clamour for ending illegal coal racketeering in the state is getting louder is misleading. In reality, except for Civil Society Women's Organisation (CSWO) which has been spearheading the movement against illegal coal mining and transportation of coal, no other NGO has demanded a CBI inquiry into the matter or expressed concern on this illegal activity. Ideally there should have been competition in demanding stern actions against the culprits but this has not happened. The otherwise noisy pressure groups have kept their mouths completely shut. Their expected silence is however noted. These groups too gain from the coal mining and transportation. Truckers pay to them at certain locations. Trucks stop at fixed sites where waiting volunteers signal the drivers and handymen. They get a share of the pie. They don't care about the environment. Perhaps, uranium mining in South West Khasi Hills is being opposed because no pressure group profits from the yellow cake's exploration.

In opposing uranium mining, NGOs turn experts and propagate an alarming narrative. The unscientific and dehumanising rat-hole mining of coal might cause more harm to the environment, water bodies, human beings and other living organisms than scientific and safe extract of uranium. Does this opposition come down to financial considerations?

It is anticipated that the media focus on this nefarious activity will remain for a while. The government is unwilling to take decisive action. The Opposition too has not come down heavily on the government. NGOs are indifferent. Will the unlawful lucrative commerce continue to thrive at the cost of the state and its people? Will the minister, who has his own brother as CM go 'unscrutinized'?

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Handwashing for better health outcomes

By Melari Shisha Nongrum

The Global Handwashing Day is celebrated every year on October 15th since 2008 as a global advocacy day dedicated to increasing awareness and understanding about the importance of handwashing with soap as an easy, effective and affordable way to prevent diseases and save lives. The current COVID19 pandemic has reminded us about the effectiveness of one of the simplest preventive measures to stop the spread of the corona virus and other viruses through handwashing with soap. Hand washing might have been taken seriously during the pandemic since we are reminded time and again through various media and because of the fear of the virus.

However, we have to realise that hand hygiene is not limited only to this pandemic but ensures better health outcomes beyond the pandemic. Research studies have revealed the effectiveness of handwashing with soap. As diarrhoea and pneumonia are leading causes of death for children under the age of five, handwashing with soap can save lives, cutting diarrhoea by almost one-half and acute respiratory infections by nearly one-quarter. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 50% of cases of child undernutrition are due to repeated diarrhoea and intestinal infections caused by poor sanitation and hygiene conditions or lack of safe water. When children get diarrhoea, they often eat less food, and have a reduced ability to absorb and benefit from nutrients in the food they do eat. As a result, this can contribute to undernutrition. When children are undernourished, they become far more susceptible to developing diarrhoea when they come into contact with the bacteria and viruses in faecal matter. And so, the cycle repeats itself. Handwashing with soap is therefore a critical determinant for achieving and maintaining good nutrition and it can break this vicious cycle.

We are very well aware that the two primary times to wash hands with soap are after contact with faeces (such as using the toilet or cleaning a child) and before contact with food (preparing food, eating, feeding a child, and so on). The other times are after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing; after contact with an animal, animal feed, or animal waste; after handling pet food or pet treats and after touching garbage. When hands are contaminated with disease-causing bacteria and viruses, these pathogens can enter the body or pass from one person to another to cause diseases such as diarrhoea and pneumonia.

In view of the facts indicated above, given the context in our own state, we have many children who are undernourished. According to the National Family Health Survey (2015-16), a large proportion of the children under five years of age are stunted (43.8%), underweight (28.9%), wasted (15.3%) and severely wasted (6.5%). The health indices reflect poorly of the health of our children. There could be many other factors that can make a child undernourished but we have one simple and easy solution that could help curb this condition among children and contribute to healthier children.

Home is where we can wash our hands regularly; adults and children are to take hand hygiene seriously. Though doable, this is not done. The National Sample Survey (NSS) 76th round report, 2019, revealed that only 35.8% of households in the country practice hand-washing with soap or detergent before a meal, while 60% households wash hands only with wa-

ter. More surprisingly, about 24% population don't wash their hands with soap or detergent even after defecation. Besides, there is a gap between the rich and the poor where only 2 out of 10 poor households use soap compared to 9 out of ten rich households. The reasons are multifaceted; knowledge, attitudes and access to water facilities and soaps are the main problems. It is important to note that several studies including a study conducted in Bangladesh found that while the use of water alone does help reduce the risk of diarrhoea, use of soap is substantially more effective. Given this context, there needs to be more awareness on the benefits of handwashing. During this pandemic and during community placements, Social Work students from the Public Health specialization have always conducted sessions in their villages to remind people including children of the importance of handwashing with soap and the steps for effective handwash. Such efforts will hopefully bring about an increase in knowledge, change attitudes and mothers and children alike would practise handwashing with soap.

Besides the home, there are other institutions that are important to consider at the community level namely schools and Anganwadi centres. These are places where children spend a lot of time and also eat their mid-day meals and supplementary nutrition respectively. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has stated that handwashing with soap reduces absenteeism due to gastro-intestinal illness in school children by 29-57%. One important issue is for teachers to teach children to wash their hands after using the toilet and before eating food. But the larger question is, "where do they wash their hands?" According to a report by the National University of Educational Planning and Administration, New Delhi, it was found that only 57% private schools and 66% private unaided schools in Meghalaya do not have water facility in schools. However, it is not surprising to note that the report did not mention the availability of handwashing facilities in the schools which shows that 'handwashing' has not been considered important enough when planning and assessing infrastructure in schools.

Furthermore, in Aganwadi Centres, under Section 5(2) of the National Food Security Act, 2013, every school and Anganwadi Centre shall have facilities for cooking meals, drinking water and sanitation. In Meghalaya, according to the Meghalaya State Food Commission, out of 5890 AWC's, only 1799 or just 30% have potable water supply and 1537 have toilet facilities. The Department is said to be dependent on Public Health Engineering (PHE) to provide these facilities. When the lack of convergence and funds are given reasons, the children continue to bear the brunt of these lacunae.

My experience in working with communities and schools is the issue of 'soap'. Who will provide the soap? We had promoted community contribution for the soaps with a collection of Re 1 per child per month to buy soap for the purpose. Of course, this was done only after parents and teachers understood the importance of hand hygiene.

With the New Education Policy, reforms would be implemented to bring about positive change, which we are hopeful that the quality of education would be enhanced at all levels.

(The writer is from Department of Public Health, School of Social Work, Martin Luther Christian University. Email: melari.nongrum@gmail.com)

TO THE EDITOR

Not convincing

Editor,
Apropos the report "Conrad defends James, denies coal illegalities" (ST Oct 13), I am not surprised by the response of the Chief Minister. Tell me, which Chief Minister will admit to such blatant illegalities? It's not just about Conrad Sangma defending his elder brother. I don't think Mukul Sangma would have taken any different stance had there been similar allegations against his younger brother Zenith Sangma. The truth is that nobody in power is willing to concede that such organised crime against the state is happening under their watch. Can we forget the circumstances leading to removal of James Sangma from Home portfolio? Is it not true that chief minister initially looked the other way? Is it not true that names of some persons close to James Sangma figured in the media reports alleging smuggling of coal from East Jaintia Hills district against the direction of NGT? Is it not a fact that only when the coalition partners put pressure on the Chief Minister that he took the easiest step of removing James Sangma from the Home department? Obviously, there was evidence of wrong doing. Otherwise, there would have been no

reason for such an action by the Chief Minister.

Come to think of it, James Sangma did not open his mouth even once to defend his personal reputation. Even now when the BJP has named him, he has maintained a curious silence. To my mind, instead of Conrad Sangma defending his brother, James Sangma himself should have denied the charge. After all, it is his name which is getting sullied.

The Chief Minister's other statement that movement of coal trucks from Meghalaya to Assam doesn't mean all are illegal may be true. But then, has the Chief Minister forgotten that a CBI probe is going on in Assam's Karimganj district regarding a scam of smuggling coal to Bangladesh with official patronage? Has the Chief Minister forgotten that Beltola police in Guwahati have detained coal trucks and arrested truck drivers engaged in illegal trade?

The Chief Minister's proposal to set up integrated check gates with CCTV facility only adds oxygen to the common belief that Meghalaya's precious coal is getting sold outside in a clandestine manner at the cost of precious revenue for the state. If everything was hunky dory then where is the

"The people who hold that our culture is an oppressive patriarchy, they don't want to admit that the current hierarchy might be predicated on competence."

— Jordan Peterson

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.63 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2020

US support to India

SIGNALS are coming from the US seeking security cooperation with the Americans so as to face the Chinese threat on the northern border, or even a joint threat from China and Pakistan. US national security adviser Robert O' Brien has stated that dialogues will not work with China. China raised the bar also by saying it will not accept India's branding of Ladakh as a Union Territory and that it has objections to the erection of roads and bridges by India in the Ladakh region.

India's response, as the US noted, is a tame one. The Modi government is taking every step with caution and refuses to be provoked. Strengthening the border infrastructure as India is doing now will by itself not be enough.

President Trump, ending his term soon, has crafted a coalition of the nations that are willing to stop China in its aggressive tracks in the Asia region, be it in the seas or on land. The quadrilateral security dialogue, styled as Quad, involves India, Japan, Australia and the US. A recent meet in Japan dwelt at length on the security threats to the region.

India is hesitating to be a part of a military alliance led by the US. If a full-scale military alliance is brought into force, this will be a formidable front against China. However, a fear could be that Indian public opinion might perhaps not be game with it, in view of our previous commitment to Non-Alignment as a state policy. Also, the US may have a bigger agenda. India had entered into a similar pact with the Soviet Union during the time of Indira Gandhi. This is possible now with the US as well. But, a likelihood seen by analysts is, what if in a future war against the US, China attacks India with missiles, as we are in China's easy geographical reach. This would mean inviting trouble.

What cannot be ignored at this point of time is also that China has built up impressive military strength, while India sat back and mused. Now, Chinese military might is five times that of India. A direct confrontation could likely mean China taking the upper hand. It will take time for India to build its military muscle matching that of China's. India might not have as much of resources too. This therefore is the time for India to see how best it can protect itself.

Welcome to the kingdom of Meghalaya

By Patricia Mukhim

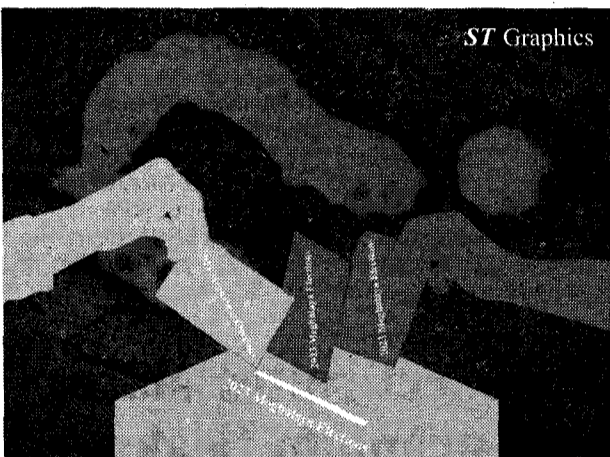
Democracy in Meghalaya has experienced a nosedive. Come 2023 and Meghalaya will be ruled by four families. Some members of those families are already part of the present MDA government. How can you claim to be a democracy when two of a family who are either brothers or uncle and nephew are both ministers? How can power be concentrated in one or two or three families? But that is exactly what will happen in 2023. It is for this reason that calculations are already on and speculations are rife about where each candidate from within the family circle and from the extended family will be contesting.

It is an open secret that at least one family is today cornering all the big contracts in the state. The family owns a construction company. There is more money to be made from government contracts than from anywhere else. Why so? Look at the quality of the roads in Meghalaya today. Even within city limits the roads are such that if a woman in labour is to be taken to hospital she will deliver on the way due to the heavy jerking of the vehicle. Let's not talk about roads beyond Shillong. The road condition in all districts is equally bad but some more than others have remained decrepit for years. No one ever asks questions as to why roads need to be repaired every year. Why should roads not have a definite shelf life? And has any contractor in this state ever been blacklisted for constructing bad roads? No. Because neither the Dorbar Shnong nor the public consider it their bounden duty to challenge corruption! MLAs are in cahoots with the contractors so who do we blame? And we have allowed this sin to persist by looking the other way.

The other day a senior bureaucrat of the Government had to visit a family in Umpling. The guy had to do a detour from Lapalng to enter Umpling because the bridge connecting Rynjah to Umpling has been closed for bridge expansion for almost a year now. Secondly, the officer found the road condition so abysmal, resulting in slowing down his driving speed to 10 KMPH because you cannot drive at 40KMPH in such a horrible thing called a 'missing road,' eaten up by the those who must have used less than

50% of the money allocated for the road when it was constructed or repaired. The officer asked his colleagues in Umpling why they don't raise a stink about such appalling road condition. They just smirked at him. End of story! But come election time and the same MLA whose face is never seen during the whole of this Covid tragedy, will return to power because money will play its dirty game. This is the sordid story of elections in Meghalaya.

The story today is that in 2023, there will be four families, two from Khasi Jaintia Hills and one from Garo Hills that will rule over Meghalaya. They will invest



ST Graphics

enough money to win at least about 35 seats and they will breeze in comfortably. If the likes of Dr Mukul Sangma and family continue to hang on like limpets to the Congress they might win the elections but they will continue to be in the dog house for the next five years. Smart thinking demands that they shift gears now in order to be somewhere in the reckoning in 2023, although they might not be game changers.

Let's face facts. The 2024 election will still belong to the BJP. Come 2023 December the Ayodhya temple will be inaugurated and Amit Shah, though not the party president currently will come up with last minute strategies, just like doves emerging out a magician's hat. Only losers will bet on a losing horse so all the Congress men and women are now contriving to chart out a new course and to draft a blueprint for action. No wonder those in the Congress who used to be most critical of the MDA Government have suddenly muted themselves like everyone now does when in a zoom

meeting. The silence is a tacit approval of the government's actions.

Meanwhile the national president of the NPP has given a clarion call in support of Gorkhaland. What does this imply? This is a forewarning that the NPP will set up candidates in the 2021 West Bengal elections; at least in the hotly contested 5 seats in what is commonly referred to as "Gorkhaland." The BJP has already started fishing in troubled waters there when the Union Home Ministry recently convened a meeting where it invited the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha. The meeting was chaired by the MoS (Home) G Kishan Reddy. The BJP leaves nothing

to chance. If the NPP sets up candidates in the five LA constituencies of Bengal, it is going to be a fight not between titans but between the giant and the dwarf in terms of resources and mobilizing capacity. The NPP may have managed to get the moniker of a 'national party' but think of the reach of the BJP and that of the NPP! Comparisons are anyways odious. However, if the NPP has been inveigled by some GJM enthusiasts then the party would want to take up the gauntlet. But where will the resources come from? Elections are not fought on goodwill. And then there's the Assam election as well!

A national party would want to set up candidates nationally (I wonder why the NPP did not try Bihar). But elections equal hard cash. So what's the NPP's revenue model? Naturally it will have to come from the private limited company called Meghalaya. After all it is in Meghalaya that the NPP was incorporated. Those ruling Meghalaya have always treated it like a family estate and politics as an entitlement, so there's nothing

strange.

One poser for the NPP leadership is this: Is it worth being a national party? Isn't the NPP playing second fiddle to the BJP in Meghalaya, Manipur and Nagaland? How does it raise the stature of its leaders? In fact, the need to inject capital into the NPP might end up in emptying the coffers of the holding Company — Meghalaya incorporated.

To keep the holding company afloat so many strategies have to be adopted. Bureaucrats have to act like directors and do their best to ensure that the Company stays afloat. Some who don't toe the line have to be removed from their posts and given some other duty that will not impede the progress of the Company. That is why we see several mid-level bureaucrats placed in important positions so that they can be "rail-roaded," into doing things they would not normally do. The senior bureaucracy have some spine to resist political pressure; but junior and mid-career bureaucrats have to perform or be shunted from department to department. It's a tough call for those not used to the game but others have learnt that it's better to be pliable and dance to different tunes than to be upright and have their backs broken.

Meanwhile, 2023 will also see Nongkrem and Mawhati as tough battle grounds. The grapevine also says some MLAs will be shifting to Mawkynrew from their present constituency since moneybags with big stakes will be entering their present constituency. The gossip is also that Adelbert Nongrum will be facing quite a few Goliaths including one who will be shifting constituency and others who will give him a run for his money. So from now until the time of reckoning the KHNAM MLA will have to do a lot of hollering about this, that and the other. The problem is he is part of the Government but out of the charmed circles of decision making, so the poor man has to take his grievances to the public domain.

If the people of Meghalaya really want to reclaim democracy they have to start another freedom movement. But why should we? Aren't we all comfortable and complicit?

US-India strategic ties Elephant in the room

By Dr. D.K. Giri

The United States of America is nudging India into a closer bilateral security alliance as the latter continues to stand-off against China at the border. Also, the US faces Presidential election on November 4th. While, obviously, supporting India, statements emanating from US officials disapprove of India's cautious approach to China.

The US National Security Adviser said, "Dialogues and negotiations will not work with China which amassed 60000 troops on the Northern border". The Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Beigun visiting India from 12-14 prior to the 2+2 meeting on 26-27 this month said, "As we build the strategic partnership between US and India, there is an elephant in the room, China". Whereas the US seeks to confront China in alliance with India, is New Delhi ready for it? Does New Delhi still cling on to strategic autonomy, non-alignment and neutrality?

The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a radio interview that tensions have spiked between China and India after the hand-to-hand combat where 20 Indian troops died and China suffered casualties so far not disclosed. Pompeo asserted: "They (India) absolutely need the US to be their ally and partner in this fight". The world has awakened and the tide has begun to turn. President Trump has built up coalition that will counter the threat from China, maintain the rule of law and the basic civic decency that come from democracies running the world, not authoritarian regimes.

Characterising the India-US growing partnership, Beigun said, in his speech to a think tank in Delhi, "US' benefits from forging close links with countries like India that seeks to provide for their own defence. US own interests intersect with those of India. We have seen the conditions emerged for an organic and deeper partnership, fundamental alignment along shared security, shared interests, shared values and geo-political goals". He elaborated on the partnership and said that post-World War II alliance format requiring in-country US troops' presence may be no longer necessary.

This is a hint at accommodating India's foreign policy tradition of strategic autonomy, or giving India leeway to maintain its neutral posture. Beigun added, "The US benefits from an India that is strong and prosperous". He promised that the US was prepared to do more to strengthen India's ability to defend itself by promoting inter-operability among the militaries of both countries through regular exercises and exchange, common defence platform and co-development. Cooperation can be achieved in multiple ways in view of advance technologies shifts in global economic scenario and changing geo-politics.

The US is categorical in condemning China's territorial aggression. It seems determined to push it back. On India-China face-off, US recognises that China has attempted to seize control of the LAC by force. A Similar aggression is seen in Taiwan Strait where the PLA Navy and Air Force continue to conduct threatening military drills. Beijing's flagship International development project, 'One Belt, One Road' is trapping gullible countries in an unsustainable debt service. Beijing also sells and supplies surveillance systems to repressive regimes like that of Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela.

The US strategy vis-à-vis China, outlined by its NSA, Secretary of State and Defence Secretary and other

ers, is two-fold. One, to improve the resilience of US institutions, of alliances and partners to counter the challenges China presents. Second, it seeks to impose tangible costs in order to compel Beijing to stop actions harmful to America's national interests and those of its allies and partner-nations. In this context, one important partnership which will be one of the most key partnerships for the US in the 21st century is that with India.

The US declares to put great emphasis on advancing the US-India Comprehensive Global Partnership. The Trump team in the foreign policy department assures that the forthcoming elections in America will not make a difference to the bilateral relationship with India. The Deputy Secretary announced, "I have never been more optimistic regarding the future possibilities of the India-US relationship".

Assessing India's foreign policy approach to the US against the backdrop of Chinese belligerence, New Delhi has so far attempted to placate Beijing while maintaining good relationship with Washington. We have consistently questioned the sagacity of maintaining strategic autonomy that imposes heavy costs to India's growing economy and plethora of development challenges. India is neither a part of an alliance system nor the nucleus of a regional security, nor any sub-system. Therefore, it runs the risk and responsibility of assuring and obtaining itself absolute security. The passionate need for absolute security puts a considerable demand on India's resources.

It is time New Delhi looks at pooling of sovereignty for a common cause like it is in the European Union. A good many scholars and observers have suggested countries accepting limitations on their autonomy in a mutually beneficial alliance system for a greater goal. New Delhi can no longer be a 'lone ranger' in international politics. In the Cold War time in the 1970s and 80s, New Delhi could play the role of mediator on many occasions. But that role got restricted by India's internal economic challenges. New Delhi, therefore, should focus on building its economy up to the size of China before beginning to confront it by herself.

The US is talking of deepening and expanding the quadrilateral security dialogue called Quad, an informal group of India, Australia, Japan and US. The perspective on Quad articulated by Beigun suggests that any country wanting a free and open Indo-Pacific and is willing to contribute to it, is welcome to join the Quad. It is a partnership built on shared interests not binding obligations and is not intended to be an 'exclusive club of four'. At the same time, he admitted that member countries have been too cautious about the Quad.

New Delhi is maintaining friendly relations with all the other three Quad participants. But it is fighting shy of developing Quad into a security framework. New Delhi is bugged by this continuing dilemma of choosing between autonomy and alliance. It is somewhat treating 'autonomy' as a Hobson's choice. This is causing continued vulnerability and heavy costs on our security. As China and Pakistan have colluded to harm India, New Delhi is obsessing with its neutrality. The hangover of non-alignment affects the foreign policy establishment of our country. The active formal engagement with other countries in alliance or partnership can also be interpreted as a relationship of inter-dependence, which is accepted as a respectable format for partnership.—INFA

TO THE EDITOR

Chaotic NEHU exams

Yours etc.,
Stevenson Marboh
Shillong-14

NEHU online exam anomalies!

Editor,
The Online Examination 2020 conducted by North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) for Sixth Semester concluded on Wednesday. But the confusion, commotion, stress and anxiety that students had to battle is far from over. Under pressure from the Government and the UGC, our ill-equipped NEHU tried to complete the Online examination within the stipulated deadline, but at the cost of its students.

Given the significant number of candidates, appearing for the Online Examination, it is a reasonable guess by any, that the speed and the quality of internet performance will be greatly affected during the period of examinations. Many candidates are unable to download and answer online the Mock Test of the EVS Paper in the MCQ format held from October 3. Hence, the University had resort to temporary, ordinary, and casual arrangement for the conduct of the Environmental Studies (EVS) paper which was held on the October 7. One of the arrangements made

by NEHU in order to reduce the network load is that the EVS Paper held on the October 7 was conducted over two sessions (9 AM to 12.00 Noon & 1.00 to 4.00 PM). The students were informed about these changes a day before the exam, which was on October 6. Serious doubts and apprehensions were raised by students in this context. A question was raised whether two separate sets of question papers were supplied over the two sessions? Since, this paper was not conducted cent percent in online mode, because a number of candidates were not able to login and download and answer the paper online, the question paper was supplied to the student's email id.

We parents are apprehensive about this matter. How can the students from the colleges including some of the elite colleges of Shillong get the added advantage of appearing for the EVS Paper in the Second Sessions with the same question paper supplied to the candidates of the First Session Colleges? In fairness to students, NEHU must give each student the same treatment. The issues are especially worrisome and pressing as a matter of justice to the students.

NEHU must clear the doubts and apprehensions of students and their par-

ents on these very serious examination anomalies.

Yours etc.,
A concerned parent,
Via email

Who will be held accountable?

Editor
North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), a premier central university is always in the news for one or the other reasons, but this time the University is making waves both in the news media and social media for the way they have conducted the final year University Examination for the year 2020. It must have been a roller coaster ride for the final year students of NEHU right from the day the routine was declared until they were successful in sending their scripts to the respective colleges via Speed Post.

It is indeed a very unpleasant experience for the students at this juncture when their minds are unsettled by the Covid fear and the pressure of examinations and to add to their woes NEHU left no stone unturned to give extra pressure to the final year students. Initially, UGC had given the deadline of September 30, 2020 to complete the final year examination. But after the discussion with the Education Minis-

ter of Meghalaya, UGC agreed to postpone the examination to October 7, 2020. Soon after that the students were given notice that they can choose the online or offline mode to appear for their examination. But soon after the University clarified that students cannot opt for the offline mode due to inconvenience during this pandemic situation. Again after a few days, students were informed that they have to appear in the online mode via an online application, "My Placement Perfective".

Then the students were also asked to appear for the mock test between October 3-5, thereby engaging students in an activity which is not productive for them just a couple of days before their final examinations — a time which is very crucial time for students. The students need to download this app through play store. The students were also asked to write down the answer in A4 size paper, make the pdf of it and submit it online. Apart from this the students were also asked to courier their answer sheets via Speed Post to their respective colleges. Now the situation is such that hundreds of students queued up in GPO, Shillong and other post offices for several hours just to courier their Answer sheets to their respective colleges.

At a time when the

number of Covid cases are rising in Meghalaya, these students are risking their lives just to courier their answer sheets. Are the students and the employees in the Post offices already vaccinated against Covid -19 that they are insulated from this deadly pandemic? In fact if the students had been asked to submit their answer scripts directly to their respective colleges this unpleasant situation would not have arisen. The University and the colleges could have easily managed as the students would have been distributed in different colleges without resulting in crowding as had happening on that fateful day.

Courier options could have been given to students who are out of station as it would have been helpful for those students. In case any unpleasant situation arises then who is going to take the responsibility? Will the University be responsible? Will the Government be held accountable which had assured that examinations would be conducted following strict protocols?

Yours etc.,
Anil Singh Roka
Shillong-2

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"Inflation is taxation without legislation."
 - Milton Friedman

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.64 SHILLONG SATURDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2020

The Ichamati-Bholaganj saga

SINCE February this year after an activist of the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) was murdered at Ichamati-Bholaganj things have been on the boil. The fact of the matter is that the area has a substantial non-tribal population whose ancestors have settled there much before East Pakistan was created. Now that the international boundaries are well demarcated Ichamati-Bholaganj is like an extension of Bangladesh with a large chunk of Bengali speaking non-tribal settlers and some Garo residents. Identity politics that has been the driving force behind every election since Meghalaya was created demands that the tribals establish that they are a majority in every District, Sub-division and Block. The Indo-Bangladesh border in Ichamati-Bholaganj is as porous as it can get with the fences having come down during the floods, so illegal migration from across the Bangladesh border cannot be ruled out. But unless an individual is identified as an illegal settler for want of the necessary documents to prove his/her citizenship, no government in any country can evict such individuals and term them as, "illegal migrants."

Ever since the NDA Government mooted the idea of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which confers citizenship on any person from the neighbouring countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, belonging to the Hindu, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist faith who has lived in India until March 2014, there have been voices of dissent in the entire North Eastern region. The strongest opposition came from the North East Students' Organisation (NESO). Thereafter, students' bodies of each state too joined the protest. The NDA went ahead and passed the CAA but not after granting the Inner Line Permit protocol to Manipur, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland already have the ILP and these states are exempted from the purview of the CAA. That leaves Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura out in the cold. Tripura in any case has a majority non-tribal population even while the tribes are reduced to 31.05%. And this is flashpoint that tribal majority states like Meghalaya fear. In December 2019 the Meghalaya Assembly was virtually coerced by pressure groups to pass a resolution to push the central government to grant Inner Line Permit to Meghalaya too. Since then, there has been an undercurrent of animosity towards the non-tribal settlers in Meghalaya even though many of them are permanent residents having settled here since the British period and even before that, having come for trading purposes.

Allegations of denial of trade license to bonafide traders of Ichamati-Bholaganj area by the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council needs attention. The KHADC has been sitting on hundreds of such applications for months and years together without giving any reason for not issuing such licenses. Now that the residents of Ichamati-Bholaganj have sought the intervention of Governor Satyapal Malik it is hoped that he would ensure solution to these issues within the framework of the Constitution.

Winter is soon approaching and brings with it the seasonal illnesses like common cold and flu. Flu comes every year and many people suffer mild to moderate symptoms. It's commonly said about the common cold and flu that if you treat, it goes in one week and if you don't it goes away in 7 days. The implication of such statements is to emphasise on the benign nature of these illnesses in majority of cases. But this year, things are different because of ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. This is because the signs and symptoms of flu and Covid-19 overlap significantly and can be easily confused. As the flu season ramps up this winter every cough and sneeze will carry an extra worry: possible COVID-19 infection. It's bound to be a confusing season for people to decide what to do when they fall ill. It is important to differentiate between these two illnesses because the diagnosis of Covid-19 in current times carries a significant burden on the individual, his/her family, health care providers and the health care delivery system.

As expected, many people will contract the seasonal flu in the coming months and once someone has symptoms which are suggestive of either flu or Covid-19, the first question that comes in the mind is regarding the testing for Covid-19. They would be anxiously wondering, whether to get themselves tested for corona virus? The testing for Covid-19 has implications for both the individual and the system. For an individual it brings a lot of stress and fear of downstream consequences, in case he or she tests positive, including fear of adverse outcomes due to illness itself and financial issues associated with the treatment, whereas for the system each and every diagnostic kit is precious and judicious use is warranted. So far we have not reached the peak of this epidemic and it is difficult to forecast the future requirements. So triage of patients at their own level and at the level of healthcare delivery assumes importance, which is self explanatory. Following are some similarities and differences between flu and Covid-19 which may give a clue to the general public once they are suffering from symptoms.

Signs and symptoms
Similarities:
 Both these diseases can

Similarities and differences

Covid-19 and Common Flu

By Dr Amit Malviya & Adorelia Laitthma

have varying degrees of symptoms and signs ranging from no symptoms to common symptoms like fever or feeling feverish/chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty in breathing, fatigue (tiredness), sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle pain or body ache, and headache. Some people may have vomiting and diarrhea, though this is more common in children than adults.

Differences:

Covid-19 has certain distinguishing features from flu. Change or loss of sense of taste and smell is quite suggestive of Covid illness. Initial symptoms of Covid-19



PIT Photo

usually include fever, dry cough and breathing difficulty whereas with flu the initial symptoms are usually running nose followed by fever. The fever associated with Covid-19 is usually not very high but experts say it is associated with more chills and feeling of exhaustion as compared to flu. Breathing difficulty is uncommon in flu. Another distinguishing feature is the presence of stomach upset and diarrhea which indicates more towards Covid-19 than the flu. In most of the cases, flu is mild and transient illness lasting for less than 7 days whereas Covid-19 symptoms can last for more than 7 days and cause more serious illness in some people like elderly, heart disease patients and smokers.

How long symptoms appear after exposure?

Differences:
 In majority of the cases, flu symptoms develop within 1 or 2 days of exposure to the flu virus, whereas the symptoms take longer time to develop in case of exposure to Covid-19 virus. Typically in Covid-19, symptoms appear 5 days after being infected but can appear as late as 14 days after infection.

How it spreads?

Similarities:
 Both Covid-19 and flu are viral illnesses and contagious, spreading from per-

son to person when in close contact (within about 6 feet); spreading mainly by droplets that are released when people with the illness cough, sneeze or talk. It is also possible to contact the virus by touching a surface or object that has virus on it and then touching his or her mouth, nose or possibly the eyes. Both flu and Covid-19 may be spread to other people by patients who never develop any symptoms or mild symptoms.

Differences:

Covid-19 virus is more contagious and more of a super-spreader than the flu virus. This means that the virus can quickly and easily

spread the virus longer. As compared to flu Covid-19 can cause more serious illness in some specific group of people. Another very important difference is the availability of vaccine, whereas there is a vaccine available to prevent flu, there is no vaccine for Covid-19 currently. Although these differences which are listed above may help to distinguish between the flu and Covid-19 they are not very prominent and well demarcated and the surest way to differentiate between them is the testing.

At present, it is advisable to follow the government protocols and advisories for testing of Covid-19 at population level. Therefore the preventive measures like personal hygiene, social distancing, wearing masks assume the utmost importance. They prevent both of these illnesses quite effectively. If someone feels unwell with any of above symptoms, the best thing to do is to self-quarantine at home - including avoiding contact with other household members and to get in touch with your health care provider to make a shared decision about Covid-19 testing.

When should people seek medical attention?
 There are certain symptoms which if present, one should not wait but get immediate medical attention. Breathing difficulty at rest or shortness of breath when doing activities which are part of routine life is a serious symptom. Persistent pain or pressure in the chest, confusion, drowsiness and inability to keep awake (feeling constantly sleepy), bluish lips or face include some of the other serious symptoms. The elderly, infants, those with chronic medical conditions like heart problems/kidney problems, diabetes and pregnant females should consult a doctor sooner than later.

Take home message
 The key differences between flu and Covid-19 are related mostly to the sequential appearance of some typical symptoms, mode and ease of spread, and risk of complications. Covid-19 seems to spread more easily than flu. Covid-19 takes longer time before appearance of symptoms and people can

spread the virus longer. As compared to flu Covid-19 can cause more serious illness in some specific group of people. Another very important difference is the availability of vaccine, whereas there is a vaccine available to prevent flu, there is no vaccine for Covid-19 currently. Although these differences which are listed above may help to distinguish between the flu and Covid-19 they are not very prominent and well demarcated and the surest way to differentiate between them is the testing. At present, it is advisable to follow the government protocols and advisories for testing of Covid-19 at population level. Therefore the preventive measures like personal hygiene, social distancing, wearing masks assume the utmost importance. They prevent both of these illnesses quite effectively. If someone feels unwell with any of above symptoms, the best thing to do is to self-quarantine at home - including avoiding contact with other household members and to get in touch with your health care provider to make a shared decision about Covid-19 testing.

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This article is for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace the advice of health care providers. (Dr Malviya DM, FACC, FSCAI is from Department of Cardiology, NEIGRIHMS & Adorelia Laitthma is Senior Research Fellow in the same Department of Cardiology)

What's so special about the Tribal Research Institute?

By Aristotle Lyngdoh

Recently, Health Minister, AL Hek proposed to the Central Government to set up another Tribal Research Institute (TRI) in the state. Such a proposal may seem right in view of the need to understand tribal lifestyle and cultures and to help them integrate with the diversity around them. However, before making such a proposal, the Minister should have consulted and found out as to what is the actual situation in the state and within the various departments of the government machinery. How will it reflect on the state government if they (central government) come to know that such an institution already exists in the state capital? Should this type of pro-activeness be treated as hyper-activity or foolishness? And for the state government or its functionary to be ignorant and unaware about such a thing is unbelievable and disgraceful. However, for the information of everyone, the Tribal Research Institute which is currently located at its own plot at Mawlai Nongkwar GS Road opposite Gaoshala was set up in 1964 by the then Assam Government, sanctioned during the Prime Ministership of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. From reliable sources this writer has learnt that retired personnel served under this Institute during its early years. There was quite a dramatic incident that has led to the establishment of this institute in our region.

A well known British-born Indian Anthropologist Dr Verrier Elwin in his conversation with Nehru in 1960 said, "North Eastern region of India is a mini-anthropological garden in the world. It'll take only half to one hour walk from one village to another, where one will encounter different dialects, attires, customary rites, traditions, eating habits, types of settlements, livelihoods and so on which are completely different from one another. Further, it will take several years of in-depth studies by qualified anthropologists to understand the way of life of the tribes there. One of the many factors that may lead to complex problem in the near future is that the tribal customary laws, heritage and traditions are running a parallel line with the Law of the Land. Therefore, there is an urgent need to set up a Research Institute in order to find a point of convergence where the local customs, traditions, practices and the Law of the Land could collude for the benefit of the local settlers." Elwin further added, "Northeastern Region is a powder keg; one day it'll blow up and when it does you'll see bloodshed."

Nehru was not convinced at that time, and then came the Indo-China war in 1962. Military Intelligence reports conveyed to Nehru at that time said, "There are 17 tribes that inhabit the mountainous slopes of NEFA and all 17 tribes are the off-shoots of the Mongoloid race. It so transpired that these tribes are more at home with the Chinese Army than with the Indian Army. In fact it was the local people who abetted and assisted the Chinese Army to advance up to Bomdila, the HQ of NEFA". This made Nehru realize the importance of how to understand the ethos of the tribal people and two years later, in 1964, he himself sanctioned two crore rupees to the Government of Assam at that time for setting up the Research Institute on tribal people. The Government of Assam then bought the plot for

rupees three lakhs at GS Road Mawlai Nongkwar which is currently housing the Meghalaya Warehouse, Arts & Culture Amphitheatre, TRI, CRPF unit, Mawlai PS and MIMHANS for some time. The place is also known as Nagaland Jail because during 1970-75 some of the arrested Naga militants were being temporarily jailed here at the request of the Nagaland government.

According to Dr Elwin, the TRI should be headed by the Director with a Doctorate in Anthropology. It should have five wings such as Evaluation & Planning, Arts & Culture, Economic & Statistic (Investigation), Philology and Legal Cell and lastly Research & Training to be headed by Deputy Directors. In all the five wings there will be field workers and data collectors and the entire workforce should not be less than 1500 personnel. And among the five wings, I personally consider Philology and legal cell as the most interesting aspect because, till date we as the Khasi tribes are not able to fully codify and protect our own customary laws and practices. And also because there is need to know more about the origin and evolution of various systems of our culture and tradition that we still embrace today. The vision of Dr. Elwin is very much relevant with our situation but that has not happened. The presence of this TRI at Mawlai Nongkwar is nothing short of jewels among swine. Is it because all are blind and can only see black diamonds or is it that we do not care much since it has no monetary benefits for anyone?

The Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs has clearly assigned the function for TRIs which include (i) conducting research and evaluation studies (ii) undertaking capacity building and training of personnel and institutions working in the area of tribal development (iii) collection of baseline data and their dissemination (iv) organizing tribal festivals (v) conducting seminars and workshops (vi) documentation and their customary laws (vii) setting up tribal museums (viii) conducting exchange visit of tribal and (ix) providing planning inputs to the State Government. I can only say that if TRIs are functioning well as per plan over these years, many communal issues and ethnic tension and violence could have been averted. The presence of such Institutes in a country like India is very important as it will also help policy makers to great extent.

The other reason that prompted our Cabinet Minister A L Hek to raise such a proposal to the Centre is perhaps because he perceived that the society is in urgent need of such an Institution. But the total absence and non-performance of the functionaries of this Institute here in Shillong, has kept everyone in the dark about its importance and functions. And if that is the case then the Minister has every right and also the privilege to seek clarification from the concerned department or to take some corrective steps if he is serious about the TRI. About this TRI I can only say that this is the gift given by the then Prime Minister Nehru to the tribal people of North East and for our state in particular. I therefore urge the present Government and the responsible people of the state to do something about this Institute and to expand its scope of operation.

E m a i l : alyngdoh2006@gmail.com

TO THE EDITOR

Empathising with Ampareen

Editor,
 The two news reports "Ampareen appears before special court, not on bail" and "Court tells Ampareen not to leave state" (ST Oct 15 and 16 respectively) have created a mixed feeling in me. All these years, since the news broke out first, there were speculations, hopes and expectations that like all other allegations of scams against public figures, she would be able to deal with it politically. Maybe, she tried. To her bad luck, it went beyond the control of the executive. There are tell-tale evidences that mark sheets have been doctored. The evidence provided by the officers concerned virtually sealed the issue. After CBI got involved, it was becoming clearer by the day that she would have no escape route. Now that the trial of the case has begun and she appeared before the Special Court, somehow I have developed a rare sympathy for her. The more I think of the case, the more I realise the inevitability of the outcome. Maybe, she will be able to drag it for some more years. But eventually the law will surely catch up with her. Lawyers say that if convicted, she will spend a few years in jail. Obviously, this will imply that the curtains

will fall on her political career. And that's the tragedy. I can speak from my personal experience and knowledge that as an MLA she has been providing wonderful service to the people of Laitumkrah-Malki constituency. As a voter myself (not necessarily her supporter), I have seen for myself that she is up and doing as an MLA. She stands by those who need her presence. She extends generous assistance, sometime exceeding expectations. Therefore, in case the court verdict goes against her and she becomes unavailable for serving the people, it will be a big loss for all. However, nothing in life is permanent and nobody is going to be with us for eternity. Honestly speaking, whatever illegality Ampareen might have committed, it was not for pecuniary gains. For all we know, she did not personally gain anything out of it. She tried to help some candidates who are known to her. Yes, it is a clear case of favouritism and nepotism. But in politics, who doesn't try to help people on political considerations? Can any politician say with honesty that they never tried to help their own people? Everybody is honest, so long as they are not found out. To be fair to Ampareen, she tried to oblige all those MLAs and MDCs who sent

her written requests for favouring their chosen ones. Whatever be the case, if she is going to be punished for this momentary lapse, then what about all those who induced her to act in the manner she did? If inducement to suicide is a cognisable offence under the law, why should inducement to crime of this nature be any different? After all, there are written requests from two dozen elected representatives. In my opinion, Ampareen should not be seen as a stand-alone culprit but an unfortunate victim of the corrupt system. Let the system be corrected and reformed. Let us go against the crime and not the perpetrator per se. I shall keep my fingers crossed for her.

Prices of essential commodities sky-rocket

Editor,
 Recently I came across a manuscript which appeared in The Shillong Times (Oct 9, 2020) that the prices of most essential commodities have shot up in Shillong markets. This is alarming and as this is artificial escalation of prices. Even commodities like vegetables etc. which are grown locally are now beyond the reach of many. In

fact, believe it or not but Shillong is the costliest place in India. No wonder corruption carries on unabated in the state. It is a sad thing that the Government of Meghalaya is doing nothing to control the sky rocketing of prices essential commodities like meat, chicken, fish, vegetables, oil, etc. The public at large are responsible for the abnormal rise of essential commodities. If this were to happen in other places the public would have gone to the streets to protest but sadly, the public here only complain at home about price rise.

The prices of vegetables which are grown locally have increased by leaps and bounds due to great demands from Assam. The Government should step in and put a stop to vehicles

coming from Assam and prevent them from lifting 100% of the vegetables grown in Meghalaya, even while the local people are paying through their noses. At least 50% of locally grown vegetables can be exported to Assam whereas 50% can be consumed locally. For the information of readers, I am giving below the comparative studies of few essential commodities that are sold in Shillong/ Raipur (Chattisgarh) and New Delhi. These rates are taken from the previous week and the information collected is from people who are residents of these places.

These are prices of few essential commodities worth highlighting and again for information of readers, tomatoes in Bihar are being sold at Rs. 2 per kg. From the above studies, it

Items per kg	Shillong	Raipur	New Delhi
Potato	Rs. 50	Rs. 20	Rs. 25
Onion	Rs. 60	Rs. 25	Rs. 30
Beef	Rs. 400	Rs. 280	Rs. 260
Chicken	Rs. 350	Rs. 180	Rs. 180
Pork	Rs. 350	Rs. 180	Rs. 200
Rohu Fish	Rs. 250	Rs. 130	Rs. 170
Apples	Rs. 200	Rs. 50	Rs. 60
Pomegranate	Rs. 250	Rs. 55	Rs. 75
Banana	Rs. 120	Rs. 25	Rs. 50
Tomato	Rs. 70	Rs. 8	Rs. 10
Beans	Rs. 100	Rs. 15	Rs. 25

Yours etc.,
 L. Dkhar,
 Jowai

"I found a parallel between the search for A Suitable Boy for Lata and search for India"

During one of the conversations series organized by the 2020 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), Geoff Macnaughton, Senior Director, Industry & Theatrical/Lead Programmer, Primetime at TIFF, catches up with Mira Nair, director of *A Suitable Boy*, a primetime presentation recipient of the Jeff Skoll Award in Impact Media.

Nair's six-part drama series is an adaptation from Vikram Seth's novel about a young Indian woman's struggle to create a balance between family duty and personal independence in post-partition India. Asha Bajaj brings you the excerpts:

Geoff: Tell us about the first time when you discovered Vikram Seth's novel.

Mira: Vikram Seth is one of our classics and extraordinary writers. I have loved all his works. But I know him as a friend and visited him while he was writing *A Suitable Boy* which took him ten years and I was just waiting for it. I read it in 1993 months after it was published.

And probably one of the few people that read it back to back twice. It's a novel that encapsulates free India moments set in 1951 right after independence. It was the time when we as a country and as a people, really struggled to find out how to shake off this extraordinary English influence that we all lived with and to make efforts to find our authentic voices.

Seth's use of humanity, humor,



drama, and extraordinary truth actually captured me. But at that time (more than 20 - 30 years back), it was too large for me to consider it as a series. I actually made my smaller version of it in *Monsoon Wedding*. But after so many years Seth decided to do a series, and I was very happy to be asked to direct it.

Geoff: How did you and Andrew Davis get to a point in which you were happy with the narrative especially knowing that you are only working with six episodes, versus the wealth of the story that you were pulling from?

Mira: I came into the picture after Andrew Davis had written the whole novel in eight episodes. I was quite charmed by the distillation of the

whole novel into the eight episodes. But due to financial constraints, we had to reduce these episodes to six hours and it was then that I got involved very muscularly into the choices.

At the heart of the tale is a very universal search for a suitable boy by a mother for her unmarried daughter, Lata. India's first national election was in the same year as *A Suitable Boy* is set.

I found a parallel between the search for a suitable boy for Lata and the search for India. Hence the importance of the deep political undertone of the novel.

Then also highlighting the characters that sometimes do not speak but are deeply the cornerstone of so much character, for instance, Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor, a deeply religious woman, and Ishan Khattar's mother's character who tries to keep this political family together amidst tumult.

The main reason why I agreed to direct the film was Saida Bai, Tabu's character. I was drawn towards it by the whole culture of the courtesan, the music, the refinement, the art of seduction, and the marginalization of the courtesan in our society.

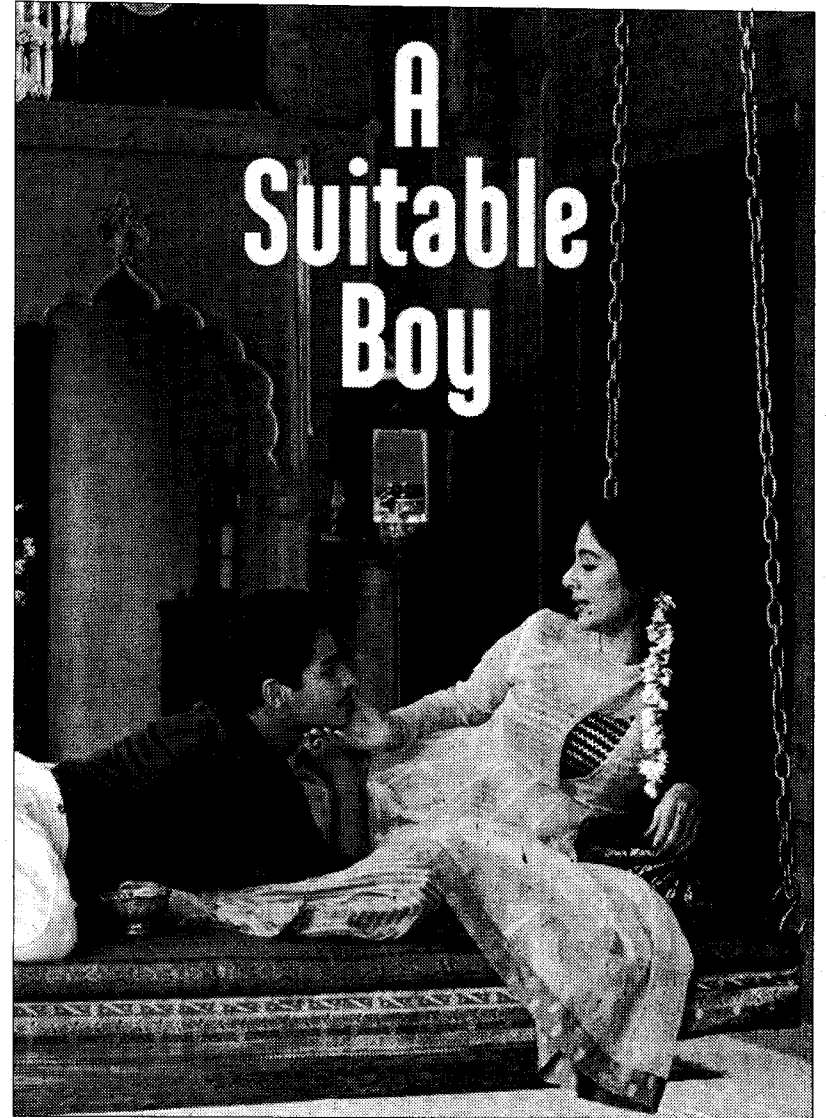
I also come from a tradition of loving that music. I was also drawn to it because of the interwovenness of both Hindu and Muslim languages, and culture. This embodies our descent from such an ancient tradition which is being obliterated today. *A Suitable Boy*, in all these facets, holds a mirror to our society today.

Geoff: We are very good friends, TIFF and you. We have had a long and strong relationship with one another. Not including this exact moment. Do you have a favorite memory of the festival?

Mira: TIFF feels like with my family to me. You have literally seen me right from the beginning with *Salaam Bombay* and other films. I have several memories. My most cornerstone memory is the extraordinary passion of the audiences. And before the world cinema or global cinema was being celebrated, TIFF always had the eye towards the subcontinent, towards the world. The diversity of the audience of Toronto, so much a part of the rest of the world embraced me. With *A Suitable Boy*, I was especially energized, because this is my first long-form cinema. I still think of it as a film, not a TV series, it's 6 hours because that is how I know to think. I was so happy and privileged and surprised to be taken in the embrace as a long-form film, which TIFF has done. I just want to thank the audience of Toronto. Toronto is very special to me for yet another reason. I got married in Toronto, weirdly, a shotgun wedding on the weekend. (laughter)

In fact, Deepa Mehta, your other wonderful filmmaker, my Benji, as we say, in a sense was the decorator of my wedding. So my relationship with Toronto is very old and lovely. And it is just so wonderful to be back, even if virtually. Even if we are not Americans anymore.

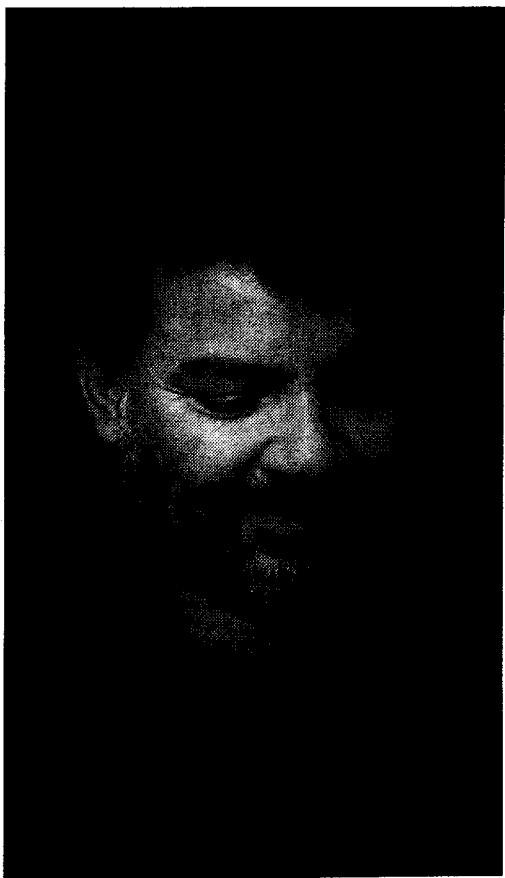
(IBNS-TWF)



'Thriving on collaborations'

By Sukant Deepak

He feels that nothing comes to life in isolation. That is not just art, everything that is fruitful is all about collaborations, he says. "And it is not that people do not understand the importance of partnering. The problem is credit. All goes for a toss when you want to ignore everyone else's efforts and just have your name out there," says actor, director, poet and storyteller Danish Husain.



Husain has been conducting *Qissebaazi*, an online storytelling workshop (as part of *Workshops at Prithvi*) in collaboration with *The Hoshurba Repertory*, which is witnessing participants from Canada and Germany besides the Indian homeland.

"Honestly, everyone needs people of a certain caliber around them. Some people are good with generating ideas while others excel in building on them. I don't see myself much of a playwright but a director. I can work on someone's play. But when I have to start writing from scratch, it is a huge challenge. One gets to learn so much in a collaboration. There is a certain exchange of dynamism. And don't they say — The sum of both of us is greater than each of us?"

Conducting a storytelling workshop for the first time digitally, Husain feels that as a theatre practitioner, he was so immersed in live performances that it was tough to comprehend the power of digital. "Of

course we knew about the outreach but never thought that it could be such an effective medium to perform."

Stuck in the US for more than four months during the lockdown, he would initially refuse any invitation for sessions on the web owing to apprehensions about the aesthetics — how would he create the stage, the lighting and the entire paraphernalia required for a performance?

"However, slowly, I realised that it was a different medium, and that I had to reorient myself. The frame then became the stage, and appliances at home were used for effect — the table lamp for example."

Stressing that he does miss the physical space and the connect with live audiences, the artist feels that digital will always have a peculiar 'disconnect'. Let's not forget, our mind knows that we are separated by miles of wires, satellite connection and laptops. You are not just two screens away, never."

For someone who actively does theatre, storytelling and acting, fluidity is the key and staying away from classification is forever important.

"The mind tends to classify in order to assimilate. It is only for easy comprehension. In real life, things are far more fluid, dynamic, at once same yet different. We switch roles effortlessly. The brain has assimilated all the aspects of life so deeply that the switch is not even conscious."

"The fluidity comes because you've absorbed everything to a level where it is not necessary to make those finer distinctions. In my case, I move towards that. Labels are made by people for their own convenience. I just think of myself as an artist who is engaging with the world," he says.

A pass-out from the Delhi School of Economics who later enrolled in an MBA course, Husain, who will soon be seen in a docu-drama directed by Academy Award winning director Orlando von Einsiedel (*The White Helmets*) smiles when asked if he misses formal training in acting.

"Yes, sometimes there is a wanting for the rigorous training associated with an acting school, something that anchors you and gives much material to work on."

However, a friend who is a pass-out from NSD once told me — "The important thing is what has one done after going there," says Husain who will soon start filming for a movie and an OTT series. (IANS)

Ode to Oscar-nominee tabla maestro

By Siddhi Jain

In a multi-artiste musical tribute to an artiste extraordinaire Pandit Chatur Lal, who was the first internationally acclaimed Indian percussionist who popularised tabla among the western audiences, a concert in his memory is set to take place on Sunday.

Pandit Chatur Lal was the first internationally acclaimed Indian percussionist who popularised the tabla among the western audiences.

He was one of the doyens to promote and give a grand acceptance of Indian classical music to the West in the mid 1950's giving concerts of Indian classical music.

Organized by the Pandit Chatur Lal Memorial Society in association with IndusInd Bank, the concert titled *Smritiyaan* is live-from-the-stage musical tribute to the Oscar nominee and Bafta awardee tabla wizard on his 55th death anniversary.

It will take place on Sunday evening on their official social media accounts. It also comes as a fresh breath of air for Indian classical music space, which is only beginning to reopen post lockdown.

Shruti Chatur Lal Sharma, granddaughter of the tabla legend and the Program Director at Pandit Chatur Lal Festival told *IANS*, "In the era of remixes, the essence of Hindustani classical music is somewhere getting lost which we need to revive. It gives me pleasure and pride that I belong to the lineage of tabla stalwart Pandit Chatur Lal. On his 55th death anniversary, Chatur Lal family looks forward to continuing his pioneering efforts to promote the Indian heritage of classical music and dance across the globe. This is the first time after the out-



break of a pandemic that such an event is being organized live from the stage."

In *Smritiyaan*, the line-up of renowned artists includes a percus-

sion ensemble by late tabla legend's grandson Pranshu Chatur Lal. Pranshu embarked his journey of rhythms under the tutelage of his father and guru Pandit Charanjit

Chatur Lal at a very young age of four. The award-winning tabla player has performed on international levels sharing the stage with various legends.

Another highlight of the evening will be a jugalbandi by the celebrated Indian folk singer and Padma Shri recipient Malini Awasthi and Kathak doyen Padma Shri Shovana Narayan.

"We, as artistes, pay our respects and shradhdhanjali to a great tabla maestro through our arts, be it dance, vocal or instrumental, as the late Pt Chatur Lal's art form spanned all genres of performing arts," Shovana Narayan told *IANS*.

Adding, Malini Awasthi said, "As an artist, it is our duty and responsibility to pay tribute in remembrance to all our gurus and legends who have set the path to promote the Indian classical music and dance. Tabla wizard Pandit Chatur Lal ji was one such legend."

She said that this is the first time for her to perform on live on stage without any rehearsal due to the COVID-19.

The upcoming concert also features Sooryagayathri, a young talented vocalist and a young disciple from Kerala who has taken social media by storm with her impeccable voice, with views in tens of millions.

Celebrating its 30 years, Pandit Chatur Lal Festival is organizing the event in support from SBI Life Insurance, ICCR (Worldwide) and Indian Raga, through which, the organisers and artists will pay respect to all the frontline COVID fighters like doctors, police, medical staff, and others who stood throughout the pandemic lockdown and are still on their duties serving the nation, they said. (IANS)

Of girls navigating cities...

By Sukant Deepak

A trained engineer who went to IIM Calcutta, and after a decade long corporate career decided to pause and gift herself some "me time", not to mention a Creative Writing course in the US later — author Manreet Sodhi Someshwar, whose latest *Girls and the City*, published by HarperCollins India recently hit the stands, has vivid memories of that break during which she wrote her first book.

"My husband and I were in Singapore that time, and I couldn't help but think of my home in Ferozepur. Memories flooded back in. To make sense of them, I started asking questions. My research took me back in time and it was the national library, not any salon, that became my haunt. Seven years later, I had a book, my first: *The Long Walk Home*," says the author who now

has six books to her credit, including the *Mehrunisa* series and *The Radiance of a Thousand Suns*.

Talking about her latest, *Girls and the City*, set in Bengaluru, which is tale of female friendships centered on a murder mystery, a whodunit, that is more of a who-was-it-done-to, Someshwar reveals that she started writing it amid the #metoo movement, wanting to explore the dynamics between sex and power.

"We are somehow still reluctant to discuss sexual assault and harassment. I saw the book as a way to reignite that conversation. It explores how women navigate everyday misogyny using wit, grit and tenacity."

Adding that women's concerns are different from those of their male counterparts, she says, "Men write about themselves whilst women write the world."

Recalling that when she switched

gears, her writing experience was limited to powerpoint presentations, the writer says that she is a self-taught one and quite happy with the fact. "This gives me the freedom to tell the stories that I really want to. I went back to school to gift myself a like-minded community. Whilst I love my friends (class- and work-mates from my previous avatars) I do get tired of hearing: 'So, when's the next book coming out?'"

"Now, books don't come off factory floors... Sometimes it is such a relief to be with other folks who tussle with writing daily. That's where being part of a Creative Writing program helps."

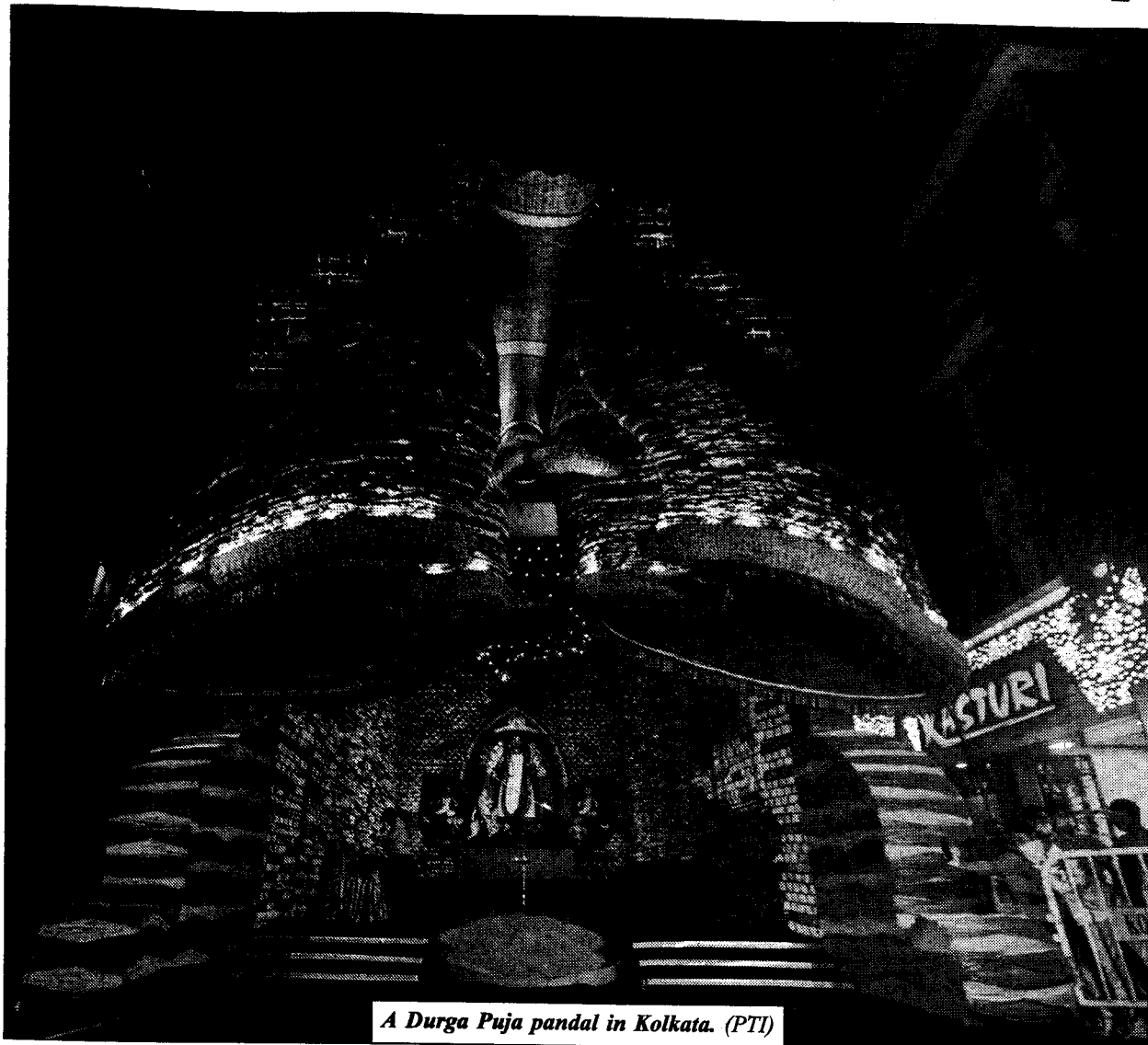
For someone who started writing when she moved out of India, the distance from home gave her the perspective she needed to write. "Additionally, that provides me with a sharp prism through which to refract my experiences. Living outside of

India, I have gained insights into the Indian diaspora and its varied challenges.

"I write books that I want to read which are not out there yet. It's liberating to be in a mix of people where each one is trying to tell stories that are important to them. That has been enriching because I have learned that while every story is particular in its concerns and setting, every well-told one is also universal in its theme."

Considering she writes across genres, it is important that she reads widely, indiscriminately and regularly. "I follow every big book with a more contemporary one. The latest one was born amidst the raging #metoo campaign of 2018 and I rode that tide because there was so much that was relevant and urgent. I began only when the compulsion to write it is stronger than not writing it," says the author who is presently working on a Partition trilogy. (IANS)

Virtual pandal-hopping



A Durga Puja pandal in Kolkata. (PTI)

By Soudhriti Bhabani

The Durga Puja festival has always been the greatest crowd-puller in West Bengal. But this year, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has redefined the lives of millions.

The religio-social-cultural phenomenon is known to be a city-wide installation art carnival that is Kolkata's own version of the Venice Biennale.

But the world, this year, has moved indoors and online when staying home means staying alive. From groceries to education, business meetings to puja shopping - everything has gone online. The world has virtually started moving on e-platforms.

Responding to the need of the hour, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata

Banerjee on Wednesday inaugurated as many 10 Durga Pujas virtually from the state secretariat Nabanna, sending a clear message to the revellers to maintain physical distancing norms and to follow the essential Covid-19 safety protocols.

In a bid to home deliver happiness, the pandal-hopping experience is also set to go virtual this year in Bengal. Surprised? Don't be. You can easily experience the pandal-panorama in the middle of a pandemic by just clicking on your mouse.

So, if you are passionate about Durga Puja even in the current situation, the trailblazing website eponymously named 'The Puja App' is here to take you on a virtual tour of around 50 top puja pandals in Kolkata. The

application will offer 360-degree virtual coverage of famous puja pandals free of cost.

From the grand facade of the lavish pandals to the most intricate detailing of the artistry - everything will be viewable, literally at your fingertips.

"The Virtual Reality (VR) compatible visuals, shot entirely in ultra HD quality, will ensure a multiplex-like experience for the viewers. For that, no one needs to download any application. They can just visit the website www.thepujaapp.com and virtually enjoy the festive spirit of pandal-hopping," said Soumya Mukherjee, one of the owners of the platform.

He said that currently it has been made available as a website and it re-

quires no downloading. One can easily log-in with their smartphones, tabs, laptops or computers as the whole interface would be highly interactive.

"We have been doing this for the past eight years but this year the response is already phenomenal owing to the Covid-19 situation. People are really interested, especially the elderly citizens. People can also visit our archives as we have kept all the VR visuals of the past seven years in that section," he said, adding that staying safe does not necessarily mean 'staying away'.

With 'The Puja App', people can comfortably avoid crowd-intensive social togetherness during the five-day festive spell.

Durga Puja, the biggest festival of eastern India, has been made globally popular by its spectacular Kolkata brand of celebrations. This week-long sensory extravaganza is now India's official nomination for a pride of place in the 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' (ICH) list for 2020, recognised by UNESCO.

Temporary structures called pandals (marquees) are erected to house the clay idols of the deities. These makeshift marvels that are built to replicate famous architectural wonders from around the world or in keeping with innovative themes are stunningly realistic and intricate specimens of fine artistry, skilled craftsmanship and creativity.

The most remarkable aspect of these pandals is the number of man-hours, the months of planning and the elaborate efforts that go into creating an exhibition for just a 7-day showcasing. The primarily fabric-over-bamboo-scaffolding structures with ingenious embellishments are completely disposable.

"This experience is not just for Kolkatans but Bengalis sitting anywhere around the globe can go on a mesmerising journey that is free from crowds, expense and exhaustion, right from sitting in the comfort of their couch. We promise to be extensive in coverage this year as we understand many Bengalis, especially those settled abroad, won't be able to visit their hometowns this year during Durga Puja. Thanks to the global Covid-19 pandemic," said Arpan Chatterjee, the technical head of the 'My Puja App' platform.

Low-key Dasara fest in Mysuru

Mysuru has been spruced and decked up even as it will host a subdued 10-day Dasara fest from Saturday amid the Covid pandemic, which has turned the annual carnival into a largely virtual show due to curbs on people gathering in large numbers at public places.

"As decided by the state government, which organises the 10-day event, the Dasara festivities will begin on Saturday at hilltop Chamundeshwari temple and inaugurated at Amba Vilas palace in a simple way due to the Covid restrictions," an official told IANS here.

Bengaluru-based, state-run Jayadeva heart hospital Director CN Manjunath will declare open the religious and cultural fest at the auspicious time between 7.45 am and 8.15 am in the presence of Chief Minister BS Yediyurappa, Mysuru district in-charge minister ST Somshekar, Wodeyar royal family members and other dignitaries.

"About 300 people, including ministers, lawmakers, officials and select religious heads, will be allowed to witness the festival events in the palace grounds. The invitees have to carry a medical certificate that they are virus free. Wearing of mask, maintaining physical distance and sanitising hands will be mandatory," a state Culture Department official said.

As visitors and tourists will not be allowed into the palace to see the reli-

gious and cultural programmes over the next 10 days, the ceremonies will be shown live on television channels and social media sites like Youtube and Facebook.

At the opening, Manjunath will felicitate six corona warriors on the occasion in recognition of their service in taking care of the infected people since the virus broke.

The festival is held every year to mark triumph of good over evil on Vijayadashi, and known for the victory parade of caparisoned elephants (*jambhoosavari*), which this year will be in the palace grounds, unlike in the past when the procession was allowed through the city to Bannimantap grounds with the grand finale of the night-time torchlight parade.

As part of the fest, Mysuru's titular Maharaja Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wodeyar will hold a private 'darbar' in the palace hall under the guidance of queen mother Pramoda Devi after the formal inauguration.

The private darbar is held every year on the first day of the fest since it was resumed by Nalvadi Krishna Raja Wodeyar (1894-1940) in the tradition of the Vijayagara empire.

The 800-year-old 280 kg golden throne of the Wodeyar rulers will be brought out from the enclosure to hold the darbar on the occasion. (IANS)



'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, October 18, 2020

Moon conjunct Mercury on your solar return chart and this is going to be an exciting year for you. You will get support of peer and bosses. Even your elders will bless you. Your relations with seniors will improve and they will keep encouraging you. You will also have the gift of the gab and will be able to get your work done. Your government related work will get done. Those who are appearing for interviews/competitive exams will get success. New job/business offers will come. Income will be good and flow of money will be continuous. You will also enter into new romantic ties. Marriage is indicated. You will come closer to near and dear ones. Your mate will be accommodative, caring and understanding. Children will listen to you. Your brothers will support you. You will develop good professional contacts. Friends will remain loyal to you.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

Some associations can be competitive in business as you shine and work well in your field of activity. You initiate a current of forceful energy to achieve success in an important venture. You are likely to protest against domination by people at work. You may have to face egoistic people. This week brings love, romance and excitement in personal relations. Deep personal relations and business partnerships are likely to get stronger. Good luck in finances and new opportunities are encouraging. This is an excellent period for starting new regimen to improve your health and well being, such as regular exercise, more structured and productive use of your time, and so forth.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

You have the desire for love, harmony and a peaceful life. It is a gentle, considerate, and sensitive vibration. You are diplomatic, warm and sensitive. This week brings for you socializing, romance and stability at the work place. Love, friendship and relationship are emphasized. There are strong chances of materialization of friendship into a long term relationship during this time. Your social life may be restricted to business and family related obligations. Luxury shopping may make a hole into your pocket but makes your family happy and brings a smile to their face.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

Self-confidence and prompt action are highlighted. You are generous with friends, and loving in family situations. You come across as especially smooth, and your good nature is bound to attract some attention. You stand in the middle of a doorway in the middle of the week while making an important decision be it professional or personal. It would be better to listen to your own judgment and do what is good for you. People around you could be judgmental or manipulative. Do not forget to share your feelings with the one who loves and cares for you.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

You are loving, stable, and harmonious in personal relations. There is conflict within and discord outside. You may be divided about business and professional matters and finally come to terms with compromise which might be the best thing to do at this time. You may disagree mentally with your partner but the love between you allows peace and acceptance. Emotions and moods can swing to extremes and it is important to achieve equilibrium. You can get stressed and manifest a health problem as you worry about everything.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

You are practical, trustworthy, hard working, and helpful. This week influences your finances and material aspects, suggests that you are considerably more goal-oriented related to earnings. Your ability to concentrate and focus helps you to achieve what you set out to do. A new project or goal begun at this time has a good chance of being successful and long lasting. It's an excellent phase to make a lifestyle change. Self-confidence and action are highlighted. You may go in for a change of your image. Personal relationships especially with your loved one are stable and rewarding.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 23)

You have intellectual vibration and ability to adapt to most situations. This period brings financial gains for those in banking, investment, hotel industry and those who are in the teaching profession. There could be alteration in ideas or plans, increase and decrease in finances and fluctuation in business. You can be lead away by undue enthusiasm unless careful inner balance is maintained. Marriage, business partnership and collaboration can be strengthened through understanding and commitment.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

You are introspective and quiet. This week brings some changes in the way you look at professional goals and new interests are developed. You connect with fun loving people, artists and entertainers. Strong existing relationships are likely to grow and transform. Your finances could also improve as long as you employ a tried and tested strategy. Attending an important social occasion or festival may put you in the public eye. Meditation and introspection is therapeutic and revealing as you intuitively get to the bottom of things.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

This phase brings youthful energy and you accept challenges in your life. You are diligent and pedantic at work and specialize further in your field of activity. You are on the threshold of a creative and inventive work that brings you name and exposure. Meditate on the constant changes happening around you and centre within. Good health and energy enables you to participate in sports and related pastimes. A pleasant surprise awaits you at the end of the week.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

You would be more accommodating and compassionate in relationships and not take things personally. You would express your adaptability and persistent energy in professional projects. You deal with official and personal matters with calm authority. You possess great power to attract creative and charismatic people around you to make your social life enviable. You would be dynamic, forceful and assertive in professional ventures to establish a position of authority. Health and energy need to be conserved through a busy time at work.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

You are practical, hard working and helpful in personal and professional matters. New friendships and group associations are likely to come about and you will experience increased energy and a stronger ability to assert yourself. A new approach to friendships or new friendships altogether will pave a new path towards happiness and fulfillment. New associations or affiliations, or plenty of social activity are in store for you. This is an excellent period for beginning a new health regimen.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

This phase brings excellent work opportunities for sportspersons and lawyers and also a favorable time to appear in written exams, handle court matters and attend to legal matters. Self-confidence and tremendous efforts are highlighted to attend professional goals. Financial benefits may come your way through investments. You need to be careful in your interpersonal dealings and you must avoid confrontations with your family. Your financial situation looks promising if you manage it well personally rather than look to others. Make sure that you do not get caught up in arguments as a simple and straightforward approach is all that's called for.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

You may see the light in a friendship, realizing its importance in general, as well as the importance of acceptance and camaraderie. Circumstances may be such that you bring a new spirit of friendship into a romance or another connection in the next months. This can be invigorating. Surprises coming from children may be part of the picture. Your creativity, romance, pleasure, and children are involved. This could manifest, for example, as a romantic proclamation from a lover, a creative project bearing fruit, a child revealing something significant to you, and other such possibilities during this time.

Career options in Mental Health

By Ranjan K Baruah

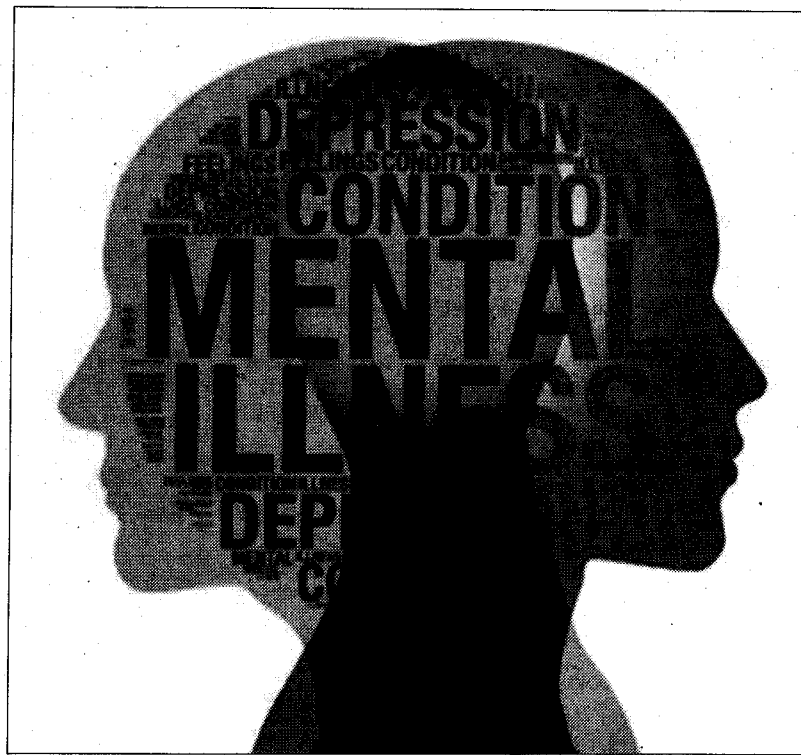
The recent COVID-19 pandemic has bought more challenges when it comes to mental health. It is one of the most neglected areas of public health. Close to 1 billion people are living with a mental disorder, 3 million people die every year from the harmful use of alcohol and one person dies every 40 seconds by suicide. And now, billions of people around the world have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is having a further impact on people's mental health.

We must understand that mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders and it is an integral part of health; indeed, there is no health without mental health. It is determined by a range of socioeconomic, biological and environmental factors.

The World Health Organisation's constitution states: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". An important implication of this definition is that mental health is more than just the absence of mental disorders or disabilities.

In 2013, the World Health Assembly approved a "Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan for 2013-2020". The Plan is a commitment by all WHO's Member States to take specific actions to improve mental health and to contribute to the attainment of a set of global targets. The Action Plan's overall goal is to promote mental well-being, prevent mental disorders, provide care, enhance recovery, promote human rights and reduce the mortality, morbidity and disability for persons with mental disorders. 10 October is also marked as World Mental Health Day.

Once we understand the issue we can also think of bringing a solution. The best way to bring solutions is to get involved in the area and work for positive change. Few designation or job profiles related to mental health issues are: Mental Health Counsellor, Psychiatrist, Mental Health Social Worker, Mental Health Nurse, Psychologist, Elderly Care Worker, Mental Health Advocate, etc.



To become psychologists or counsellors we can choose psychology as our subjects of studies. The course and subject is available in many different colleges and universities across the country and also abroad. One may choose to become mental health counsellors after they finish their course in psychology. Similarly after completing MBBS degree one may choose to become psychiatrist which deals on mental health issues. Many students are confused and ask me the difference between psychologist and psychiatrist. Psychiatrist is a doctor who can prescribe medicine where as psychologist is like counsellors and they can not recommend medicines.

After completing nursing education one may choose to do specialisation in mental health to become a mental health nurse. Nurses can choose different specialisation in this area and build their vibrant careers. Students studying Social Work may do specialisations in mental health to become mental health social workers. Apart from becoming mental health nurses they can also specialise in elderly care as both are interlinked. There are many other job options apart from these in

the field of mental health issues. Mental Health research professionals focus on finding out new illnesses; try bringing medicines that can help patients with certain illnesses and study more about various illnesses. We have very limited mental health professionals in the country or even outside which brings more opportunity for students who want to be in this field.

The National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS) is an Institute of National Importance governed by the act of Parliament titled NIMHANS Act, 2012. This institute is a multidisciplinary institute for patient care, academic pursuit and cutting edge research in the field of mental health and neurosciences in India. Apart from qualification aspirants must have the skills like effective communication, spirit of teamwork, patience, etc. This is a challenging field hence we need to have proper planning when we choose it as a career path.

(Ranjan K Baruah is a career mentor and skill trainer and can be reached at 8473943734 or bkrnanjan@gmail.com)

"Demands for equality for women are threats to men's self-esteem and sense of sexual turf."

--- Alexis de Tocqueville

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 66 SHILLONG, MONDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2020

'No' to lockdown

SIGNIFICANTLY, a government-appointed panel on Covid control has come up with its findings that included a recommendation to avoid lockdowns even as the safety protocols are strictly followed. The arrival of the Chinese pandemic had shocked the world and several steps that were put in place with immediate effect from late March last were based on assumptions. These needed close scrutiny in conformity with the experience the nation – as also the world – has gained from such a critical situation. The committee has stressed that the festival season that is currently on, which coincides with the winter chill, is when abundant caution is a must. Safety norms need to be adhered to strictly, even as these festivals are all about mass gatherings in public places – be it the Navaratri or Ganesh festival, or Christmas which too is approaching. In the event of any relaxation in controls during this season, there could be a monthly spike of the order of 26 lakh infections a month. Notably, the committee went into an elaborate study into the Covid situation. Lockdown is no longer acceptable as it has cast a heavy shadow on the national economy as also on the livelihoods of people. While activities can resume in all spheres, it is also important that the safety guidelines like social distancing, wearing of masks, washing of hands and face etc are strictly adhered to.

As per latest indications, a few Covid vaccines could be in the market by March. The vulnerable sections could start getting one or the other vaccine hopefully at an affordable price or with government subsidy. Controlling the Covid spread is a national endeavour, more than an individual effort. The national economy will not lift up from the present depths if the virus continues to have its sway. It is thus important that vaccines or any other preventive medical intervention should not overlook the need for their affordability to the common masses too. These are the hands that push the economic activities for the nation. To considerable relief, the panel has concluded that India has already crossed the peak by mid-September; and that the nation will record minimal active symptomatic infections by the start of the next year. Around 30 per cent of the population has developed anti-bodies. The rate of recovery is improving, and the rate of deaths is also coming down. Activities are returning to normal. Even the worst-hit Mumbai is rolling out its local train services; meaning that the situation there too is reasonably under control. It's a time of wait and watch but precautions of masking, hand washing and distancing are non-negotiable. We can ignore them at our own risk.

Charm of the Black Diamond

By HH Mohrmen

The saying that there is only one thing permanent in the world and that is change rings true in almost every instance. However, there are certain exceptions and those are the links that the Government of Meghalaya has with coal. The bond between the Government of Meghalaya and the black diamond is so deep that it is beyond the ordinary human being's understanding. The truth is that while everything else in the world changes, the relationship between the Government and the said mineral remains the same. No matter which party comes to power the charm of the black diamond captivates the entire ruling dispensation irrespective of their political colour.

The battle against illegal rat hole mining of coal in the state persisted since the early nineties and the government then defended the system on the plea that it is a traditional livelihood activity of the people in the state and it is legal. Despite the fact that there is no document to support the claim that coal mining in Meghalaya is legal, every successive government continued in the business as usual mode until April 2014 when the National Green Tribunal banned mining and transport of coal from Meghalaya. It was only after studies were published that many rivers and streams in Jaintia hills were polluted and the water in these rivers was contaminated with acid mine drainage that the court brought the entire system to a grinding halt.

Then there is the whole sordid saga of the state government trying to contest against the ban and supported the coal lobbyist in their fight to persuade the Tribunal to lift the ban, which of course did not happen. Now that the NGT has lifted the ban on coal mining subject to the State Government complying with the court directives, the latter is doing nothing to come up with a policy which is a requirement of the NGT.

The ban on coal mining was a major issue in the last election to the State legislative assembly, but in spite of the fact that the NGT has lifted the ban, the State Government has done precious little to enable coal mining to start in the state. The MDA government

which came to power with a promise to allow coal mining to resume if it is voted to power is yet to do anything in this regard. The NPP which won the election with the issue of coal ban as one of their election agenda has not been able to come up with any kind of policy to resume mining and transportation of coal from the State.

So why is the Government dragging its feet on this issue? What makes the Government dilly-dally in working on the recommendation of the court order to allow mining to begin? The lifting of the NGT ban should have been a golden opportunity for the State Government to come up with policy to resume coal mining in the state. Unfortunately the Government is not doing anything to that effect. The people of the State have the right to ask why the MDA

when the Government is not sincere in coming up with a policy to monitor and control mining in the state? What is the message that the Government is sending to the masses by not taking the issue of illegal transportation of coal head-on? The general public understand that mining is allowed and sure enough coal mining activities have started in many places and collection of fresh coal is seen in many places now.

The Government is not even sincere in the case of people involved in illegal transportation of coal in the state. The prime accused in the murder attempt of Agnes Kharshing and her friend not only remain scot-free but they are seen hobnobbing with those in power. It was alleged that even higher-ups in the Government are involved in the illegal transport of coal from the State.



ST File Photo

government is deliberately delaying the matter relating to the coal mining issue. Is there anything behind this sordid affair that the Government does not want to regulate and introduce environment friendly mining system in the State?

Why does this Government choose to remain mute and not seize the opportunity to solve the issue once and for all? Is it because the Government wants this arrangement to continue for its ulterior motive? The question that people are asking is, who is benefitting from this state of affairs? If it is allowed to continue isn't it true that it will ensure that only those in the corridors of power are benefitting from the deal? Is it not true that the prevailing situation is like a goose that lays golden eggs for those who are in power? What is the point of organising campaigns for planting a million trees in the State

The Conrad-James drama reminds me of the song, "He ain't heavy, he's my brother." The recent statement of the Chief Minister defending his elder brother against the allegations that he is involved in illegal transportation of coal is on expected lines. But Conrad will find it hard to convince a large section of the population in the State with his latest utterance because it is not consistent with his earlier act. The question is, if the Cabinet Minister was not involved in the coal transportation, why did the CM relieve him of the Home portfolio that he held earlier? Black diamond has not only enchanted those in the power, whatever their political leaning is, but for reasons beyond one's comprehension all the pressure groups of every hue remain silent on the matter too. Mum is the word when it comes to coal mining and illegal transport of coal.

In spite of the fact that the impact of coal mining extends to almost all the districts of the State and illegal transportation of coal encourages corruption at every level and it has only benefitted people who are close to the corridors of power, no pressure group had raised their voices against the system that allows this to happen. Perhaps because it is fashionable to oppose uranium mining whereas opposing the system that allows illegal transport of coal is not cool at all. Raising voices against the illegal act is like stirring a hornet's nest which has the potential to strike one and all. Any kind of mining is bad and the impact coal mining extends to almost every part of the state. On the same line the pressure groups decision to protest against immersion of goddess Durga while remaining silent on the drastic impact of mining on the rivers in the coal mining areas, is also questionable. Maybe we have to re-examine and do something on this selective opposition and have our priorities right.

A study of the history of elections in Meghalaya would help one realise that are at least two issues which continue to appear before every election. It seems like every party has a secret understanding that there are certain issues that have to be postponed to ensure that they remain election issues every five years. The two major election issues which keeps reappearing every election are the Assam-Meghalaya border issue and the influx of people from outside the State. The two have always been the contentious issues come election time. But it now looks like we will have the issue of coal mining as another item in the list of issues in the ensuing elections in the State.

Governments come and go but when it comes to coal mining, the only thing that changes is their name. When it comes to black diamond, parties will change their colours to black once they switch sides and sit in power. Black diamond has the charm to change any party to its colour once they are in the Government and the proverbial saying that it is but the same wine in a new bottle becomes a reality.

(Email: hhmohrmen67@gmail.com)

All is not well with Wangala

By Jonty Rhode Sangma

As an ardent supporter of 100 Drums Wangala festival, I am sad to read the letter, "Much ado about Wangala," (ST Sep 22, 2020). I have been following 100 Drums Wangala for the last many years as a diehard fan and I have not come across any internal disputes on organisational matters in the past. It was smooth sailing all along under the able stewardship of our former Chairman Mr LK Marak, who ran the office consecutively for the last few decades without any mishap. It is perhaps for the first time such a rift has surfaced in the organisation since its inception and this is not a good sign for the future of 100 Drums Wangala.

In the meantime, a new internal problem has emerged out of organising committee in the form of misappropriation of 100 Drums Wangala Festival fund by the Chairman, in the run up to hold the festival at Chibrage amidst the Covid pandemic.

There have been serious allegations against the Chairman LRC Momin for his dictatorial working style and abuse of his official power at the same time as an elected Chairman. The matter has come to light when the Head Assistant of the Romrang Block Development office representing the Ex-officio secretary of 100 Drums Wangala Organising Committee has replied to the query of one of the members present at the meeting at Asanang. He informed that the Chairman has withdrawn an amount of rupees ten lakhs on two occasions from the Wangala fund without the knowledge of the Committee members. The amount was spent on some unauthorised constructions in the new site at Chibrage, etc.

Why is the self styled working Chairman hell-bent on organising 100 drums Wangala festival even with 30 drums? The very name itself says 100 Drums Wangala Festival and definitely not 30 drums Wangala festival! Perhaps he doesn't know the history of why and how it was started! Every year 11 group of dancers are present wherein one group of 10 drummers and 10 dancers performed and one group is kept on standby so that the very purpose of the name 100 Drums Wangala Festival is not broken! They say that if the annual festival is organised the funds will come from the Centre. Is it all about money? Why put hundreds and thousands of people at risk? Will the self styled Working Chairman Ronald Rikman Sangma or Nokma Council President Skylance Momin take responsibility should anything happen?

Why don't they get this that 100 Drums Wangala Festival is just a showcase of the dance of the forefathers and not the actual Wangala that the traditional Garos practice! Nobody's stopping the real Wangala happening in the Songsarek villages as it's their religion and not just a symbolic dance. But to even think that by not organising 100 Drums Wangala Festival for one year, the Committee will be losing the funds is disgusting and selfish. How could one even think of dancing and merry-making when the rest of the world is suffering? Do Ronald Rikman Sangma or Skylance Momin think they are safe? And that the virus cannot touch them? God forbid! I welcome the move from the people of Asanang not to host 100 Drums Wangala festival this year by putting people in danger! Hence every right thinking citizen should object to this mindless act of certain people in the organisation just for the objective of getting money from the centre! The lone surviving founder member of the 100 Drums Wangala Festival Mr Leander K Marak also objected to Organising the

festival during pandemic.

Some argue that even the Behdienkhlam festival was organised so why not the Wangala. Those who say that should know that Behdienkhlam is a religious festival of the Niamtre (indigenous faith) of the Pnar devotees in Jaintia Hills, organised by the Sein Raji whereas the constitution of 100 Drums Wangala Festival Organisation clearly states that it is a purely non-political non-religious observance.

It's just a symbolic representation on how our forefathers used to dance and hence the misinterpretation of the real Songsarek Wangala dance and the display of 100 drums Wangala dance should be clarified to one and all! But this is what happens when mindless self-proclaimed failed politicians try to make political capital out of a festival. When everybody is objecting to holding the festival, why make it an ego issue and push for organizing even 30 Drums Wangala Festival? Money shouldn't be the only agenda here. What happens if the Wangala festival becomes the reason for the spread of Corona? In the Oct 2 meeting some dancers were brought in a pick-up truck with absolutely no social distancing! God save the villagers who innocently followed what a section of organizers directed them to do! The original members of 100 Drums Wangala Festival still object to organising the festival during the pandemic and the decision has been taken with the host villagers of Asanang. Only a handful of "new members" who have just joined the Organisation without following the Constitution want the festival to happen at any cost. There are people who joined the organisation so that they get the videography photography project; there are self-proclaimed designers who are trying to get their designs included for all the dancers which was not accepted by the original members of the Organisation. These are the disgruntled members who are creating a rift with the help of a businessman who will obviously look for greener pastures.

The Chairman was unwell for some time and during his absence, he has intentionally (illegally) appointed his friend (businessman) as Working Chairman, which is against the Constitution as there's no post for Working Chairman there. Actually he should have handed over charge to his Vice Chairman to run the office as per the Organisation's Constitution. Since then, they have been carrying out illegal transaction of 100 Drums Wangala festival fund for the project which has not been even submitted to the Government, as informed by insiders.

The members have expressed their unhappiness at sudden emergence of internal politics being played by the Chairman and his cohorts openly which is against the spirit of promoting our rich traditional culture like Wangala dance. Some members of the new faction are reported to be claiming themselves as the founding members of 100 Drums Wangala Festival Organising Committee. The fact is that Mr Leander K. Marak, former Chairman is the lone living testimony of the said Committee which was started was back in 1976.

The general pulse of the Wangala Committee members and the well wishers is that the Chairman should resign from his post immediately on moral grounds and a general body meeting be convened to elect new office bearers to save the Organisation from complete disintegration. Meanwhile the office of the Wangala Committee at Asanang should be sealed till an amicable settlement is reached in the Organisation. The Chairman should clean up his backyard before going for Wangala at Chibrage.

TO THE EDITOR

Are we governed by a mafia?

Editor,
As a citizen of a state based on a government elected by the people I am greatly disturbed and distressed by recent events that have taken place within the sphere of governance in Meghalaya. The latest news "PWD subverts rules to allot work to VIP firm" (ST Oct 14, 2020), simply reconfirms the growing belief with many that the Govt of Meghalaya is now run by a set of people out to make a fast buck for themselves than in providing service to the people. Governance it seems has been auctioned to a mafia that is out to make money at all costs regardless of the consequences on the state and its people.

The above news item relates to a tender called for the construction of the 11.52 Km Laitkor-Pomlakrai-Laitlyngkot road for Rs 30 crores. A tender is a process by which the best contractor for the work is identified through a predetermined set of rules and procedures. Merit based on price, work experience, reputation and a host of other requirements etc are the criteria for allocation of work. It

ensures that the public is provided with the best available service provider. In the above case all of these conditions were discarded and overlooked in favour of the least deserving firm who never even bothered to comply with the terms of the tender documents. A more wilful, deliberate and premeditated plot to deceive and defraud the people and the state is yet to be found in the history of Meghalaya.

From indications above this attempt to allocate the work for road construction to a dubious firm will simply ensure that the people of Pomlakrai and surrounding areas will be now burdened with a sub-standard road. Should the people of the area tolerate such nonsense? Should the MLA, MDC and other pressure groups of the area remain silent conspirators to this outrage? This a clear attempt to cheat the people and for whatever reasons, the departmental tender committee is wholly responsible for this crime. The Chief Minister, the PWD Minister and the Chief Engineer PWD should immediately cancel this work allocation, if they have the guts and if they are not party to the crime. For it is a crime; an attempt to cheat the Govt and the people.

The Chief Secretary, who is the Chief Vigilance Officer should start initiating immediate legal action

against the Chairman and members of the Departmental Tender Committee. If need be they should be suspended and penalised so as to send a message that Govt of Meghalaya does not encourage corruption by its officers.

This MDA Govt has been associated and correlated with too many activities that smack of official involvement with dark criminal deeds against the interests of the people. The stink of involvement of a senior minister with the illegal transportation of coal simply refuses to die down. Demands for the arrest of the minister is making the rounds. There is a rising crescendo of demand for more transparency and accountability in Covid related expenditures. Public scepticism in this regard is growing. There is suspicion that the Govt decision to construct a super mall at Barik Point is simply to facilitate a land grab attempt by another well heeled minister. The BJP is raising misgivings about the financial integrity and propriety of the GHADC, JHADC and the KHADC.

All in all there seems to be growing evidence that the rich are entering politics simply to rob and exploit the poor. Political power devoid of any social responsibility or shame seems to be the

latest vogue in politics and political parties seem to be encouraging it. Mafia dons seem to be taking over the governance of the state. Tragic unless we the people put a stop to it!

Yours etc.,
Samuel Nongkynrih
Via email

NEET & choice of medical colleges

Editor,
Through your esteemed newspaper I would like to bring to the notice of all about the MBBS seats via Government quota in our State of Meghalaya for the students who have qualified for NEET UG 2020.

Firstly, I convey my heartiest congratulations to all the students who have qualified. I would also like to encourage each student as well as concerned parents who are applying for Government quota to be aware of the available colleges allotted to Government of Meghalaya for pursuing the MBBS degree. Students should update themselves regarding the available seats prior to final counselling. Aspirants should be aware of the rankings of the colleges as well so as to facilitate the higher rankers to get their college of choice based on informed decision.

It is important to know that all medical colleges are not equal. I would also urge the Health Department to maintain absolute transparency in seat allotment so as to not deprive the deserving candidates of the opportunity to opt for the college of their choice. Sadly, in Meghalaya, the allocation of medical seats has been a subject of nepotism for many years now with undeserving candidates getting in to the best institutions while those who have done well but have no political backing get into second or third best colleges.

Lastly, I would encourage those who haven't qualified for NEET this year to not lose heart and to give it another try, for the toil and hard work is bitter but the fruit is sweet.

Yours etc.,
A concerned doctor,
Name withheld on request

A horrific crime

Editor,
It is shocking to read about the horrific crime of burying alive a 90 year old man in West Khasi Hills, on allegations that he engages in black magic. That this should happen in this day and age shows that our mindsets are still in the medieval age. Our state has been having cases in the past

of people being lynched, mobbed and attacked on the assumption of the victim practicing witchcraft. This time again the crime committed by three young men against their aged uncle defeats all sane thinking and instead exposes the heartless souls of the three men who buried the helpless man alive, purely on the assumption that their uncle must have practiced witchcraft and had cast a spell on his niece. Superstitions have such a strong influence on people, despite their having adopted the Christian faith. Such people fear no God and can kill without compunction. The three men have taken the life of a fellow human being when they have no power to create life. What if the 90 year old man was innocent? Even if he is not, should they have taken the law into their own hands? It's about time that such heinous acts are dealt with a strong hand by the court of law so that others may be deterred from committing such heinous acts in the future.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
Via email

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

"It's hard to get that real good feeling about festivals sometimes."

— Meg White

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.67 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 20, 2020

Governance a casualty in Meghalaya

THE allegations by an elected representative that the MDA Government is losing Rs 1200-1500 crore of revenue on account of the illegal extraction and transportation of coal should be taken seriously. This amount is not small change for a state like Meghalaya that relies heavily on central government dole. Secondly, the entire state machinery appears to be facilitating this illegality thereby sabotaging the rule of law. That the officer on special duty (OSD) to the former Home Minister is being mentioned by the Lok Ayukta should have pushed the government to replace the OSD and to correct the anomalies. Instead the Government chooses to challenge the Lok Ayukta in court which is unprecedented. It is only in the present government that OSDs have been used to cut deals. Earlier, people who held this post conducted themselves with dignity. What irks the public about this Government is that the OSDs also screen out who can meet the Chief Minister and who cannot. This is not what democracy is all about. The Chief Minister cannot avoid meeting people when they ask for an audience, not to address their personal grievances, but to flag an issue of public concern.

The BJP, an alliance partner in the MDA Government has been firing on all cylinders to keep the issue of corruption alive. The Party now plans to approach the High Court to address corruption in the three district councils – a point that has been simmering for a long time now and which the NPP – the leading coalition partner has been trying to sweep under the carpet. Another sore point about the present coalition is that dialogue seems to have degenerated to diatribes in the media. The State NPP President and newly elected Rajya Sabha member, uses pejorative language bordering on arrogance while countering the allegations of the BJP President Ernest Mawrie and spokesperson, Bernard Marak. This would not go down well with the BJP and the NPP might have to pay the price for such arrogance.

The failure of governance and the impunity it brings into how institutions and individuals function are serious issues. They erode public trust and confidence which take a long time to correct. When institutions are compromised it is difficult to bring them back on the rails. As it is, lawlessness is on the rise in the state. The law keepers who are told to facilitate the movement of coal-bearing trucks are not going to do it without compensation. There will be attrition even in the police morale. This is not a good sign for Meghalaya.

TO THE EDITOR

Can't empathise with corruption

Editor,
The letter captioned 'Empathising with Ampareen,' by Jonathan S, reflects on the emotions that humans feel when someone near and dear to us is being harmed just as we feel concerned when they are not in good health, even as this scam is being screened by law of the land. However, I disagree on certain points raised by the writer regarding the contributions made by the MLA of East Shillong towards those who need her interventions. As a legislator, she or any other MLA is duty bound to assist the people of the constituency in their need, be it to provide safe drinking water, good roads, drains, street lighting, PDS, other social developmental schemes and above all security of the constituents. But to extend help only to those with personal needs does not justify the position that an MLA holds. As an elected representative she represents all the constituents cutting across party lines, caste, creed or religion and not only those that voted for her.

To extend generous assistance beyond expectations to supporters from the public exchequer does not add to the credit of an MLA. Doing good to others and showing the right path are two conflicting attitudes of the human mind. 'I may be a

good person but am I doing the right thing?' The writer also pointed to the illegality that the legislator might have committed even though it was not for pecuniary gains. But that does not justify the fact that she had committed the act only to help others or to have been merely victimized by the corrupt system. If that is the case then a thief who steals to feed his family stands justified for the act he/she commits! Can that be a rational argument for any right thinking citizen?

Ampareen would have been applauded if she had brought to light such practices that were prevalent in the education department then, whereby posts for teachers were allotted not on merit but on recommendations made by public representatives. Helping those who are known to the legislator by depriving the rights of those who are not known to her are the bases of the entire accusations. No sane mind will help someone by infringing upon the rights of the other even for a political reason. If that is the case then the entire approach of a competitive exam for jobs should be done away with. In that case departments or service commissions could advertise for jobs by asking candidates to submit the legislator's recommendation instead of conducting the exams to fill up vacancies. How legal will that be? Ever since the Education

How to live and thrive in the lockdown

By SaamduChetri and Jagdish Rattanani

For so many students sitting in their homes and not knowing when the lockdown will end for their particular schools or colleges, this is a difficult time. Opening up has risks. Not opening up has other worries. Some have lost a loved one to Covid-19. Others have faced severe restrictions due to quarantine, or are helping family members struck by the disease, or just anxious about what will come next.

There are harrowing stories emerging of some who are unable to cope as they are couped up in their homes. You can be among family and still be very alone. Worse, people get on each other's nerves. There is a fight for space, for hogging the bandwidth and actually on every trivial matter because it is not the reason that is important. It is that the nerves are frayed. The cohabitation stress is taking a toll.

Young audiences, all a bundle of youthful energy, desperately want a way out of this situation that has snatched them away from friends and locked them in with parents. Oh, the horrors! The pressure to break out is therefore the most for college students. Hostel life beckons, friends are waiting...how much can a phone make up for a lost, late evening dinner, a missing handshake, a warm hug? A recent survey by 'YourDost', a Bengaluru-based online mental health platform found that college students were the most affected by the pandemic and lockdown. The survey showed that "students registered 41 per cent increase in emotions of anxiety/fear/worry, 54 per cent increase in anger/irritability/frustration, 27 per cent in hopelessness, sense of sadness was increased by 17 per cent, and 38 per cent increase in the feeling of loneliness/boredom." This is a worrying state of affairs.

Difficult as it sounds, we would want young audiences to pause and approach the challenge with ways that are simple and potentially powerful. Call it a strategy, if you will, but it is more than that because it will help us manage not just the immediate but also cast a long shadow on how we shape up and emerge from this situation. Can we come out of the lockdown as citi-

zens who are smarter, wiser and equipped with at least some tools and experience to manage change of a high order? That would be such an asset.

The story we need to tell ourselves is that six months, even a year, is not a very long time in our long and happy lives. This may not be easy to young minds to fathom as many of us grow with the idea that a year, particularly an academic year, is too much to lose. This is the Indian context. Globally, many students do take time off to travel, to do projects elsewhere, and away from their universities. It becomes a source of good



learning that is a very different form of academic achievement. So think of this as an opportunity where you can use your head, heart and hands to nurture the self. When we are 50, 60, and 70, we can hopefully look back to these days and tell our children and grandchildren some powerful stories about how the world changed one fine day in March 2020, when an unseen, unheard of and unknown species wrought collective havoc on mankind by the changing the way we lived, dramatically, drastically and maybe decisively. So what is that story of the lockdown that you treasure?

A good way to begin is to make a new friend, a very different friend, a close person who we live with but don't know fully and well enough. This is yourself, the inner self, the ocean that is embodied in you. Think about you – do you know yourself, do you really understand yourself, do you really "meet" yourself? Let this be the beginning of a new enquiry.

The first problem: We don't know about classes, exams, jobs, placements and a host of other things. Noth-

ing is predictable. But look again, and think again. Is this really new? Uncertainty was always there – right from our birth. That this uncertainty is manifest today in itself makes it less uncertain. The bigger problem is the uncertainty we don't see and don't know. The author Naseeb Nicholas Taleb gives this example of a turkey that is sure of its next meal – it is so certain because food is good, and it is growing fat, actually being fattened for the Thanksgiving dinner. Come one day, and there will be a nasty surprise. We are in waters we know are uncertain. This is better than being in waters that we know

and understood when often we do not. In sum, don't take the standard prescriptions for granted. Instead, Enquire. This is our head at work.

Second, amid this uncertainty, what is it that brings me joy, happiness, and an element of playfulness. Books and certificates apart, it is good to pick up an activity that is a source of joy, a new discovery, an element of fun – and usually something we have never tried before. Is classical music a source of joy, or painting, or singing, or just dance? Or could it be listening to distant radio broadcasts or reading the classics? Explore. This is our heart at work.

It is not easy to always talk with meaning and connection to our loved ones. But we must equally know that one of the biggest regrets of many successful people is that they did not spend time or talk or listen in to what their loved ones had to say. Do you have a parent, a grandparent, an asibling, who you haven't sat down to listen to in years? Do it now. Make something out of that conversation. Make it an ongo-

ing discussion. Write it as a diary. These treasures will hold out for a long time, and become your support on many a wintry night. Engage. This, too, is our heart at work.

Many youngsters know that stress at work and in school means that they eat in not very healthy ways. Their sleep habits are equally unhealthy. Here is an opportunity to govern these two. One of the best diets offered is the one that probably your Mom follows – eat as much, as long as you cook it yourself. You know the ingredients, you understand the oil, you know the masalas. Pick up cooking as something that will stay with you forever – whether you are a boy or a girl. Prefer traditional, Indian, food. Roti-daal or idli-dosa is preferred to pasta and pizza. Why? Because, in the former, you usually start from scratch with the most fundamental ingredients. Let your family senior be the guide. Then, with everybody around, and to your heart's content, Eat. This is your heart and your hands at work.

Enquire, Engage, Explore, Eat. This will also drive a routine that can regulate the day and help us sleep well. Sleeping well and deep of course will help give the energy to exercise till you break out into a sweat, with mindfulness in every breath. Open small niches of conversation, share your thoughts. And build it up to an experience that this lockdown can be a memorable one, hopefully leaving all of us richer and ready to be a fuller participant in the world whenever business is back. There will still be some who need help to do this, and if you feel you are anxious, feeling low or easily disturbed and often not in the mood, do not hesitate to reach out to your trusted friend or adviser – in the house or outside.

(Dr. SaamduChetri is the former executive director of the Gross National Happiness Centre in Bhutan which he popularised globally as an alternative to GDP as the only metric of growth and wellbeing. Jagdish Rattanani is a journalist and a faculty member at SPIJMR. Views are personal) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Hail Durga!

Deepa Majumdar

This article is dedicated to Sri Sarada Devi, our historical Durga!

As Durga Puja arrives this momentous year of the pandemic, I imagine prayers rising like fragrant vapors from Earth – ecumenical prayers imploring the great Goddess Durga to heal Earth and all her creatures of Covid-19. Her eyes radiating an uncrowned regality, and her stance, the leonine strength of Shakti (strength), her deca-arms express her ambidextrous character – both blessing and chastising. Although our supreme benefactress, and the originary origin of all that is auspicious, Durga castigates as well. Yet even her chastisements are hidden blessings. Like honeyed arrows, they find their targets, redeeming the human

mestic violence – risk her divine wrath – a non-violent volcanic wrath that can reduce them to ashes in this life and in the hereafter. Nations and civilizations that abuse women go to rack and ruin by her fiat.

If in 2020, we interpreted Mahishasura, as a symbol of all the forces of moral and natural evil in the world right now – whether Covid-19, climate change, racism, violence against women, or the plight of the poor – we would not be remiss. Cringing at her holy feet, as she pierces him effortlessly with her spear, Mahishasura is neither matter, nor nothingness, but the opposite of Shakti. If Durga represents Shakti, or the strength that comes from God consciousness and the practice of the moral virtues that lead to this



PTI PHOTO

hearts they reach, through divine castigation that is the greatest of her blessings. When we meditate on her majestic visage and glorious glance of sheer mercy, our heartstremble with awe.

I can well imagine how inspired a sculptor has to be, to forge in Durga's icon, the right expression in her eyes. Indeed, it is she herself who inspires her sculptor. To dismiss this glorious image of Durga as a mere idol – as vulgar ideologues of the Abrahamic religions might – speaks of a frightening dearth of faith, belief, and mystical fervor – a febrile,

highest consciousness – then Mahishasura represents pursuit of worldly power, which robs us of strength, making us empty and violent. Although Shakti and power are polar opposites, all too many people worldwide confuse the two.

If effortless grace and benefaction mark Durga's mien, then calm majesty marks her eyes that pour forth the ceaseless plenitude of Shakti. Radiating the strength of pure chastity, her majestic glance expresses awe-inspiring nonchalance. Neither guilt-ridden, nor murderous, She slays

"It is She who bestows this bhakti upon Her votary. Again, it is She who puts sight into the eye of his soul – awakening it, and enabling it to see her true nature, which is the living Durga."

blinding materialism that cannot see past the material image to the Light within this awe-inspiring icon. By imploring her presence, Her votary elicits this divine Light in the icon of the great Goddess – not willing, nor summoning it, but pleading for it. A direct echo of the fervor of her votary, She, who is Pure Consciousness or wakefulness itself, awakens accordingly – in direct proportion to the degree of his bhakti (devotion) – recompensing his bhakti with her divine Presence. It is She who bestows this bhakti upon Her votary. Again, it is She who puts sight into the eye of his soul – awakening it, and enabling it to see her true nature, which is the living Durga.

A numinous ideal of Shakti for every human person, Durgais especially present in members of the female gender – whether adult or child. For any human endeavor to succeed, the votary must first propitiate Durga. As the source of strength or Shakti, She is the numinous ideal of a chaste feminism. All demons of patriarchy – especially those who commit rape and do-

Mahishasura with inimitable nonchalance! From her supra-moral podium of pure Grace, She destroys him for his own good, as it were. In a posture of marvelous Shakti, She strides a ferocious lion, which expresses her contained ferocity, as it helps her destroy evil. Her ten arms also symbolize this plenitude of Shakti – thus adding to her resplendent majesty.

One of the most endearing features of this level of Hinduism is the affection the Godhead inspires in her votary for herself – quite the opposite of the fear that the Abrahamic God inspires. His affection overflowing, the votary of Durga, takes liberties with the great Goddess, even as he extols her virtues and her awe-inspiring Shakti. This is exactly as it should be. For the Godhead is not some frightening punitive Judge to be encountered after death – but our most intimate immanent Friend, ever present in the here and now. Lodged in the depths of our own hearts and in that of every being, Durga is the divine Substratum and Creatrix of all that exists!

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"Nothing is as seductive as the assurance of success."

— Gertrude Himmelfarb

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.68 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 21, 2020

Reassurance from PM

WHEN the Prime Minister addresses the nation, big revelations are generally expected. But Narendra Modi's address on Tuesday carried little more than a promise that the nation is all set to reach the vaccines against Covid-19 pandemic in the coming few months and the usual advice to people to help check the virus spread and not be lax. He stressed that while the days of the lockdown are over, the pandemic is still on a roll. The PM's promise is that when the vaccine arrives, everyone will get it in a planned, phased and fast manner. The government is already making arrangements for storage, transportation and distribution of the vaccine in a safe mode.

Notably, this was the seventh nationally televised address to the nation by the PM since March last when he shut down the nation for three weeks at a stretch, followed by a series of lockdowns. The way forward is to live with the pandemic for now and see it away through resort to vaccines and observance of Covid protocols.

While the PM's address confined itself to Covid-control, what many expected was also a reference to the building up of tension along the northern border region. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi was right in urging the PM to enlighten the nation on when the PM "is going to drive out the Chinese" from the land it occupied in recent incursions in Ladakh region. This might bring back memories of the large swathes of land in Chinese occupation since the 1962 War, when India stood back stunned. There has been no effort to get back those territories by successive governments. Under PM Modi's term, engagements with China on friendly terms reached its zenith only to witness an about-turn and new offensive from China in recent months.

On the Covid scene, however, there were reassurances from the PM about the positives vis-à-vis the Indian scene; that the recovery rate is among the highest in the world and deaths are relatively less so far. The festival season being close at hand, a word of caution from the PM alerts the citizens about the need to maintain the social distancing and other norms, like wearing of masks. This is more so as the season of festivals is approaching and the general tendency is to crowd around in public places.

A reassurance from the PM is that the days of lockdown are over. The economy needs a push up from the bottom to which it has sunk and normal activities must resume on all fronts.

TO THE EDITOR

NEIGRIHMS at the crossroads!

Editor,
After the controversial Director of NEIGRIHMS was repatriated to his parent department, the Institute is left with a spare-tyre Director, the Head of Department, Anesthesiology. For NEIGRIHMS this is a case of, "from the frying pan into the fire. The care-taker director is being given charge for a period of 6 months by which time a new Director is expected to join. But this Acting Director wasted no time in agenda-setting. The first thing he did was to remove a senior Doctor from the post of Medical Superintendent and appointed a junior doctor in his place. The priority of this Acting Director is to place his loyalists in all important decision making positions with no respect for rules or normal practices and making sure he runs the show.

Initially he criticized the plasma therapy approved by Health Experts from the Government of India and got a befitting reply from the DHS, Government of Meghalaya for criticizing the antigen test. The question is, can one man run an organization where there are more qualified persons around? This institute is run like a privately owned hospital not a public utility,

hence accountability does not exist.

The tenure of Deputy Director (Administration) ends in December 2020. This means that if everything goes as per schedule, by January 2021 this Institute will get a new Director and a DDA (unless the latter gets extension). The advertisement for the post of Director is already out but it is a mystery as to how the advertisement for the post of the Deputy Director had vanished. Surely something fishy is going on! Only time will tell.

For a while now NEIGRIHMS has been taken for a ride by whichever way the Director of the day wants and their wish is supreme. Several super specialist doctors have left during these past few years and the (dis)credit for this goes to the captain of the ship — the Director. The problem started with the appointment of an engineer as an administrator, a post advertised for appointment on deputation but the engineer working in the same institute as an executive engineer (civil) joined the post. The result? He has no capacity or appropriate qualification to checkmate the Director when it comes to government rules and procedures which is the principal role of the Deputy Director (Administration). Unfortunately for NEIGRIHMS the DDA is not only a 'yes' man of the

Director, but, the man who also controls all purchases in the Institute and is known as the 'GURU' is his chief adviser. The Guru was appointed as a Liaison Officer with the Ministry by none other than the Deputy Director who is also the Disbursement Officer. Now, when the Disbursement Officer and the Purchase man connive then the result is corruption. Though due care had been taken to cover the tracks of this arrangement, there is no perfect crime in this world.

There was a time when both these guys signed cheques when payment is made to suppliers and contractors. Really! Is this place an Institute of Excellence as someone rightly questioned?

The Shillong Times carried a report "CBI seeking Centre's nod for NEIGRIHMS probe," (Aug 10, 2020), as claimed by the ex-Director, Dr DM Thappa which was also confirmed by the CBI office in the city. I wonder if the CBI will also look into matters concerning the illegal activities flourishing in this Institute and endorsed by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Or are the "Babus" in the central government not accountable for this mess? Surely not all are accomplices to the crime! Dr Thappa also claimed that with the help of the Deputy Director a private pharmacy (Life Care Pharmacy) was es-

ablished by shutting down an Institute run pharmacy. The truth is, there are many relatives of staff members who are doing business in NEIGRIHMS for a very long time by violating all the rules and guidelines of the government starting with the 'Guru' who single handedly controls all purchases amounting to crores of rupees annually. His own brother is the main link for suppliers to be able to do business in the Institution. His other cousin is a permanent staff in the Purchase section appointed under the shadow of his recommendation (of course signed/endorsed by a Committee). No, this is not coincidence and not all happening without the knowledge of the Administration. Gone are the days where quality is considered a priority in this Institute. Now it's a case of the cheapest one winning the contract. Suppliers and contractors walk around like kings, not only because they are well connected but in one way or another are relatives of staff working in the Institute. In a situation like this, fairness is the last word when it comes to winning a contract for supply or work.

As is always the case, evil prospers because the truth is silent. But the truth can no longer be hidden because this is the last chance for this Institute to come out of the black hole! AIIMS, Guwahati is ex-

pected to be fully operational in 2 to 3 years and then what will happen to NEIGRIHMS? Undoubtedly, our state and people will be the main losers. All AIIMS are under the PMSSY where they are directly controlled by the PMO. NEIGRIHMS is neither under PMSSY nor at par with AIIMS because no one bothers to build it. All are busy in building their own selves! In fact they are more serious in pursuing greater autonomy for the Institute which is the last thing NEIGRIHMS needs.

This Institute needs a Director who not only realizes that autocracy is dead in a democratic country but also a person who has a stake on this Institute; someone who not only has qualifications but a good character and personality and a leader who takes everyone along when it comes to building the Institution; a quality which the incumbent Director is lacking.

It was only during the time of Dr R K Sharma as Director that this institute went full throttle ahead. The reason is not his qualifications and experience, but because he is a resident of Shillong. As someone who really wants to see this institute achieve higher levels of excellence, I humbly request all those who have a say in the functioning of NEIGRIHMS to keep personal ambitions aside; keep out religious and community

feelings and work for the upliftment of NEIGRIHMS — the one of its kind Health Institution in the region till date.

All those who want to see this Institute grow, do pray that this time a positive change should come. This is a golden opportunity for Mr Toki Blah and other Governing Council members to get proactive and make sure that everyone gets the message that NEIGRIHMS belongs to the people, not to individuals. Our highly educated Chief Minister should realize that it's a matter of pride for the State to have an Institute at par with other National Health Institutes which our local population trust.

When other states are pushing their candidates to the top post why can't we have someone who really has a stake in this Institute and our local community as Director? Is it wrong to say that NEIGRIHMS is for Meghalaya first and then for others? Do something before it is too late because as we all know, opportunity doesn't knock twice.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

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

Military stand off may last until China recognises LAC

Both sides have failed to build trust

By Nantoo Banerjee

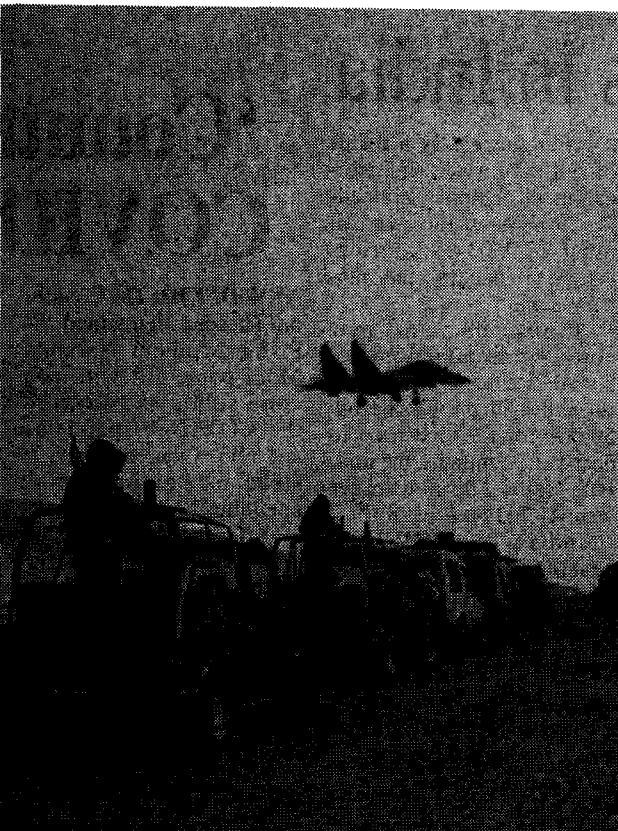
India's current border dispute with China owes its origin in 1950 when China sent its troops to Tibet taking control of the remote mountainous region that declared independence in 1913. The Chinese military further crushed a massive Buddhist uprising in Tibet in 1959. Dalai Lama, the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader, fled Tibet with his close followers. He was granted asylum in India by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Angry Beijing laid claim to almost 80,000 sq km of India-controlled territory in Sikkim and protected country, Bhutan, the same year. In September 1959, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai in a letter to Pandit Nehru made a formal declaration that claimed China's sovereignty over the Ladakh region in eastern Kashmir.

Within three years, China formally attacked India. The war lasted less than a week by which China took control of around 40,000 sq km of territory in Kashmir, called Aksai Chin, as India badly lost the war. China changed its earlier neutral stance over Kashmir and came diplomatically close to Pakistan. The very next year, in 1963, China and Pakistan reached a settlement over an area between northern Kashmir and Moslem-dominated Xinjiang region while India and China accused each other of transgressions in contested border territories. China condemned the merger of Sikkim with India in 1975. The two big Asian countries did not have top level diplomatic relations for several years. Only in 1976, India and China restored diplomatic representation to the ambassadorial status after a 15-year pause. All these are part of history, now.

Could the latest round of the Chinese military build up along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), specially in the Ladakh region, has something to do with the revocation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution? The constitution amendment removed the special status of Jammu & Kashmir. The provision was part of the conditions under which Maharaja Hari Singh ceded Kashmir to India in 1947. The article

granted special semi-autonomous status to India-administered Kashmir. The abrogation of Article 370 upset both Pakistan and China. It made J&K and Ladakh as part and parcel of India and allowed Indians to buy property there. The state now stands bifurcated into two Union Territories -- Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh. J&K

latter's treatment to Buddhists in Tibet. Nehru simply failed to understand China and went up to the extent of declining a US offer to India of a permanent seat in the all powerful UN Security Council. In the words of Congress leader and former UN Under-General Secretary Shashi Tharoor, Nehru "declined a US offer" to India to take a



would have a legislature, a la Delhi. Ladakh won't. Ladakh would be ruled directly by New Delhi. Ladakh's new status was difficult to be digested easily by the People's Republic of China. For long, China did not recognise Ladakh and present Arunachal Pradesh as parts of India.

Interestingly, China's diplomacy towards India has been as inconsistent as India's towards China. Socialist Nehru's diplomatic romanticism towards China soon after it became the people's republic under Chairman Mao, his 'Indi-Chini Bhai Bhai' campaign and Panchsheel (five principles of peaceful coexistence) Treaty, which China accepted in 1954, failed to bring the two countries closer. Even Bhimrao Ambedkar chided Nehru in Parliament on Panchsheel treaty with China after the

permanent seat at the UNSC in 1953. Nehru, said Tharoor in an interview in 2004, wanted China be given the seat, instead. China never quite appreciated Nehru's unbelievable gesture.

Today, China is staunchly against any expansion of the UNSC and India's permanent membership in the UN body. However, it must be noted that China maintained a 'blow hot, blow cold' relationship with India over the years, depending on its own national interest. For instance, during the best part of 1980s, China took a neutral stance on the Kashmir dispute although in 1986, Beijing condemned and disputed New Delhi's proclamation of Arunachal Pradesh as a state. During 1990s and 2000s India and China were engaged in several dispute resolution mechanisms as well as con-

fidence-building measures pertaining to border issues. China even took a neutral stance over the war between India and Pakistan in Kargil. During the next decade, as India got closer to the US, China changed its position once again at the UN and other international forums to support Pakistan against India. China announced a massive investment of over \$50 billion for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project.

Regarding India's currently growing border tension with China, the Indian foreign ministry seems to have failed to convince China to accept the LAC and help erase China's hazy historical concept and approach on the territorial demarcation between the two countries. Even before Communist-ruled China, under Chairman Mao Zedong, taking control of the world's third biggest country by geographical size, in October 1949, the Chinese rulers did not accept that Ladakh was part of India. The nationalist Kuomintang government of the pre-1949 Republic of China had repeatedly contested the British drawings of boundaries in the region, including the famous McMahon Line (1914) between the borders of Tibet and India.

While independent India recognised the McMahon Line as its international boundary with China, Beijing refused to accept the lines drawn by the British colonial power, asserting that it was not signatories to the British treaties. Unfortunately, this has been at the root of the India-China border dispute over the 4,000-km-plus-long Line of Actual Control. However, it would be grossly wrong on the part of Beijing to conveniently craft a new border line with India on the basis of its centuries-old prejudiced perceptions. The LAC provides the best solution to India-China border dispute if the two Asian powers sturly wish to end military tension in the region and grow. Until China accepts the reality, the war-like situation along the LAC will continue. (IPA Service)

Leading scientists feel that the U.S. admin has failed to deal with pandemic Top medical, scientific journals call for ouster of Trump in polls

By Lawrence Albright

Two esteemed medical and scientific journals have broken with almost two centuries of non-partisanship and weighed in on the upcoming Presidential elections in the United States.

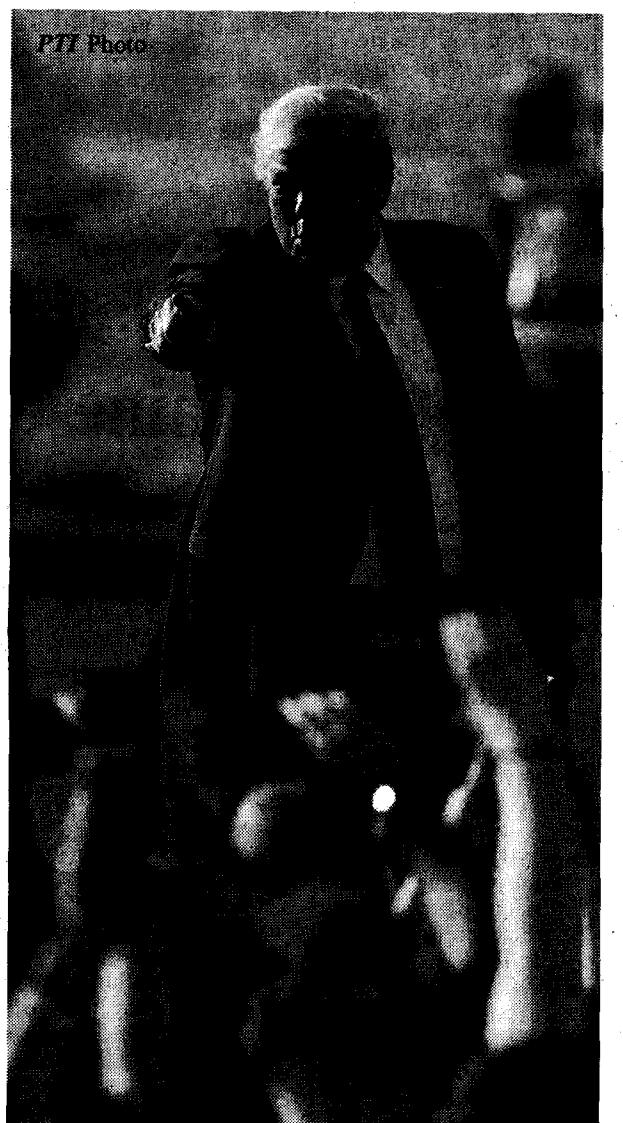
Scientific American Magazine, in its October 2020 issue, published an editorial entitled "Scientific American Endorses Joe Biden," while the New England Journal of Medicine published a statement signed by all 34 editors of the journal, "Dying in a Leadership Vacuum," which urged voters to deny President Donald Trump a second term in office. Scientific American has never endorsed a presidential candidate in its 175-year history. The New England Journal of Medicine's non-partisanship dates to its founding in 1812.

"COVID-19 has created a crisis throughout the world. This crisis has pro-

mined them."

The editors note that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which was the world's leading disease response organization, has been eviscerated and has suffered dramatic testing and policy failures. The National Institutes of Health have played a key role in vaccine development but have been excluded from much crucial government decision making. The Food and Drug Administration has been shamefully politicized, appearing to respond to pressure from the administration rather than scientific evidence. America's current leaders have undercut trust in science and in government, causing damage that will certainly outlast them.

The New England Journal of Medicine calls for voters to deny Trump a second term, but it does not endorse Joe Biden by name. Scientific American's edi-



duced a test of leadership. With no good options to combat a novel pathogen, countries were forced to make hard choices about how to respond. Here in the United States, our leaders have failed that test. They have taken a crisis and turned it into a tragedy," the New England Journal of Medicine's editorial declared.

As befits the focus of the journal, the emphasis of its statement is focused exclusively on the coronavirus pandemic and the Trump administration's response. It was presumably written before the news that Trump himself had become infected with COVID-19.

Continuing in their condemnation, the editors wrote: "The response of our nation's leaders has been consistently inadequate. The federal government has largely abandoned disease control to the states. Governors have varied in their responses, not so much by party as by competence."

Trump has regularly tried to shift blame to governors for the country's botched coronavirus effort, but the journal's statement made clear said that the bulk of the blame still rests with the White House. "Whatever their competence, governors do not have the tools that Washington controls. Instead of using those tools, the federal government has under-

torial, like that of the New England Journal of Medicine, is sharply critical of the Trump administration's response to the COVID-19 threat, but goes beyond the pandemic to assail the Trump administration for wishing to eliminate the Affordable Care Act without a plan to replace it; for proposing billions of dollars in cuts to the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control, the National Science Foundation; and for continually pushing to eliminate health rules from the Environmental Protection Agency—a move that would put more people at risk for heart and lung disease attributable to pollution.

It also castigates Trump for his ongoing denial of the reality of climate change. "The changing climate is already causing an...increase in severe storms, wildfires, and extreme flooding," says the editorial, noting that Biden has plans for dealing with both the pandemic and environmental issues.

"Although Trump and his allies have tried to create obstacles to prevent people from casting ballots in November, either by mail or in person, it is crucial that we surmount them and vote. It's time to move Trump out and elect Biden, who has a record of following the data and being guided by science," concluded the Scientific American editors. (IPA Service)

"War is failure of diplomacy."

— John Dingell

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.69 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2020

Normalising corruption

WHEN allegations of corruption become a daily affair and charges are traded over media, the public faces a fatigue which then turns to disinterest. It is then that the public begin to normalise corruption as something that cannot be cured and hence must be endured. Even as the slanging match between the BJP (vide its president and spokesperson) and the NPP goes full throttle, the two BJP MLAs (one of whom is a minister) don't seem to be on the same page with their party leadership in the state. It's almost as if the two BJP MLAs and another defeated leader want to convey to the state BJP leadership that they should learn to endure the pain of coalition politics or get out of it. The minister and the MLA certainly are not ready to part ways with the NPP. Hence the state BJP is left non-plussed and virtually orphaned.

In this game of trading charges, governance has taken a hit. Firstly, Covid had derailed the governance process when a major chunk of resources had to be invested in fighting the pandemic. Then the allegations of illegal mining and transportation of coal had eroded the public trust and made corruption a matter of course. The public know that corruption is being facilitated by the state. They find the government denial facile. Time was when Meghalaya was under the grip of non-state actors who held it ransom and extortion and killings were rampant. Subsequent governments through various interventions were able to clip the wings of the HNLC and later the GNLC. In the latter case the military commander Sohan Shira was allegedly killed in a gun battle with the state police. Meghalaya's police force is capable of outperforming itself when circumstances demand but what it needs is a strong, credible leadership. The barometer for good governance is the ability of the state to uphold the rule of law under all circumstances. And in this, the police force is a critical actor. It has to perform its duties independently and not at the behest of politicians. But that is easier said than done. Politicians have time and again used the police to facilitate their acts of omission and commission and police have complied. This amounts to collusion and governance is the casualty.

The State BJP has been crying wolf for the past one month to no avail. As a result the public has lost faith in the efficacy of the BJP which came to power in 2014 on the bandwagon of, "Na khaunga, na khaane dunga" (we will neither tolerate corruption nor allow others to indulge in corruption). The public see a gap between promise and delivery and has therefore lost all interest in accusations of corruption and has normalised it. But where will this rapid erosion of governance take Meghalaya?

India-Taiwan trade talks
Beijing warns New Delhi

By Dr. D.K. Giri

India ups the ante against China. Beijing is ostensibly rattled. Although reports of a trade deal with Taiwan have not been officially confirmed by Indian agency, Beijing has issued a veiled warning to New Delhi. Obviously, it is not just India-Taiwan, Beijing is reacting to the latest development in the Quad, and the ensuing defence pact between India and the US. As New Delhi decides to take on China, the latter makes a desperate attempt to bully India.

Chinese Foreign Ministry's Spokesperson Zhao Lijian commented, "The one-China principle is the common consensus of the international community, including India, and also serves as the political foundation for China to develop relations with any country." New Delhi has so far reconciled to and respected one-China policy. But, given China's belligerence against India and its meddling in her internal affairs, New Delhi is seeking to pay back in its own coin.

Recently, India participated symbolically in the National Day of Taiwan drawing sharp response from Beijing. The Chinese embassy in New Delhi issued an advisory to the Indian media against felicitating Taiwan on its National Day. The Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi rebutted by saying that media in India is free and vibrant unlike in China. Media follows its independent line on politics, national as well as international.

The cooperation between Taiwan and India is rising especially since a pro-independent Prime Minister took over in Taiwan. During the pandemic, Taiwan supported India with supply of critical medical items. Trade between the two countries is on the rise and Taiwan has a trade office in Mumbai. The growing proximity between New Delhi and Taipei is not lost on Beijing. Zhao sought to emphasise, "China is firmly opposed to any official exchange of any form and the signing of any agreement of official nature between Taiwan and any country have been diplomatic ties with China". On a serious note, observers interpret the Beijing's diplomatic advisory to India as a military threat. The vibe emanating from China points to Chinese military taking action if New Delhi were to seal a deal of

any sort with Taiwan. However, this was on cards. New Delhi has to take the bull by the horns and pitch for closer relations with Taiwan including a diplomatic contact in future.

Since containing China consists of a multi-pronged strategy it is in order that we factor the development in the Quad. New Delhi has invited, for the first time, Australia, the third partner in Quad to participate in the joint naval exercise along with Japan and the US. This exercise underlines the strategy of developing Quad into a real security grouping. Apparently, the rogue behaviour shown by Beijing at the time of a global crisis caused by the pandemic, which again was unleashed by China, has con-

cerners too see it the same way. But for long term partnership between these four democracies, Quad should mean more than China. It should be a partnership based on shared values and interests including rule of law, freedom of navigation, respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, peaceful resolution of disputes and free trade.

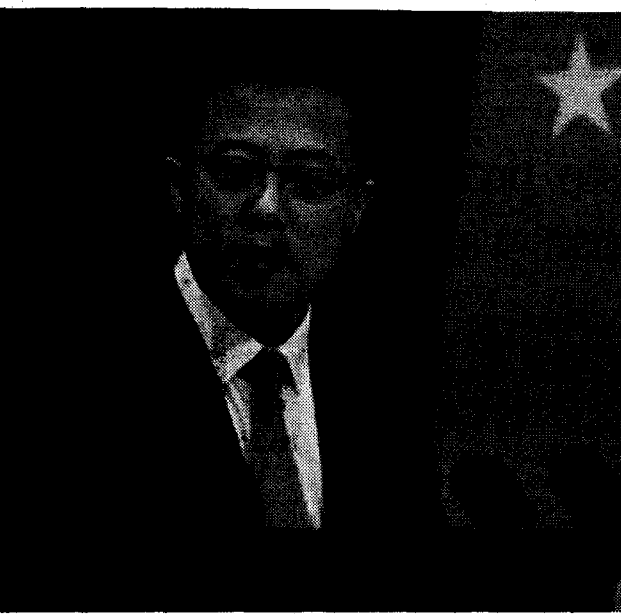
India-Pacific region draws attention from other countries like Germany, UK and France. Germany, which is holding the EU presidency at present, is spearheading an-India-Pacific strategy for the European Union. Germany has hinted more than once that any engagement with India will always have the China angle in the equation. Out of all the four mem-

of Agreement (LEMOA) was signed in August 2016. It allows each other's military to replenish from others bases: access supplies, spare parts and services from other countries land, air and ports which then can be reimbursed. The Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) signed in 2018 after the first 2+2 dialogue allows US to provide India with encrypted communications equipment and systems. In simpler terms it is like Whatsapp or Telegram for the two militaries.

While LEMOA lays the bases for mutual trust on exchange of valuable assets, COMCASA connects two militaries and BECA facilitates sharing classified information in real time without any risk of being compromised. All these pacts put together mean both militaries coming closer and building trust in the face of an increasingly aggressive China.

The sceptics might read a US strategy in these pacts to wean India away from its dependence on Russia. India was putting off US overtures because of deep-rooted links between Pakistan and Pentagon. The US was still rely on Rawalpindi for access to an exit from Afghanistan. Both these premises have changed. The US is successfully nudging India to engage in Afghanistan, partly to replace Pakistan and the Chinese aggression has pushed New Delhi into America's embrace.

Apparently, New Delhi has blown the bugle although not so loud, against China. The India-Pacific region manned by Quad is the real bulwark against Chinese aggression. New Delhi is the critical anchor in making India-Pacific a viable strategic instrument. Japan may have originated the idea and Washington may have given it a push but it is India that has made Quad happen while cautiously dealing with China. That caution needs to be thrown to the winds and New Delhi must embrace the challenge of sustaining the momentum in the Quad. Taiwan is a pinprick for China, but it should not become another Tibet. The countdown for China has begun and there is no turning back for New Delhi. — INFA (The writer is Prof. International Relations, JMI)



solidated the Quad. The partners in Quad have responded warmly to India inviting Australia to join the Malabar Naval exercise. The US Navy Chief of Information said, "Sea power x 4" with the flags of India, the US, Japan and Australia will be sailing together in November. The Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato said in Tokyo, "If this is to be regularised, it will be welcomed by Japanese government". Responding to the invitation, the Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne said, "We have the invitation from India and Australia will participate in exercise Malabar 2020. The exercise will bring together four key regional defence partners in November 2020". Arguably, the United States views Quad as a countervailing body to China. May be other part-

ners in Quad it is India that shares a long border with China and is facing Chinese hostility for many years. So, the onus is on New Delhi to keep the Quad going for a secure and conflict-free India-Pacific region. The security and prosperity of many countries depend on it and China is the elephant in the room. The third thorn in China's flesh is the India-US defence deals in the forthcoming 2+2 ministerial meeting India and US are going to sign the Basic Exchange and Co-operation Agreement, which pertains to geospatial intelligence, and sharing information on maps and satellite images for defence. The BECA is sequel to LEMOA and COMCASA; these three defence pacts are considered to troika of foundational pacts leading to deeper military co-operation.

On the pacts, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum

India-U.S. Relations under a Biden presidency

Reasons for discomfort of Modi and BJP

By Nitya Chakraborty

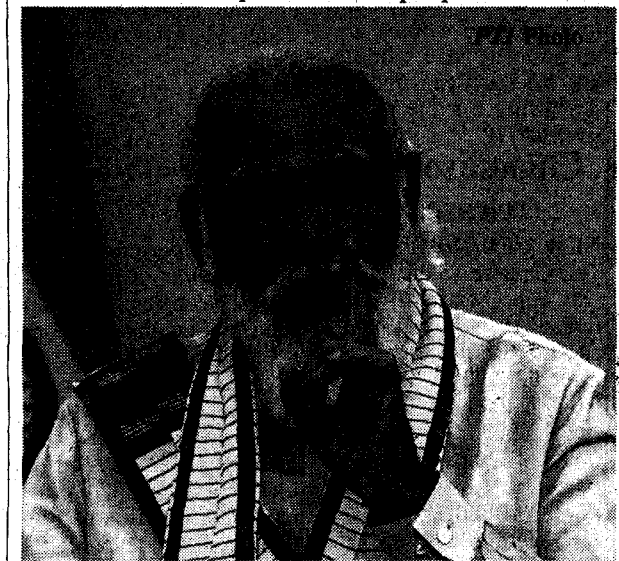
With less than two weeks to go for the Presidential elections in USA scheduled on November 3, talks have started about what is going to be the impact of the coming to the White House of Joe Biden as President and Kamala Harris as Vice-President on the India-U.S. relations. All indications suggest that unless, there is a major change in the opinion of the voters in the crucial swing states in the last minute before November 3, the Democratic candidate will have a clean sweep of the electoral college by getting much more than the required majority of 270 votes.

The India-US relations both political and economic are now at a peak level under the Trump Presidency and Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister of India. In no other time, the Indian Government identified so much with the electoral ambitions of a leading political party of USA, especially with its President. Trump has publicised the support of Modi in the election campaign among the Indian American voters who total 1.8 million and are expected

concerning India. Sanders is highly critical of Narendra Modi and he considers him among the authoritarian rulers along with the Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and others. The issues relating to human rights violations will be under scanner by the Democratic leadership.

The bill introduced by the Democrats last month gives some indication of the contours of the US policy towards both China and India. Though in US system, the President has enough powers of his own and he may not necessarily always go by the Party programmes, this outline gives enough indications about the changes which will be taking place in the U.S. policy under Biden compared to Trump era.

First and foremost, the Democrats policy paper mentions of Chinese coercion in Europe but does not mention Chinese incursions or aggression against India. The document ignores QUAD initiative which India is publicising. In sum, Biden presidency will look at China from their business collaboration perspective and there



to play a crucial role in making difference in the swing states of Florida, Pennsylvania and Michigan.

Last year, at the Houston meeting of the NRIs, Modi supporters gave the slogan Aap Ki Bar Trump Sarkar in the presence of both Modi and Trump giving the signal that the Indian PM is fully supportive of the second term for the Republican President. This is a case of putting all eggs in one basket- this time in the basket of Trump and such things had never happened in the

is little place of India there. India has to give a total rethink at its China policy once Biden era starts.

The Democrats are giving big emphasis on human rights and it has been mentioned that US cooperation and largesses are linked with the good report on the status of minorities in the recipient country. India will be questioned by the Democrats more fiercely if they come to power on the rights issue in Kashmir and the unfair treatment to the minorities in India. Already

"Most of the upcoming Democratic leaders of Indian origin are close to Sanders and that will have an impact in their views of the Modi government"

history of Indian foreign policy when the country's PM openly supported a candidate of a particular party of USA before the Presidential elections.

Democratic Party leaders are naturally jittery with the Indian Prime Minister but that will not matter if Trump wins for the second time. But if Biden wins, which is likely, some change is attitude will follow once the new president takes over on January 20, 2021. Biden is a centrist fellow in the Democratic Party and he is a close follower of former President Obama. On his own, he will be taking moderate positions on some of the issues relating to India and will certainly not be vindictive towards PM Modi, but he will be under tremendous pressure from the Left within the Democratic Party to take strong positions on human rights issues as also treatment of minorities.

The central policy making leadership of the Democratic Party now consists of supporters of Bernie Sanders and they will have a role in deciding on issues

adverse reports are lying with the Congress panels and the Democratic members will make use of those to corner India. Most of the upcoming Democratic leaders of Indian origin are close to Sanders and that will have an impact in their views of the Modi government.

The Governments come and go but the foreign office remains permanent and it is the face of all diplomatic activities. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his rabid supporters of Republican Hindu coalition in America, have made matters messy and one sided, but the foreign service officers in USA who are very competent, have to take the responsibility of removing the misapprehensions of the Democrats. It is now up to South Block to give a new direction to their staff in Washington and New York once the Biden Presidency starts. Their task is formidable but not impossible. The damage Modi and the BJP have done to India's image, has to be repaired and that task only the seasoned diplomats can do. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Questions on COVID expenses

Editor, The state government has recently given an outline of its expenses during the COVID pandemic amounting to Rs 400 crore (I have deliberately made it Rs 400 and not Rs 399! For, a crore here or there makes no difference!). Going by the public reaction, I haven't seen anybody endorsing the figures dished out by the Government. Most people believe that at least 25% of the expenses could be seriously questioned. I know when the RTI reports are made available our worst fears will come true. I am not one of those who would pass judgment without factual base. Truth is that right now we have no evidence of avoidable expenses.

However, I am a little intrigued by one expenditure provided by the government relating to support to labour force and the daily wage earners. The figure quoted is Rs 51 crore. This looks incredible. We know for a fact that the State Government had decided to pay an ex-gratia of Rs 700 per beneficiary. It was also officially stated that only those who are registered

with the Labour Department would be eligible. As far as I know, there are no more than 30,000 labourers who are registered with the Department. Therefore, the expenditure on this head should logically be Rs 2.10 crore. If the figure quoted is genuine, then there should be 1.75 lakh beneficiaries to account for Rs 51 crore.

Therefore, the question arises whether the figure of Rs 51 crore is a typographical error or genuine. I would request the government to clarify the following: 1) How many labourers received the ex-gratia? 2) Whether only registered labourers were the beneficiaries? 3) If not, why was this deviation from the earlier stated position? 4) At what rate was the ex-gratia disbursed? 5) Whether unregistered labourers were also included? 6) If yes, then on what basis were they selected? 7) Whether the coal mine workers were included or not?

I don't know whether the Labour Department will be kind enough to respond to these queries. If they have nothing to hide, I hope they will. I shall eagerly look forward to it.

Yours etc.,
Donbok Pohrmen,
Jowai-5

II

Editor, The Shillong Times reported on October 17, "Corona Centres No More Free". While I welcome the move, I feel that this should have been imposed a long time back. Be that as it may, now that the Government has fixed Rs 380 for a day's meal, including breakfast, lunch and dinner, for everybody who is admitted to corona care centres run by the Government, I am wondering whether the rate fixed earlier for the same food supplied by private suppliers is justified. According to some reliable sources, the rate fixed so long was Rs 650 per head per day. If this is true, then how come the rate has suddenly been slashed? Has the menu changed drastically or has the Government decided to lessen the burden on the users of the corona care centres by subsidising the cost? For all I know, no supplier can bring down the cost by Rs 270 per head, unless the menu is different or Government subsidies are available.

You may do a bit of investigative journalism, in case the authorities do not respond to this letter.

Yours etc.,
Deliancy Syiemlieh,
Via email.

Corruption charges won't stick

Editor, I am sure Chief Minister Conrad Sangma is tired of rebutting the corruption charges leveled on his Government by the BJP. Time has come to drop the BJP from the coalition. The NPP can survive quite well without the support of the BJP with just two MLAs. Someone has rightly pointed out that if the BJP really cares about corruption it should just take the matter to court on behalf of the GHADC. Why wait for the "caged parrot" called the CBI which the BJP in Uttar Pradesh has been merrily using to save Republic TV from the TRP scam? When BJP alleges that the NPP is corrupt it is only tainting itself since the Party is still part of the coalition. In 2023, people will judge the BJP, NPP, UDP, HSPDP, PDF with the same yardstick that they judge the NPP. None of the coalition partners can get away by saying they were not part of the grand scheme of corruption. By association all of these parties are tainted because they are tacitly supporting the illegal transportation of coal since the MDA took over the reins

of the state. So the NPP need not fear about the next election. The Congress Party is in disarray; the BJP will never be accepted in Meghalaya, not especially after how the Party is hounding minorities and now the 83-year old Fr. Stan Swamy who is booked under the NIA. The regional parties will never come together under a single umbrella but will have to support one or other national party. So as far as NPP is concerned it can safely win the 2023 elections. The Party controls the purse strings of Meghalaya and he who pays the piper calls the tune. So Conrad Sangma and his family should not worry too much!

Yours etc.,
D A Sangma,
Via email

Accept Stammering

Editor, International Stammering Awareness Day (ISAD) is celebrated on October 22 worldwide. The day is designated to bring public awareness on the issues faced by millions of people — one percent of the world's population — who stammer. In India too, millions of people are confronting the challenge of stammering. It creates trouble for education,

interpersonal relationships, social activities, and finding employment. Our society recognizes that every individual must speak fluently. Stammers are isolated and many times judged incapable of jobs and marriage. Community is giving advice to people who stammer to speak slowly, breathe repeatedly, and to develop self-confidence. This kind of advice does not assist them and makes their life more complicated. The need of the hour is that people should accept stammering as a human diversity and accept it graciously. If you come across anyone who stammers, listen to him/her patiently, give the person time to speak, and do not make any assumptions about anything on the basis of stammering. Exclusively equal opportunities and full participation may empower people who stammer in society. At the same time, the people who stammer should stammer and talk to more people and remove the fear of stammering.

Yours etc.,
Amit Singh Kushwaha,
Satma (M.P.)

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

"The stimulus was a case of political patronage, corporate welfare, and cronyism at their worst."

- Paul Ryan

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 79 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2020

Time for festival cheer

THE season of festival, although restrained brings with it good news on a few fronts. One report is that the Centre has set aside Rs 50,000 crore for highly subsidized vaccination of its 1.34 billion people against the Covid-19 pandemic. Another is the disbursal of bonus to over 30 lakh government employees even in these trying times. The flow of about Rs 3737 crore as bonus plus rolling out of money through a leave travel voucher scheme for government employees could bring cheer to several lakh families. With state governments too expected to follow suit, this could be seen as a major step to boost the sagging market sentiments, which could in turn give a boost to the national economy set on a revival path. Other families too crave for governmental support in equal measure.

Notably, there is criticism as to why such a patronage to the government staff and their families who were well-protected in the course of this pandemic spread for over seven months. The government staff was paid regular salaries even as the lockdown periods saw them sitting back in their homes and hardly doing any work. Exceptions were the police-security services and the health care sector. Those manning these two sectors more than compensated for the way the other staffed away their time. Yet, governments cannot afford to antagonize the powerful bureaucracy. Notably unions of railway employees have threatened to halt train services if the bonus was not paid well in time, irrespective of whether or not the government could afford to. India as a democracy has its strengths and its weak spots. Governments have to bow before every pressure group. More so, when the leadership is weak! Nothing goes to show India has ever had a strong leadership. This was reflected even in the way the Modi government tackled the Covid spread.

On the vaccine front, however, the government is seen to be seriously pursuing its options. A few vaccine candidates from within the country are racing against time for obtaining the results and approvals, while those from other nations are also raising hopes of an early delivery. There are naysayers about the vaccines remain though, more so, amid instances of the death of an Oxford-introduced vaccine's volunteer in Brazil. Safety is of paramount importance when a vaccine or a few vaccines are marketed. The price aspect is important too, and the Centre's reported move in this direction, to reach it cheap and fast, will be well appreciated.

Politics of patronage and privilege

By Patricia Mukhim

Someone had rightly said that politicians are insecure and intimidated men. They advance politically only as they placate, appease, bribe, seduce, bamboozle or otherwise manage to manipulate the demanding and threatening elements in their constituencies. Voters who went to the polling booth hoping to vote for change and did not get a single penny to press the EVM are foolish idealists because we can hardly make a difference. The ideals we vote for are our imaginative understanding of that which is desirable but which is increasingly becoming impossible. The voter is a now a blackmailer and each one who has any clout and says he/she can bring voters to the booth to vote for a candidate is assured of a regular government contract. That's how it has worked in Meghalaya for several decades.

There was a generation that would faithfully quote "Honesty is the Best Policy." Today this is passé. Honesty does not pay and you would be a lunatic to look for an 'honest' politician. Once elected politicians will bend the rules and then proceed to 'rule,' not to govern. The constituent has been bought and should stay bought. I wish politicians could record who they paid money to so they can turn around and blackmail all trouble-mongers who usually pretend they are 'better than you' when they take to the streets to raise this or that issue, just so they come to the limelight. Come election time and these same youth are in the fray. Street fights are only to deceive the public, that they care and are fighting for their rights. No one cares for the public and if we believe that politicians care for anyone but themselves we must get our heads examined.

The youth of Meghalaya have seen from close quarters that politics is the quickest way to catapult them to name, fame and a cushy lifestyle they would have never afforded considering the circumstances they come from. I am talking here not of the PA Sangma brood that were born with a golden spoon and whose paths were already laid out by a dotting father. I am speaking here of the thousands of young

people who haven't made much of their lives and who see politics as the only vehicle to instant wealth and fame. Who would not want to be in politics when the stakes are so attractive? And in politics the ends justify the means. And then having been elected who would want to be in the doghouse after five years? To get re-elected means the MLA/minister must show some work but the bulk of his wealth (money from the public exchequer) is set aside to buy votes before the next polls are held. The MLA scheme money comes in handy here!

The fact that Meghalaya just saw 877 infant deaths and 61 pregnant mothers dying between April and July this year did not even cause a flutter here. I wonder if anyone will take up

while Khasi states. And we will never know our territory because we have not allowed a cadastral survey to be carried out. Simple! And even today no one wants a cadastral survey lest it be known how much land is owned by which politician, businessman and bureaucrat. These three categories are the only real players in the Casino called Meghalaya!

There was a time when honour and dignity meant something. Politicians have always needed money to fight elections. So come election time and businessmen/contractors would visit them and give their little packets of notes with the hope of getting back double the bonanza if the man (sorry about the gender bias here but women don't figure much in the politics of Meghalaya) is elected. Then, there was some dividing line between big business and politics. Now everyone in big business, including those owning construction

companies have become politicians because politics is the biggest business today. The only non-businessman politician I know is Mr Lakhmen Rymbui. Every other politician has deep pockets.

For a long time many of us lived with the illusion that we have been appointed policemen of the human race. Alas! We are all captives of the pictures in our heads. Our mistaken belief is that the world we experience is the world that really exists. But over the years there are several parallel universes in Meghalaya. There is a universe where the rich and famous move around in. There is the universe where the poor live desperate lives unable to access basic health care and during the pandemic not able to buy food and other basic needs. There are other universes where the vested interests straddle, creating their own reasons for existence in that universe.

Meghalaya's pain is that its philosophers and thinkers too have all joined politics. Wisdom dictates that when philosophers become politicians they cease to be philosophers. Politics is like a one way ticket to the top for everybody who is somebody. Naturally the state is devoid of voices that promote reason and logic. Our universities have only bred an opportunistic breed of "academicians" who don't want to offend anyone. Hence issues that require a head-on analysis; issues that afflict the state and its polity are all drowned in the cacophony of the ivory towers of universities. There is a clever attempt to skirt controversy as if the aim of academics is not to interrogate but to accept the status quo. When people make noises about NEHU they are only doing it for their vested interests; not for the public good. And I say this with all responsibility, so please chew on this truth dear revered professors, especially the locally bred ones who actually have a duty and responsibility to advocate better public policies.

Let me end with verses from WH Auden's poem, September 1st 1939; "All I have is a voice/To undo the folded lie."

Centre & BJP desperate to bail out far right Republic TV

By Sushil Kutty

The Bharatiya Janata Party and the Shiv Sena are no longer handshaking friends and won't be unless the Shiv Sena returns to the earlier nuptial arrangement - BJP on top! The two have been at war since after Uddhav Thackeray dumped his dead father's legacy and went secular than thou to form government in Mumbai with support from Sharad Pawar's NCP and Sonia Gandhi's Congress.

With control over Maharashtra gone, the BJP's stallion has been chapping at the bits. But the MVA mare has been nimble-footed with wily riders from the Congress and NCP to mount the charge, if required, in style! Now, with the Bihar assembly election round the corner and stakes higher than 'Blacktop' at the LAC, skirmishes have multiplied and proxies are at each other's throats even as these sacrificial goats face lynching in the bitter and fro.

It's not rocket science to decipher that, under the circumstances, the death of a 'Bihar' actor in Bollywood is as much poll plank as it is to log that the opposing party's diatribe is to build the atmospheric that Uddhav Thackeray's MVA government is up to its neck in wrongdoings and therefore not fit to rule. Oust!

At a certain level, the proxies know the risks. Whether it's Republic Media Network or Bollywood, risk-taking is part and parcel. It'll be naive to believe that Arnab Goswami and his Republic Media Network don't know what's in store. Arnab G is the face of the 'nationalist' BJP and the Modi Government in the 'MVA-BJP War 2020.' And Bollywood for various reasons happens to be in the MVA tent.

At least in the Mumbai Police lines, Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray couldn't do much when the Sushant Singh Rajput case was given to the CBI. The Supreme Court was involved and the Maharashtra government did not and could not invoke 'consent' and keep the CBI out on a limb. But since then too much saltwater has battered the rocks on the seashore and the Mumbai Police Commissioner has gone too far ahead in the game to be given up at the altar.

Of course, it's a dirty war. The Modi Government gives the impression to the hoi polloi that Modi is so engrossed in keeping the morale of the troops up at the LAC, and fighting Covid-19 countrywide, that he's got no time for TRP wars and Bollywood bolognaise, however tasty the sauce!

But the perception handlers forget that the caged parrot is let out of the golden cage only when there's need to take over a particular case that has the potential to destroy competition and mark supremacy. The CBI, sad to say, is a hedgemon's hand to play, and the 'central' in it spells who controls it, and who it serves!

If intelligent Indians haven't noticed, fools would tell them that it's confounding and rather funny that Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has been of late too eager to hand over criminal cases registered in Uttar Pradesh - whether the Hathras gang-rape or Lucknow 'Golden Rabbit TRP case' - to the Centre's Central Bureau of Investigation.

It's almost as if Yogi has been left instructions to do so - 'Better give it to big daddy, sonny!' And because the BJP rules both in New Delhi (not to be confused with Kejrival's 'Dilli') and in Lucknow, the cases get equal treatment: Results wouldn't be different whether investigated by state police or central investigators. The same hand controls the joystick!

So, it was that the West Bengal and the Telangana governments refused 'consent' to the CBI. These two governments knew that giving 'consent' to the CBI to enter their states was tantamount to inviting the executioner to a peace conclave. Of course, it's another matter that state governments don't want the CBI to pry into matters that state governments want kept hidden, under wraps! There's a 50:50 chance that the Centre lets in/out the caged parrot not to deliver justice but to divert justice to suit a narrative that suits the Centre's narrative.

The SSR case and the fallout Bollywood drugs investigations against certain actors were like desserts served to the "unknown killers" of SSR. People were emotionally involved and their feelings could not be hurt. And the fate of major elections in a state hinged on these cases. The Shiv Sena had every intention to contest the Bihar elections and denying 'consent' to the CBI in the SSR case would have been 'suicide.'

Not so the TRP 'scam' case. This is a criminal case on which both the Modi Government at the Centre and the MVA Government in Maharashtra want to have scrutiny and oversight over. Therefore, the tussle to get control, and the tit-for-tat. The MVA Government lodges a TRP-scandal case in Mumbai to be investigated by the Mumbai Police. Then, there's a TRP case lodged in Lucknow and, lo behold, there's a nationwide TRP case to be investigated by the intrepid CBI.

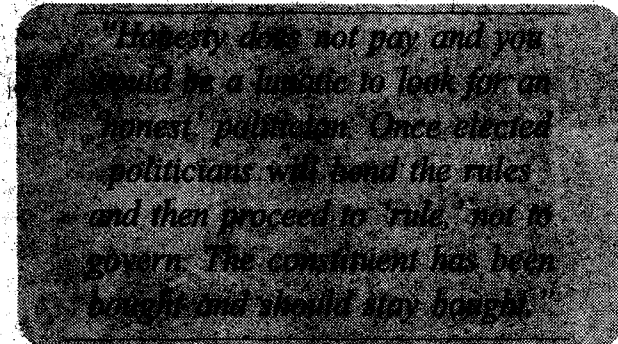
Just in the nick of time! So to speak. After Republic TV got wise to Mumbai Police's intentions, and just after Yogi Adityanath, acting for the Centre and "BJP's friend" Arnab Goswami, the Uddhav Thackeray dispensation, executioner-style, refused "consent" to the CBI - the doors locked and the keys thrown into the dank sewer behind the Gateway of India!

The Uddhav Thackeray Government's refusal of 'consent' came a day after the CBI took over the TRP case lodged in Uttar Pradesh, which had 'Modi Government' written all over it. The apprehension was that the October 6 Mumbai Police TRP case against Republic TV would be "subsumed" and buried to be never exhumed if it's taken over by the CBI.

Republic TV's counsel Harish Salve had already asked that the case be transferred to the CBI. It's also not lost on anyone that both the BJP and the Modi Government stand behind Republic TV with talk of a threat to press freedom building up. Earlier, in a reverse déjà vu, the Bihar Police had instituted a case in the SSR death mystery and then, too, the case had gone to the CBI.

So, what should one make of all this? There's no denying that at least in the TRP 'scam' case, the Yogi Adityanath Government and the Modi Government are "using" them to wage war on the opposition. And, if the Uddhav Thackeray Government is using the Mumbai Police to target Republic TV Network, the courts have taken cognizance and both the High Court and the Supreme Court are "keeping track."

The powers to withdraw "consent" accorded to a state government comes from the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act. The CBI cannot override it. But the Centre can still give the TRP case to the National Investigation Agency (NIA), if suspicions are raised of a threat to national security, of foreign forces behind the scam. There's already talk of a Dawood Ibrahim link and there are reports of a \$50 million 'supari' on the head of Arnab Goswami. (IPA Service)



this matter in the State Assembly and if the Assembly Committee on Women's Empowerment has conducted a field research on this matter, using the state's resources. In states like Sikkim, the MP uses his funds party to employ young research associates to pan out to different parts of the state and get data out. This is also to unearth what the real problems and needs of the villages beyond the state capital. Even MLAs in that state use their MLA funds partly to study the problems of the state in-depth so that governance interventions are more precise and address the core issues with visible outcomes after five years. I guess the MLAs/MPs in Meghalaya will not spare money for such people-oriented interventions.

The fact about Meghalaya is that we have produced very few MLAs who qualify to be leaders. The first test of a leader is

whenever trouble erupts in the Assam-Meghalaya border as a result of Assam's salami slicing tactics. Firstly, all concerned including Meghalaya do not treat the situation seriously. Forget about the Central Ministers calling our CM to assure him of necessary action to ensure justice. Moreover our CM can never expect expression of regret from the Assam CM or Home Minister as they had done to the Mizoram CM. The Assam CM has never deputed a DGP and other top officials to the Assam-Meghalaya Border whenever trouble erupts. At the most, only officials of the rank of DC are deputed to the border during such times. These Assam officials always speak in confrontational tones towards Meghalaya and the Assam CM even refused to have a Border Commission to resolve its dispute with Meghalaya while requesting for the same Border Commission to resolve its disputes with Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh.

The above contrasting behaviour in my humble opinion imply that the Centre tends to adopt a conciliatory approach towards Meghalaya while requesting for the same Border Commission to resolve its disputes with Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh.

acts aggressively against Meghalaya. I hope our leaders are listening but are they?

Yours etc., Samuel Swett, Shillong-2

Govt lacks technical skills

Editor, With the increase in the number of graduates every year and the limited employment opportunities, there is also a very low grade professionalism among many government organisations. The fact that there are only one or two placements for any job offerings, makes many graduates with the desired qualifications want to apply but the most annoying fact is that despite the advancement in technology and technical skills, Government organisations like PHE, MeECL, MBDA and others would still not have the facilities for online submission of application forms.

As we all know there are several job openings offered by JJM and of course the contractual post has never mentioned the exact qualifications of the desired candidates. What is mentioned is either Social work/ MBA/ Engineering/ Social science/ management for one single post. Any graduate who would come across the advertisement and needed a job would apply, when they

have either one of those qualifications. And in order to apply those candidates would have to go and get a hard copy of their documents and then go all the way to the office to submit those forms if there were no walk-in interviews, which is a pathetic condition especially when there is always some form of nepotism. This is a total waste of time, energy and money for the qualified youth.

There are also some organisations where job applications require cash in the form of challan or bank draft. Online payment methods were especially made to substitute these kind of transactions and with the pandemic it's all the more important that online payments are facilitated. But that's not the case with government departments which are still stuck in the mud.

There are a number of programmers and IT graduates who were sponsored by the government and qualified for the JEE (Mains), who would be able to fix these kind of small problems. Government organisations should employ these individuals before employing any other staff, otherwise there is no point in creating a smart city or a smart town.

Yours etc., Arthur Colleen, Via email

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TO THE EDITOR

Improve law and order in the State

Editor, Apropos the news item published in The Shillong Times under the caption "Ichamaty issue spills into city," (ST Oct 23, 2020), I would like to ask this pertinent question. Since when has submitting a representation or filing a complaint before a constitutional head of the Union/state or any other public authorities been made an offence in Meghalaya, following which an FIR could be lodged? It seems here that people, especially the marginalized section, are to forfeit their right to ventilate their grievances before concerned authorities and to seek protection to their life, liberty and livelihood. The recent developments that took place in Ichamaty as gathered from newspaper reports seem to suggest that attempts are being made by some vested interests to silence all voices which speak out against any discrimination or atrocities and which seek protection from the authorities. Above all, what the citizens want from the government is protection to life and property which the government should ensure to its citizens by maintaining law and order. But sadly under the present MDA government, I believe the citizens

cannot be said to be safe in the true sense of safety. It is an admitted fact in the public domain that the present MDA government has miserably failed and showed dismal performance in matters of restoring law and order in the state. The violent incident of May 31, 2018 and thereafter what happened in Bara Bazar area is still fresh in our minds and many are bearing the consequence till date. Therefore, we happened to hear the aftermath of the violent incident at Ichamaty.

After the violent incident of May 31, 2018 that happened in the heart of Shillong city, I, as a concerned citizen and in public interest, had submitted a representation dated June 4, 2018 to our Chief Minister with copies thereof to all concerned drawing his kind attention to the deteriorating law and order situation in our state, with a prayer to protect the life and property of citizens. I wonder now, by submitting the above mentioned representation if I had committed any offence. Would the authorities enlighten citizens in this regard?

Hope the present MDA government will do the needful to improve the law and order situation in the state and restore the confidence of the citizens on the government machinery.

Yours etc., Aneceta Syiem, Via email

Border disputes: different responses

Editor, We see from press reports (Times of India, October 20, 2020) that the violence along the Mizoram-Assam Border has been treated seriously by everyone who should be concerned. Firstly, the Union Home Minister, Amit Shah took keen interest and called the Mizoram CM to express regret over the clash and assured him of steps to restore cordial relationships between the two states. Moreover, the Minister for DoNER, Dr Jitendra Singh and the Union Home Secretary also spoke to the Mizoram CM. The Mizoram CM also received calls from the Assam CM and Home Minister who expressed regret over the trouble in the border areas. Secondly, Assam deputed its Director General of Police and other top officials to hold talks with Mizoram officials. The statement by the Assam DGP reveals the conciliatory approach of Assam towards Mizoram. The Assam DGP said "the border issue has to be resolved through a conciliatory approach and not through confrontation". He added that the first priority is to defuse the tension along the border and to restore normalcy. Now contrast the above to what usually happens

whenever trouble erupts in the Assam-Meghalaya border as a result of Assam's salami slicing tactics. Firstly, all concerned including Meghalaya do not treat the situation seriously. Forget about the Central Ministers calling our CM to assure him of necessary action to ensure justice. Moreover our CM can never expect expression of regret from the Assam CM or Home Minister as they had done to the Mizoram CM. The Assam CM has never deputed a DGP and other top officials to the Assam-Meghalaya Border whenever trouble erupts. At the most, only officials of the rank of DC are deputed to the border during such times. These Assam officials always speak in confrontational tones towards Meghalaya and the Assam CM even refused to have a Border Commission to resolve its dispute with Meghalaya while requesting for the same Border Commission to resolve its disputes with Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh.

"To be trusted is a greater compliment than being loved."

— George MacDonald

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.71 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2020

Erosion of public trust

PUBLIC trust is the essence of democracy. The public elect a set of leaders and place their trust on those leaders to deliver what has been promised in the election manifesto. The word public trust dates back to the origins of democracy where it is believed that within the public lies the true power of society. Hence it is incumbent upon those elected to govern not to break this public trust. One reason why bribery was regarded as a notorious evil is that it contributes to the culture of political corruption. Other areas where the public trust is betrayed is when there is lobbying by special interest groups or when there exists a cartel that drives government decision making. All these signs are visible in Meghalaya today.

That the Leader of the Opposition in the Assembly had a first-hand account of how the coal auction business is used to cover up the illegal coal mining and transportation cartel and that the District Administration is part of the misconduct, suggests that the venality dominates the entire governance system. The administrators have been bullied into carrying out political orders or face the consequences. What is of concern is the silence of the public or the civil society. No one is ready to take on the government when that is their primary role. To leave the business of checking corruption only to the political class is to lower the standards of democracy.

Time was when it was expected of political leaders to adhere to moral rules more strictly than common citizens. For, given their high office, they decide and act on behalf of those they govern. Moreover, by and large, their choices and actions affect more people, often in more serious ways, than the choices and actions of common citizens, not least as an example to others. But when politicians break all the rules and then cover up their tracks through blatant political lying, there is a cause of grave concern because the other actors in society also believe they can get away by subverting the law. When politicians lack moral authority, the rule of law collapses; interest groups jump into the moral vacuum and manipulate the system by adopting the moral high ground and pointing to the failure of the state. This is being witnessed in Meghalaya today. The political leadership has lost its moral authority to rein in the reactionaries waiting in the wings to bully the government to follow their diktat.

Once a government is pushed into a corner and appeasement politics takes over there are very slim chances that it will stand up to other forms of bullying from other quarters. The downward slide is imminent. Covid has only hastened the slide.

Indian super rich have raised their assets by 35 percent in April-July 2020

In pandemic, billionaires wealth increases

By Prabhat Patnaik

Wealth distribution data are notoriously difficult to interpret. This is because variations in stock prices affect wealth distribution, so that a stock market boom suddenly makes the rich appear much richer, while a stock market collapse makes wealth distribution less unequal overnight. In other words, the fact that the rich hold a part of their wealth in the form of stocks makes it difficult to estimate their total wealth which now has one durable component and another that is potentially evanescent.

There are certain occasions however when one can say something definitive about wealth distribution; and the period of the pandemic has been one such occasion. There can be little doubt that during the months of the pandemic even while millions of working people all over the world were suffering from acute loss of employment and income, the world's billionaires added hugely to their wealth; and this certainly meant an increase in wealth inequality in the world.

According to a report by the Swiss bank UBS, mentioned in The Guardian of October 7, the wealth of the world's billionaires increased by 27.5 per cent between April and July this year, the period when the pandemic was at its peak. Their wealth by the end of July had touched a record high of \$10.2 trillion or £7.8 trillion. The previous peak of billionaires' wealth was \$8.9 trillion at the end of 2017. Since then while the number of billionaires has increased slightly from 2158 to 2189, their wealth has increased considerably. In fact between end of 2017 and end of July 2020, per capita wealth of the billionaires has increased by 13 per cent. The point however is that this increase is the net result of two contradictory movements: a fall until April 2020 and a sharp rise by 27.5 per cent thereafter until end-July.

This rise has a particular significance. Since large masses of people hardly own any wealth and what little they own does not fluctuate much in value unlike stock market prices, an increase in stock prices increases ipso facto wealth inequality in society, and, conversely, a reduction in stock prices reduces wealth inequality. A firm conclusion, we have seen, about the magnitude of change in wealth inequality

becomes difficult to draw.

The increase in wealth inequality after April however is altogether different. According to a UBS spokesperson, when stock prices were falling prior to April 2020 the billionaires not only did not sell off their stocks in a panic, but actually bought up stocks from smaller owners who were engaged in panic-selling; as a result, when stock prices increased after April, they got enormous capital gains. These gains arose essentially because the small stock-owners did not have the capacity to hold on to their stocks. Thus the increase in concentration of wealth during the pandemic was not just vis-à-vis the very poor who are without any wealth anyway, but also vis-à-vis small wealth holders. It was not just the spontaneous effect of a general rise in stock prices; it was a specific act of what Marx had called centralisation of capital.

In Imperialism Lenin had said that every crisis under capitalism, whether economic or political, becomes an occasion for centralisation of capital; one has to add medical crises to Lenin's list, indeed every possible kind of crisis.

The usual mechanism for centralisation is the ruin that visits small capitalist producers during a crisis (it also visits petty producers but their decimation is covered under the term primitive accumulation of capital, rather than centralisation), and hence those, typically smaller banks or credit agencies, that had financed them. All these are either taken over by larger companies, or simply go under, leaving the field open for larger companies to encroach upon the space hitherto occupied by them.

In addition to this mechanism for centralisation, there is also the sheer fusion of capitals, the pooling together of vast masses of small capitals into a few large ones, such as what the banks or the stock market bring about. This constitutes another mechanism, a powerful one at that, of centralisation.

What we have seen during the pandemic is yet another mechanism of centralisation, different from the above two, arising from the inability of small wealth-holders to face stockprice col-

lapses that the billionaires can face. This ability of billionaires has nothing to do with any "courage", or "guts" or "entrepreneurship" or any of those supposed virtues that capitalist mythology invests them with; it has simply to do with the fact that they are big.

Because they are big they can afford to take stock-price fluctuations in their stride, and even make massive gains from the inability of small wealthholders to do so. In fact ironically their ability to withstand stock-price fluctuations arises not from their being "risk-takers" but from their being precisely the opposite, namely, averse to taking risks.

Their being rich implies that they can afford the luxury of not taking risks, i.e., the luxury of "safety". Hence they hold their wealth in a diversified form to minimise risk, and stocks are only one of the forms in which they hold their wealth. When stock-market prices collapse to an unusual degree, as happens with any unprecedented crisis, they can remain unperturbed, while smaller wealth-holders are taken unawares. The large wealth-holders use this opportunity to make gains from the woes of smaller stockholders who start selling stocks in desperation.

An example will make the point clear. If I have Rs 100 of wealth then I would like to hold it in a form that gives me a large enough income even if there is a danger of my making capital losses. My preference is not because I like taking risks but because I need the income desperately. So I shall put all my wealth, say, into stocks; by contrast if I have Rs 1 million then I already have ample income anyway and I can afford to hold say only half of my wealth in the form of stocks and the other half in the form of bank balances which hardly give any income. If there is a 10 per cent fall in stock prices then while the small stock-holder loses 10 per cent of his wealth, the large stockholder loses only 5 per cent (i.e., 10 per cent on half his wealth). The latter therefore can afford to take the fall in his stride, while the former cannot. And when in desperation, to prevent further losses, the former starts selling stocks, the latter, i.e., the large stock-holder, buys up these stocks and holds them till the

market turns more favourable.

Stock-market fluctuations are common under capitalism; but the falls are much sharper during crises, no matter how they are caused. And this is precisely the period when the large wealth-holders make a killing at the expense of the smaller ones. Centralisation occurs with a vengeance during such periods.

This entire process while carried out vis-à-vis small wealth-holders, is reminiscent of the primitive accumulation of capital inflicted upon petty producers. If the large wealth-holders buy stocks worth (genuinely) Rs 100 from smaller ones at Rs 100, then there is no net gain for them. To pay for this purchase they have to either run down their cash balances or to borrow from banks or to sell some other asset they own; in all these cases there is no increase in the net assets they own (or their "net worth"). But if they purchase stocks worth Rs 100 for only Rs 50 because of a crash in stockprices, and, say, borrow this amount from a bank, then when stock-prices recover to their true value, they would have expanded their net worth by Rs 50. Larger stock-holders in this case would have enriched themselves at the expense of the smaller ones by Rs 50, which is analogous to primitive accumulation of capital.

The UBS spokesperson claimed that the increase in wealth concentration during the pandemic was a phenomenon alien to capitalism. He could not have been more wrong. It is entirely in conformity with the logic of capitalism; in fact it is inevitable under capitalism that every human tragedy which unleashes a crisis in this system becomes an occasion for an increase in wealth concentration through the mechanism just outlined.

This increase in wealth concentration has happened in country after country including even in India, where, according to the same source, the wealth of Indian billionaires has increased by 35 per cent over the same period to \$ 423 billion (The Wire, October 16). Over this period, output has contracted by almost a quarter, and so has employment; this contrast gives an idea of the modus operandi of capitalism. (IPA Service)

Ah! NH 44

By Francis Suchiang

National Highway 44 starts from the bridge at Nongthymmai (opposite Jingskieng Power House) to Umkiang. The bridge was built by the British probably in the 1920's. It could bear the gross vehicular weight of 12 tons in the era of trucks of seven tons capacity. Meghalaya struck coal in 1978, six years after statehood. And the said bridge never tortured for so many years, snapped in 1984. Meghalaya practices rat-hole mining, being cheap as far as labour goes. To make matters worse the sale of coal at Lad Rymbai and elsewhere had a new economic doctrine. One can load one's truck as much as one could. It resembles the 'buy one shirt and get one free' deal that baffles me as an economist. The trucks were Tata S/Model 1210, meaning 10x10=100 HP and 12 tons axle load. GOI ministry of transport concedes low power trucks reinforced in the suspension system (not allowed in strict engineering terms) the 'load as much as one could' or marjee load in Hindi turned out to be 35 tons, almost three times the permitted load.

From Lad Rymbai to Beltola the NH 44 has four of the world's notorious gradients not seen in any country, namely Sohshrieh, Riat Turiem 4 km from Jowai, Riat Puriang 17 km from Jowai, and Sohryngkham 16 km East Shillong. These gradients proved to be the graveyards of the so called Tata trucks. Sohryngkham and Puriang traffic jams became hell for commuters who spent weeks of sleepless nights. Puriang was famous as a labour room in Sumos as expecting mothers were trapped in traffic jams. For office goers of Jowai and Shillong it turned out to be a pleasant exercise. My friend simply peeped through the window praying to see empty roads, meaning undeclared holiday with no loss of casual leave.

Sohryngkham village utilized this opportunity in giving tea and snacks to starving passengers. Students appearing for examinations became Carl Lewis or Usain Bolt, but if investigators are not kind hearted, then they lose one year. I happened to be caught once in such a traffic snarl but luckily retreated back home. In the thick of such a situation, the place of traffic jam of days or weeks became a transit point. Shillong buses and cars turned back with Jowai passengers and vice versa after due calculated division of fares. Mothers with babies in arms and a leather suit case overhead moved to their new vehicles. It reminds me of the 1947 partition when Gandhi wept bitterly as the Lahore Amritsar road grew slippery with blood of two brothers fighting against the British Raj together. The sharp contrast here is that there were greetings and exchange of smiles between stranded passengers some of whom with eyeballs deep down the sockets on account of sleepless nights.

Last week, a trader friend told me that he received a call from KHADC office to collect the renewed licence. He was also told to bring Rs 10,000 for under the table payment. Why should we pay this amount? We have all paid our enhanced licence fees fixed most unfairly. There seems to be no fair treatment for the non-tribal traders although they never falter in paying all the prescribed fees and pay income tax, GST etc which contribute to the running of the government establishments here. We are always at the receiving end. What a pity!

Everyone was optimistic when in 2014, the National Green Tribunal banned coal mining. To the contrary the movement of coal multiplied as now the much bigger

monsters, the 12 wheelers equipped with tarpaulin to block the satellite imagery took to the road. Two judicious policemen trying to climb the huge body to inspect whether it was cigarette or coal were transferred to distant postings. Truck drivers face sleepless nights and loss of days as they had to queue their vehicles for pollution test or else face fines. There are only two pollution testing centres and in Shillong where the registration number is now V, the forced test proved a nightmare. There is no consumer protection system as in other countries, where automobile industries take care of the customers as regards to emission problems. These countries have regular checks not for fines but to apprise the car owner of the next step to follow be it tuning of the engine or if the catalytic converter needs a replacement. If the guaranteed mileage is still in place the catalytic converter is free except for the fixing charge.

Why is NH 44 or its continuation till Guwahati does not last? The answer is (1) These 12 wheeler overloaded trucks from say Jaipur do not shed off some percentage of load at Guwahati or from Silchar to Shillong. With 40 tons load they crawl on the notorious gradients at 6km/hr (illegal speed from the lower speed limit). So Umiling-Nongpoh road becomes a workshop of vehicles due to overheat or worn gearboxes. Traffic jams are bound to happen and it is problematic for those with train or air tickets. There is no whistle allowance to revive the lungs of our traffic police blowing whistle non-stop to clear traffic. There are times in which a phone call from the truck operators would put our police into the job of a chowkidar to guard the stranded trucks with valuables.

Over and above this, these 12 wheelers are not equipped with two differentials. With a single differential the torque of the 4 tyres is sufficient to peel off the bitumen, no matter how well PWD does its jobs.

A matter of grave concern is that the Transport Department seems to be unaware of the speed limit. Look at the Shillong - Tura highway. One who drives will understand the lack of super elevation and transition curve in sharp turn. When asked about this, the answer was that trucks have to travel at limit of 40km/hour. This is welcome but what about our cars and Sumos that need sensible speed? Nongstoin Sumo drivers complain of the short life span of tyres. So where is the middle limit? In as much as there is upper speed limit, there is as well a lower speed limit. Any vehicle below this limit is fined heavily with a term tail gating. In USA where the registration number plates are a must unlike in our country where only few comply, the driver simply has to consult his mobile to know of his penalty of slow speed in case he is guilty.

For Shillong-Jowai commuters it is just sheer luck or kismet that we are still alive. From Myntdu bridge to Khlieh Tyrshi a heavily overloaded 12 wheeler would crawl at snail's pace of 6km/hr. You need not consult your speedometer. Just look at a small boy walking behind his truck with a wooden jam to throw into the rear tyres receding in the event of diesel mis-injection or gear changing. So what if the jam refuses to perform. If one is in a JCB or WW II armored vehicle, one is safe. But what can a small car do? Lives will be lost. Unless our leaders and the bureaucrats in the Transport Department become wise and aware of impending dangers only kismet will govern our life span in driving.

TO THE EDITOR

Political turmoil crippling tourism!

Editor,

We are in the 21st century and if we still scrutinize people on the basis of race, caste, nationality, and ethnicity, it may incite social unrest as in the other disturbed nations of the world. Let the Government decide on the statuses of the people. However, as a citizen of the nation, it is a smart move to allude to the government regarding the probable infiltration of Bangladeshis into the state, but just take a moment and think, won't it be an injustice to the Indian Bengali community as a whole to consider them as Bangladeshis? Organizing protests and targeting minorities is a crime against humanity. It is my humble request to the people of Meghalaya not to engage themselves in these trivial issues that may invite maelstrom and may turn out to be regressive and counter-productive to the development of the state.

It is time for all of us to consider ourselves to be global citizens hence attaching ourselves to a particular group or community, and treating others with disdain will only add to our woes. Meghalaya is no longer the Meghalaya of the '70s. Back then people were hesitant to move from one place to the other, but now the situation has changed. People are not restricted to their own country or to a

state due to the free movement. Students from various states come to Meghalaya for their studies, similarly, the students from Meghalaya go out to other states and abroad for schooling and further studies. If a problem of race, caste, nationality, and ethnicity takes over humanity, free movement of the people will stop and people will be confined to their respective places.

We have been facing restrictions in movement from one place to another since the arrival of a tiny virus. During this eerie and tumultuous time did the medical professionals treat the patients after scrutinizing their legal statuses, caste, and creed? No, if we allow religion, race, ethnicity, and so on and so forth to be pervasive that will only divide people and the problem of racial discrimination will persist and hinder this world from becoming a global village.

The word Meghalaya has been derived from a Sanskrit word which means 'abode of clouds.' It is one of the most beautiful states in India and a must-visit tourist destination. It seems the people of Meghalaya are oblivious to the fact or pretend to be unaware that the influx of tourists from various parts of the world can be significant in booming the economy of the state. But, racial discrimination, communal riots, and intermittent picketing can be coun-

ter-productive for the tourism industry. It is needless to mention that Meghalaya is endowed with profound gifts such as beautiful landscapes, unique cultures, lush green forests, flora, and fauna; cascading rivers, caves, wild-lives, waterfalls, and the beautiful hills encapsulating the states.

It is time for the people of Meghalaya to realize how significant the tourism industry can be in introducing their state to the wider population across the globe. Therefore, a serious approach towards bettering the political situation of the state will help tourism to flourish and to a larger extent that will solve the problem of unemployment as well.

Let me end my writing by adding a Sanskrit sloka - Janani Janma Bhumischa Swargadapi Gariyesh which means - "Mother and motherland are superior to even heaven." One has a right to love his state or a birth place, but not at the cost of jeopardizing the beautiful image of a beautiful state like Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,
Tirtha Acharya
Via email

NPP gains by default

Editor,
As a Congress supporter, I am not surprised that some Congress MLAs are planning to join NPP. Our MLAs have no patience and no

sense of shame. They do exactly what they wish to and seem to get away with it. They always want to be in power and feel like fish out of water when thrown out of power. It is only in Meghalaya that politicians switch from one party to another when it suits them politically. While the Congress MLAs have become known for their only love-power; the BJP MLAs are no less. Can we forget that one of the sitting BJP MLAs has changed party so many times? Once this person was in BJP, then went to Congress, and then reverted back to BJP. He has always managed to be in power. The other BJP MLA has been in NCP, UDP, Congress and now BJP. Floor crossing for them is like changing under garments!

I have also noted that Congress is a sinking party. We read news reports about attempts at revamping the party within December. What has happened to that? Now suddenly we find former CM Mukul Sangma has sprung into action. His statements are appearing in the press more frequently. He also went to check coal dumps in Garo Hills. He is the party's one-horse cart. Mukul has not been able to keep the party MLAs intact. That is his failure. Unless the legislature party is strong, the organization cannot be strong. Therefore, both Congress and BJP are heading for a collapse. Congress because of its internal issues

and BJP for political ideology and for choosing to take up wrong issues. Therefore, it is most likely that the regional parties like NPP are going to rule the roost as long as Modi is the PM.

Yours etc.,
Badalin M. Dohling,
Via email.

KHADC antics on trade licences

Editor,
I am amused to read the news captioned "KHADC to renew trade licences within 2 months" (ST Oct 17, 2020). As a non-tribal trader who has lived all my life in Shillong, I can say that KHADC has been violating its own rules by not-renewing trade licences. I recall when Paul Lyngdoh was the EM in-charge of Trade, he came up with modernisation of the system. He introduced biometrics, photographing of the licensees at the District Council, police verification and of course recommendation of the Dorbar Shnong. Besides, he also raised the renewal fees abnormally high for augmenting revenue for the Council. All these, I understand were introduced primarily to check benami trading and to make the system fool proof. In one of your reports, he was quoted as saying that some people in the KHADC make quick bucks on the sly.

Like all law abiding citizens, I too complied with all the formalities, albeit with a lot of effort. At every step

there was a hurdle. I managed to cross all the hurdles, completed the photography and biometrics in May 2019. Since then, I have been waiting for my renewed licence. Despite repeated visits to the Council office, I have not been able to obtain my licence. Each time I visit, they tell me, "we will let you know". Now it is more than 17 months and it is time for applying for fresh renewal.

Now the KHADC EM is saying that all licences will be issued within two months. This is a cruel joke. KHADC should understand that it is not above the law. If somebody challenges their whims and fancies in the court, they will cut a sorry figure.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

"Happiness exists on earth, and it is won through prudent exercise of reason, knowledge of the harmony of the universe, and constant practice of generosity."

— Jose Marti

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.72 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2020

With us, a step forward

THERE is all-round affirmation that the time has come for India to take solid steps to protect its territorial integrity and sovereignty in view of the steady worsening of the security situation in the geopolitical region. The designs by China's Xi Jinping to target India and usurp more of territory along the Line of Actual Control are by now well-documented. The killing of 20 brave Indian soldiers in the course of the over 170-day long stand-off in Galwan Valley woke India up to the perils that lay ahead. The Chinese military build-up along the LAC is continuing with a feverish pitch. It is in the fitness of things that India signs some prominent pacts with the US in New Delhi this week to enhance military level cooperation. This is short of a full-fledged military pact.

While details of the agreements are yet to be revealed, what has come to be known is that the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geopolitical Cooperation signed in the presence of visiting US secretary of state Mike Pompeo and defence secretary Mark K Ester will help the two sides share modern military technology and satellite maps of what's happening on the ground. A closer eye could be kept on what the Chinese are up to along the border regions. Reports are that with new technology at hand, India should be able to fire missiles with exact precision at a time when wars are mostly about attacks from the air and less about battles on the ground. This was evident in the US war on Iraq when missiles flattened the entire Saddam Hussein edifice in Baghdad in a matter of a few days, making his land army to run for cover.

It is reckoned that China has over the years amassed such military power that it now has five times the power of India in matters of hi-tech equipment, fighter planes, missiles and tanks. Fears are also that India may have to face a simultaneous war with Pakistan and China in tandem. While India was hesitant in the past to become part of big power games and acted as the principal spur for the Non-Aligned movement that stood for global peace, times have changed. Today, alignment is the way forward and more so when a titan like China is bent on provoking India and grabbing more of its land. The huge swathes of Indian land that China grabbed in the 1962 War still remain with China. Better military ties with the US are the calling of the times.

Communalizing the Ichamati issue

By Albert Thyriang

In the last ten days or so a lot has happened in relation to Ichamati. A complaint to the governor of Meghalaya; FIRs against the three complainants, NCPDR's directive to prove alleged harassment of non-tribal women and children, police enquiry, GHADC's expert Committee to prove discrimination charges, accusation of benami business, an ex Silchar MP writing to the Prime Minister, Meghalaya's Home Minister's theory linking the re-emergence of Ichamati issue to 2021 polls in WB; the criticism of outside interference by a minority MLA; the demand to ban KSU by an ex-governor; the 'provocative' Bangladeshi posters by the students' union; not excluding the war on social media on the sensitive subject.

We are not fully informed of the Ichamati unrest. Our comments are based on secondary sources. Knowledge of the ground realities is limited for many of us. In the press and in social media mostly, Ichamati is mentioned but there are other villages like Bholaganj, Majai and Tylap where uneasy simmers have been brewing.

According to sources quoting Census 2011, Ichamati has a total population of 627 people out of whom 172 are scheduled tribes. Bholaganj has a bigger total population with 1225 inhabitants of whom 168 belong to the scheduled tribe. The October 17 editorial of this daily informs that a substantial non-tribal population have settled in the Bangladesh border of Ichamati-Bholaganj even before East Pakistan came into being. The exact composition may be unknown but for the record, the Indo-Bangladesh border under Shella-Bholaganj Block has a mixed population. History dates back to the British era. Although there may be illegal immigrants but unless they are identified no one can be targeted. The tension is traced back to the murder of a member of the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) in February this year in Ichamati. The student body was in the village, 83 kms from Shillong and 21.7 KM from the tourist paradise, Sohra (Cherapunjee) for a public meeting to trumpet support against CAA and for the Inner Line Permit (ILP). During the meeting a clash erupted between the members of the Union and non-tribals resulting in the death of the activist. Following the ultimatum by a militant outfit, The Hymnietrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) in March to Hindu-Bengalis to leave the area there was an alleged exodus of migrant workers. The proscribed organisation also

alleged that the violence in Ichamati was part of a Hindutva agenda. Vested interests comprising individuals and groups judged this 'exodus' and certain 'actions' by GHADC and NGOs as persecution of Bengali Hindus in Meghalaya. They went overboard on social media depicting that Hindu Bengalis are unsafe in the State.

What made matters worse was the memorandum submitted to Governor, Satya Pal Malik by Prantush Sarkar, Mridul Das and Binayak Roy, on October 15 last. The trio's prayer before Raj Bhavan is blatantly communal besides levelling serious charges against the State Government, the Courts, District Council and the Police that there was misuse of official machinery to harass and suppress the residents of the area. The memorandum claimed that the 7000 families, most of whom are Hindus, would be 'uprooted and de-established from Ichamati and Bholaganj.' The two page submission is a chilling dare labelling the District Council and Legislative Assembly 'Christianised' institutions. Disturbingly, an extract reads "...one of the major reasons for such step motherly attitude by the state, as the majority of the people in the state are Christian with 74.59% of the total population and majority of members in the District Council and Legislative Assembly belong to Christian Religion and without any help of the state machinery, such illegal activities in the state cannot be perpetuated."

Continuing with the communal tone the memorandum alleged discrimination, stating that the Hindu residents were denied EPIC, domicile and birth certificates, ration cards and job cards because of their religion. In its outburst against local groups like KSU, FKJGP, HYC, they said that the groups in connivance with the District Council and Police have shut down shops and business establishments of Hindus under the pretext of not having valid trade licence and NOCs from various local headmen. No wonder the FIRs were filed against the trio for vitiating communal harmony.

Others who magnified the disquiet on religious line are some aggressive social media users. The individuals may have grudges but their intentional exaggeration with communal intent is highly objectionable. They came live on Facebook during rallies and protests from Kolkata (Meghalaya House) demanding justice for 'persecuted' Bengali Hindus. One active user uses terms like 'over

ground terrorism' and 'criminal actions by NGOs'. Another, with the intention of sensationalising the situation, sarcastically asked, "How long will it take from Ichamati from Shillong?" while vowing to visit the 'troubled spot' on a particular date to prove to the world the truth of the allegations.

The over enthusiastic folks also planted the narrative of Meghalaya being a part of India and hence everyone is free to settle here. This is only a partial truth. Except for the cantonment areas and the European Ward, Meghalaya is under the cover of the Sixth Schedule of the India Constitution where non-tribals cannot buy land and own property. Trade is also regulated by the ADCs. This aspect of the law is deliberately not told on Facebook posts, live streams, YouTube videos and tweets that denounce 'religious harassment, discrimination and persecution' in the state. They also harp on the decline of non-tribals in Meghalaya over the years for the above reasons. The 'outside interlopers' link Christians and 'Christian missionaries' to the purported atrocities in Ichamati. Whether they are loose cannons or part of a larger sinister design, these are intentional and malicious attempts to sow seeds of communal disharmony.

The KSU's vigil protest on the national highway in Nongphoh might have been a response to the 'visit' of the 'unwanted guest' but the provocative banners in Shillong, "All Meghalaya Bengalis are Bangladeshis" is communal beyond limits. This condemnable incitement was all the more unacceptable as the poster campaign was done on the eve of Durga Puja. Equally confrontational was the tweet of erstwhile Meghalaya governor, Thagata Roy who branded the KSU a 'terrorist organization' to be outlawed like the HNLC. The immature, controversial ex-Governor wrote, "I say this taking full responsibility... KSU needs to be banned just like HNLC. It is an anti-national terrorist organization, threatening Indian citizens, some of whom are residents of Meghalaya since British times..." While in office Roy had equated the status of non-tribals in Meghalaya with the Kashmiri Pandits in 1991. While the state was up in arms against CAA the ex-Governor and wannabe West Bengal CM also observed, much to the displeasure of the local populace, that the religion based law should have been passed much earlier.

If the students' pro-

nouncement is deemed 'provocative' so too the extreme views of the seasoned politician! If he calls an unarmed group a 'terrorist organisation' what about the Hindu nationalist organisation, to which he is associated with, that was accused of involvement in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the Gujarat pogrom, the demolition of Babri Masjid, the Kandhamal violence and other riots? What about other Hindutva affiliate outfits who spread hate and intolerance in the entire country? There is a strong possibility that an element of that ideology is also playing with fire in Meghalaya. If the 'Bangladeshi banners' are unacceptable what about the likes of Amit Shah vowing to banish all illegal migrants to Bangladesh multiple times?

The genesis of the strife in Ichamati is the CABT-returned-CAA. As quoted by the editorial the whole North East is apprehensive of the Citizenship Act as large scale influx of illegal immigrants from the neighbouring country might render the microscopic indigenous tribal communities in the region minorities in their native land. Before its passage in Rajya Sabha the central government exempted CAA to IPL status states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur ignoring Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. Though protected by the Sixth Schedule the tribal communities in Meghalaya fear CAA will encourage illegal immigrants to flock to the state turning it into another Tripura where the tribal population has been reduced to about 30 percent and marginalising them politically and economically. The porous Ichamati-Bholaganj international border might be one of the leaky spots for Bangladeshis to cross over to Meghalaya hoping to take advantage of CAA thus worsening the already fragile demographic composition.

Unfortunately, during the public rally against CAA clashes took place leading to the communal rumbling, the re-surfacing of which has spilled over elsewhere in and outside the state. Even at the cost of trivialising the vexed issue by dubbing it a simple matter, the State Government claims it is on the job to normalise the situation through talks with different groups. Seeking goodwill from all stakeholders to resolve the turbulence is appreciated but reining in the trouble makers is essential to prevent Ichamati from becoming a communal flash point.

E m a i l : thalbert@rediffmail.com

Arbab Goswami misusing media freedom Mumbai police abusing powers by witch hunting journalists

By Sushil Kutty

The Maharashtra Government and the Mumbai Police will not have to work hard to compile the list of FIRs filed against Republic TV Editor-in-Chief Arnab Goswami. There are hundreds of FIRs lodged against him piled high on Mumbai Police Commissioner Parambir Singh's desk. There is no love lost between the two and the apex court has asked Arnab to give an assurance that he will do "responsible journalism."

The two - Arnab Goswami and Mumbai government/police - have been at loggerheads since April this year. "Loggerheads" is putting it rather mildly. Chief Justice Sharad Bobde put it right when he snapped, "Frankly speaking, I cannot stand it. This has never been the level of our public discourse."

Directed at Goswami, the CJI could have said it for the Mumbai Police and he wouldn't have missed the woods for the trees. Both Goswami and the Mumbai Police have been trying hard at bringing the level of discourse down to its nadir.

That said, there are folks who wouldn't balk at saying that the top court has been taking things rather lightly. The same court has taken suo moto notice of far less volatile matters and laid out dictats. Of course, Arnab Goswami has an "obnoxious" style of going after alleged wrongdoers.

Especially, his antics-filled performance on his 7pm 'Poocha Hai Bharat' show, which takes the cake. Goswami carries irreverence to an altogether different level. People take him at face value and they identify with his crass eloquence.

Rival media baron and TV anchor Rajat Sharma of India TV says, "I don't like Arnab Goswami's journalism!" He is not alone. Top anchors from maybe a hundred other television news channels don't like Goswami's journalism.

They have been helplessly watching Goswami humiliating and disparaging them, designating them members of "lobby of Lutyens Delhi media" and accusing them of being in cahoots with the corrupt. Unverified charges and allegations, and it's only now that the Supreme Court is saying, "I can't stand it anymore."

Goswami's loud, brash, high decibel-belligerence should have been made to walk the plank at the very outset and the man should have been made aware that saying the same things in a manner fitting would have yielded similar results, no need to go all bark and spitfire.

Talking of people who don't like Goswami, there is a plethora of political parties which hate his programmes - Congress, Shiv Sena, Sharad Pawar's NCP, Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool, Mehbooba Mufti's TDP and Farooq Abdullah's National Conference to communist parties CPI and CPM.

Arnab Goswami makes enemies "left, right and centre", which is a primetime show on rival NDTV, which Goswami doesn't lose an opportunity to pull down left, right and centre! But that is his template: Loud and brash. It's a fact though that more anchors in every television news channels are aping Goswami. Losing TRPs is a great leveller and the Arnab-style works wonders.

It was falling TRPs which made hordes of media to gun for Republic Media Network. And it was TRP which gave the Mumbai Police the excuse to lodge a patently suspi-

cious FIR against Republic TV Network. The police erred and the Republic pounced.

Surprisingly, the courts haven't questioned Mumbai Police on this brazen frame-up. The Bombay High Court took note when Maharashtra Government counsel Kapil Sibal admitted that "there's no case" but the court did not dwell on it which didn't gel with the Aam Aadmi. Maybe the courts and judiciary read things differently.

The top court should have questioned the Mumbai Police for digging up the archives and pulling out laws from the British-raj era to nail journalists. The top court should also have asked what's a notorious encounter-cop doing heading the investigations?

Inspector Waze brings to the table a degree of sinister moves which is scary. He was suspended from the Mumbai Police for the alleged "murder in custody" of a young man for which he was suspended from the police force. He quit the force and joined the Shiv Sena. In June, after Uddhav Govt. came to power, he was reinstated in service. His exploits have been discussed threadbare but there's no move to take him off and out.

For the time being, the top court wants a list of all cases filed against Goswami and "some assurances" of more "responsible reporting." The loud, brash Jumping-Jack of television Journalism, hated by rivals Rajat Sharma and Sudhir Chaudhary, has been asked to "explain how he is going to go about this."

That said, the Supreme Court spoke in a conciliatory tone and expected the same from Goswami and the Mumbai Police. The court asked Mumbai Police to tell what it "would not do" and police counsel Abhijit Manu Singhvi assured that no Republic TV journalist will be arrested without due process and summons will come with a 48-hour notice.

Goswami has been giving a pasting to the Uddhav Thackeray government on the Palghar lynching, the Sushant Singh Rajput mystery death and the Mumbai Police handling of them. Earlier, the Bombay High court had said that "prima facie" no case could be made against Goswami. It was against this ruling that the case went to the top court.

The point is that an inflexion point has been crossed. The Supreme Court was told by the Maharashtra Government counsel that beyond a certain point there should not be an "impression that someone is above the law." CJI Bobde agreed and said some people were being targeted with "higher intensity", which called for a greater "standard of protection."

Then, again, he said that freedom of press does not mean journalists cannot be questioned for commission of "crimes while doing their work." CJI Bobde stressed that harmony in society was paramount and that was an indirect indictment of Arnab Goswami's style of journalism, which India TV's Rajat Sharma does not like and which Zee TV's Sudhir Chaudhary could do without.

Not surprisingly, the CJI struck a balance and said, "Nobody is immune from being questioned. We can ensure the questioning takes place with dignity and privacy, but we also want you (Arnab Goswami) to act with more responsibility." Everybody agreed. But will Arnab agree to change his style which is giving republic TV higher TRPs? (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Meghalaya must show its spine

Editor,
In continuation to my letter captioned, "Border disputes: different responses" (ST Oct 23, 2020) published by your esteemed paper wherein I had sought to draw attention to the contrasting responses adopted by the Central and Assam governments when it comes to border disputes between Assam and neighbouring states, I had also mentioned that the Central government treats the disputes between Assam and Meghalaya nonchalantly while Assam's disputes with other states are treated with the seriousness they deserve.

In this regard, I wish to draw the attention of all concerned that as per your paper's report under the headline "Centre hopeful of resolving border disputes by 2021," we understand that the Central government had immediately deputed a Joint Secretary in-charge, Northeast from the Home Ministry who met the Mizoram Chief Minister and top officials in the Mizoram government besides civil society organisations like the

Young Mizo Association and assured them that the Centre is keen to bring a permanent solution to the border disputes between the two states by March or later next year. The Joint Secretary made the above statement in the backdrop of talks being held between the Assam and Mizoram officials on their border disputes and the Mizoram's government refusal to withdraw its police forces from disputed areas.

Implicit in the above report is that if the Central government exercise its will, it can play pacifier and interlocutor between states. In the instant case it acted with alacrity while the Assam-Meghalaya border dispute is left to fester for 48 years leaving our border inhabitants at the receiving end of Assam's repeated aggression.

To complicate matters further, Assam does not even condescend to spare the time to hold border talks with Meghalaya. Last time it cited the corona virus crisis. But, when it comes to talks with Mizoram there are no such hindrances. Under the circumstances, there is no denying the fact that the Meghalaya Government is

really weak and at the mercy of Assam. Therefore we should now beg the Centre to intervene and act as referee to settle the border dispute within a timeline as it has promised Mizoram and in this regard the forthcoming Assembly session may pass a resolution to request the Central government to do the needful.

Yours etc.,
Samuel Sweet
Shillong-793002

Curb the trouble makers

Editor,
It is condemnable that people from outside the state would suddenly emerge on social media platforms and start building a momentum of hate and tension by reviving the past with a deadly motive of stoking communal disharmony in the State, and around. It is appreciable that the State Police sensing a time bomb ticking were able to ensure tranquility and peace during these days of Puja celebrations. Local media reports have now stated that there have been no tensions in and around Majai, Bholaganj and Ichamati which is categorically declared and clarified by the non-Khasi residents of

those areas. This raises the question as to what were the motives of the individuals in inciting such actions. It is earnestly hoped that peace and unity returns and these mischievous elements be brought to justice.

Yours etc.,
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar
Shillong-3

Irritating Covid mobile message

Editor,
Sometimes I wonder if people are really "listening" to the irritating COVID pre-call message that comes every time we make a call. Whoever I have asked have nearly all said that they find the message not just irritating but a complete waste of their precious time. The saying, "too much of anything is bad," is what is perfectly applicable here too. In order to avoid hearing the same message, many people these days have taken an alternative option like calling by WhatsApp or by sending messages. Even the voice of Amitabh Bachchan has literally failed to cheer up his crazy fans. Is this not an embar-

rassment for the wealthy?

In the first few months of the pandemic, people never grumbled. As a matter of fact, the massive awareness and warning against the coronavirus was a must. True, the Government must force the message down the throats of its citizens who are habitually irresponsible and insensitive. Moreover, the government can't take the risk as the major part of the population might not follow the precautionary measures against the virus. But we are now into the seventh month and if "some" people don't comply with the COVID regulations then they won't be even after hearing the same sermon for another ten years. One netizen expresses his anger on social media thus: "If I don't die of coronavirus, I'll probably die of an overdose of listening to the forced coronavirus ringtone."

Obviously this pre-call message has cumulatively disrupted the routine affairs of countless people while putting many others on the verge of chaos and loss. A medical officer who has to make frequent calls to his juniors quips - "No doubt, the Covid message can be given once or twice on each alternate day but not all the

time. It has adversely affected people's day to day activities". Who knows if some hot-tempered freaks would not bang their cell phones like they bang and break their TVs or remotes when their favorite cricket team loses the game? Undoubtedly, the COVID message has wreaked havoc on business and commerce as they are totally dependent on mobile communication.

Now let's make one small calculation. If a person makes 4 calls in 24 hours then that means his roughly 2-minute time is wasted by this pre-call pater. If we multiply that by 100 crore citizens, it comes to approximately 3800 years of time span per one-day-one-night. Just evaluate and imagine how this overdone message has retarded the pace of economic development and tempo of growth and progress. Here I can't say much but I sincerely wish that some group of mathematicians put these facts and figures across to the PMO. The Government must take the public call now.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

"Hate speech and freedom of speech are two different things."

— Leslie Jones

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.73 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2020

Point and counterpoint

THE Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) is a right wing agenda to grant citizenship to Hindus living as refugees in India. These Hindus are presumed to have come to India from Muslim majority states of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh where they are ostensibly persecuted. They are assumed to have faced persecution merely because they are Hindus. Bangladesh has denied persecuting Hindus. At least Sheikh Hasina the present Prime Minister of Bangladesh has said so in no uncertain terms. In Pakistan, Hindus and Christians face persecution; so too in Taliban dominated Afghanistan. The fear of the tribal majority states of North East India is that the Hindus granted citizenship might be settled in their states and upset the demographic balance. Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura already bear a huge burden of illegal migration. Tripura is the classic example of how a tribal state has been reduced to a status where the tribes are now a mere 30% of the population and live on the fringes of development with little or no access to education, even as all institutions of governance are dominated by the Bengali speaking population.

The revocation of Article 370 which gives special status to the people of Jammu and Kashmir last year has sent tremors that special statuses enjoyed by the tribal majority North Eastern states like Nagaland and its special status under 371(a) might be revoked. The latest notification issued by the Union Home Ministry relaxing the laws for buying land in Kashmir and allowing non-Kashmiris the right to own land there has created further apprehensions that such land laws might also be diluted in these states. Up until now, non-tribals cannot own land in Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and in the hills of Manipur. This has been a grievance for the non-tribals who are permanent residents of the states and have lived there for generations. This simmering discontent has found resonance with the BJP which overtly stands for Hindu nationalism and believes every part of India should be home to every Indian. The presence of disciples of the RSS in the North East who have been working silently including amongst tribals adopting the indigenous faith like in Meghalaya has only accentuated the fears that a Ghar Wapasi type of movement could also be unleashed here.

All these undercurrents might have provoked certain pressure groups in Meghalaya to go on a provocative postering campaign before the Puja celebrations thus adding to the fears of breakdown of law and order. While the uncalled for reaction from outside the state may be seen as irresponsible interference, any attempt to create communal disharmony should be dealt with a strong hand. That Puja passed off peacefully is a glaring testimony to the fictitious allegation of discrimination against the Hindu community. If the non-tribals have other issues like Trade Licenses etc, they will be better off approaching the local authorities rather than exerting undue pressure from outside.

Indian govt must think of new mechanism to regulate social media giant

Facebook has moral responsibility to disallow hate speech

By Jithendra Palepu

A Wall Street Journal report published in August this year had accused Facebook of political bias in India. The report stated that Facebook India's public policy head had intervened multiple times concerning the banning of several Bhartiya Janata Party leaders for posting 'hate speech' on the platform. Following these allegations, in September, Ajit Mohan, Managing Director Facebook, India, had deposed before the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Information Technology. Additionally, Mohan was also summoned by the peace and harmony committee of the Delhi Government. The committee had expressed suspicion over Facebook's probable role in the 'orchestration' of Delhi riots earlier this year.

Needless to say, the objective and purpose of Facebook from when it first began have been gradually altered by political and corporate forces. The online social media platform is now being weaponised to spread hate speech and circulate fake news. These allegations are not confined to India but have surfaced in other countries as well.

For instance, in March 2018, United Nations [UN] investigators in Myanmar had claimed Facebook's involvement in inciting violence and hatred against Muslim minority groups in the country. UN Myanmar investigator Yanghee Lee said that the platform had "turned into a beast". The UN came out very hard on Facebook for its inaction on the circulation of hate speech on its platform which purportedly led to large-scale attacks on the Rohingya Muslims.

In light of repeated allegations such as these, it is essential to delve deeper into how Facebook has operated itself overtime, how effective have been the online hate speech laws especially in India, and how Facebook's community standards are failing to regulate hate speech content. Since its inception, Facebook has maintained itself as an online platform. But during a court proceeding in the United States, the social media platform claimed to be a publisher and suggested that it could make editorial decisions. Facebook has conveniently gone back and forth on whether it's a platform or a publisher. It is known to be flippant on its stance. Recent events have shown that Facebook is conven-

iently playing with words to evade liability in different jurisdictions.

For instance, in the United States, Facebook enjoys certain liberty if it is viewed as a publisher or a media company. Therefore, securing greater protection under the garb of free speech laws of the US. On the contrary, it has resisted being called a publisher or a media company elsewhere, but claims to be a platform in countries like Germany and Australia owing to stringent restrictions.

In India, Facebook is commonly understood and seen as a platform or a forum and cannot claim to be a publisher since it does not take any editorial decisions whatsoever. The Press and Registration of Books Act 1867 define the word editor as "the person who controls the selection of the matter that is published in newspaper." A plain reading of this definition would suggest that Facebook does not take any editorial decisions.

The social media giant has the potential to impact elections and public order. Facebook has banned users for their activity on the platform which it has deemed to be unfit or infringing. This decision-making function of Facebook flows from the decision making power of an editor of a publishing house. Therefore, whether or not we like it, Facebook has ceased to be a social media platform and is on its way to becoming an editorial activist.

Online hate speech in India is governed by the Information Technology [IT] Act 2000. Section 69A of the IT Act enables the central government to order the blockage of public access to information available via computer resources. The central government can order such blockage if it is satisfied that it is necessary to do so. Section 79 of the IT act provides that the intermediary shall act as a mere platform and not a speaker. Needless to say, Facebook takes shelter under this law.

As of now, there is nothing in the Indian legal framework that pertains to terminology such as Forum, Platform, etc. Currently, social media platforms fall under the definition of 'intermediaries' in the IT Act 2000. However, the Personal Data Protection Bill 2019 seeks to bring in a new definition for these platforms under the category of 'social media in-

termediaries'. Currently, in India the legal, political, and societal factors are all acting in favour of Facebook's interests. As a platform or a forum, it is not responsible for content creation. It is involved in the transmission and circulation of the content. Section 79 of the IT Act 2000 exempts intermediaries for the content by any third party. Section 79 was amended in 2008 and now it exempts a wide range of intermediaries from any liability for any sort of content by any third parties even though such content is in direct violation of other Indian Laws. If at all intermediaries seek protection under Section 79, they have to succumb to certain obligations contained in the said section.

Thus, to procure the protection the intermediary shall merely provide access to communication systems and shall function as a platform but not as a speaker. It is provided that the intermediary should not initiate a transmission, and should not select the receivers of the transmission. Additionally, it is required that the intermediary should not select or modify the information contained in the transmission and 'observes due diligence'.

This 'observation' of 'due diligence' include- the publication of rules and policies and user agreements; the obligation to refrain from knowingly hosting, publishing, and transmitting infringing information upon receiving actual knowledge of it; and the obligation to take down infringing information upon receiving actual knowledge of it. As part of 'due diligence' compliance, Facebook has come up with 'community standards' which are the ideal standards to be followed while users are on its platform. These community standards are self-regulatory mechanisms that Facebook designed to curtail hate speech.

The existing legal framework in India is not enough to tackle the cases of online hate speech. At the same time, there is a dire need to control online hate speech on platforms such as Facebook and Whatsapp given their massive user base in India. The existing laws in India require the government to notify the intermediary about the infringing content, so the intermediary can take action. But what happens when that government's leaders are them-

selves the perpetrators of such infringing content that constitutes hate speech? This situation is bound to put the government in a tough spot and thus, in such instances the government tends to avoid notifying the intermediary. What should be the recourse in such a case?

In Shreya Singhalvs Union of India, 2015, the Supreme Court of India held that the intermediary is only obligated to take down the content upon the receipt of actual knowledge by a court order or by the appropriate government or its agency. But not based on user complaints.

The situation is very dynamic in India, and thus, calls for an alternate system or mechanism wherein complaints raised by an individual user are also welcomed. In which case, the ultimate decision would be with Facebook's overseeing board which could ensure quick removal of hate speech content. In the ongoing case of Sudarshan TV, Justice K.M. Joseph opined that "media can't fall foul of standards prescribed by themselves." If the intermediary upon having the actual knowledge about the infringing or hateful content has not taken any action, then the intermediary will lose the immunity provided by Section 79 and will be open to all kinds of prosecutions under various laws. It is necessary to acknowledge that Facebook can no longer be bracketed as a social media platform. Therefore, a mechanism of strict laws will go a long way to help curb hate speech online.

Germany, for instance, has imposed an obligation on Facebook and other social media platforms to report any sort of criminal or infringing content directly to the federal police. In case of a default, social media platforms have to bear the brunt of heavy fines as imposed as penalties. Encouraging hate speech in the guise of free speech is directly violating the ideals of the Indian Constitution. Legislatures all across the globe have been very responsive and reactive to online hate speech. It's time that the Indian state gears up to combat hate speech. Given the massive user base that Facebook has in India, it is essential for the platform to realise its moral responsibility and act on it. (IPA Service)

NIA acting like another "caged parrot" Leading investigative agency filing fake chargesheets

By Arun Srivastava

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) which in recent times has suffered severe crisis of credibility and faith in the eyes of the people has suffered yet another shattering blow with the Maharashtra government withdrawing general consent for operations within its territory. Before Maharashtra four other states have also withdrawn consent. Obviously this should worry the CBI and the onus is on the agency, not its masters, to ensure its credibility.

The CBI has, in the past, been called a "caged parrot" that sings the Centre's tune. Professionally the CBI enjoys highest order of trustworthiness, but for its own misdemeanour of pleasing the political masters by agreeing to become an active partner in their dirty game. It has not only done a disservice to the people of the country but more than that to the professional ethics. No law abiding citizen now desires that any case of serious nature and deserves an impartial inquiry should be handed over to the CBI. It is only the government and vested interest prefer to hand over the cases to the agency that too purely with the ill-gotten to bury and hush up the case.

The UP government's design to assign the investigation into the case of TRP

of sedition. It has already implicated nearly a dozen prominent academics and intellectuals in this case. What is bizarre is most of the arrested persons have been labelled as "urban naxals", a coin evolved by the RSS. These persons are accused of being soft to Naxalites or helping them. Though Supreme Court says that as an accused has an indefensible fundamental right to bail if the investigating agency fails to file the charge-sheet within the stipulated period, a significant number of these accused persons are yet to be charged.

The true character of a state is perhaps best exposed by its choice of enemies. The latest victim of the NIA is an 83-year-old Jesuit priest, Father Stan Swamy, who has devoted his life to fight for the cause of most oppressed among the Indian people, the Adivasis in Jharkhand. He has been jailed on grave charges of treason and terror, of being a Maoist, being actively involved in violent Maoist enterprises, part of a larger sinister Maoist Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy.

Prominent intellectuals, lawyers, writers, poets, activists and student leaders have been arrested for dissenting with the policies of the government. He has carefully documented the monstrous profits made by



manipulations by TV channels when Mumbai police was already probing the matter was purely aimed at protecting the owners, editors and anchors of the TV channels who were involved in scams. The move came amidst the opposition's allegations that the Centre was striving to circumvent investigations by Maharashtra police especially in the cases related to the death of actor Sushant Singh Rajput and the TRP scam.

While the CBI is considered a Central investigative agency, it was not constituted by an Act of Parliament like the National Investigation Agency (NIA). The CBI was formed under the law, Delhi Special Police Establishment Act 1946 (DSPE Act). The NIA can take up a case dealing with scheduled offences in India without the consent of the state government in question.

Unfortunately the NIA is also being used by the Modi government to serve its political interests. It is worth mentioning the Bhima Koregaon case. While the Maharashtra government was reviewing the Bhima Koregaon case and had ordered to hold back framing of charges, the NIA at the directive of the Home Minister took over the case without the state's consent. This was done under the façade of NIA enjoying the right of countrywide jurisdiction to take over any case related to terrorism. The Home Ministry had entrusted the NIA with the Bhima Koregaon case at the initiative of the RSS only with the ominous intention to implicate the social activists and left inclined intellectuals. The RSS leaders were highly critical of the Koregaon case as it was against their Hindutva agenda. The NIA used the Koregaon case to involve the names of prominent activists and to frame charges

big corporations, and the inestimable price that people dependent on the land and forests pay. He had opposed the manner in which land was acquired at dirt prices for the Adani power plant in Godda, and how the bulldozers destroyed the standing crop. Adani Power signed in 2016 an agreement with Bangladesh to build a 1,600 MW power plant in Godda, Jharkhand. The coal would be imported from Adani's mines in Australia.

In his own words, "If you question this form of development, you are anti-development, which is equal to anti-government, which is equal to anti-national. A simple equation. This is why the government calls me a Maoist, although I am completely opposed to Maoist methods, and have nothing to do with them". He researched and found that at least 3000 Adivasi and Dalit youth in Jharkhand had been jailed for years for being Maoists.

With Sudha Bhardwaj, already in jail in Koregaon case, he co-convoked the Persecuted Prisoners Solidarity Committee and filed a petition in the Jharkhand High Court seeking their release. Astonishingly the NIA has accused him of plotting to murder Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In the video he recorded before his arrest, he declared quietly, "I am ready to pay the price, whatever it is." He is older than the republic which he fights to defend. For him, the love of his country and the love of his religion is the love of its poorest people. Meanwhile people have been mobilising mass movement to exert pressure on the central government to release Father Stan Swamy. They assert that the priest's arrest is unconstitutional and immoral and shows how the Government machinery is being used to silence voices raised for tribal and Dalit rights. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Who's creating unrest in Meghalaya?

Editor,

The unsavoury developments in the socio-political arena during the last fortnight in Shillong has proved our worst fears right. There was always a suspicion that the Hindu right wing elements have begun to penetrate into tribal states of the Northeast and are asserting themselves like never before. The portents are very clear. They are moving the Governor (who is a BJP man) instead of moving the State Government; they are moving the Prime Minister, instead of seeking our Chief Minister's assistance. Even the Ichamati issue came to a flashpoint after a petition was submitted to the Union Minister of Women and Child Welfare and through it the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights issued notice to the Meghalaya Government. This is not a healthy trend. Worse still is the sudden resurgence of these reactionary elements located at various places of the country. The distasteful comments by the former Governor, Tathagata Roy from the safe distance of Kolkata is simply unacceptable.

Every right thinking per-

son will feel outraged by such communal remarks by a self-professed Hindu ideologue. Even political leaders from Cachar area are hyper active on this issue. Some of them have referred to the presence of 70,000 Khasis and Jaintias who live there permanently. These pointers are unmistakable evidence of the right wing jingoism that has taken over the politics of the country. As minority Christians, I feel, we should also seek international help in mitigating our fears of being trampled by the majoritarian rule in the country. The most blatant case of religious intolerance in the country today is the arrest of Fr Stan Swamy.

All things considered, if the Ichamati residents can take the help of Delhi, so can the Christians knock the doors of international bodies, including the UN for reining in the "constitutional terrorism" unleashed by a regime that has won elections by default.

Yours etc.,
Pynshngain Jyrwa,
Via email

Thanks for a peaceful Puja

Editor,

I thank all concerned for giving us a peaceful Puja this year. We had a simple celebration but most nota-

bly it was devoid of any untoward incident. Sometime Puja revelers create trouble among themselves. This time, such rowdy behaviour was totally absent. The Administration did a perfect job and therefore deserves our kudos. Had the Puja got disturbed, I shudder to think what might have been the reactions outside the State. Thank God for the good senses that prevailed among all concerned.

Yours etc.,
Dibakar Roy,
Via email

Govt lacks technical skills

Editor,

Along with the increase in number of graduates every year and the limited employment opportunities, there is also a very low professionalism in many government organisations. The fact that there would be only one or two placements for any job offering pushes a lot of graduates with the desired qualifications to apply, but, the most annoying fact is that despite the progress in technology and advancement in technical skills, Government organisations like PHE, MeECL, MBDA and others still don't have facility for online submission of applications.

As we all know there are

several job openings offered by Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM). For these contractual posts what is not specifically mentioned are the exact qualifications of a candidate. The educational qualifications sought are Social work/ MBA/ Engineering/ Social science/ Management etc., for one single post. Hence any graduate who comes across the advertisement and needs a job would apply, if he/she has either one of those qualifications. And in order to apply, those candidates would have to get a hard copy of their documents and then go all the way to the office for submission if there is no walk-in interview. This is pathetic especially when as we all know there will be nepotism and favoritism. Hence this is a total waste of time, energy and money.

There are also some organisations where a job application requires cash to be submitted in the form of a challan or bank draft. Online payment methods were especially made to substitute these kinds of transactions and with the pandemic it's all the more important for online payments to take place.

There are a lot of programmers and IT graduates who were sponsored by the Government and qualified for JEE mains, who would

be able to fix these sort of small problems. Government organisations should employ these individuals before employing any other staff otherwise there is no point in trying to create a smart city or a smart town.

Yours etc.,
Arthur Collen,
Via email

Is Agriculture not a State subject?

Editor,

It is indubitably unprecedented that in September this year the Modi Govt., using brute majority in parliament, passed 3 laws on the farm sector: Farmers' (Empowerment & Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm services Act, 2020; Farmers' Produce Trade & Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020 and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020. Mentionably these Acts took effect from September 27, 2020 as President Ram Nath Kovind has expeditiously given his assent. In the aftermath of the enactments of these farm laws, there have been widespread agitations among the farmers in India and as the last straw, the State Government of Punjab has of late passed a counter resolution to put paid to the Central laws in question, thereby indicating that the State

Government can arguably defy Central Acts in a federal set up! The implacable fear of the farming communities against the said Acts is the abiding doubt that Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMC) which are intended to ensure fair price for farm products shall subsequently lead to corporate monopolizing of the farm sector. Additionally, a good number of experienced and bona-fide constitutional experts are harboring a view that the passing of the aforesaid Acts is nothing short of a blatant breach of the principles of a federal structure as enshrined in our time-honoured Constitution given that Agriculture is unquestionably a state subject under Entry 14 of the List II which explicitly does not grant competence to the Central Government to legislate as the issues relate to Agriculture.

In fine, the Modi Government has therefore set a very undemocratic precedent, which I fear, can be conveniently adopted by later unscrupulous rulers leading to demeaning the essence of Parliamentary democracy and for which India is placed in high esteem globally as the largest democracy in the world.

Yours etc.,
Jerome K. Diengdoh,
Via email

"The art of communication is the language of leadership."

— James Humes

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.74 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 30, 2020

'New mood' in Bihar

THE assembly election scene in Bihar is warming up further with the first phase of polling over and the second phase set to start. Despite opinion polls repeatedly claiming that the BJP-NDA alliance is bouncing back to power, the scenario is one of uncertainty as is the case with all polls.

As the campaign progresses, there is ground to suspect the Nitish Kumar-led poll juggernaut is facing serious odds. The chief minister himself feels the pinch on the campaign front and is increasingly becoming restless. The reasons are not far to seek. For one, the BJP that is contesting about as many seats as the Janata Dal United is reportedly aiming to grab the CM post if a situation favours such a switch-over. The BJP did better than the JDU in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. Opinion polls say PM Modi is more popular in the state than the CM who ruled the state for the past 15 years with only a short break. Opinion polls are not the last word and they on occasions have a tendency to misrepresent facts. The reality on the ground could be different.

There is some justification on the part of RJD leader Tejaswi Yadav that Nitish by now has a tired appearance. There is a noticeable complacency on the part of the CM in recent years -- a sharp contrast to the energetic manner in which he took on the Lalu Prasad enterprise, made Lalu bite the dust and later end up in jail over corruption cases. Nitish Kumar as CM was also credited with restoration of law and order. But all these are past credits. Nitish's handling of the Covid scenario in the state left much to be desired. He blinked when migrant labour from the state raised a hue and cry for help to return home. This is what his opponents are now screaming aloud. No leader can rest his oars on past laurels. People are concerned about the present, and tend to forget the past. Trust BJP this time to urge Nitish to take some rest if his stock falls in the three-phase polls. The BJP is now singing a different tune, though. Its leaders have gone on record to say the party will back Nitish for the CM's post. The post election scenario works on an altogether different dynamic. Nitish himself knows as much; a reason also why he is losing his calm and composure.

What seems to work at the ground level is also BJP leader Chirag Paswan's decision to contest the polls alone, outside of the NDA framework, and fight the JDU in all the seats that Nitish Kumar's party has put up candidates. Many suspect there is a hidden understanding between BJP and Chirag, to spite Nitish. Chirag made it clear, though, that he might even have post-poll alliances with Tejaswi to rob Nitish of the CM's post.

Local languages should be part of Assembly debates

By Patricia Mukhim

The Assembly session is coming up soon. Those familiar with the English language will be posing questions in the Queen's English to those that have not had the good fortune of being educated in elite institutions in this country and abroad. But I believe the latter group have earthy wisdom and connect with the people that the English educated don't often have. I still recall how the answer of the Agriculture Minister, Banteidor Lyngdoh on what scientific agriculture actually implies being turned into a national joke because he was struggling to answer it in English and said things that were translated in his head from Khasi to English. That's what most of us do. We think in our native languages and translate that thought into English. There's nothing wrong about not understanding something said in a language that is alien to us. There is nothing in the criteria for being an MLA which says that he/she should know to speak and write English. That is why MLAs and MPs across this country speak in their native languages in their respective state assemblies. You hear Tamil being spoken in Tamilnadu, Kannada in Karnataka and Kerala CM, Pinarayi Vijayan is never heard speaking in English even when he speaks to media persons representing national television.

Purists will argue that Khasi and Garo are not yet recognized languages in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. But so what? The Government needs to hire translators who can do simultaneous translations in Garo when a Khasi legislator is speaking; in Khasi when a Garo legislator is speaking and in English for the benefit of those that speak neither Khasi nor Garo. The reason one is suggesting this is because when a Khasi MLA has the liberty of speaking in the local language the constituents will hear what is being said in the Assembly and they will know whether their problems are being adequately represented. They will also take more interest in Assembly proceedings and become 'active' citizens. Secondly, when the MLA can speak in a language he (gender neutral) is fluent in he can give

better, more relevant and meaningful answers to the questions put by colleagues. After all, the purpose of putting questions in the Assembly is not to embarrass anyone but to be able to check if government spending is commensurate to the work visible on the ground and whether the benefits of governance flow to the people.

In December last year, Santhali language was spoken for the first time in the Rajya Sabha when MP

Khasi alphabet and pronunciation

A a	B b	K k	D d	E e	G g	Ng ng	H h
a	bi	ke	di	e	eg	eng	esh
[a]	[b]	[k]	[d]	[e]	[g]	[ŋ]	[h]
I i	J j	L l	M m	N n	Ñ ñ	O o	
i	j	l	m	n	ñ	o	
[i]	[j]	[l]	[m]	[n]	[ɲ]	[o]	
P p	R r	S s	T t	U u	W w	Y y	
pe	ar	es	t	u	dh	yu	waj
[p]	[r]	[s]	[t]	[o/ɔ/ʉ]	[w]	[ɣ-ɨʔ]	

Sarjini Hembram of the Biju Janata Dal from Odisha used it to raise a matter of urgent public importance during the Zero Hour. Santhali is spoken mostly by the tribals of Odisha. Hembram demanded the Bharat Ratna for Raghunath Murmu, who in 1925 created the Ol Chiki script for the Santhali language. Murmu is revered by tribals and is recognised as a big cultural icon in Odisha. Rajya Sabha, Chairman Venkaiah Naidu, who has encouraged MPs to use their local language for raising Zero Hour mentions, ensured that while English and Hindi translations are available to other members on headphones this was the first time that Santhali language was used in the Upper House. All the other members also welcome the move.

Mr Naidu then informed the House that the interpretation in Hindi was done under a new scheme by a non-regular employee engaged for the purpose. The interpreter from Santhali was a Ph D student. Rajya Sabha has regular employees who translate statements made on the floor of the House in different recognised Indian languages into Hindi and English. To enlarge the basket of languages used, outside language experts have

been engaged on need basis to translate.

Granted that Khasi and Garo are not yet recognized languages and we can blame ourselves for not pushing enough to get them the much needed recognition but a beginning can be made by making provisions for legislators to speak in the language of their foremothers. Let them answer all questions and especially zero hour motions in the language they are most comfortable in so that all of us can benefit from their en-

agement in the August House -- a place where people are not to be made the butt of jokes of. I am sure many legislators will outshine themselves if they are allowed this liberty. The Meghalaya Assembly has seen many MLAs sit through their five-year terms without speaking a word. If one were to analyse the reason behind this silence it is because (a) they don't feel adequate to debate in English -- an exercise that is daunting for many of us (b) they are not confident about raising supplementary questions on their feet should the need arise.

Noted linguist Ganesh Devy constantly reminds us that India has 780 languages of which 220 have been lost in the last 50 years. According to the 2001 Census, India has 30 languages that are spoken by more than a million people each. The Constitution lists only 22 languages and protects them in the Eighth schedule. Many languages are kept out of this Schedule even if they deserve to be included. This includes Tulu which is spoken by over 1.8 million people and has inscriptions dating back to the 14th and 15th centuries. Interestingly, Hindi, a much younger Indo-Aryan language has been gaining prominence much before Independence. When a refined

language loses its status in literary and daily interactions, the way of life associated with it also vanishes. The 2001 Census also found that while Hindi is the fastest growing language, the number of speakers of other languages has dropped.

Khasi and Garo languages will only gain prominence if they are spoken in the seats of democracy -- the state assembly and parliament. If we don't protect and promote our own languages, especially the Khasi language which is now in the endangered list, our future generations will soon end up never understanding their 'real' roots and culture. That makes them rootless humans with a very superficial understanding of their rich cultural traditions. What is true about Khasi language is that not enough has been invested in its promotion and evolution. There is an urgent need to add to the cache of vocabulary and to invent words that are in sync with the times. New words are constantly added to the English language when they become common parlance. Khasi too can do the same. Language must grow and hence it cannot be sacrosanct.

The MDA Government would earn laurels if it were to make the first move in introducing tri-language debates in the Assembly. Every MLA has been duly elected by the people to represent their voices and their aspirations. It would be a sorry state of affairs if they spend five years without making a dent in the Assembly simply because they lacked confidence to speak in English. Perhaps that is one reason why they then have to buy votes to make up for their silence at a time when they should be speaking up.

We should also understand that there is a certain politics assigned to language. English when spoken amidst a group that does not understand it well enough becomes the language of hegemony. This should not happen in a democracy. That we have allowed this to happen since 1972 shows our lack of foresight. We should not step back from addressing this important issue.

His Dussehra address calls for speedy building of Hindu Rashtra
RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat declares war against Indian ethos

By Krishna Jha

While analysing the features of fascism in the Italian context, Antonio Gramsci had pointed out that grounds were prepared even before the dominating forces unveiled themselves. The various democratic structures were slowly taken over. Uniformity was imposed on culture replacing its multiplicity. Efforts were made to influence the psyche of people and either win them over or do away with opposing sections. To get rid of any divergence, there were attempts made to directly eliminate them taking extreme positions or slowly usurp the hegemony manoeuvring all the way.

The Dussehra speech, made by RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat on October 24 this year in Nagpur, reflects the maturing up of the same process that was initiated by RSS in 1925, an organisation that strived for exclusivity, allowing no other to prevail.

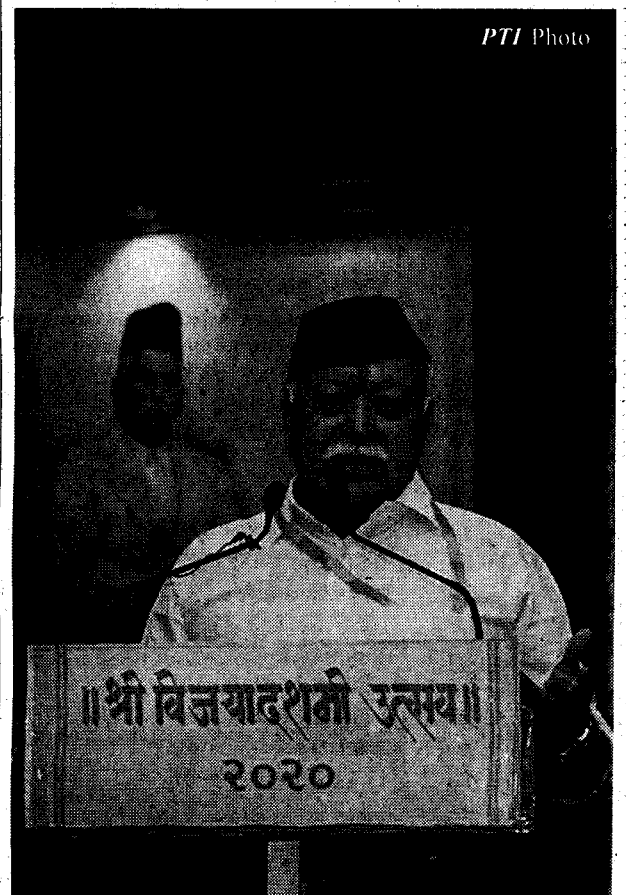
Bhagwat, in his speech, also said that the organisation was not power centric. However, the fact is that the Bharatiya Janata Party which is closely linked with the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh or the RSS has the country's governance in its hands since

were keen to distort the true meaning of this term and added, "It is for this reason that this term is the first target of castigation by those who instigate inter-group conflicts, who are bent on splitting our country and society."

Bhagwat was very clear when he said being part of Hindu Rashtra, one was Hindu, but it did not require giving up one's faith, language, land or any other identity marker. It only made it imperative that there should be absolutely no quest for supremacy.

So, the Hindu Rashtra has only one supreme force ruling the country, and challenges to it would not be tolerated.

The idea that the Hindus must have the exclusive right to define the national identity of Bharatvarshwas in the nebulous form when Savarkar propounded it. But Gbwalkar, in his book, 'We or Our Nationhood Defined', first published in March 1939, eight months before he became the RSS chief, compared the project of promoting a Hindu Rashtra with German anti-semitism. In his book, he gleefully presented Hitler's treatment of Jews as a model to be applied on Indian Muslims and Chris-



PTI Photo

2014. The ruling BJP has traversed a long way, and it showed when in his speech, the RSS Supremo openly declared, "India is a 'Hindu Rashtra' and Hindutva is the essence of its self-hood or the Swa. The phrase used by him was not new; what was new was his assertion. He added, "To us, it is the word expressing our identity along with the continuity of its spirituality based traditions and its entire wealth of value system in the land of Bharat". The traditions and the value system that were mentioned as part of Hindutva, were brought in to explain the self-hood, the essence of Hindu Rashtra, leaving no space for diversity.

Bhagwat was not ambivalent as he said that the word Hindu Rashtra was applicable to entire 1.3 bn people of Bharatvarsh. The Hindu Rashtra which had a new name, that was Bharatvarsh, was not India, said Bhagwat.

There is every possibility that Dussehra speech by Bhagwat was a certain raiser for the coming days as India becomes Bharatvarsh. Bharatvarsh, a Hindu Rashtra, where entire people are identified with it, loses the heritage of composite culture.

There is no other. The variations are smoothed up. Minorities are left to face the ordeal.

Making the intentions of the RSS clear, Bhagwat said there were sections that

tians. "To keep up the purity of the Race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the semitic races -- the Jews," Golwalkar wrote. "Race pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well nigh impossible it is for Races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by."

He added further, "From this standpoint, [...] non-Hindu peoples in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture [...] and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment not even citizen's rights."

The circle is closing down...yet we have our rich traditions, nourished during the freedom struggle, and in the days of post independence while building our nation, a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic, as spelt out by our Constitution.

We will remain one, keeping alive all the Diversities. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Need for unbiased approach

Editor, I am provoked by the write-up "Communalising the Ichamati issue" by Albert Thyrniang (ST Oct 28). In my considered view, the writer has paraphrased the developments on the Ichamati issue in a biased manner. In upholding the majoritarian view on the issue, he has been unfair to the residents of Ichamati. Passing judgment by listening to one side of the story will be a travesty of justice. Not only did Thyrniang not think that the residents of these border villages have a case; he made it worse by deprecating the petition filed before the Governor. Why it should be an offence to submit a memorandum to the head of the state is beyond my comprehension. Does he seriously think that it is a criminal offence? Under which sections of the IPC or Cr PC? Actually, the atmosphere of free thinking and tolerance for contrary views has become impossible in the light of such one-sided partisan narratives. Intellectuals and opinion makers like Thyrniang should look at these sensitive issues more dispassionately before passing any judgment. I am pained that the case of the Ichamati residents has been ignored deliberately or by default. Since

February, after the unfortunate death of a KSU activist there, life has become hell for these residents. The non-tribals (read non-Khasis) have been living in a state of constant fear and anxiety. Many bread winners have left the place out of fear of reprisal or are lodged in jail. Their physical absence has made the life of their families miserable. Shops have remained closed by the diktat of those who are running a parallel administration in Meghalaya. The traders' fault is that they could not produce valid district council trade licence. And why so? Because the District Council has been sitting on their applications for renewal of licence! Why can't Thyrniang empathize with this suffering lot? Why can't he pressurize the District Council to issue the licences, if the applicants qualify for the same? By withholding the licences, the District Council has brought further miseries on the people of Ichamati.

I also find that Thyrniang suffers from some stark lack of knowledge about our Sixth Schedule. If Thyrniang would care to read the Constitution and the debate that preceded it in the Constituent Assembly, it will be evident to him that the framers of Sixth Schedule explicitly wanted Shillong to be out of the purview of the Sixth Schedule. In fact, the Sixth Schedule lays down unambiguously that the Shillong Municipal Areas, including Eu-

ropean Ward and Cantonment, will be a free zone. It will be appropriate to recall that under the Sixth Schedule District Councils are empowered to enforce "reasonable restrictions" on non-tribals. Whether the restrictions as they exist today are "reasonable" or not is different matter. Over the years this provision has been subverted and the rights of the non-Khasi residents of Shillong have been taken away. I would like the likes of Thyrniang to dwell on this aspect of regression of Shillong.

If we want harmony, there has to be justice for all and at all levels. I don't think any non-Khasi is asking anything more than their Constitutional and human rights. If that continues to be denied to them, there is bound to be pressure on those who govern the country. In such a situation, only the lawful authorities of Meghalaya (Government, Police, District Council etc) will themselves be blamed for this "interference" from outside. Let us not disregard law. We all must learn to submit before law.

My humble submission therefore is that the Khasis and other tribes who are in majority in the state show their sense of humanity and large-heartedness in accommodating "others". It joins in them that being the majority community they themselves solve the problems at hand without interventions of any kind--legal or political.

Yours etc,
N K Sharma,
Via email

Make peace with neighbours

Editor, Apropos the report, "Shullai wants Centre to iron out Assam-Meghalaya border tiff" (ST Oct 24, 2020), the initiative taken by South Shillong MLA -- Sanbor Shullai in writing to the Union Home Minister, Amit Shah is commendable. This prompt move by the MLA is perhaps in view of the recent violent face-off in the Assam-Mizoram border. The protracted boundary disputes at about 12 different border areas in Meghalaya and Assam have literally become sore points. Frequent confrontations in the past have also led to brutal skirmishes resulting in loss of lives. It may be mentioned here that at some places the Assam government uses certain communities as fencing walls. The motive is known to everyone. This only goes to create "misunderstanding" among the communities from either side.

All efforts made by previous governments from both sides have gone in vain. One believes the decisive intervention by the Union Ministry alone will help iron out the differences and to arrive at a permanent solution. Mr. Samuel Swett in his letter "Meghalaya must show its spine" (ST,

Oct 28, 2020) has rightly expressed the urgency for an amicable solution. While the Centre can hurry up to assure a permanent solution to the leaders of Assam-Mizoram, why are such assurances not given to Meghalaya for so many years? Should we still remain complacent and sit back? No, not at all. We have witnessed enough bloodbath. What is most desirable now is if all political parties, even social & welfare organizations, irrespective of their ideologies and affiliations, would come together and write to the Union Home Ministry as repeatedly as possible. Hope the State BJP leaders will take the lead here. This alone can draw the attention of Delhi. The Central Government would do good if it urgently helps in building peace with all our adjoining states and also the neighbouring state. The situation should not go from bad to worse.

We also have a painful saga and instances of beligerence concerning the "illegal" immigrants from the neighbouring country. Should we not learn from Tripura and Assam where the indigenous natives are under the mercy of the outside "fearsome" forces? Striving for self-protection is the prime duty now. Metaphorically, the state must put on a "thick mask" and no virus of hostility should infect us. We love peace and so we can surely "love our neighbours"

from a distance.
Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali,
Shillong

Law on mask-wearing

Editor, The Rajasthan government is soon coming up with a law to make the wearing of masks compulsory. CM Ashok Gehlot indicated that the state government is planning to make it mandatory for all to wear masks in the state to check the spread of COVID-19 infection. A Bill shall be introduced in the forthcoming assembly session. Washing hands, wearing masks, and maintaining social distance are the only ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19 until a vaccine is launched. Rajasthan will be the first state in the country to bring a law on mask-wearing. This is a commendable move to ensure people's safety. The need of the hour is for people to follow COVID-19 safeguards and support the government in the fight against this global pandemic.

Yours etc.,
Amit Singh Kushwaha,
Satna (M.P.)

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"Eternal vigilance is the price of eternal development."

— Gordon B. Hinckley

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.75 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2020

Vigilance Awareness Week

The Central Vigilance Commission observes and enjoins upon all public institutions in the country to observe Vigilance Awareness Week every year during the week in which the birthday of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (October 31) falls. This year Vigilance Awareness Week falls between October 27 - November 2. The theme for this year is 'Satark Bharat, Samridh Bharat' (Vigilant India, Prosperous India)." The word vigilance when used in this context means to maintain vigil so that there is no laxity whereby public funds are misused. The Chief Vigilance Commission is a supra-body created to control corruption in all public funded institutions including banks and public utilities.

No one needs to be told that corruption is a major hindrance to the progress of the nation. Corruption sucks the lifeblood of the country and keeps the large majority of people at subsistence levels even while a very small minority cream off the national wealth. Yet the same corrupt people take a pledge to fight corruption year after year without batting an eyelid because like every other observance, this too is a ritual. However, it must be said that in a democracy unless citizens take responsibility and become whistle blowers against corruption, this menace cannot be rooted out. Today the large majority of the poor and destitute in this country are so disempowered that they would not dare call out corruption even if they are at the receiving end. From distribution of poor quality rice under Government schemes to inferior quality roads and bridges constructed by contractors that have to shell out money to politicians and engineers, we have it all despite the years Vigilance Week observation.

Nevertheless Vigilance Week seeks to nudge the conscience of those in charge of accounts and disbursements of funds including those in charge of purchases which is where leakages happen. Also corruption is not merely stealing from the public exchequer. It also means theft of time and that is a standard lapse in most states including ours where government employees, especially the clerical staff are not in their seats at the designated time of 10 AM. They casually walk in an hour or two later and leave before the stipulated working time. And no one has been able to set this straight. Besides punctuality there is also the ethics of timely disposal of work and optimising productivity by the use of technology.

Unfortunately, governments have not put in place a mechanism for checking the daily output from every staff and to evaluate and monitor whether they are getting value for money. India is notorious for not maintaining strict working hours and timelines. Those who deal with government departments know what unnecessary delays they have to face. Government employees don't believe in the adage "Time is Money," but others who do business with government live by that adage. Unless government employees are trained to work like employees of private organizations, this country will continue to lag behind on all fronts.

Reimagining the narrative of our nation

By Binodan K D Sarma

Homi Bhabha in his eponymous work Nation and Narration propounded the concept of a nation being composed of multiple narratives. His theory in a very brief summary, among many other things about a nation, is that it is a 'metaphor' synthesised from a political thought and literary language' of any age. Bhabha outlines and decodes multiple literary narratives in his effort to meticulously establish his theory, which makes the piece of work, both, a very exciting and at the same time a daunting piece to read and assimilate. I was acutely reminded of his work because of the state of affairs of the narrative that seems to be shaping our nation lately.

The narrative I am observing is least interesting, yet daunting and very worrying. I say this because the current narrative seems to be in a tearing hurry to change the composite structure of how India, as a nation, is to be perceived and how she should be culturally shaping herself in the future. It reeks of a licensing of creative thought process, much like the licensing act of 1737 in England, which very sadly ended the career of one of the greatest political satirists and playwright, Henry Fielding.

In his work, Bhabha quotes the erstwhile political philosopher Hannah Arendt, and I am drawn to one particular observation made by her, of how the society in a modern nation is "curiously" a "hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance." This observation, in fact will not come as a surprise to many of us today, where we have hyperventilating news anchors, actresses and political armies ready to comment, shout and troll everything from a death of an actor to how advertisements are corrupting the "religious" fabric of a community.

Bhabha and Hannah made these observations long before we in India saw the influx of debates on such issues. Call it the growing commercialism, capitalism or the onslaught of use and misuse of digital platforms to opine, in the last few years there has been a shift in what our nation's narrative through these mediums, has been. At the cost of being labeled as 'secular gang-

ster' or even an 'urban naxal,' I sadly have to say that this narrative through the brigade of these media channels and social media is restrictive, regressive and radical to the extent that I would draw an analogy to a similar phenomenon observed, though in a more violent manner, during the Talibanisation of Afghanistan. Is this a very harsh analogy? Not really. The difference lies only in the fact that the current brigade of narrative is not defined just by a religious ideology but also by a regimented political ambition. Is it being successful? Will it lead to more licensing? From the face of it, the answer is yes. I answer in the affirmative because I saw the last bastion of democratic expression, advertising, fall last week.

I joined advertising fourteen years ago because I saw it as a medium of free will and expression. The romanticisation of the madmen, their creative freedom and arrogance has kept me in the race in this demanding field for the longest period. We are creators. We are the smarter race. We can tell stories that built brands, people loved or hated. We told stories in sixty, thirty and even in measly three seconds. We are unapologetic of our flaws and arrogant of our successes.

In the last fourteen years, I have seen a lot of transition, from sixty second films to three second thumb stoppers, from television commercials to digital content, from celebrities to YouTube stars, but what never changed was the spirit of the industry - being bold. If a story can be told, it should and will be told. We have in these glorious years shown a husband take the wife's surname, talked of same sex love, shown promiscuity of married women to good smelling neighbours, shown inter-religious harmony, shown third gender equality and even Goddess dressed up in haute couture.

We consider ourselves as a part of a brave new world and we never were licensed, yet. Our stories were part of the cultural narrative and in its own unique way shaping our nation. We always believe in progression, moving away from the old to a new. We always are

about being bolder. But in the last few years the transition and narrative around our professional work also began to change. Being bold came about with caveats. People's sentiments became more important than an insight. "Will it be safe?" "Great insight, but as a brand we cannot speak about it," "Not in these times, brother" are some common feedbacks we experienced from brands we serviced. Something had changed. The brands were scared and boldness did not come easy. Revenues were important and so we played it safe too. However occasionally a great story would be published, almost like a burst of sunshine in winter and lift our hopes. The bastion is alive. Good days will come.

The latest Tanishq ad was exactly that and when I first watched it, before the outrage, I smiled and spoke to myself - "Good old madmen. Still can tell a story." The joy was short lived. The outrage that followed the ad with the trolls, the warnings, the propaganda and debate, leading to the brand withdrawing the ad and thereafter issuing a public apology, shattered my belief in the bastion. It had fallen prey to the narrative that a few wanted us to believe in. A narrative that is shaping intolerance towards anyone who questions a structure that right wing political manifesto is building. I would not be worried of an attempt at the narrative, if it would have remained as an attempt only. The worrying aspect is the mass acceptance of the same.

Nothing is more worrying than this, that a country that boasts of being the largest democracy and secular spirit is now rewriting the foundation of that very narrative, through an online troll army. Nothing is more worrying than the fact that our premier follows the handle of the gentleman who exhorted his online troll army of 1.2 lakh followers to take on Tanishq for the ad. Nothing is more worrying than that in a span of 24 hours, an army of right wing media had distorted facts, created stories, published opinions, shared with millions that the harmless and lovely ad is actually a case of "love Jihad." Nothing is more worrying than

the fact that this episode may drive the last nail into the coffin of the free will creativity that a few motley madmen enjoy in their expression of ideas.

Not long ago, much before this Tanishq incident, a harmless regional ad of edible oil brand for Bengal depicting fish being fried met with the same treatment from a right wing religious group. The angst, similar, disregard for religious emotions. Fish is non-vegetarian and depiction of a goddess frying non-veg food is blasphemy. The result is a similar backlash; the brand issuing an apology and making an edit. Even though the controversy did not attain national debate, the ominous bells had been rung. Just that a few madmen had not heard it yet.

Is this narrative of intolerance and propaganda, across all issues a visible attempt to shape the meaning of our nation to a radical one? Without doubt! So much so that it cannot even be ignored that there is a shameless and meek acceptance of this by thinkers and political analysts across, leave aside the common people. Will this acceptance make us better individuals? I wish I could say that, because no country with a single-minded radical narrative has done anything better than forge a world war that led to mass destruction.

Can we still do something about it? We certainly can. By rejecting the trolls and challenging the perpetrators. By endorsing brands, people and ideologies that make feeble or bold attempts to reject such radical narratives. As professor Timothy Brennan would put it, by writing our own logical bold imaginative construct of a nation that we want to see. This imaginative construct is what I see coming from the last bastion of democracy - advertising. So this is to my friends and colleagues of the industry out there, exhorting them to not let our bastion fall, to continue writing narratives that can shape our nation the way we want to see it. We can take them on. We always have. Amen

E s m a i l
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Musings of a so-called Non-tribal

By Biswajit Ghosh

I am a Bengalee and a bona-fide citizen of Meghalaya. Let me make this very clear - the Bengalees of Meghalaya and throughout this nation and abroad too all are Bangladeshis by blood and by root. After all they are all from undivided Bengal. The soil of Bengal had given us innumerable jewels whose sacrifices have given us freedom from the clutches of the British. A good number of Bengalees were part of the freedom movement where ladies played a vital role. They gave away their valuable ornaments to raise funds for the cause of the nation. In the field of education the soil of Bengal or so called Bangladesh had made great contributions towards nation building. Our national anthem which was recently recognized as the world's best national anthem was composed by poet-philosopher Rabindra Nath Tagore, a Bangladeshi by blood and by root since he was the son of undivided Bengal.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee who composed, "Vande Mataram," a national song, was also a Bangladeshi by blood. So too the former President of India Pranab Mukherjee. Freedom fighters Netaji Subash Chandra Bose, Kudiram Bose, Konoklata and many others are all of Bengalee origin. The word "Meghalaya" is derived from the Bengalee words, "Megher Alay" or the abode of clouds as coined by Rabindra Nath Tagore. Meghalaya is an integral part of India and the Indian Constitution has granted Fundamental rights to its citizens but everyone must follow the democratic path. Here I would like to mention a few words which have played a vital role in creating an unhealthy atmosphere from time to time. These words are 'infiltrators,' 'illegal immigrants,' 'outsiders' 'migrant labourers' etc. All such words must be condemned by each and every right thinking person irrespective of caste, creed and religion' because such words have been weaponised by certain vested interests that create havoc in the society from time to time to make their existence felt. This is totally uncalled for as it hampers development.

I have a question to the Government of Meghalaya and its clear stand towards the above pejorative words which have been part of Meghalaya's lexicon. Are these words applicable to all those who enter Meghalaya from others part of India? Does Government of Meghalaya have any respect for the Fundamental Rights of Indian citizens? Our Fundamental Rights grants us freedom of movement and the freedom to settle in any part of India. Let's come to the real point of minorities or the so called "NON-TRIBALS" of Meghalaya and their plight since 1979. At that time the non tribal population ratio was more than 38%. Now after a gap of thirty years the ratio has come down to almost 9% or 10%. So it's clear that the population ratio gone down by 28% approximately. In such circumstances it's clear that no illegal immigration or infiltration has taken place till date. However, if there are any illegal immigrants then what steps have successive governments taken to deal with them? How many of them were deported from the State. Does the Government have any record?

Truth must prevail at any cost. Nowadays people are very much aware and informed of the facts as they obtain in Meghalaya. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains are all minorities and are the so-called non-tribals so there should be a Minority Cell under the Government for all non-

tribals. The Cell will have one representative from each religious group since everyone has the right to express his or her views because whenever we talk about our rights and justice we are tagged as communal.

Some incidents that happened since 1979 can never be forgotten. I remember "Ghosh Dairy" Jaia; it was a black day in the history of Meghalaya. A young boy of 20 plus years was murdered. He was cut into pieces with an axe. Some houses were burnt and people were attacked from all nooks and corners by arrows and other sharp weapons. There was stone pelting and bloodshed. This mayhem continued for more than two hours but the Administration was totally immobile. Roughly about five hundred families were evacuated from there empty-handed. Where was law of the land then? Am I communal? Those horrific memories are still fresh in my mind. Justice is yet to be given to those who suffered or whose family members were killed. Again in 1989, 1990 in Mawlai Mawroh 9 members of a Bihari family earning a livelihood by selling milk, were attacked. The man was burnt along with two minors below eight years of age. All the bodies were lined up at the Barapathar cremation ground. This memory too is still vivid. And then another incident during the 1991 Durga Puja on the third day or "Navami" in the evening a young girl was moving towards Laitumkrah in a taxi when she was attacked with a petrol bomb. The next day was the immersion day of Goddess Durga and our people reacted to that incident. Am I communal to remember these horrific incidents?

Now coming to the recent incident of Ichamati where a tribal man was beaten to death allegedly by non-tribals, one understand that the members of the victim's family are suffering since the deceased left behind his small children and the family is helpless indeed. Such an incident must be condemned by each and every right thinking person in society irrespective of caste and community. The killer or killers must get stringent punishment as per law, but the question arises as to why such an incident happened? How did it happen? Where are the right thinking people of the society to raise their voices against each injustice whether the victims are tribal or non-tribal? In all such incidents an independent enquiry should be instituted and taken over by the CBI. Justice must prevail equally; otherwise the Government has to answer for all these incidents.

After the Ichamati incident what happened in lewduh and its adjoining areas? How many lives were lost? How many were injured? It's very clear to all, but in this case there is no hue and cry for justice. Should justice not be given to all equally whether tribal or non-tribal since no one is above the law and law should take its own course?

Last but not the least, let's remember that love begets love and pain begets pain. Let us work collectively for the upliftment of society in particular and the nation as a whole, as we are all humans with the same blood running through our veins. When a patient is admitted in hospital and he or she needs blood transfusion we never ask the hospital authorities where that blood comes from and whether it is from a particular caste and community; tribal or non-tribal.

Hence brotherhood should be maintained at all costs because we need to work at building society not to break and destroy its solidarity.

TO THE EDITOR

The matter warrants top priority

Editor,
A propos the article, 'Local languages should be part of Assembly debate,' by the editor (ST Oct 30, 2020), the suggestive write up has appeared at a no better time than this. It took me back to 1968 when the Kothari Commission, in its main nine paragraphs writes, "The child should be taught in his/her own mother tongue as this would enable it to grasp the subject without memorization." What a vision! Unfortunately for us the Khasis and Garos, we are much handicapped by the acute shortage of Science vocabulary unlike our Bengali friends. This is the reason why Bengal produced two world renowned scientists - SN Bose (Statistics with particle Boson named after him) and J. Bose (Electromagnetic waves). In recent times we had Amartya Sen and Abhijeet Banerjee as Nobel laureates in Economics. If our authors of Khasi and Garo society could divert more time in developing the Science vocabulary then parrot-like study may be eliminated as this has caused children to miss playing in parks and playgrounds in the evening.

The Assembly is the house of elected legislators where policy matters are dis-

cussed and debated for the betterment of the constituency and welfare of the state. It is really very painful to witness our legislators, who because they are educated in village schools, could never convince the House no matter how important their presentations are as 'English' proves to be an obstacle. So the legislators whose names are prefixed with 'Dr' and long tails thereafter, dominate the proceedings. Gone are those days when the rustic Mr Nit Shabong spoke in English on the Government's faulty priorities. He said "At lewduh near Motphran we build a bridge over a dry river but in Sohiong, my constituency we do not have bridge over wet river." Those were the good old days when debates were very meaningful indeed unlike today filled with coal, coal and coal and the 34 lakh tons remain undiminished in spite of huge movement of trucks.

Let us not expect anything from the Eighth Schedule especially when the climate in Delhi is now thick with CAA, abandoned only temporarily by Modi Ji and Amit Shah Ji. We could expect a shivering wintry cold when the BJP in NPP clothing still rules us. Instead let us utilize the suggestion made in the article to have individual screens with subtitles in Garo and Khasi and of course English for the hi-

fi legislators. I believe patriotism with mother tongue is more pronounced.

Yours etc.,
Manbha Diengdoh,
Via email

Window of no opportunities

Editor,
Having completed my graduate studies, I'm still tied between job applications and considering whether to take a break this year before delving into the employment phase of my life. While that is my problem, I'm still caught in utter shock at the window period given in certain job posts/advertisements - the ones published in newspapers a day before, specifying the last date of applications to be the very next day! That's hardly 24 hours, and these job applications require documents that may take a day or more to assemble for a mistake-free submission.

The unfortunate part of this cycle within the State of Meghalaya is that the common assumption of these job applications becoming a mere formality holds true. While my future can be dwindled in the hands of the authorities who put up one day window periods for employment applications, I still have to ask - why is this still happening within the State's public job sectors and why isn't something being done? I might

already have the answer and it's the same one I've been warned against for some time now (even when I'm writing this) - but with the employment situation like this, I've got nothing to lose when I call out on a few big wrongs!

Yours etc.,
Kathie Decurse,
Via email

No one's above the law!

Editor,
Wikipedia defines a crime as an unlawful act punishable by a state or other authority. A crime is an offence that is harmful not only to some individuals but to a community, society and the state. Thus crime has legal bearing and if proven guilty, the perpetrators of crime must be punished as per the law. The daily newspapers, news channels, social media are flooded with reports of one form of crime or another committed by some person or group. The impact of criminal acts is that the general public are directly or indirectly affected as crimes penetrate deep down into the system and the society that we are all part of.

We need to ask ourselves this question: Why are there crimes? Simply put, there are crimes because there are perpetrators of crimes. A crime can be committed for various reasons. For example, a person could be stealing to feed a starving family afflicted by poverty. A crime can also oc-

cur as an act of self defence on being attacked; it could be a show of strength on the weak and feeble like women, girls and children. Crimes can also happen due to abuse of power especially in the administration through nepotism, favouritism, bribes, etc. Thus it may not be wrong to attribute crime to poverty, peer pressure, drugs, politics, religion, family conditions, the society, unemployment, deprivation, unfair judicial system. These are contributors towards crimes. The sad truth is that perpetrators of crimes have allowed their conscience to take a back seat. The criminal act overcomes their ability to think rationally. Hence criminals have no fear of the law and no humanity left within them and above all no longer fear God.

But whatever the reason behind committing a crime, the fact is that once a crime is committed, the perpetrator must be punished. When a crime is committed by an individual or a group of individuals it is imperative that they be brought to justice and the law must be allowed to take its course. If proven guilty, the perpetrator must be punished as per the laws of the land. The law must act with no prejudice and unfairness. It does not and should not matter if the perpetrator is an ordinary human being or someone high and mighty in the society. The purpose of the law is to judge one and all with the same yardstick. Therefore, a crime committed by anyone must not be brushed under the carpet but must be brought into the public domain for others

to learn that no one can escape the long arm of the law as all are equal before it.

What are these laws? Laws are system of rules that a country or community recognises so as to regulate the actions of the citizens and if there are defaulters then penalties can be imposed. Why do we need laws and the legal system? The purpose of the legal system is not only to punish a perpetrator of crime but to provide justice to the victim and also to help curb such crimes from recurring. The law is also needed to ameliorate the harm done by the offender on an individual or even a society at large. The law does not only regulate behaviours of people but also acts as a deterrent.

For the law to act as a deterrent, it is important that a perpetrator of crime is brought to book and the victim is provided justice. But how is it that some perpetrators of crime go scot free, when others are victimised? Very often it is also a case of justice delayed and justice denied. These are times when the legal system becomes a farce and a mockery. However, the duty of every law abiding citizen is to abide by the rules and laws that govern the State and its people and if there are any violators, they must be punished. No crime is bigger than the one that condones crime and there is no worse criminal than the one that considers himself/herself above the law!

Yours etc.,
Jenniefer Dkhar,
Via email