

*"Pessimism leads to weakness,
optimism to power."*

— William James

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On 'Urban Naxalites'

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi's speech at an event marking National Unity Day – Rashtriya Ekta Divas, marking the 150th birth anniversary of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel -- was especially significant in some respects. His exhortation to the nation was that a new model of Urban Naxalism has emerged, which should be tackled effectively at both governmental and people's levels. They, he says, are trying to destabilize the economy and deter investors. Notably, the PM has not identified these forces. An inference could be the criticism of his government by segments of the urban elite. They have a problem: they are better informed and show a tendency to analyse things. Normally, the media reflected such thoughts. Views in the past used to get spread by word of mouth too. Today, social media is a more potent medium for expression of views, which are unabridged, aggressive and forthright. At the same time, the established media has largely lost its verve. Critical comments against the powers-that-be are rare now due to alleged manipulation of the media, or arm-twisting by governments. A pliant media, with only a few exceptions, are willing to crawl when asked to bend. This also ensured that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been having a quiet run. The past over 10 years was a period of relative calm except for the Muslim offensives against the CAA-NRC and the Manipur upheavals. On the surface, nothing goes to show yet that there is a calculated attempt to target the establishment.

Fact of the matter is also that the Congress party or the INDIA alliance has not been able to move a finger against the Modi government. The usual street shows against price rise and unemployment, orchestrated by the Left or the Opposition as a whole, are also missing. This looks strange. Industrial development is less and the agriculture sector is ailing for long. Salaries/wages are not going up in most sectors in any substantial manner. The natural growth of the services sector has helped absorb large numbers of youths in various jobs. This was the only silver lining. The present situation was tailor-made for mass upheavals. Yet, the peace on the surface is worth an investigation. The rolling out of welfare schemes for the poor—who are the first to run into the streets and raise a banner of revolt—since the time of the UPA-II, as in the case of subsidized or free ration, might be keeping tempers under control. The stray voices of dissent, here or there, too seem to be unacceptable to the Modi establishment. That Modi has avoided touching hot subjects in the last 10 years, other than CAA, too requires a mention here. Confrontations require guts.

Letters to the Editor

Delayed census jeopardises progress of the country

Editor,
Census data of any country is integral to policy formulation. The Central Government is planning the census exercise next year and is scheduled to complete the process by 2026. While the modalities of the exercise including caste inclusion are still being worked out, the outcome will be followed by delimitation of constituencies of the Lok Sabha and their reservation for women.

Census enumeration was carried out by all governments uninterrupted since 1872 but was thrown off schedule by the pandemic in 2020. Since then the delay in resumption of the census operations is being criticised by political parties and public policy experts. The issue of including caste enumeration for which the last caste census was held in 1931 has also generated political heat.

Out of 233 nations (including those not recognised by the United Nations), only 44 have failed to conduct a census since the pandemic. India finds itself in the company of Nigeria, Afghanistan, Madagascar, Sri Lanka and Ukraine. Indian census is considered one of the hallmarks of its administrative success, along with the conduct of free and fair elections.

A census is the need of

the hour. Without it the administrative state operates in a vacuum and with outdated assumptions, harming the livelihoods of 140 crore Indians. The inclusion of caste still remains contentious but most political parties, including the Congress and the BJP, have come around to accepting the criticality of caste as a marker for affirmative action. The last time India conducted a comprehensive caste census was in 1931. Since then, our society has undergone seismic shifts economically, socially and politically. Yet, the data we rely on to make crucial policy decisions is outdated and incomplete.

The absence of a census jeopardises India's long-term growth prospects, weakens the delivery of quality public goods and services and undermines the credibility of its institutions. Worse, it serves as a tool of exclusion for marginalised groups, women and the poor.

For a nation as diverse and complex as India, accurate demographic data on age distribution, literacy levels, poverty rates, and household access to amenities such as electricity, water, healthcare, and education are indispensable. This data sheds light on unaddressed infrastructure gaps and economic conditions, enabling targeted programmes and progress measurement. Without such data, plans to bridge inequalities and drive development remain incomplete. Additionally, census is crucial for understanding India's marginalised communities. With specific data on Scheduled

Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the government can monitor and improve affirmative action efforts. Nevertheless, the question of a comprehensive caste census persists, especially with calls from opposition parties to include Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Such data is vital for examining the equitable distribution of reservation benefits among OBC groups, ensuring that smaller, disadvantaged communities are not overshadowed by dominant castes.

Fears exist that caste census may deepen social divisions. Nonetheless, caste remains a central element in both politics and administration. By facing this reality through transparent data collection, India can address disparities rather than sidestepping the issue. Though the last caste census was conducted in the 1930s, its insights into socio-economic stratification still resonate. A new caste census could be pivotal for advancing equality within communities and government programs.

There are additional concerns about how updated census data might impact political representation. The southern states that adopted family planning worry about losing seats in Parliament if constituency boundaries are redrawn based on the new population data. Meanwhile, states like Bihar and UP, where birth rates remain high, could gain parliamentary influence. As this scenario unfolds, Article 82 of the Constitution, which safeguards states' interests, may require reinforcement

to protect regions that prioritised population control. Ultimately, the census is essential for measuring social and economic progress. Its findings, including caste data, are crucial to building an inclusive future where policy aligns with the actual needs of all citizens.

It is expected from the government that opinions of opposition parties should be taken before the start of the census otherwise the very purpose of conducting the census will be jeopardised and if there is difference of opinion the same should be settled amicably.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Raihan,
Via email

We are all siblings

Editor,
Bhai Photo will be celebrated in West Bengal on November 3. It will also be celebrated in other states by different names such as Bhai Dooj, Bhai Beej, Bhai Bij, Bhai Tika, Bhatru Dwitiya, and Bhatru Dwitiya. Legend has it that the god of death, Yama, visited his sister, Yamuna, on the second lunar day of Sukla Paksha. After Yamuna welcomed him with a tilak, Yama declared that any brother who received a tilak on this day would be blessed with a long life.

These are all about a legend and an occasion in which a sister wishes her brother a long life. But I know one thing. I would have died young if I did not have a

sister who risked her own life to save her brother's.

I have two siblings, a brother and sister, whom I call Didi. It is because of her loving heart that I am still alive today. I vividly remember that day when she did a spiderman-like act to save me by throwing herself deliberately into a deadly danger. I was a small child then. Didi was also a small girl. She is only six years older than me. One day, I went out with Didi outside our house. She was engaged in conversation with another small girl of her age, and I stood nearby.

Suddenly, a furious looking big bull started running after me. There were men nearby who raised an alarm, but they did not dare to come in front of the bull to save me. Didi came rushing and just snatched me out by the skin of her teeth. She could not pick me up properly but somehow managed to drag me out to safety.

While my sister saved my life in my childhood, another sister helped me to recover from the Delta variant of Covid-19. She used to make a phone call every day during the period of my illness and assured me of her daily prayers for my recovery. Interestingly, we never met, and I could never meet her in my life, as she is no more. But her memory will live on in this brother and her students. Her whole life was dedicated to teaching.

She was a Goan Christian, and I am a Bengali Hindu. We do not have any blood relation. Therefore, our sister-brother relation

has crossed the hurdles of region, religion, and blood relation. But it has its roots in the human bonding that lies in our genome.

It reiterated the scientific discovery that says all living human beings have originated from one woman. Research has shown that fragments of the mitochondrial genome carried by all humans alive today can be traced to a single woman ancestor living an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 years ago. This woman, known as "Mitochondrial Eve," lived in Africa.

My Goan sister and I, irrespective of our differences in religion, caste, state, and gender, carry the same genome of that mother. This is a scientific truth, not man-made divisions. We must not let religious and caste hatred cast a spell on the truth that all human beings are siblings.

The discovery of the truth of our genome bonds enhances the significance of Bhai Photo. It has made it a candidate for an international celebration between brothers and sisters across different communities and countries. We should now say on this day - brothers and sisters of the world, unite! Bhai Photo is a day for me to express my gratitude to my Rita didi and Thecla sis.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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Education mirage in Meghalaya: Lets starts at the very beginning

By Patricia Mukhim

started decades ago by short-sighted policy makers.

So much on the personal front. Mr Tembe has accurately defined Meghalaya's education problem. There are too many categories of schools from fully government run schools to government aided ones to SSA to deficit schools amongst others. Tembe also spoke about the need to rationalise schools—meaning there cannot be too many different types of schools within short distances of one another with not enough students in either of the schools. This happened because of politics. Every MLA or political wannabe wants a school where people ask for one, without any study on the financial viability and economic feasibility of starting such schools in the long run. So now Meghalaya is saddled with a problem it finds difficult to extricate itself from and it's a system that is so lacking in content and delivery that most kids in the villages prefer to stay out of school than to waste time inside a classroom. The question then is—whose fault is this? The children who want out or the teachers who couldn't be bothered or the system which continues to spin on rusted wheels because changing the wheels means overhauling the entire education system?

First things first. Does Meghalaya really need a state board—MBOSE that is decrepit and has not changed gears to drive on the right track since its inception. The only time MBOSE was in the news was whether it should be located in Shillong or Tura. That incident led to a sad saga of firing where lives were lost. MBOSE continues to be headquartered in Tura with a functional office in Shillong. It is a Board with no new thinking; no creativity; no dynamism and no energy. Other than paying salaries to people who work in MBOSE there are no measurable educational outcomes other than conducting examinations and publishing results. So instead of using CBSE text books and tinkering with a defunct system, is it not better that all schools in Meghalaya affiliate themselves with the CBSE and ready their students to write their NEET and other entrance exams for entry into professional courses? I know this sounds like an insane suggestion but a decrepit institution does not lend itself to reforms. So that's my two-penny outrageous and perhaps lousy suggestion to Mr Tembe.

My second suggestion is that Meghalaya needs a comprehensive survey/research on why students find learning so boring. What would they rather do? What would they want to do in the classroom? What co-curricular activities will help them learn better? Kids, especially the little ones, are bursting with energy. Today there was a function in my locality where a school was asked to bring their play-school kids to sing. You could see them brimming with zest and ardour; waving at their parents from the stage. They sang with all the passion at their command and loved what they were doing. So what happens to these same kids when they go to higher classes? Why do their energy levels drop? Mr Tembe spoke about their flagging attention span within 5 minutes of real teaching. Is there a disconnect between what children want to learn and what's taught to them? Do we even bother to ask them?

I agree that it's easy to jump to lousy solutions when we don't have a strong grasp of the facts—and we can't get that if we don't leave our desks and gather facts from close observation over a period of time, not from a one-day question answer session. In fact the researcher should be allowed to quietly slip into the classroom while teaching is going on and observe the students' body language; take note of how many are yawning and how many have their interests elsewhere. That's the only way we can put our fingers on the pulse and address the problems.

Research is not always about data collection (quantitative). It's about observing human reactions and taking note of them (qualitative). Data without facts give us a two-dimensional, black-and-white view of the world. Facts without data give us colour and texture, but not the detailed insights we need to solve the thorniest problems. Therefore, to arrive at useful conclusions both facts and data are important.

Research also means we frame our problems correctly. We really don't know if the poor learning outcomes and behavioural issues of students could be because of poor nutrition, or because of lead in our water systems as has been borne out through research on lead contamination of water in different states of this country. When a problem statement is well framed it opens up avenues for discussion and perhaps

finding a solution. A bad problem statement on the other hand narrows down or closes alternatives for thinking and takes us down a cul-de-sac of facile thinking.

A well-framed problem statement opens up avenues of discussion and options. A bad problem statement closes down alternatives and quickly sends you into a cul-de-sac of superficial thinking.

Suppose the problem statements are - School drop out at the primary and high school level is due to poverty. Adolescent girls that drop out of school tend to become victims of teenage pregnancy. Are both of the above problems or symptoms of a larger problem. I am putting these problem statements to be corrected by PhD scholars because I am not one. If we can get a handle on why a teenage girl jumps into a relationship and gets saddled with a child before she can even care for herself, we might start to do education the right way. So we really need to probe the minds of these child-mothers with empathy and love.

Asking "why" repeatedly before we settle on an answer is a powerful way to avoid jumping to conclusions or implementing weak solutions. Asking questions around the problem statements might help us get to the root cause, as each question pushes us to a deeper understanding of the real problem. We need a real solution to education; not a short term one that treats only the symptoms. Swapnil Tembe has very correctly articulated one of our persistent problems—the huge burden of untrained teachers at 43%. Also, the bulk of the money spent by the government amounting to Rs 3,600 crores goes into salary payment. Evidently the salary paid has not yielded results. Education reforms require a political spine but I am unsure who amongst the MDA ministers has that spine. If you ask me, this reform must be spearheaded by the Chief Minister himself. The task before the Education Department therefore is (a) conduct a comprehensive survey on reasons for school drop-outs (b) dismantle MBOSE and if necessary create a Board that is at par with the CBSE (c) many teachers are in the classroom to earn a salary, not to educate. Most teachers think that teaching is equivalent to educating. You teach a subject but you educate a human.

On that note I hope Mr Swapnil Tembe does not have sleepless nights thinking of the problems posed here and those he has himself figured out.

Our Country, Our Responsibility

By Joseph M. Kharkongor

Bangladesh is facing a sugar crisis...again! Yes, for over the past two years or so, the country has been grappling with a serious shortage of sugar as mills fail to meet local demand. This has aggravated the problems of the country which is already facing food inflation.

So, what in the sweet heavens went wrong? Some economists believe that high production costs and mismanagement of factories have led to a drop in sugar production in Bangladesh over the past two years. According to BSFC, around 425000 acres of land are under sugarcane cultivation and the annual production is about 7.5 million tons, of which only 2.28 million tons are used in sugar mills and the rest goes to molasses making. But despite the 15 sugar mills in existence, production remained far less than the country's total estimated annual demand of about 400000 tons.

The drooping of Bangladesh's once blossoming sugar industry has in turn created a thriving illicit cross-border trade, opening the doors for smugglers through Bangladesh's porous international borders like Meghalaya which stretches for approximately 443 kms. Smugglers collude with factory workers in India and villagers residing along the international border, who then smuggle sugar and sell it along the border areas. Bags of sugar from India are continually ferried into Bangladesh on almost a daily basis. Large-scale traders use large trucks and dumpers, while smaller traders rely on regular vehicles like pick-ups and sumos to ferry illegal sugar into the country through uncontrolled border points. The number of bags smuggled during each trip depends on the size of the vehicle; and once in Bangladesh, the sugar is repackaged into different sacks and smaller packages from local sugar factories to evade taxes.

Although some smugglers along the Indo-Bangla border have been prosecuted and smuggled sugar confiscated, law enforcement actions have not deterred such criminals. A multi-agency response is therefore, needed to stop sugar smuggling into Bangladesh. Investigative and enforcement teams made up of officials from the BSF, Customs and the MLP must work together to cripple the networks driving this crime. Lower taxation could also incentivize and enable sugar factories to produce cheaply, while lowering the retail price of sugar for local consumers. To protect the country from the influx of illegal sugar, the government must look beyond the current inadequate border control measures and find ways to make the smugglers' rewards somewhat sour.

In some never-before-seen images made possible by an anonymous hacker, Bangladeshi smugglers numbering in the hundreds are seen exiting Indian soil carrying bags of sugar in broad daylight. GPS coordinates pinpoint the location to an open field of a village located at Meghalaya's East Khasi Hills; just a few hundred meters from the Indo-Bangla international border. The file which was extracted from the Gmail account of a senior employee at the Ministry of Home Affairs, appears to be the draft of an internal report.

According to this report, smuggling of cattle also takes place, where truckloads from states like Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan are shipped to the Indo-Bangla border ostensibly for grazing purposes. The average price of a buffalo, the report claims, is Rs. 2000; but once it crosses the international border, its price increases

to Rs. 5000. Interestingly, the Bangladesh government levies custom duties on these smuggled cattle at the rate of Rs. 420 per cattle. Thus, a buffalo which would normally cost Rs. 2000 in India would cost Rs. 5420 after it is smuggled. No wonder cattle smuggling has become so lucrative!

Apart from this, smuggling of narcotics, liquor, arms and ammunition, precious stones and Chinese-made goods also finds its way into Bangladesh illegally. Presently, the Indo-Bangla border has 802 BOPs with 80 BSF battalions guarding the 4096.7 km long stretch; and on an average, seizes about one lakh cattle per year. Therefore, it is estimated that the Indian government is losing approximately Rs. 10560 crores to cattle smugglers annually. The 37-page report further claims that smuggling of other essential items such as salt and onion are also rampant along the Indo-Bangla border. To address these problems, the government should make an effort to first and foremost, settle border disputes and fully demarcate the borders at the earliest opportunity. It is also highly recommended that a 'Border Trade Management Committee' be created under the Border Security Force and the MLP, which would focus solely on illicit cross-border trade.

Proper management of borders is essential for national security and neglect of any of its aspects can seriously jeopardize the defence of the country. But effective management of India's international borders is quite a challenging task given the difficult terrain and complex socio-economic milieu, coupled with unhelpful neighbours. However, identifying sensitive areas, increasing the number of border posts in these areas and augmenting the strength of the border guarding personnel in sensitive BOPs, could help in the prevention of smuggling. Additionally, installing alarm systems to detect breach of fence could also help in regulating suspicious activity in these areas.

It is imperative that due consideration should be given to these hurdles and adequate measures formulated to find a way out. It can be said without doubt that one area where the government needs to focus more is on Centre-state relations; as most of the problems of implementation of any plan or programme stem from their mutually divergent perceptions and hence uncooperative attitude towards each other. Another factor of vital importance for border management is to have a well-trained and dedicated border guarding force, which also has warm and friendly relations with the local population. Although larger constraints like lack of political will, vested interests and lack of coordination between Centre and State governments would require considerable time and concerted efforts to mitigate, smaller issues like smuggling however, could definitely be resolved if handled properly... all it takes is teamwork!

(The author is a private teacher and skill trainer. He resides at Mawlai Nongkwar, Shillong - 8. Joseph M. Kharkongor is not involved in any of the hacking or uncovering of information, but plays the part of a middleman, passing on data received anonymously via email to the press. For any questions or concern regarding material featured/mentioned in this article or any of the previous articles or letters by this author, feel free to email the hacker directly at roy.marbaniang@protonmail.com)

"Life is measured in love and positive contributions and moments of grace."

— Carly Fiorina

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Erasing Shillong's History

ST Anthony's Primary School which houses students from Nursery to Class 5 and now has close to 800 students is soon to be demolished and replaced by a four-storeyed structure. Reasons given by the institutional head is that at the time of its construction 123 years ago the building was never meant to accommodate so many students and structurally too it has been subjected to a lot of wear and tear that cannot be remedied by repurposing the building. The century plus school building is not just an educational institution of brick and mortar but a historical artefact that is linked to the history of Shillong. While realists may consider a building nothing more than a series of walls covered with a roof that protects whatever is inside from external elements, past pupils of the school and many others who value heritage buildings are mourning the impending loss of a slice of Meghalaya's history. Space in Shillong city is a huge constraint hence the custodians of St Anthony's School feel that it would serve a greater purpose if the new school building is planned in a manner to accommodate the growing number of students rather than give in to emotional attachments.

Going by the comments of the present custodians of the School, they too mourn the loss of a landmark building and the fact that a new structure will replace it. Anyone born after the demolition of the school will not know what the iconic building looked like. For many others though, buildings across the world have secured a place in the hearts of people, often for reasons that are not entirely explainable. This same nostalgia is now making the alumni and the parents of the present batch of primary school students regret the demolition because it means erasing history. Architects opine that repurposing an old building is always more sustainable than demolishing it. Using a tectonic approach to architecture allows buildings to be rehabilitated in a way that respects their original structure, while improving their energy performance and meeting the needs of their occupants. Besides, for several individuals and communities worldwide, historic buildings create a sense of place. They capture a moment in history and serve as a powerful reminder of who we are and where we came from.

While plans to demolish the grand old St Anthony's School is taking shape observers have questioned the silence of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) Meghalaya Chapter. INTACH was founded in 1984 in New Delhi with the vision to spearhead heritage awareness and conservation in India. Today INTACH is recognized as one of the world's largest heritage organizations, with over 228 Chapters across the country. In the past 40 years, INTACH has pioneered the conservation and preservation of both natural and built heritage and intangible heritage as well. And what about the Meghalaya Heritage Act which had earlier identified heritage buildings like Tara Ghar among others? Pragmatism must be tempered by a sense of history. Not every old building needs to be pulled apart. Some are reminders of unwritten history.

Inclusivity in Dorbar Shnong: The new toolkit for growth and social change

By Erwin K. Syiem Sutnga

The matrilineal tribes of the Khasi Jaintia and Garo people in Meghalaya stands as one of the few remaining matrilineal societies in the world. This system offers women significant control over familial identity, inheritance and property, but it does not necessarily translate to political or leadership empowerment. Despite women's centrality in family and clan dynamics where the children take the clan name of their mother, they remain sidelined in key decision-making bodies like the Dorbar Shnong or A-kingrangni Krima (village council in Garo Hills). This exclusion becomes all the more striking when juxtaposed with the various socio-economic challenges that could benefit from women's unique insights and leadership. What is encouraging is that in Kur or Clan Organisation Khasi- Jaintia women are being given a more dynamic role. Encouraged by the positive response I got from my last article on the need for changes in the Dorbar Shnong and its role in our evolving and changing world, I did research on the issue now raised in this treatise.

In this attempt at a comprehensive analysis, we will explore the contradictions inherent in the matrilineal systems of Meghalaya. Emphasis is on the social and governance issues that need immediate attention—such as child abuse, domestic violence, substance abuse inclusive of drugs and alcohol abuse and the role that women could play in tackling these problems if they were given space in the governance systems in the Dorbar Shnong. We will also look at the education system, which fails to account for hidden disabilities like dyslexia and other learning difficulties, and how social awareness and coordinated community efforts can help reduce the dropout rate in the region. Another key sector issue self-employment, skills development and financial stability of economically challenged house holds and unemployed youths.

The contradictions of Matriliney: Exclusion from participation

Despite being matrilineal, where lineage and inheritance are passed through women, tribal society of the Khasi- Jaintia tribes remains largely patriarchal when it comes to political power and governance both in the traditional grassroot governance system and in the political sphere of electoral politics. In the main the Dorbar Shnong, which governs local village affairs, remains an all-male body, where women are excluded from formal participatory roles. This exclusion is in stark contrast to their pivotal roles in family welfare and clan responsibilities. Women, who manage the family's financial, emotional, and

social needs, are generally not given a voice in matters of public governance especially in the rural areas while changes are starting to come about in more urban areas and in the capital of Shillong.

This paradox restricts women's potential to contribute to crucial community issues like domestic violence, child abuse, substance abuse, and even educational reforms—problems that disproportionately affect women, children, and vulnerable groups within the society.

Impact on Social Issues: A missed opportunity for effective governance

1. High Incidents of POCSO Cases and Child Abuse

One of the most pressing social issues in Meghalaya is the rising number of cases under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO). A substantial number of these cases involve abuse and rape perpetrated within the community, often by family members or trusted individuals. Women, who are the primary caregivers in Khasi Jaintia and Garo society, could play a crucial role in early detection, reporting, and offering support to victims if they were part of the decision-making processes in the Dorbar Shnong or A-kingrangni Krima. Their exclusion, however, limits the community's ability to effectively combat child abuse.

Moreover, male-dominated governance structures often fail to prioritize child protection or establish robust mechanisms for justice and rehabilitation. Women's involvement could lead to stronger community-based child protection committees, more stringent surveillance, and a more compassionate approach to victim support. Going by the rising number of POCSO cases in every district and I speak as a member of the legal fraternity, the problem is a menace that needs to be tackled by social action and awareness programmes so that would be offenders also can identify their own need for treatment.

2. Domestic Violence: A hidden crisis

Domestic violence is another issue that, despite our tribal society's matrilineal framework, remains prevalent. The exclusion of women from the Dorbar Shnong means that domestic violence often goes underreported and under-addressed. In many cases, women are hesitant to report their abuse to male leaders for fear of judgment, retaliation, or social stigma. If women had prominent participatory roles within the Dorbar Shnong or A-kingrangni Krima as is the case in Garo Hills, there would be a stronger push for legal reforms, shelters for victims, counseling services, and community education programs focused on elimi-

nating domestic violence. This is very much needed so that the genuine incidents of domestic violence are tackled while controlling the rise of false cases against men made out of spite or ulterior motives which manipulate the law for egregious reasons.

3. Substance Abuse: The growing menace of Drugs and Alcoholism

The growing problem of substance abuse, particularly among young men in tribal society whether they be Khasi, Jaintia, Garo, or amongst other demographic groups is often deeply linked to other social ills such as broken homes, domestic violence and crime, parental neglect. Drug addiction and alcoholism are not only detrimental to the individual but also to the family and the entire community. The absence of women from participatory governance impedes the creation of effective rehabilitation programs and anti-drug campaigns. Women, especially as mothers and caregivers, can bring valuable insight into understanding the emotional and psychological factors behind substance abuse and could lead community-driven efforts to combat these issues.

Women's groups could organize rehabilitation centers, anti-drug campaigns, and community outreach programs, focusing on both prevention and treatment. Additionally, they could play a crucial role in collaboration with law enforcement and the local Dorbar Shnong and Village Councils to curb drug trafficking and alcohol abuse in their villages.

The Education System: tackling hidden disabilities and reducing Dropout Rates

While social issues such as child abuse, domestic violence, and substance abuse remain critical, the education delivery system in the state faces its own challenges. Particularly in the challenge of dealing with unhappy teachers and the increasing needs for diversification and addressing the emerging needs of the people of Meghalaya. A very big concern is addressing the hidden disabilities and high dropout rates. Addressing these problems requires a coordinated government and community effort, including the involvement of women, educators, and the Dorbar Shnong.

1. Hidden Disabilities: Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia, Auditory Processing Disorder and Nonverbal Learning Disability

One of the major shortcomings in the current education system is its failure to recognize and address hidden learning disabilities such as dyslexia (reading disability), dysgraphia (writing difficulties), dyscalculia (fear of or difficulty with math), Auditory Processing

Disorder (APD affects how the brain processes auditory information. Children with APD can hear sounds correctly but may struggle to interpret and make sense of the information. This can affect their ability to follow spoken instructions, concentrate in noisy environments, or understand spoken language clearly) and Nonverbal Learning Disability (NLD affects visual-spatial and motor skills, as well as social skills. Children with NLD may have difficulty understanding nonverbal cues such as facial expressions or body language).

These disabilities often go unnoticed, as children with them may appear to have normal intelligence and capabilities. Early diagnosis and intervention are crucial to helping children overcome the challenges associated with these learning disabilities. These disabilities often go undiagnosed, leading to poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and ultimately, higher dropout rates.

Children with learning disabilities are often labeled as "slow" or "lazy" because their difficulties are misunderstood. The absence of early intervention and appropriate teaching strategies means that these children fall further behind their peers, leading to frustration and disillusionment with the education system. Social awareness campaigns, spearheaded by women's groups and community leaders, could educate parents and teachers about these hidden disabilities, encouraging early detection and tailored learning methods.

Incorporating trained counselors and special educators within schools, as well as establishing community support groups for children with learning disabilities, could significantly improve retention rates and overall academic performance. Women, given their roles as caregivers and educators within the family, could lead this social awareness campaign, ensuring that no child is left behind due to learning challenges.

2. High Dropout Rates: Coordinated Social Action

The dropout rate in Meghalaya, particularly among adolescents, is alarmingly high. This problem is often linked to socio-economic factors, substance abuse, and lack of engagement in school activities. Women's inclusion in governance and social action could help tackle this issue by ensuring that schools are more responsive to the needs of children, especially girls, who are at higher risk of dropping out due to early marriage, domestic responsibilities, or abuse.

Women's groups can col-

laborate with local schools to develop after-school programs, vocational training, and counselling services to keep children engaged in their education. They could also organise community-driven campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of education, particularly for girls, and work with the government to ensure that every child has access to quality education, free from discrimination or barriers due to socio-economic status.

Coordinated social action between the Dorbar Shnong or A-kingrangni Krima, women's groups, educators, and parents can provide the necessary support systems to ensure that children stay in school and receive the education they deserve. Initiatives like mid-day meal programs, scholarships, and mentoring could be promoted to ease the financial burden on families and make education more accessible.

The Role of Women in Social Action: A path to progress

The inclusion of women in the Dorbar Shnong or A-kingrangni Krima and other governance structures could provide solutions to the pressing social and educational issues facing the community. Women, with their deep understanding of family dynamics and their roles as caregivers, are uniquely positioned to lead community-based initiatives that address these challenges.

1. Formation of Support Networks

Women can lead the formation of support networks for victims of domestic violence, child abuse, and those struggling with addiction. These networks can provide not only emotional support but also access to legal assistance, counselling, and rehabilitation services. By working in tandem with law enforcement, women's groups can ensure that victims receive justice and that perpetrators are held accountable.

2. Economic Empowerment through Education and SHGs

Self-help groups (SHGs) can be instrumental in addressing both social and economic challenges. By promoting skills development, vocational training, and financial literacy, SHGs can help women and young people in the community become self-reliant. Women's inclusion in the Dorbar Shnong or A-kingrangni Krima can ensure that SHGs receive the support they need, whether through government schemes or community resources, to empower their members economically.

Additionally, SHGs can advocate for more inclusive education policies that cater to children with hidden disabilities, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to

succeed academically and later, professionally.

3. Health and Education Campaigns

Women's leadership can also spearhead health and education campaigns that target the entire community. From raising awareness about the importance of maternal and child health to addressing hidden learning disabilities, women's groups can play a pivotal role in shaping a more inclusive and responsive community. With the rampant epidemic nature of cancer affliction, women groups can form support systems for cancer patients and their families. So also in the campaign to manage AIDS and HIV infection. It is also a sad fact that childbirth and mother mortality is also a lingering problem. Shri Sampath Kumar IAS towards the end of the COVID 19 pandemic had pioneered the concept of Village Health Councils in the rural areas. Mandatory inclusion of women in the functioning of these Village Health Councils will go to a large extent to make the health delivery system in the villages more effective in reaching the poorest of the poor and the sick. Women's insight into family and community needs ensures that these campaigns are not only effective but also sustainable.

Conclusion: Inclusivity is key to Community growth

The exclusion of women from leadership roles in the Dorbar Shnong or A-kingrangni Krima represents a significant missed opportunity for addressing the socio-economic and educational challenges facing the major tribal communities in Meghalaya. From child abuse and domestic violence to substance abuse and the education system's failure to support children with learning disabilities, these are problems that require the unique insights and leadership of women. By including women in decision-making processes, the community can become more responsive, more equitable, and more effective in tackling these pressing issues.

Coordinated social action, driven by women's groups and community leaders, can foster a more inclusive governance system, where the needs of the most vulnerable are not only acknowledged but addressed. In doing so, the Dorbar Shnong or A-kingrangni Krima can evolve into a truly inclusive institution that represents all members of the community, ensuring a brighter and more prosperous future for all. As a leading women activist told me 'We do not want to be Rangbah Shnong but there are problems today which needs a mother's touch' Very true in the emerging scenario of social and economic challenges facing Meghalaya today.

Letters to the Editor

Is the Meghalaya Heritage Act only on paper?

Editor,

The news report about the demolition of the 123 year old iconic St. Anthony's School building was astounding and affected many concerned citizens to the core! Finally the once feared assumption over the years that the heritage buildings of the city with all their architectural, historical aesthetic significance, which give our people a sense of pride, of history, of culture and most importantly, which have also become part of our identity has arrived, if nothing is done! The demolition of these structures will leave a huge void in contemporary society and the future generation. The lamentation on this matter by any concerned citizen cannot be simply dismissed as mere emotions or attachments! It has a wider implication and only those who have a sense of heritage can understand the feeling. It may sound cliched to repeat over and over again

about the need to preserve these structures in our city, given that these buildings are the only concrete evidence of our history -- the others, not being preserved, are erased from our memory! In other states of India despite the rich structural evidence of their ancient past, people would still fight tooth and nail to ensure the safety of and to preserve heritage buildings that have crossed eighty years of their existence and have been successful in their fight to put in place mechanisms to ensure that these precious heritage buildings are protected, preserved, restored and meant to stay permanently; not ruling out the need to strike a balance between the need to preserve and to adapt to the changing needs of time.

Questions arise as to what role the Meghalaya Heritage Authority plays in cases of such demolition? Or is the Meghalaya Heritage Act only on paper? As per the Act does this iconic St Anthony's building should fall under Grade I or Grade II of the Grading of listed buildings/listed precincts that are not meant to be demolished and distorted for reasons described under: 1. It possesses architec-

tural aesthetics, cultural and historical significance of the state. (2) It is a local landmark which contributes to the image and identity of the region. (3) It is a work of master craftsmen and a model of proportion or ornamentation to suit the climate of the region.

If heritage buildings like St Anthony's School are allowed to be demolished then what can happen in the near future is scary to imagine. We have already lost many precious gems of Shillong like 'Solomon Villa', where Tagore stayed in 1937, 'Ashley Hall' where Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose stayed in 1938 and many more. The fate of the properties all of which are today at the whims and fancies of the owners raise these questions. How long can we just be mere spectators and lament a litany of grievances over such loss which even money can't buy? Can we afford to lose more?

One may say that demolition of the said school building is needed for the new building to be constructed keeping in mind the safety of the students which is of prime importance. Of course the safety of the students comes first and maybe

there are other valid reasons for such buildings to be demolished but what is the Heritage Act for if it does not address these problems and provide alternatives in order not to demolish the entire structure but to supervise for a compatible alternative to maintain the heritage essence of the place? I wonder if the Meghalaya Heritage Act is just a paper tiger and whether the Meghalaya Heritage Authority is failing in its duty. Is this Authority if it indeed exists accountable to the state and its people? Why does it need the citizens to push the authorities all the time to do their duties and to do it well?

Yours etc.,
Bethania Sohtun
Shillong 14

Charade of Education

Editor,

The title of the article, "Education mirage in Meghalaya", by Patricia Mukhim in the Shillong Times of Nov 1, 2024 says it all. Every now and then there is a storm in the media or in the streets, but nothing

is done except to cover the cracks with more paper or with band-aids at best.

This tiresome charade of education in our state has made us all weary, most of all teachers and parents. The unwitting victims, children and youth, are bereft of any cognitive compass. Year after year, decade after decade, miserable indices and results are published in ASER, Niti Aayog, and in MBOSE pass percentages. The details of this educational misery are public knowledge. The government seems inattentive, defensive, or hapless. Policies, task forces and commissions come and go, but we seem unable to get past the paperwork.

Example of the health department: Not so many years ago, health in our state was in a dismal mess. In recent years, we have seen a great turnaround. Led by enlightened and efficient officers, robust initiatives to engage with maternal mortality, vaccination, infectious and lifestyle diseases have resulted in perceptible successes. These efforts were underpinned by two well framed policies: the Meghalaya State Health Policy and the

Meghalaya Mental Health and Social Care Policy. The drafting of both these policies included participatory inputs from a wide array of stakeholders. The Health Department took a scientific approach, depending on locally relevant research, such as from the Indian Institute of Public Health, Shillong. The Department proactively sought and took on board ideas from civil society.

Education has reached a tipping point: When matters reach a breaking point, something has to give. The special article by Patricia Mukhim dwelt at length on MBOSE. It is now amply clear that there is no possibility of rehabilitating MBOSE. It needs to be shut down without fanfare. There are precedents for such drastic actions. The Medical Council of India, after decades of inefficiency, court cases and corruption was finally shut down. The new National Medical Council is progressive and effective.

Just as the Health Department realized, problems cannot be solved overnight. Each issue has to be considered in its own way, with focused expertise. Many

problems in education are intertwined, hence, untangling the causative factors will require nuanced approaches. Omnibus approaches such as Commissions, will find it impossible to make finely dissected analyses. Will power, persistence, and hard decisions are called for. If education in our state is not righted soon, another generation of students will be consigned to an uncertain future.

We often hear of outside consultants being brought in by the State Government at high cost. The general explanation is that such expertise does not exist in the state. We don't see much effort by the Education Department to engage with civil society or with stakeholder groups. A key strategy of the SDG approach is partnership. There are specific recommendations for collaboration with the private sector and community organizations. The Government is not expected to do everything on its own. This convergence could be a winning formula.

Yours etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor,
Via email

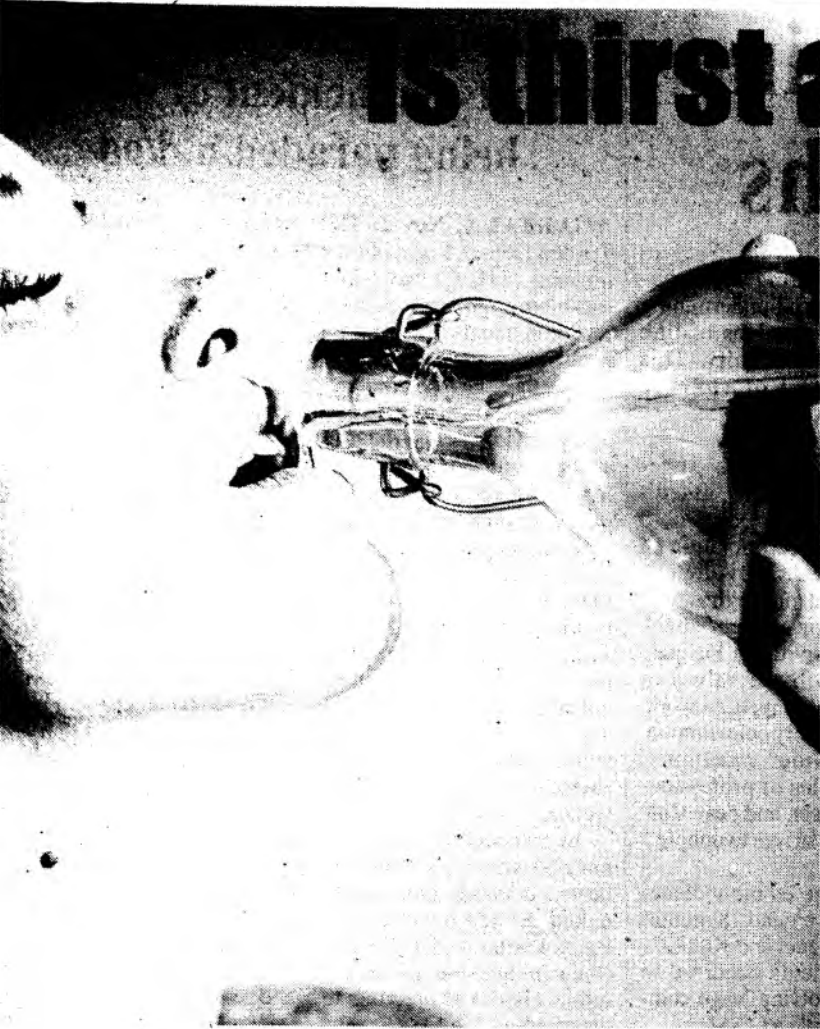
A clarification

Editor,

With reference to the article, "Khasi and Nepal: Unraveling their Connection" published in The Shillong Times on October 30, 2024, I would like to express my appreciation for the insightful piece. The author noted that the Gorkha Durga Puja Committee of Shillong has marked 129 years this year. However, I would like to clarify that the Gorkha Durga Puja Committee, located at Lukier Road, Paltan Bazar, Shillong, was actually established in 1872 and completed 152 years this year, making it the oldest Durga Puja Committee in Shillong.

Yours etc.,
Sharad Rana
President, Shree Shree Gorkha Durga Puja Committee
Via email

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



Thirst is first a good predictor of dehydration?

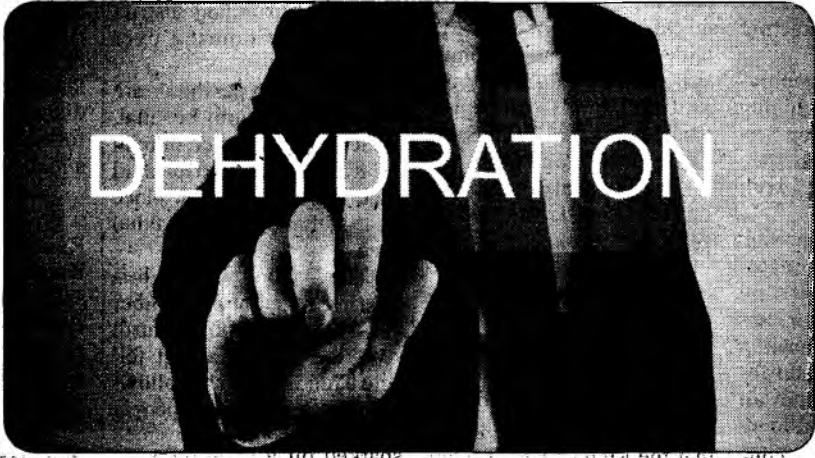
For example, a recent study explored the impact of thirst on fluid intake and hydration status. Participants attended a lab in the morning and then later in the afternoon to provide markers of hydration status (such as urine, blood samples and body weight). The relationship between levels of thirst in the morning and afternoon hydration status was negligible.

Further, thirst may be driven by environmental factors, such as access to water. For example, one study looked at whether ample access to water in a lab influenced how much people drank and how hydrated they were. The link between how thirsty they felt and how hydrated they were was weak, suggesting the availability of water influenced their fluid intake more than thirst.

Exercise can also change our thirst mechanism, though studies are limited at this stage.

Interestingly, research shows women experience thirst more strongly than men, regardless of hydration status. To understand gender differences in thirst, researchers infused men and women with fluids and then measured their thirst and how hydrated they were. They found women generally reported thirst at a lower level of fluid loss. Women have also been found to respond more to feeling thirsty by drinking more water.

Other ways to tell if you need to drink some water While acknowledging some people



Water is essential for daily functioning and health, and we can only survive a few days without it. Yet we constantly lose water through sweat, urination and even evaporation when we breathe.

This is why we have evolved a way to regulate and maintain water in our bodies. Like other animals, our survival relies on a strong biological drive that tells us to find and drink water to balance fluid loss.

This is thirst - a sensation of dryness in the mouth signalling we need to have a drink. This basic physiological mechanism is controlled mainly by part of the brain's "control centre", called the hypothalamus. The hypothalamus receives signals from various regions of the body and in return, releases hormones that act as a messenger to signal the thirst sensation.

What is dehydration?

Staying hydrated (having enough water in our bodies) is important for several reasons, including: -regulating body temperature through sweat and respiration -lubricating joints

and eyes -preventing infections -digesting and absorbing nutrients -flushing out waste (via the kidneys)

-preventing constipation -brain function (including memory and concentration) -mood and energy levels

-physical performance and recovery from exercise -skin health. Dehydration occurs when our body doesn't have enough water. Even slight drops in fluid levels have noticeable consequences, such as headaches, feeling dizzy, lethargy and struggling to concentrate.

Chronic dehydration can pose more serious health risks, including urinary tract infections, constipation and kidney stones.

What does the evidence say?

Despite thirst being one of the most basic biological drivers for good hydration, science suggests our feelings of thirst and subsequent fluid intake, don't always correlate with hydration levels.

How docs use light to diagnose any disease

You're not feeling well. You've had a pounding headache all week, dizzy spells and have vomited up your past few meals.

You visit your GP to get some answers and sit while they shine a light in your eyes, order a blood test and request some medical imaging.

Everything your GP just did relies on light. These are just some of the optical technologies that have had an enormous impact in how we diagnose disease.

1. On-the-spot tests Point-of-care diagnostics allow doctors to test patients on the spot and get answers in minutes, rather than sending samples to a lab for analysis.

The "flashlight" your GP uses to view the inside of your eye (known as an ophthalmoscope) is a great example. This allows doctors to detect abnormal blood flow in the eye, deformations of the cornea (the outermost clear layer of the eye), or swollen optical discs (a round section at the back of the eye where the nerve link to the brain begins). Swollen discs are a sign of elevated pressure inside your head (or in the worst case, a brain tumour) that could be causing your headaches.

The invention of lasers and LEDs has enabled many other miniaturised technologies to be provided at the bedside or clinic rather than in the lab.

Pulse oximetry is a famous example, where a clip attached to your finger reports how well your blood is oxygenated. It does this by measuring the different responses of oxygenated and de-oxygenated blood to different colours of light.

Pulse oximetry is used at hospitals (and sometimes at home) to monitor your respiratory and heart health. In hospitals, it is also a valuable tool for detecting heart defects in babies.

2. Looking at molecules Now, back to that blood-test. Analysing a small amount of your blood can diagnose many different diseases. A machine called an automated "full blood count analyser" tests for general markers of your health. This machine directs focused beams of light through blood samples held in small glass tubes. It counts the number of blood cells, determines

their specific type, and reports the level of haemoglobin (the protein in red blood cells that distributes oxygen around your body). In minutes, this machine can provide a snapshot of your overall health.

For more specific disease markers, blood serum is separated from the heavier cells by spinning in a rotating instrument called a centrifuge. The serum is then exposed to special chemical stains and enzyme assays that change colour depending on whether specific molecules, which may be the sign of a disease, are present. These colour changes can't be detected with the naked eye. However, a light beam from an instrument called a spectrometer can detect tiny amounts of these substances in the blood and determine if the biomarkers for diseases are present, and at what levels.

3. Medical imaging Let's re-visit those medical images your GP ordered. The development of fibre-optic technology, made famous for transforming high-speed digital communications (such as the NBN), allows light to get inside the body. The result? High-resolution optical imaging. A common example is an endoscope, where fibres with a tiny camera on the end are inserted into the body's natural openings (such as your mouth or anus) to examine your gut or respiratory tracts. Surgeons can insert the same technology through tiny cuts to view the inside of the body on a video screen during laparoscopic surgery (also known as keyhole surgery) to diagnose and treat disease.

How about the future? Progress in nanotechnology and a better understanding of the interactions of light with our tissues are leading to new light-based tools to help diagnose disease. These include: -nanomaterials (materials on an extremely small scale, many thousands of times smaller than the width of a human hair). These devices allow non-invasive measurements of sweat, tears and saliva, in real time -AI tools to analyse how blood serum scatters infrared light. So the next time you're at the GP and they perform (or order) some tests, chances are that at least one of those tests depend on light to help diagnose disease. (The Conversation)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, NOVEMBER 3, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon trine Mars on your solar return chart and it is a very good combination. You will be popular and will display excellent leadership qualities. You could also get involved in an exciting romantic tie with a person known to you. It will be an intense and passionate affair leading to marriage. Money and wealth will keep coming. Your bosses will keep on encouraging you and will also accept your ideas. You will show maturity in dealing with different problems in life. You will also get an opportunity to show your creative skills at your place of work. Your distinct style of thinking will help in meeting lot of challenging situations. You will get full support from your partner. Your brother/sisters will keep supporting you. New job/business opportunities will keep coming. Business trips will keep you busy. Students will get admission in courses of their choice.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) It is going to be a great week. You will pass your time well and relax fully with your family. And will go out to watch movie, enjoy shopping and have lunch/dinner. Your wishes will get fulfilled. Students will perform well in exams/interviews. You will enjoy your work and have fun and happiness. Money and wealth will keep coming. You will enjoy good equations with your partner/spouse. You will get involved in family matters and duties of the family would increase. You would get busy preparing for a party/get-together at your place. A dispute with colleagues at workplace is also not ruled out. You need to be careful. Business trips will keep you busy and will prove to be beneficial.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You will be getting mixed results this week. Your health will remain delicate but there is nothing much to worry. You will get money, name, fame and power. And you will be looking forward to change your old and annoying perspective. There will be wonderful opportunity for you in business/job. And you will take views from persons who matter and will also listen to them with keenness. You will feel peaceful and relaxed with family members and will plan to go out on a short trip to enjoy some moments in solitude. You will be experiencing some change in your work and personal matters but will adapt to them well. You will make good use of your intelligence and solve problems that come your way.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) You will be very fortunate in money matters this week. And you will receive income from multiple sources. You will also have good earning from business. The investments that you have made will also reap rich dividends. You will be working hard at your workplace and will put lot of efforts. The ties with your peers and superiors will also gradually improve. You will balance your personal and professional life well. And will enjoy wonderful moments with your family members. And will come in contact with influential persons. Your enemies will be unable to harm you. You will be making best use of your communication skills and will be interacting with lot of people. Those in creative fields will get good name and fame.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You will witness tremendous changes in your life this week. And they will prove to be beneficial in the long run. Your financial position will improve by leaps and bounds. Money inflow will be continuous. You will also be able to recover money that was given as loan to some person. You will work very hard to achieve your goals at your workplace and will get success too. You will make plans for expansion of your business. Otherwise, you can have a war of words with your siblings/colleagues. You also need to avoid ego clashes with soul mate who otherwise will keep supporting you. New romantic relations are not ruled out. And your best kept secrets too will come out all of a sudden. A court order will come in your favour. And your hurdles in life will get removed gradually.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) It is going to be a very favorable week for you. You will work in team spirit and will be goal oriented. Your colleagues will work in team spirit after seeking consultation from you. Your self-respect and dignity too will increase. There will be stability in your career and your confidence will be high. Your business will prosper and flourish. You will get money after putting hard work. You will also get success in government related matters. You could also be rewarded for your wonderful contributions at your workplace. Peace and harmony will prevail at your home. You will get busy with your mate in preparation for a family function at your house. It will consume your time and energy. But you will feel elated. You will witness positive developments in your life. This will ensure that you have a happy and secure future ahead.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) Your confidence will get a boost and work conditions will improve considerably. It is going to be a very good time period for you. Fortune favors the brave. New job offers will keep coming. Your sources of income will increase. Your bosses will

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) You will be tested during this week. There will be some disappointments at your workplace. And you could be demoted or face suspension. An unfortunate or unpleasant incident may take place which will spoil your reputation. Some business losses too may upset you. There will be good profits in business too. Peace and harmony will prevail in family relations. And you will behave politely and in a gentle manner with everyone. Relations with your brothers will remain good. You can have a fruitful discussion with your mate on a matter of great importance. Money inflow will be continuous.



Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) It is going to be an excellent week from all perspective. You will make good progress in your job/business. Your property related dispute will also get resolved amicably. You will enjoy your work and share excellent rapport with your bosses/colleagues. It will lead to a very cozy relationship. Health of a family elder may be a cause of some worry. But you will enjoy wonderful moments with your mate and plan to spend some time with your family. You will also receive money that was struck somewhere. Financial position will remain satisfactory. And you will minutely examine and decide on various aspects related to life.



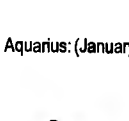
Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) It is going to be an exceptional time period for you. Your efforts will start giving results and you will have full backing of your bosses. And you will make excellent progress in your profession. Your pending tasks too will get completed. A tax dispute with authority will also get settled. You will focus on financial related work too. You will win people's attention with your charming and irresistible personality. You may start a new business venture. Though you will be preoccupied with your job/business yet will be able to find some time to relax with family. Auspicious function will also take place at your home.



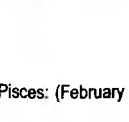
Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) It is going to be a very favorable week for you. And your prestige will get enhanced at your workplace. You will be given additional responsibility. Hence your name and fame will rise. Your bosses will keep encouraging you. Hence your confidence will get a big boost. You will be interacting a lot with people in general and will be able to solve their complex problems. You will undertake and finish difficult tasks with ease at your workplace. You will also meet an important and influential person. It will open the doors of progress for you. He/she will be pleased and satisfied with your work. Your influence in your family will also increase and your views will get preference. You will enjoy good understanding with your spouse and will respect each other's feelings and sentiments. You could be invited to a feast or party too.



Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) The beginning of the week will be normal. You will enjoy wonderful equation with your superiors and your colleagues will not be so enthusiastic. The favorable planetary position indicates that you can get involved in a romantic relation with a stranger whom you will meet all of a sudden. It is going to be a very warm and fulfilling relationship. You will have to pay a heavy price for a wrong decision in your business. Hence you need to be careful. Arrival of unexpected guests will take you by surprise but you will remain happy. Thus ending your worries. Financial position will get better. And you will experience freshness in your romantic ties. Your enemies will be unable to harm you. And you will undertake something very important at your place of work.



Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You will be getting many opportunities to rise in your career this week. It is going to be a very good time period. A new job offer matching your caliber and expectations will come to you. It will make you cheerful. Business/work related trips too could be undertaken which will prove to be very beneficial. New contacts will be developed. You will also remain busy in business meetings/conferences. Business profits too will rise. But you could feel upset with the behavior of a family member. But matter would be resolved quickly. Your married life is going to be wonderful and you will share amazing bonding with your soulmate. You will remain happy. Financial position will remain stable and strong. You can plan to go on a tourist destination with family for fun and relaxation. It is a very fruitful time period for students and they will excel in studies. You can also develop interest in yoga, meditation and some light form of exercise.



Here are 3 science-backed strategies to rein in stress

Uncertainty about the election getting to you? Is anxiety the dominant feature of your emotional landscape, maybe with a small sprinkling of impending doom? You are not alone. A recent survey found 69% of American adults are seriously stressed about the 2024 presidential election.

It's difficult not to be worked up about politics in today's polarised climate. Regardless of which side of the political aisle you sit on, you may find yourself glued to your browser or TV, gobbling up every tiny tidbit of news and feeling your stress levels skyrocket.

I'm a psychologist who develops and tests strategies for combating anxiety. As I constantly tell my stressed-out clients, when it comes to election news, there's a fine line between being well informed and being oversaturated with information.

If you're ready to short-circuit your stress spiral, here are three science-backed strategies for coping with anxiety in times of uncertainty. Approach your emotions with mindfulness

Being mindful refers to the quality of awareness you bring to your experiences - specifically, nonjudgmental attention focused on what's happening right now.

Mindfulness practices originated in Eastern spiritual traditions, including Buddhism. Over the past several decades, mindfulness has gained popularity as a powerful tool for managing anxiety. For instance, meditation apps such as Headspace and Calm incorporate it. Even if meditation isn't your thing, though, you can still apply non-judgmental awareness, focused on the present, to election-related anxiety.

Be present. Anxiety can draw you into an uncomfortable spiral of "what-ifs" about the future. When you make a point to be present, you remind yourself what is actually happening right now, rather than letting hypothetical fears take over.

Although you may have serious concerns about the fate of the nation, those outcomes have not yet come to bear. As I tell my patients, "We'll cross that bridge if we come to it. For now,

focus on the step right in front of you." If you notice yourself getting carried away by thoughts of the future, you can pull yourself back to the present by bringing awareness to simple sensations you feel



your feet on the floor, the rhythm of your breath, or the sounds around you - and remind yourself that you are safe in the current moment.

Pay nonjudgmental attention. Many people are hard on themselves for feeling strong emotions. This critical mindset might look like telling yourself that you're overreacting, or that it's weak to let others see that you're upset. You might even view that uncomfortable feeling in the pit of your stomach as evidence that negative outcomes are right around the corner.

Making judgments about your emotions only serves to make you feel worse. In fact, researchers find that pushing away emotions or beating yourself up for having them leads to more frequent and stronger anxiety.

Instead, try giving yourself a break. Tell yourself, "This election is high stakes, so it makes sense I'm anxious." Then, notice if your anxiety is driven by a fear about the future, and bring yourself back to the present.

Get flexible with your thinking Cognitive flexibility is the ability to shift away from rigid, all-or-nothing thinking about the future.

When people are anxious, they tend to focus on the worst-case scenario. For example, you might be telling yourself, "With this candidate in office, things will be terrible and I won't be able to cope." In this scenario, I encourage my patients to move past that initial thought of how awful it will be and instead consider exactly how they will respond to the inauguration, the next day, week, month and so on.

Cognitive flexibility allows you to explore how you will cope, even in the face of a negative outcome, helping you feel a bit less out of control. If you're experiencing a lot of anxiety about the election, try thinking through what you'd do if the undesirable candidate takes office - thoughts like "I'll donate to causes that are important to me" and "I'll attend protests." Choose your actions with intention

Another tool for managing your anxiety is to consider whether your behaviours are affecting how you feel.

Remember, for instance, the goal of 24-hour news networks is to increase ratings. It's in their interest to keep you riveted to your screens by making it seem like important announcements are imminent. As a result, it may feel difficult to disconnect and take part in your usual self-care behavior.

Try telling yourself, "If something happens, someone will text me," and go for a walk or, better yet, to bed. Keeping up with healthy habits can help reduce your vulnerability to uncontrolled anxiety.

Post-Election Day, you may continue to feel drawn to the news and motivated to show up - whether that means donating, volunteering or protesting - for a variety of causes you think will be affected by the election results. Many people describe feeling guilty if they say no or disengage, leading them to overcommit and wind up overwhelmed.

If this sounds like you, try reminding yourself that taking a break from politics to cook, engage with your family or friends, get some work done or go to the gym does not mean you don't care. In fact, keeping up with the activities that fuel you will give you the energy to contribute to important causes more meaningfully. (The Conversation)

"Dreams are today's answers to tomorrow's questions."

—Edgar Cayce

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXVII No. 84 SHILLONG, MONDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2024

Focus on Kashmir

THE steady deterioration in the law and order situation in Jammu and Kashmir in recent weeks is a matter of serious concern – to the people, the central government and the provincial government headed by Omar Abdullah of the National Conference. The series of gunfights between terrorists and security forces was topped with a grenade attack at a Sunday market in Srinagar, which injured over 10 innocents. Abdullah cannot wash his hands of the issues at stake in the aftermath of his party making moderate success in the assembly polls. He cannot also take things easy on the pretext that law and order is still under the control of the central government.

The assembly polls had thrown up a split verdict, in which NC got only 42 of the 90 seats while its Congress ally got seven seats. This could have ensured a majority in the assembly but for the fact that the Congress has opted not to join the Abdullah government. The NC can derive some satisfaction as four Independent MLAs have thrown their weight behind Abdullah in the running of the government. The Congress has, under the present circumstances, no way other than backing the NC unless a major realignment of forces takes place there. This is unlikely. Now that power is legitimately vested in Abdullah to chart the future course of the state, it also imposes on him the responsibility of ensuring peace at the ground level. He will be called upon to use his mass support to neutralize Pakistan-inspired terrorists operating from within Jammu and Kashmir. On the other hand, if the present scenario of a steady increase in acts of terror continues, the central government would likely use this as an alibi to throw the Abdullah dispensation out. Guaranteeing peace for Kashmir should be Abdullah's first priority.

It was widely acknowledged that the past over six years were mostly a period of peace in Kashmir Valley. This, after the veteran leaders were put under house arrest subsequent to the abolition of Article 370 of the Constitution that had, since Independence, given a Special Status to the region. The resultant positive turns in Kashmir helped revive the money-spinning tourism sector. Industrialists saw an opportunity there and set up their units, which promised uplift to the economy and abundant job opportunities to the youth. Pakistan, more so its Army, must be biding its time to make hell out of the Valley so that they could fish in troubled waters. Abdullah must seek saner advice, mediate, and stand by the central government to wipe out terrorism from wider Kashmir's soil – not just on the Indian side, but in PoK too-- through sustained efforts on the ground and at diplomatic levels.

Recent reports in the media that Shillong has emerged as the most sought-after destination in Asia is indeed heartening. The MDA government, in general, and the Tourism Department, in particular, deserve commendation for a job well done. Travel platform Skyscanner released its Travel Trends Report 2025, revealing the top destinations where Indians plan to travel. According to the report, Meghalaya's Shillong is set to be the top Indian city that travelers are considering for next year.

Shillong has overtaken Baku, the historic capital of Azerbaijan, to become the most popular destination for Indian travelers in 2025. It is also the only Indian city on the list of places Indian travelers prefer to visit in the coming year. The findings, based on a sample of 1,000 Indian respondents, showed that 66% of Indian travelers plan to travel more in 2025.

"Shillong in India sits on top among the most buzzing destinations, followed by Baku, Azerbaijan, and Langkawi, Malaysia, which offer travelers a diverse range of experiences and an ideal mix of relaxation and adventure," the report states.

The Current Status of Tourism in Meghalaya

There is no denying that tourism in the state has grown significantly. Previously, tourism revolved around the "three Ss" (Shillong, Smit, and Sohra), but now many more destinations are available for tourists. At the same time, it is also undeniable that tourism in Meghalaya has yet to reach its full potential. Because of this, many still refer to it as "Maggie noodle tourism" or "alu-muri tourism." Currently, it's still largely sightseeing-based, benefiting primarily hoteliers, tour operators, and restaurateurs, while locals receive only minimal benefits in the form of entry fees and parking fees. There is limited opportunity for the youth to even operate as guides.

While we congratulate the State Government for making Meghalaya a top travel destination for Indian tourists, the need of the hour is to move beyond sightseeing and create a tourism model that offers broader opportunities for more people to engage with the state.

The Land of Festivals

A Meghalayan living abroad, while visiting the state recently, remarked on seeing the billboards and posters, "So we even have healing festivals now." She was referring to the numerous and varied festivals celebrated in the state. There

are three types of festivals celebrated here: religious, cultural, and music festivals, but the festival the visitor mentioned was an evangelical event organized by a particular church to preach the gospel to non-believers.

Religious festivals that could attract tourists include various Behdienkham festivals, Ka Noh Sakyiat, Ka Chad Sukra, Ka Pastieh Kopati, Rongkusi, Durga Puja in Jaintia Hills, Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem, Ka Shad Pomblang Smit in Khasi Hills, Shad Sajer in Ri Bhoi District, and Wangala Dance in Garo Hills. These festivals are connected to traditional religions and farming practices of the people and are celebrated annually.

Cultural festivals include New Year celebrations and Christmas events in Jowai and Shillong, along with the neglected Bamphar in Jowai. Music festivals, like Cherry Blossom, NH7, and Megong, attract music lovers from across the country. There are also shows and gigs organized by music enthusiasts in different parts of the state. However, these events benefit only a few people and have a limited impact on the local economy. Additionally, local bands and musicians often do not benefit from these events.

The Government deserves credit for introducing the Meghalaya Grassroots Music Program (MGMP), a project supporting local talent. Many artists have benefitted from MGMP. While Shillong's title as the "rock capital of India" remains intact, tourism and festivals in Meghalaya face a major problem: waste.

Cleanliness and Waste Management

A friend who visited recently remarked on how clean a particular village claimed to be but questioned how they managed waste. How is waste in the village disposed of? The 2016 Waste Management Rules prohibit open burning, so can we call a village the "cleanest" when we don't know how they finally dispose of their waste? Claiming to be a clean village is not only about cleaning the houses, streets, and paths but also includes segregation and proper management of waste.

Waste management is a crucial issue that the government often overlooks in its tourism promotion efforts. Litter not only creates an eyesore but also harms the environment. Waste is expected to become a global crisis, with projections sug-

gesting that by 2050, there will be more plastic than fish in the oceans. The question is how the government can achieve the global Sustainable Development Goals when the state lacks policies to manage waste effectively, particularly at popular tourist destinations.

Litter on roads is primarily caused by passengers discarding waste from moving vehicles. On October 2, communities clean the roads, but within hours, they are littered again. It is not local residents who litter the streets but passengers in passing vehicles. The All Khasi Meghalaya Tourist Taxi Association (AKMTTA) has a valid point in demanding that the Government regulate vehicles, particularly those ferrying tourists, as these are a major source of waste.

One way to control littering is to ensure that both Meghalaya and Assam-based tourist taxis operating in the state instruct their passengers not to throw waste except in designated disposal facilities. The Transport Department can control and monitor the drivers and taxis registered with them, but they cannot regulate taxis from another state operating in Meghalaya.

The Transport Department of Meghalaya should mandate that taxis ferrying tourists, especially those from another state, register with the tourism department to ensure safety and maintain cleanliness. To ensure that local operators also benefit from the business, another option is to have tourists from Assam disembark at the Inter-State Bus Terminal and transfer to local taxis, thereby benefiting the local economy and supporting waste control efforts. This arrangement would be a win-win solution for taxis from Assam and those operated by locals. To keep the state clean and tourists safe, the Government needs to take this matter seriously. It is within the government's purview to ensure that all taxi drivers undergo training on waste management and on the security and safety of tourists.

Tourism as an Unlimited Opportunity

When Shnongpdeng was promoted as a tourist spot, the nearby village of Darang also wanted to enter the tourism business. Initially, Shnongpdeng locals feared competition as they shared the same river, Umngot, and thus had similar appeal. However, at a meeting organized by the late Donny M Wahlang,

Additional Deputy Commissioner of West Jaintia Hills District, they were made to understand that tourism is a limitless opportunity, offering benefits to multiple communities, each with unique attractions. Despite administrative support, tourism in Darang has yet to reach its potential due to a lack of community participation.

Beyond Sightseeing Tourism

What does Meghalaya offer to attract tourists? Although we lack monuments like the Taj Mahal or Qutub Minar, we have natural and cultural heritage such as sacred forests, living root bridges, waterfalls, rivers, and canyons. These, however, only facilitate short visits, so we must promote destinations where tourists can stay longer.

The Government should collaborate with locals to identify destinations with unique offerings. Rural tourism, designed to provide immersive experiences, would involve more people. A proposal for this type of tourism was submitted to MBMA but is still pending. Tourism should aim to create youth employment, boost farmers' incomes, and support affordable home stays.

Meiramew Cafes and the Circular Economy

Once, while visiting Krangshuri, we noticed litter from shops selling packaged snacks. Kong Patricia Mukhim questioned their earnings from these items, suggesting instead that they sell local products like yams and sweet potatoes, which yield higher profits. Selling locally produced food benefits not only the sellers but also farmers and locals involved in food preparation.

In the past, boiled yams and sweet potatoes were sold bound with bamboo strips (thri). Seasonal items like Soh-ot (local chestnuts) could be dried, processed, and packaged. There is vast potential if we think creatively.

An Indian visitor to Am-larew, after tasting the food, remarked, "I didn't expect to have such good biryani here." Despite the rich and diverse indigenous food system of the War people, there are only a few good local food options for visitors. Meiramew Café in Khweng, promoted by NESFAS, has attracted many food enthusiasts. This model could inspire government-supported local food options. It is time for the Government to design tourism products that will benefit rural communities, allowing them to have a share of the tourism "cake" and enjoy its rewards too.

It's the Economy Stupid

By Henry K Lyngdoh

The news report KSU asks govt, MTDF to stop dreaming about railways" (ST Oct 26, 2024) following by the news report, "Govt clarifies rly projects in state not abandoned" (ST Oct 27, 2024) made by the DY CM, Sniawbhalang Dhar are confusing. The KSU apparently wishes to impress upon the public its continued stand on the ILP. The Dy CM on the other hand is trying to sell "his tough guy" posture to the Centre. To some of us living outside the state such statements can be confusing but this should not deter our love and the soft spot we have for Meghalaya. Its still our heart and home. Actually both the Government and the pressure groups of the state have a lot to learn from those of us who are posted far away from home. We offer a birds eye view of the situation, a view perhaps difficult for those at home to develop. Our views are unbiased, balanced and impartial and perhaps we even come with wisdom and experience on our side. Time we shared our views and opinion with the rest of the State and the Jaitbynriew. Our only hope is that it is taken with the sincerity it demands.

First let us point out that the taunts of the KSU on the Government are totally pointless and unnecessary. Those holding political office today have all reached the limit of their abilities. They had crawled on their bellies to pass a resolution on the ILP so what more is expected of them? If asked to jump again our politician's only response will be "How High?" They only ask to be now left alone to complete their five years of office; pocket as much money as they can and that's that. Actually the statement by our Dy CM mentioned is pathetic. He spoke simply to let out air (ban shu lait jynhaw). There's no substance; no meaning; no import to what he said. In Germany we call such persons nutzlosen Mensch (meaning a useless human being)! Well, it's time to call a spade a spade!

As for the KSU and the other pressure groups like the FKJGP, HITO, HNYF & HYC we believe that its time they did a reality check on their demand for the ILP. The mandate for granting ILP status to Meghalaya is with the centre and the Government of India has made it abundantly clear that ILP cannot come together with the 6th Schedule. By now this has become obvious to everyone. We have to give up one of the two. Amit Shah blundered with the ILP in Manipur and is unlikely to make the same mistake with Meghalaya. The demand for ILP has therefore reached the end of the road and the ILP issue now needs closure. Lets not give false hope to our people. It's not fair. If influx is still an issue we need to think afresh on how to curb it. We need to start thinking about influx control that lie within the powers of the State Government. Strengthening perhaps the Meghalaya Residents Safety & Security Act (MRSSA) could be a better option. This we believe is an option, under the present circumstances, that calls and demands for greater in depth study. So let's do it! We have nothing left to lose.

Our terrified youngsters believe that one day, we as a society will simply disappear, swamped out by outsiders. Perhaps, but can History provide some consolation? History offers to shed light on the subject by pointing out that the collapse of ancient civilizations had more to do with the fall in educational values and breakdown of the economy than anything else. For Meghalaya, our education has already gone down the hill, so we can safely assume that we are already on the slippery slope of a societal meltdown. As far as the economy is concerned, how have we performed in the last 50 years? Statehood in 1972 found our economy

dependent on agriculture and government service. 50 years down the line we have managed to expand in only two areas i.e mass production of useless, vision-less fund pocketing politicians and contractors together with a multitude of extortionist cab drivers. Per capita we are at the bottom of the ladder. Our economy continues to shrink instead of grow. To hide their own incompetence and acts of corruption our leaders encourage and instigate our youngsters, in their demand for ILP, towards agitations, civic and social unrest. As a strategy politicians call it "Muddying the waters" and it seems to be working. It's difficult to see or think clearly because everyone is so busy feeding their respective egos. Shame on the political class for leaving the state so vulnerable and helpless. Actually we should be thoroughly ashamed of ourselves!

Jarred Diamond the famous historian points out that collapse and survival of civilizations depend mainly on the direction of the economy of those civilizations. He is of the view that economic survival can come about from identifying two crucial choices distinguishing the past societies that failed from those that survived (a) Long-term planning: "... the courage to practice long-term thinking, and to make bold, courageous, anticipatory decisions at a time when problems have become perceptible but before they have reached crisis proportions." Diamond says it can be especially bad when the short-term interest of elite leaders conflicts with the long-term interests of the society, and the elite are insulated from the direct consequences. (b) Willingness to reconsider core values: "... the courage to make painful decisions about values. Which of the values that formerly served a society well can continue to be maintained under new changed circumstances? Which of these treasured values must instead be jettisoned and replaced with different approaches?"

Diamond also took pains to point out the symptoms of an economic collapse. Often economic collapse is accompanied by social and civil unrest together with frequent breakdown of law and order. Capital (both wealth and human assets) start to fly out and poverty begins to seep in and as this increases there is a deep consciousness of societal inequalities in the social makeup. Poverty often results in migration of the rural poor to rich urban centres where the cycle of injustice simply becomes more pronounced. Child abuse, child neglect and substance abuse are not far from such scenes. The social consequences of the economic crisis are usually related to unemployment, poverty, inequality, political crisis, changing of cultural patterns, conflicts and the rise of extremist movements. All of these seem so familiar and contemporary to the Meghalayan society of today! As a Jaitbynriew we are petrified by the thought that someday we might become "hewers of wood and drawers of water." A distinct possibility, if we as a community fail to hold the economy in our hands we might just end up as slaves or servants of others. Most of us are already bonded laborers to our own kin and kin, the so-called "High Level" folks. Quite possible if it has not already happened. So the time to be honest with ourselves; to course correct, has arrived. Let us not be scared by what confronts us but be resolved that we can fix it, provided we are really concerned with the future roadway for our people. So this is a clarion call to the youth of Meghalaya: Come rally round the bugle call. You have nothing to lose but what you have already lost!

Letters to the Editor

Drug menace: Needed bold decisions or disastrous future awaits

Editor,

Blame it on unemployment, bad company, or poor upbringing but drug peddlers are mushrooming across Shillong. As the saying goes, "necessity knows no law," and these peddlers seem to live by it. Many don't even consider it illegal or unethical at all to sell drugs to younger children. Some even go so far as to justify their actions, claiming that addicts "come to life" only after a dose of the substances they provide, as if dealing drugs is some kind of community service.

Let me share a chilling fact. A young boy—a student at a well-known school in town—was lured into the "incredible high" of intoxication by his peers. At first, he resisted, but after five "free doses," he was completely hooked. By the time his family discovered he was using drugs, he'd already been addicted for six months. This is how countless young, vulnerable children are drawn into the pit of substance abuse, often without their parents even realizing it. Heartbreaking, isn't it?

With over 300,000 people affected, the Meghalaya gov-

ernment knows it practically can't afford to sit on the sidelines. Social Welfare Minister Paul Lyngdoh, perhaps more concerned than any of his colleagues, has taken a strong stand. Shortly after assuming office, Bah Lyngdoh sounded the alarm, rallying stakeholders and government agencies into action. Thanks to tip-offs from concerned NGOs and local Dorbar members, the government recently arrested a notorious dealer from Lower Paltan Bazar whose operations had devastated countless families.

Unfortunately, some unscrupulous lawyers often rush in without remorse to secure bail for these dangerous criminals, proving to be a serious liability to society. Their actions only add to the grief and suffering in the entire state. "Queen bee of drug peddling held again, 4th time in 9 years!" (ST, September 27).

Paul Lyngdoh has rightly called for a "major overhaul" of the state police and the Anti-Narcotic Task Force (ANTF). Meghalaya desperately needs a robust law enforcement team with "sharper teeth" and greater powers to completely dismantle the drug supply chain from its very roots. The government must immediately address this matter on a war footing. Boosting police manpower is a must. This will enable round-the-clock patrols, backed by sharper

intelligence gathering and stronger community outreach.

Let me speak my mind with urgency. What if the number of 300,000 people already affected soon balloons to 600,000—or even a million? Yes, I earnestly press the alarm bell. If we don't wake up now and make bold decisions, the future will be nothing short of disastrous.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

Importance of making children wear helmets

Editor,

Road safety is not only important to adults but it is equally important to children, as we know they are our future and it is our responsibility to protect them in every way we can. One of the ways we can protect them is by ensuring that children wear helmets while riding on two-wheelers. With the increasing number of families opting for motorcycles and scooters, it is essential to prioritize the safety of our youngest passengers and prevent head injuries, which can have lifelong consequences.

Statistics show that wearing a helmet can reduce the risk of head injury up to 85%. Despite this, many children still ride without proper headgear. This can be attributed to

the perception that helmets are uncomfortable, or simply not seeing them as necessary. However this oversight can lead to tragic consequences that could easily be avoided. Helmets are proven to reduce the risk of head injuries significantly during accidents. When children see adults prioritizing helmet use, they are more likely to adopt these habits themselves which can lead to a very good practice for their own safety.

As adults we must make sure that children are equipped with properly fitting helmets every time they ride. Wearing a helmet is a simple yet effective measure to safeguard our children while they enjoy the freedom of two-wheelers.

Yours etc.,
Waiabiangkhi Shalam,
Via email

Smart City in ICU

Editor,

A number of newspapers and social media channels have been very critical of the display of Shillong Smart City signboards without any visible signs of smartness. This has made the Government a laughing stock not only within the state but outside as well. There have been cost overruns, sluggish implementation, bureaucratic bottlenecks and an unplanned approach to implementation. No one knows what exactly is a Smart City and

what components fit into that description of smartness. There is continuous load shedding, absence of street lighting, haphazard parking in localities, unsafe drinking water and many other issues. Does the Smart City concept address these or is it just a cosmetic solution to utilize public money when the state financial situation is in dire straits? People should question their MLAs about this Smart City thing rather than just moaning and groaning and twiddling their thumbs.

Yours etc.,
Dominic Stadlin
Wankhar
Via email

Why target only firecrackers for environmental pollution?

Editor,

It has become a norm for the so-called environmentalists and some organizations to wake up from their year-long slumber just before Deepawali and launch selective campaigns solely targeting firecrackers during Diwali as a source of pollution. However, it is essential to recognize that firecrackers, while contributing to pollution for 2-3 days, are not the sole or primary cause of poor air quality. Studies suggest that factors like vehicle emissions, construction dust,

and industrial waste contribute far more significantly to long-term air pollution in urban areas.

The Explosives Act, 1884 and the Explosive Substances Act, 1908 and rules made thereunder regulates production/manufacture and sale of fire crackers in India and the manufacturers are required to follow specific guidelines to ensure safety and environmental compliance. Thus, targeting the end users of fire crackers which are completely legal and have been manufactured adhering to existing laws, during a particular festival, is wholly unjustified and appears to be agenda driven rather than having real concern for the environment.

Efforts should however, be made by all stakeholders to improve air quality holistically, by addressing all major pollution sources rather than isolating one that is used for a limited time during a cultural festival. Surprisingly, voices of such environmentalists always remain muted on the perennial sources of environmental pollution for reasons best known to them.

Yours etc.,
D. Bhattacharjee
Shillong-1

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.

"Nurture your minds with great thoughts.
To believe in the heroic makes heroes."

— Benjamin Disraeli

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NEHU Needs Restoration

IT is unsavoury news for a 50-year old University which once strode the region like a Colossus and was widely respected, to now find itself in the throes of ignominy with students shouting slogans outside the Vice Chancellor's office instead of attending classes. The teaching and non-teaching community of the University too are on the warpath because of certain alleged indiscretions of the Vice Chancellor in the appointment of senior administrative staff, bypassing qualified local applicants. It is not difficult to comprehend what textbook the NEHU Vice Chancellor is following to guide his actions. Never in the past has a Vice Chancellor been the subject of such excoriation. Universities in this country are increasingly under threat from the Government, thereby restricting their ability to teach and research freely. Higher education institutions are being targeted because they are the home of critical inquiry and the free exchange of ideas. The Government wants to control universities out of fear that allowing them to operate freely might ultimately limit state power to operate without scrutiny. There is evidence of Government interference in leadership and governance structures.

A Vice Chancellor (VC) is expected to have leadership qualities since he is the pivot around which the University revolves. That also means he has to be able to inspire the entire faculty, staff and students and this demands extraordinary 'people' skills. Above all the VC must be an ace administrator capable of running the administrative functions smoothly with optimal and efficient use of the University's resources. Additionally, the VC must also be a competent manager of the human resource of the University for the best outcomes. It is expected that the Vice Chancellor should be a policymaker with a vision who can formulate progressive policies for the university's future. Last but perhaps the most important criterion for being a VC is to be a leader in academics too so that the University's academic standards stand the test of rigid scrutiny.

The present problem in NEHU is in the nepotism involved in appointment of the Registrar and Deputy Registrars who allegedly are ill-suited to the tribal ethos for which NEHU was founded in the first place. The students and faculty are particularly aggrieved by the Registrar, a retired army personnel, who appears to lack the finesse to communicate in a language that is civil and courteous as is the practice in India's North East, no matter who one is talking to. The Registrar's core competence is to facilitate communication between students, faculty, and administrative staff to support the educational mission of the university. If this core mission is defeated then the Registrar's appointment is facile. For the sake of NEHU's reputation it is important to resolve the crisis at the earliest.

Letters to the Editor

Not all Bengali speaking Muslims are Bangladeshis

Editor,

Sabir Mallick, a migrant worker from West Bengal, was lynched by cow vigilantes in Haryana two months ago on the suspicion that he had consumed beef. Now, a lab report on a meat sample taken from his shanty has confirmed that it was not beef. The Deputy Superintendent of Police, Badhra, Bharat Bhushan said, "The meat sample from the shanty had been taken and sent for testing to a laboratory in Faridabad. We have received the report, which has confirmed that it was not beef."

After Sabir was killed, his uncle said the reason behind his killing was the suspicion revolving around his origins, stemming from his mother tongue, and had nothing to do with beef eating. His uncle, Babar Ali Mallick, clearly said to a reporter at that time, "As my nephew was speaking Bengali, he was falsely suspected to be a Bangladeshi."

The lab report on the meat sample corroborated what his uncle had said. A dangerous design has been orchestrated in many parts of India to label Bengalis from West Bengal as Bangladeshis, especially if they are Muslims. From Haryana to Odisha, Bengali speaking migrant workers were attacked after being labelled as Bangladeshis.

The Chief Minister of Assam said that he would take sides against "Miya

Muslims," a discriminatory euphemism for the minority Bengali Muslim community, and would not let them "go to Upper Assam." Such comments can destroy trust between communities, as happened between Meiteis and Kuki-Zos in Manipur.

Samirul Islam, the chairman of the West Bengal Migrant Workers' Development Board, pointed out the heinous plot to target Bengali speaking workers. He said, "It has become a threat for migrant workers from Bengal to work in BJP-ruled states. Speaking Bengali in states like BJP-run Haryana or Odisha is dangerous as aggressive groups like cow vigilantes consider them Bangladeshis."

Those who are instigating people to hate Bengalis are totally opposed to the spirit of India's renaissance. They want to go back to the days of sati and untouchability. Therefore, they hate Bengalis, as Bengalis gave the light of renaissance to the rest of India. This design needs to be rooted out to safeguard India's unity and progress.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy is the maker of modern India. His was a life-long crusade for women's right to inheritance and property and against sati, casteism, and superstitions. The orthodox condemned him and organised a social boycott against him. As it was then, so it is now. Dabholkar, Pansare, Kalburgi, and Gauri Lankesh were killed in the twenty-first century for running with the torch of Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The same force is now on the prowl to attack Bengali speaking workers.

Interestingly, like them,

even some Bengalis describe Raja Ram Mohan Roy as a stooge of the British. But they themselves are self-haters and take great pleasure in fault-finding about anything Bengali. They, like some orthodox, regressive groups, are completely averse to Bengal's syncretic culture.

This culture has been crafted by the likes of Sri Chaitanya, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Lalon Fakir, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Sri Ramakrishna, Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, and many more stalwarts.

We need to peacefully fight an ideological battle, not only to safeguard the minorities but also to reclaim the progress that we have so far achieved. We need to reclaim the spirit of India's renaissance, the essence of our freedom struggle, and the ideals of our Constitution. Stringent action must be taken against the criminals and their supporters who want to divide the country.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Maintain Sanctity of Parliamentary Committees.

Editor,

Parliamentary Committees are a component of Parliament hence their sanctity should be maintained by all Parliamentarians. However, the Parliamentary Committee constituted for the Waqf Board is reportedly not maintaining decorum. The objective of setting up

KHADC would streamline the construction quality and is not just another layer of authority and red tapism for the public to endure.

Few years back a massive road repair work was going on near my house. The workers inadvertently damaged the big water pipe of the Shnong which had been in place decades ago. Water was flooding everywhere on the road while residents around were without water. It went on for 2-3 days and the Shnong didn't have the wherewithal to act on it. I decided to approach the then Principal Secretary, PHE, Meghalaya Government. His reply was that the water pipe belonged to the Shnong. I said, "correct," but the Shnong couldn't do anything and we the residents were suffering. Finally, he sent the Executive Engineer who fixed the problem.

Next comes my experience in rural areas. We bought some land in Ri Bhoi district while we were abroad. On our return back to base - in this case, home, I decided to do some farming. I started by planting some fruit saplings and naturally to plant something, anything one has to dig the earth. Suddenly the neighbouring farmers landed at the place and told us that that, that part of the land belonged to them. Naturally we took the only route open to us which is to take the matter to the RS since our land documents were issued by him. A joint meeting was held. Documents were presented. The documents produced by the other claimants were issued by the Sirdar on the same portion of land. The RS admitted his helplessness and advised us to take the matter to the Syiem or the District Council. We were told later that the practice of selling the same land to different people was quite prevalent. In short, cheating was tolerated by the Dorbar Shnong! My family contemplated the misfortune for a while including the option of going for litigation. Then I realized that litigation would also mean not having access to

our land at all and God only knows when the litigation would end. So I decided to approach the other claimants. I requested them to show me the part of the land which belonged to them. We did a tour and there were markers which gave some authenticity about their claim. I calculated roughly the loss to us which was minimal compared to the entire land owned by us. I offered a compromise that they would give us access to our land through their property in lieu of their claims. They agreed. Where on earth can two authorities issue documents on the same piece of land? I am of the firm view that no cadastral survey means no development in the modern sense will ever happen in Meghalaya.

These empirical stories illustrate the limitations of the capacity of the RS and the DS as well as the systemic institutional ambiguity open to abuse. I also profusely acknowledge the voluntary services rendered by them with regard to day to day requirements like proof of residence certificate, assistance during deaths and natural calamities, their exemplary role during the Covid pandemic, etc.

Amazingly, one industry which flourishes abundantly in Meghalaya, is the pressure group industry. Related to the RS and DS is the Synjuk Ki Nonsynshar Shnong Ka Bri Hynniewtrep (SNSBH). Over half a century ago my late grandfather was a RS. All I heard was that he was a Nongtrei Shnong (Worker) of the Shnong. Now I read about Nongsynshar. To my limited knowledge of Khasi and English, Nongsynshar means a Ruler. My understanding has always been that even the Syiem is considered as the Traditional Chief or the Custodian and not a Ruler or even worse a 'King' as some people tend to now equate the Syiem to.

Respected SNSBH, agreed you want to assume the role of a ruler. Fine, but also do not assert your only authority for authority's sake bordering on be-

ing authoritarian but also allow yourselves to be held accountable. That implies transforming the RS and DS into dynamic grassroots institutions and truly community driven ones. Its time to break away from discriminatory anachronisms such as allowing only male members to be RS or only some clan (Jait) to be RS or excluding non-tribals born and bred for generations to be part of the Dorbar. It's time to be ready for democratization and constitutional changes modelled on the Panchayats. The benefits include regular funding and budgeting including remuneration. State Government and ADCs should also stop being disingenuous and treating the RS and DS like a football. Do your part about clear cut responsibilities, roles, accountability mechanisms, governance structure of the RS and DS etc. This will enable them to be more effective on issues like waste management and environment conservation, revenue generating issues like tourism and later even stretch that to deeper issues like health and education. The target should be to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) enunciated by the United Nations and the Government of India.

About the paramount importance of institutions, three academic luminaries received the 2024 Nobel Prize for Economics. They were awarded for their work on the theme "How institutions are formed and affect prosperity." The importance of societal institutions for a country's prosperity cannot be over-emphasized. The academics have cogently argued that inclusive institutions drive prosperity and also how extractive institutions lead to poverty. They have also analyzed that the persistence of institutions - in this case their continuance beyond a point - merely for the sake of persistence can also lead to poverty. This should make us sit and think through issues concerning traditional institutions in a world that requires modern governance models.

(The writer is former diplomat)

who wholeheartedly supported the Bill was asked some sharp questions by the Opposition members. It is learnt that the administrator in his presentation appreciated the provision for separate boards for Agakhani and Bohra communities, saying that it is "forward looking" and "promotes the eclectic nature of the society."

Chaos erupted again during the JPC meeting on the Waqf (Amendment) bill after the Delhi Waqf Board supported the proposed changes to the legislation. Delhi Waqf Board administrator, IAS officer Ashwini Kumar backed the bill even as Opposition MPs called his stand "illegal." The Opposition said the Delhi Waqf Board administrator was not a Muslim and argued that the law stated that non-Muslims could not be on the Waqf board. A BJP MP pointed out that when Arvind Kejriwal was the Chief Minister, he had appointed a Hindu administrator to the Delhi Waqf Board.

Due to differences of opinions between the Ruling and Opposition parties such ruckus is likely to continue in the coming days too. Even if the Bill is passed in both Houses of Parliament, resentment will continue among Muslims. Hence keeping in view the need for national integration the Government should take into confidence those who are against this Bill.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

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The Institution of Rangbah Shnong and Dorbar Shnong

By Rudi Warjiri

our land at all and God only knows when the litigation would end. So I decided to approach the other claimants. I requested them to show me the part of the land which belonged to them. We did a tour and there were markers which gave some authenticity about their claim. I calculated roughly the loss to us which was minimal compared to the entire land owned by us. I offered a compromise that they would give us access to our land through their property in lieu of their claims. They agreed. Where on earth can two authorities issue documents on the same piece of land? I am of the firm view that no cadastral survey means no development in the modern sense will ever happen in Meghalaya.

These empirical stories illustrate the limitations of the capacity of the RS and the DS as well as the systemic institutional ambiguity open to abuse. I also profusely acknowledge the voluntary services rendered by them with regard to day to day requirements like proof of residence certificate, assistance during deaths and natural calamities, their exemplary role during the Covid pandemic, etc.

Amazingly, one industry which flourishes abundantly in Meghalaya, is the pressure group industry. Related to the RS and DS is the Synjuk Ki Nonsynshar Shnong Ka Bri Hynniewtrep (SNSBH). Over half a century ago my late grandfather was a RS. All I heard was that he was a Nongtrei Shnong (Worker) of the Shnong. Now I read about Nongsynshar. To my limited knowledge of Khasi and English, Nongsynshar means a Ruler. My understanding has always been that even the Syiem is considered as the Traditional Chief or the Custodian and not a Ruler or even worse a 'King' as some people tend to now equate the Syiem to.

Respected SNSBH, agreed you want to assume the role of a ruler. Fine, but also do not assert your only authority for authority's sake bordering on be-

ing authoritarian but also allow yourselves to be held accountable. That implies transforming the RS and DS into dynamic grassroots institutions and truly community driven ones. Its time to break away from discriminatory anachronisms such as allowing only male members to be RS or only some clan (Jait) to be RS or excluding non-tribals born and bred for generations to be part of the Dorbar. It's time to be ready for democratization and constitutional changes modelled on the Panchayats. The benefits include regular funding and budgeting including remuneration. State Government and ADCs should also stop being disingenuous and treating the RS and DS like a football. Do your part about clear cut responsibilities, roles, accountability mechanisms, governance structure of the RS and DS etc. This will enable them to be more effective on issues like waste management and environment conservation, revenue generating issues like tourism and later even stretch that to deeper issues like health and education. The target should be to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) enunciated by the United Nations and the Government of India.

About the paramount importance of institutions, three academic luminaries received the 2024 Nobel Prize for Economics. They were awarded for their work on the theme "How institutions are formed and affect prosperity." The importance of societal institutions for a country's prosperity cannot be over-emphasized. The academics have cogently argued that inclusive institutions drive prosperity and also how extractive institutions lead to poverty. They have also analyzed that the persistence of institutions - in this case their continuance beyond a point - merely for the sake of persistence can also lead to poverty. This should make us sit and think through issues concerning traditional institutions in a world that requires modern governance models.

(The writer is former diplomat)

Why GDP is a perverse index of well-being

By Aseem Shrivastava

I was once trained as an economist. For the tribe of economists, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of a country is a sacrosanct measure of national production within the borders of the country. Not just economists and policy-wonks, businessmen, politicians, the media and the universities constantly refer to it. Its textbook definition goes: "the total value of all the goods and services produced in a country in one year." "Value" could be nominal or real (after adjusting for inflation). But it is always stated in monetary terms (in current or constant dollars or rupees or whichever currency you wish).

The classic text-book example used to be that if a man marries his house-keeper, the GDP of the country would fall. One can come up with a thousand similar stories. My grandmother used to knit sweaters for not just me but the entire (joint) family. Her contribution to the GDP? Nil. If the same sweaters were sold for a profit in the export market, they would have warmed the hearts of GDP-conscious patriots!

The joy that my grandmother derived from making sweaters for everyone was incomparable. So was our happiness when we received such hand-made gifts of love. But there is no room for such things in the economic calculus of today's experts. They know no other index of human well-being than the GDP. In the process they usually track human misery more closely than human happiness. They forget what Einstein (to whom the quote is rightly or falsely attributed) might have meant when he said: "Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted."

Let us consider three other dimensions of GDP that economists rarely speak about. The first has to do with the fact that the origins of the GDP as an official measure of national production are as recent as 1937 when Simon Kuznets (who received a Nobel Prize for his immense dulling labours) made a presentation to the US Congress on the subject. In a time of war, it facilitated a simple way to compare the relative military strengths of two different countries. This aspect of the GDP became ideologically very potent by the time the Cold War took hold of the world after 1945, and capitalist and communist ideologues would be commonly found trying to prove the superiority of their respective systems by making crude GDP comparisons.

The United Nations was formed in 1945. It officially adopted the system of national accounts developed by Kuznets. By 1953, the first international data comparing GDP across countries was released. During the same period, after the famous 1944 conference at Bretton-Woods when the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were created, the idea of 'development' was hurled upon the world. In the aggressive climate generated by the Western powers (and the Soviet Union) the compulsion to 'develop' was felt by every government in the world, an artificial imperative that survives the last three generations.

As the idea of 'development' came of age in the 1950s, 'welfare economics' was born, pioneered by such stalwarts as Nobel economists Kenneth Arrow

and Amartya Sen. They themselves were rarely so crude, but many others of their ilk, as well as policy wonks, businessmen, and governments began seeing GDP not merely as a measure of an economy's production, but as an index of human well-being itself. People — often from within the profession of economics — pointed out the absurdity of such an intellectual leap. But the powers in control of the profession as well as those in high office were not to be deterred. GDP, at least as a proxy measure of human well-being, was here to stay. The fact that its primary purpose was to compare just how much and how quickly a country could produce the steel or military hardware to win wars over its enemies was conveniently overlooked. And it remains that way.

The happiness of grandmothers and grand-children is of little concern to those who wish to make a nation 'great'.

A second aspect of GDP as a measure of well-being deserves graver comment.

If parents begin charging children retrospectively for having raised them to the age of reason, education, and economic productivity, the country's GDP would rise dramatically. The same result will obtain if children begin charging parents for looking after them in old age. Given the global and national dispersion of families, homes for senior citizens already make sense.

The full monetisation of mammalian affections would constitute an economic miracle of global fame. However, society (or what remains of it after the virtual victory of dating apps over it) would stand defeated, if not destroyed. The economic anthropologist Karl Polanyi had pointed out in his prophetic 1944 volume - The Great Transformation - that the triumph of the market would eventually result in the destruction of "the substance of society." Now, with the speedy rise of the virtual sphere, and the erosion of the family and the community across wealthier parts of the world, we have hard evidence of this.

Finally, consider the fact that every time an oil drill is installed anywhere, Mother Earth heaves a sigh of crushing distress, an accumulating agony which is already turning the human adventure on earth into a terminal ecological nightmare. Exhaustible resources are closer to complete exhaustion. Not to romanticise the past, but the air everywhere was immeasurably cleaner the world over before 'progress' had begun a few centuries ago, and species death through climate change or nuclear Armageddon was not even a dystopian fantasy.

The deployment of GDP as a measure of happiness and well-being when such are the stakes presents to us an idea of organised human stupidity today. Perhaps it is the inevitable collateral damage of a 'smart world' exclusively devoted to the organisation of races among 'smart people.' Fashion parades, the original root of the spread of the word 'smart', are now the glamorous metaphors for life itself.

(Aseem Shrivastava used to be an economist. He now teaches ecosophy). (Syn-dicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

"Great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people."

— Eleanor Roosevelt

The Shillong Times

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Projects, acquisitions

IN a significant order, the Supreme Court has ruled, inter alia, that governments cannot deem it fit to take over any private or community property for common good. The case related to Article 31 C of the Constitution that protects Article 39B stating, "the ownership and control of the material resources of the community are so distributed as to best subserve the common good." The nine-bench Constitution bench was headed by CJI Chandrachud, which issued a judgement with an 8-1 majority. It also states, among other things, that the context, the nature of the resource the government seeks to take over, the characteristics and impact of the resource on the wellbeing of the community etc should be taken into consideration while arriving at a decision on a take-over. In sum, the inference is that governments can only selectively takeover property from private individuals or others.

The rights of individuals must be respected at all cost, but not at the cost of national well-being. The interest of the nation is the collective interest of the community. Hence, a balancing of interests is well-advised. The apex court in its wisdom has rightly not given the full authority for governments to indulge. Yet, notably, several infrastructural projects, be they of highways or ports or of industrial units, failed to take off for years until the central government tightened its legal mechanisms and simultaneously increased the rate of compensations for property acquirement to facilitate the smooth progress of such projects. Now, it is easy for the highways ministry to lay roads across the country for the reason that justice is done to those who lose their property thus. Governments cannot expect individuals to suffer. It is well-endowed to offer them fair compensation. Yet, in several cases of takeover for industrial purposes etc, governments cite excuses or rules and are reluctant to help those who lost their homes and hearths. They languish in make-shift tents for decades before any meaningful help comes to them to reconstruct their lives. Those who stand in the middle, including politicians and officials, seek to take a cut, further exacerbating the plight of such people. Rehabilitation is often a mirage. The incompetence of those who run the nation, or states, made the plight of such people more pathetic.

Courts are duty bound to ensure the rights of the people in a democracy. At the same time, courts also must be mindful of the ground realities. Organised attempts to stonewall projects, at the behest of vested interests including politicians in the opposition parties, kill several projects. They have their ulterior motives, which are mostly linked to their own interests. In a scenario where the media, especially the electronic media, play up such "protests" and sensationalize matters, public interest suffers at the altar of vested interests.

Bamboo Mission Meghalaya - The Enabling Factors

By Toki Blah

This write-up is a continuation to my earlier article in this newspaper (ST October 8, 2024) captioned "DoNER Bamboo Policy for the NE." The attempt to whip up public interest on bamboo, especially that of Meghalaya's Policy makers is because this writer strongly believes that if handled and managed properly, a Meghalaya specific Bamboo Mission can be a game changer in improving the economic fortunes of the people of this state. It is also the result of numerous queries on how, we as a state, can exploit this proposed Policy of DoNER. If my earlier article had dealt with the economic potentials of bamboo, this current essay will try to highlight the required 'Enabling Factors' that need to be in place before the revolution in Green Gold can start happening here in our state. Let me be more specific as to what is meant by the term 'Enabling'. The best exemplifying of the term is the Central Government's decision to remove bamboo from the listed items under regulation of the Ministry of Environment and Forest and to transfer it as an item under the Ministry of Agriculture. In one shot all the restrictions of felling, transport and sale of bamboo under the Ministry of Forest & Environment was removed. Bamboo is now an agricultural item that can be cultivated, harvested, processed and freely sold as any other agricultural crop such as potatoes, ginger, turmeric etc., without restriction from any rules and regulations. The market decides. This will now enable all players be it the small cultivator, the small entrepreneur, the big investor or the different institutions of governance in the state to plan and visualise how they will enter and what role to play in this lucrative bamboo market.

If we speak of a Meghalaya specific Bamboo Mission, the first thing that comes to mind is the need to have a (a) state specific Bamboo Vision and (b) a state specific Bamboo Mission. (a) The Bamboo Vision shall be a road map on how Meghalaya intends to utilise bamboo as the tool to uplift the economic fortunes of specific target groups. In this case the specific target groups should be our small upland farmers, especially the landless agriculturalist and the

unemployed youth. These form approximately 80% of our population. The rich, big landlords and the well to do are not excluded but the Bamboo Vision shall primarily focus on the upliftment of our poor. The ultimate vision is to transform the economic trajectory of Meghalaya into an upward curve through a judicious approach on value addition of bamboo as an agricultural crop. It can easily create 40,000 to 50,000 job opportunities! This opportunity must not be lost on how we can bring in our poor as active stakeholders towards the 10 Billion Dollar Economy that the MDA Government has declared as its goal. (b) The state specific Bamboo Mission will be the determination of the Government to take up this Bamboo project on a Mission Mode. The Nodal Department identified to push the mission forward should be quickly identified. Actually the role of Govt will be to identify and facilitate the role of other stakeholders of the mission. These other stakeholders should include the three ADCs; other existing institutions of governance such as the village councils (Dorbars and Akhings); people oriented NGOs such as the village level women and youth groups and existing agricultural groups etc. These stakeholders may need hand-holding through relevant trainings, exposures or empowerment programmes. This is the enabling process for all concerned stakeholders. The Bamboo mission will establish enabling agencies to hand-hold the identified stakeholders towards the objectives of the Mission. We can start on this mode and learn as we go along.

Security of tenancy for the landless
Of importance is how do we fit in our rural poor into the Mission? Statements have been made of the existence of 31% of agricultural households practicing farming on leased lands. I personally believe that it is more than this. In the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, (not sure of the Garo Hills), farming on leased land is done through informal year to year lease of land (called Rep Bhura by some). Now because of the insecurity and informal nature of the lease, neither

the farmer is interested in investing on the land nor is the Government able to help him as he has no security of tenancy over his leased land. Here is where the role of the District Councils as mission stakeholders becomes so important since they are mandated by The Constitution { 6th Schedule, Para 3(a)} to make laws in relation to the "occupation or use of land for the purpose of agriculture or any other purpose likely to promote the interest of the inhabitants". A Law by the District Councils is required to make agricultural tenancy, between land owner and tenant, a more formal long term lease contract (20 to 25 years would be ideal) so as to create interest of the tenant on his leased land and to enable Government and Financial Agencies to invest on such secure land leases for the benefit of the landless tenant. The question of land ownership will not be touched nor is there call for ADC intervention on the mutually agreed rent on the so leased land. We need a simple law that can enable our small landless farmers to dream big and reach for the sky. Such an enabling law from the ADCs is a must for elevating the rural economy. As a people we must stimulate our ADCs towards such a goal.

There will be skeptics, and they are quite justified with their pessimism, since in the past similar schemes aiming at rural poverty alleviation and job creation have miserably failed. So how can the Bamboo Mission be any different? Let me try to assuage these fears. In the past, ambitious schemes were conceived but in implementation failed to recognize four vital ground realities (a) Lack of motivation and self confidence of the stakeholders (b) Need for hand holding and enabling interventions to make the stakeholders see the light at the end of the tunnel (c) Availability of easy credit (d) inability of the stakeholder to market his produce on his own. We are talking of a small farmer whose marketing experience and ability are limited to exploitative Jewduh and to "shi khoh" (basketful) quantity of sale. The DoNER Policy for Bamboo as we are given to understand speaks of making

available technology, investments together with assured international market. It is a complete quantum change for our small farmers.

(i) Through a cluster approach, the Bamboo Mission can think of farm gate purchase of products. The market thus comes to the farmer not the other way round. (ii) Affinity based farm groups (groups formed by farmers of a compact area producing the same crop) provides self confidence from numbers than attempting to go it alone. (iii) Easy Bank linkage for farm based groups or cooperatives from Scheduled Commercial Banks like, NBARD, SIDBI, NeDFI will further boost farmer self assurance (iv) The assurance of a market for his produce plus the security of tenancy over land can now enable the farmer to really invest on his holdings. From the micro economics of "shi-khoh," the bamboo farmer now needs to think in macro terms of Quintals and Tonnes. For these things to happen we need to put our heads together and plan. As we plan we should not miss the forest for the trees. Our objectives and the target should remain steadfast. A proper road map with achievable milestones should be prepared. Development is not magic. Its going to take time, effort and perseverance and most importantly, sincere planning. Only then can the Bamboo Mission be successful.

In conclusion, if the above developments have raised our hopes for a better tomorrow, then what else is there left for us to say or do? One thing remains and that is how we engage with our elected representatives. I appeal to our educated youth, "Please don't let your MLA or MDC get away so easily." Meet them; engage with them on the subject; demand they raise the potentials of a Meghalaya Bamboo Mission on the floor of the House; its your Right as a voter; your entitlement as a caretaker of the future. We must not miss the bus again simply because of the ignorance, ego and laziness of our representatives. Let them for once raise an issue of the people. Enough is enough with all the corruption, self aggrandizement and sleaze in governance. Forget further enriching the rich. Start talking about the future of our children!

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Ethics, God and Our Constitution..!

Whenever I'm called to speak at a Rotary meeting, I am fascinated by the Four Way Test, which Rotarians repeat together at the start. The Rotary Four-Way Test is a guiding principle for ethical decision-making, developed by Herbert J. Taylor in 1932. Here's its story: Herbert J. Taylor, a prominent businessman, faced a significant challenge in 1932. His company, Club Aluminium, was struggling financially due to the Great Depression.

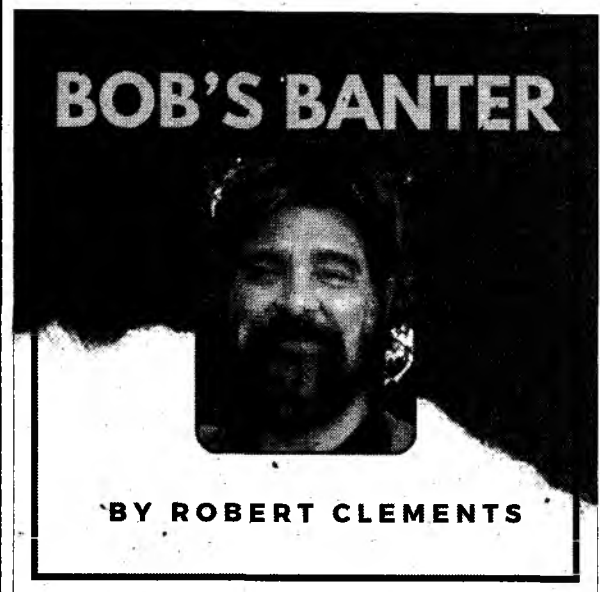
Taylor decided to revive the business while maintaining ethical standards and developed the Four-Way Test to guide his decision-making and ensure the company's actions aligned with moral

to fight for Russia.

Why? Yes, why wasn't it a shock? Ponder for a moment about North Korea, the dictatorship, the total suppression of human rights, their nuclear pile up and their constant threat to the world!

Now, ask yourself again, why weren't you shocked. Is it because both countries share very similar ideologies about elected leaders? Both are dictatorships, even if camouflaged under the guise of elections? Both have taken away the people's voice? Both are bullies?

Think deeply, then ask yourself, how would you react if you heard India had sent troops to help Russia? Looking at how we are suddenly leaning towards that country, don't be shocked if



principles. The test consists of four simple questions: 1. Is it the truth? 2. Is it fair to all concerned? 3. Will it build goodwill and better friendships? 4. Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

Employees were encouraged to apply these principles in their daily work, leading to:

Improved relationships with customers and suppliers. Increased trust and loyalty. Enhanced reputation and eventually full financial recovery.

In 1943, Rotary International adopted the Four-Way Test as its official guiding principle. Today, it remains a cornerstone of Rotary's values, promoting ethical decision-making and service to others.

As I think about Herbert Taylor, deciding to honour ethical principles instead of profits, I remember the story of the prophet Elijah in the Bible, in 1 Kings 17:10-16, 'who when he came to the town gate, saw a widow there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread."

"As surely as the Lord your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, so that we may eat it—and die."

Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.'"

She went away and did as Elijah had told her. She first made Elijah's food, which must have used up all her resources. But by doing so, there was food every day for Elijah, and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.

Put God and ethics first and your jug of oil as the widow and Herbert J. Taylor found will never run dry..!

And these same ethics should come into play when our country deals with other countries: It didn't shock anyone when we heard North Korean troops had been sent

that day isn't far away. But looking at what we believe in, would we be doing the right thing? Would it be ethical?

Which begs the question; isn't it time that the Constitution, which safeguards our beliefs and the rights of every Indian, also safeguards our foreign policies?

That every government, that comes in, should strictly follow the ideologies laid down in our laws, while dealing with other countries? That a democracy supports a democracy, that people's rights safeguarded by our Constitution, is also safeguarded in the countries we support, and that any country violating the same doesn't get our support during a war?

It is time that just as rules, regulations and the law apply to every other union minister in our domestic setting, it also applies to our external policies.

This is an absolutely logical argument, because as the old adage goes, "a person is known by the friends he keeps," and so also a country, but here we go beyond: That the Constitution of our country is binding on our relationships and support given to other nations.

It is very easy to sway a mob. If Delhi starts shouting that the US is bad, before you can say Jack Robinson or the Indian equivalent, the rest of a group in our country will say the same. That is how mob psychology works.

But that isn't how our Constitution works. The law is definite, and if these checks and balances have guarded our people well, I am sure it will certainly look after our foreign policy too. So, we need to check whether our agreements and exchanges with other nations follow the same set of rules, and from which no government will be allowed to deviate.

Which begs the last question; are we jumping towards Russia and China, because of revelations that might surface, through US and Canadian investigations into killings we are accused of being involved in? Then let's face those lawful investigations head on, since they are both democracies doing it fairly, and let's not sell our souls to the devil like Dr Faustus, for a few scraps of immediate gain..!

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

Letters to the Editor

When good news is bad news for some

Editor,
If one reads media reports, 90 percent of what is reported and opined is negative. The media draws its strength from negative reportage and thrives on negativity. For the media, good news is actually bad news. That is their job. The human mind has been subconsciously trained to bite, chew, and digest negativity first. But as someone aptly pointed out, "Negativity is contagious, just as positivity is." Naysayers go the extra mile to create negativity, making it thrive for their own vested interests. In the face of a negative ecosystem, there must be voices that stand up, speak out, and spread positivity based on facts.

Recently, a friend hurled expletives when he came across the news that Shillong has been named the Top Travel Destination for 2025 by Skyscanner's "Travel Trends Report 2025." Shillong was ahead of Baku (Azerbaijan), Langkawi (Malaysia), and others. No other Indian city, hill station, or tourist destination featured on the list. This is good and big news. But why were some people, like my friend who hurled expletives (which cannot be reproduced here), so negative? What is negative about people wanting to visit our place? Guests are like gods. The customer is king/queen. Perhaps some people cannot accept good news, let alone digest it. Perhaps they are simply not accustomed to receiving good news. It's a mindset conditioned to believe that good things

can't happen in our very own land.

Under such gloomy circumstances, we are reminded of the wisdom of our ancestors, who foresaw all this negativity. The celebrated poet from our own land, U Soso Tham, aptly pointed out: "Jingstad ngi wad sawdong pyrthei; jingshai ka Ringim tip eiei." Loosely translated, this phrase means, "In search of wisdom, we travel across the seas; we are ignorant of the light in our own land." Tourism is one of the lights that the Almighty has bestowed on Meghalaya. The potential is huge. Successive governments have worked to market Meghalaya as a tourist destination, aware of the transformative power this sector possesses.

For the naysayers, here's some statistics. Over the last six years, the Conrad K. Sangma government has made strides in taking tourism to the next level. Under the homestay schemes, more than 600 have been sanctioned, and out of these, around 70 have become operational. Investments amounting to about Rs 1,300 crore from Externally Aided Projects and the Union Tourism Ministry will strengthen our tourism sector. Meghalaya had no luxury hotel even after nearly 50 years of statehood. Now, we have two high-end hotels, Vivanta and Courtyard by Marriott.

The Bah and the Kong selling local produce and other items in tourist spots have multiplied over the years. PRIME tourism vehicles number more than 45 now, in addition to the privately operated ones, which have increased due to the dividends reaped from the sector.

Good things are happening, which may not be to everyone's liking. Well, there

are loopholes and drawbacks but we can always come forward to offer constructive suggestions or give positive criticism. And, hello! Here, we are talking about tourists, not illegal infiltrators. So, let's not get carried away by negative emotions or jump the gun. Leave your biases behind, come and be a part of the growth story.

Yours etc.,
Lang Lyngdoh,
Shillong - 1

Food safety handling practices by street vendors

Editor,
In response to the Government's recent order, to relocate 700 street vendors within Shillong to newly identified areas equipped with roofs, washrooms, and water facilities, I would like to raise concerns regarding public health and food safety protocols when it comes to street vendors handling food items. While this initiative aims to improve working conditions for vendors, it also requires vendors to register with the Town Vending Committee. However, there remains a question of whether health, and safety measures, particularly concerning food hygiene, will be enforced. I would urge the authorities to conduct health inspections and investigative measures before vendors receive clearance to sell food items and whether these inspections will occur biannually as a regular practice. Also, if assurances have to be given that these protocols will be implemented consistently to safeguard both vendors and the wider community.

Yours etc.,
Benjamin Laloo,
Via email

Yatra that came a cropper!

Editor,
Towards the fog end of September, this year Swami Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati Maharaj of Uttarakhand proposed to organize a Gau Dhvaj Shapana Bharat yatra in some NE states of India for advocating a sweeping ban on cow slaughter. However, his much-publicized yatra was nipped in the bud. In Meghalaya, several NGOs had firmly opposed his entry into Shillong, plus the State Government too was against his yatra manoeuvres in Meghalaya. Incidentally, the said Swami's earlier attempts to land in Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland also came unstuck as he was shoed away lock stock and barrel!

I don't understand why the Swami is so concerned about the traditional food habits of the indigenous tribes of India's North-East? Probably the latter doesn't know the pivotal fact that ancient Hindu scriptures - hold-your-breath - established beyond an iota of doubt that even upper class Hindus and revered rishis had relished beef consumption in those bygone eras. And wonders never cease that in Bhavabuti's well-known play, Uttara-Rama-Charitra, written in the 8th century AD, we come across a dialogue between two hermit boys, Saudahataki and Dandayana, at Ayodhya. The conversations shockingly referred to Vasistha, a revered Rishi of three lifetimes, who had heartily munched a poor tawny heifer (a young

cow) without any demur whatsoever!

Markedly, the prominent Indian litterateur, Nirad Chaudhury had written in his book of essays, The Continent of Circe which has been awarded the Duff Cooper prize in 1966, these iconic words, "Love of cows in the Vedas goes with every possible economic use of cattle, including, of course, their slaughter for food." Unfortunately, since 2014 with the assumption of powers by the saffron government even possessing a portion of beef at home has become an ominous taboo as occurred at Dadri village of UP in 2015 when Mohammed Akhlaq was outrageously lynched on mere suspicion of slaughtering a cow!

All is said and done, I hope that Swami Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati Maharaj is listening

Yours etc.,
Jerome K Diengdoh,
Shillong-2

Concerning the dismantling of St. Anthony's L.P School

Editor,
It is nice to know that many individuals are expressing their concern about the proposed dismantling of St. Anthony's L.P School at Don Bosco. Definitely, it is one of the unique buildings in the city and all wish to preserve it. Practically every day, concerned people express their opinions in the newspapers and also on different YouTube channels. I too am a lover of history and wish to preserve the building at all costs. However, things are created in time and subjected

to life spans (philosophy of impermanence of Buddha). Therefore, anything created in time will come to an end or will get old. If the individuals are so concerned about the old building, how many of them are still living in thatched houses? How many of them will come to rescue the management if the building collapses on the children? Or are we just spectators and pen down without knowing the intent of the management? Why do we suffer for months during the repairing work of the Umiam Bridge? Because the bridge is in danger and to prevent it, the government takes a decision to renovate it. And sadly, even today heavy vehicles cannot pass through it.

People wish to build new houses when they have the opportunity, then why not a better school and better facilities for the children? When we look around we see new Churches being constructed and the old ones have been abandoned due to the increase in the number of worshippers. Therefore, if the individuals are so concerned about the old building, let them also go back to thatched homes. Perhaps the management is concerned for the betterment of the students and not about public opinion. If people around the Laitumkhrah area are constructing bigger buildings housing shops and restaurants, why not a new temple of knowledge for the children who are endangered in the old building?

Yours etc.,
Aiborlang Nongsiej,
Mawkyrwat

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

"Ethnic diversity adds richness to a society."

—Gary Locke

The Shillong Times

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America's Shift To The Political Right

IN an election campaign that saw a blustering Trump with his misogynistic swipe at his rival Kamala Harris, American voters have chosen to return the former as their President. Never before has it been so difficult for commentators to write on an election which many predict will push the United States on a precarious course that is difficult to envision. Trump has his peccadilloes and it will take the Opposition a huge dose of political energy to pull the reins on a President whose past defines his future actions and decisions. The United States was founded on strong principles of democracy yet the American Constitution also envisaged that there is a strong possibility that voters might at some point elect an authoritarian leader and wrote safeguards into the Constitution which include powers granted to two other branches of government designed to be a check on a president who would bend and break laws to serve his own ends. And they enacted a set of rights — the most crucial one being the First Amendment which gives citizens the right to assemble, speak and protest against the words and actions of their leader.

Commentators during the course of the campaign had pointed at the undecided voters whose swing votes the Democrats needed to win this election. These undecided voters looked for some policy directions from Kamala Harris on issues that hurt the common citizens, namely soaring prices, the issue of immigrants coming in through the porous southern border and economic policies that exacerbated the inequality in American society. Harris did not clearly spell out if she and her Party were going to address these issues. In rally after rally, Harris was just responding to Trump's reckless taunts. Finally, Americans cast their votes in favour of some change rather than for the status quo. It's difficult to imagine how the world's oldest democracy has chosen to vote for a man who is considered by some of his ardent supporters to be deeply flawed and to entrust him with the task of fixing America's most urgent problems.

Trump has never camouflaged his xenophobic and misogynistic tendencies. Add to that the racism that he overtly professes. It therefore means that the American voters endorse all these proclivities of their President. Else they had a choice to reject them and vote for the alternative. But what has pushed Americans to vote for uncertainty and chaos? Is it because the alternative is equally chaotic with many protesting the Biden Government's overt and covert support to Netanyahu and almost endorsing his genocidal tendencies. There was a huge divide in the US over whether it should continue to support Israel despite all the atrocities on Palestinians. This too played a major role in the elections. Although this is a decisive verdict, it will be safe to say that Trump's second innings will be hugely challenging when it comes to dousing Israel's jingoism and stifling military support to Ukraine. Whether the 47th POTUS will be able to usher in a new world order will be globally watched with interest.

Letters to the Editor

Loss of Shillong's identity versus practicality

Editor,
Apropos of the news report titled "123-year-old iconic St. Anthony's building set to be dismantled" (ST October 29, 2024), I became deeply concerned by the statement of Fr. Saji where he stated that "...people may not even recognize the spot where this building once stood. It will soon become almost insignificant". The reason why we preserve historical structures and artifacts is to never forget a society's origins and its identity. Hence, an outrage and disapproval has arisen against this decision.

The building is synonymous with the history and identity of Shillong as a hill station and an educational hub. It is also a symbol of the contribution the Salesians and the Catholic Church to intellectual development of boys and youth. It is NOT insignificant. Preservation is to be done so that generations would be able to learn, understand and take pride of the city's history and legacy.

His other statement, "Practicality cannot be ignored ... we are ensuring that the school remains not only a place of learning but also a safe haven for students", also brings out the question of the practicality of the school, sharing its premises with Don Bosco Technical School, which houses an automobile and steel fabrication workshop quite close to the building and basketball court.

Various mishaps have occurred before (but never reported) where students have received injuries due to the activities related with DBTS. Now, a short metal barricade divides the premise but that too does not seem practical.

Another question also arises of the building's exclusion from the Meghalaya Heritage Act, 2012. Most structures in the list seem to be government bungalows that are largely inaccessible to the general public. The Shillong Club building which was reconstructed after 1962 is also in the list.

As the plan for demolition continues, let us mourn the loss of another iconic architectural heritage of Laitumkhrah and Shillong, while continuing to plead for its inclusion under the Meghalaya Heritage Act. The congregation must consider Architectural Facadism (façadomy), where the front facade of the building is conserved while the new structure is built behind it.

Yours etc.,
Eric Sohtun
Shillong - 6

Boost police manpower to combat the drug menace

Editor,
Firstly I'd like to congratulate Sali Gwali for his earlier letter, "Beware, Drug Traffickers Are Destroying Our Society" (ST, Sep 19, 2024). Just a few days after it was published, the notorious kingpin he hinted in the letter was arrested by police with the help of local

NEHU is again on the burn. The teachers, students, staff and civil society organizations have come out in the open, raising their voices. Not a day passes without some press statements, meetings, resolutions, demonstrations and other forms of protest in the University. Although the controversial recruitment and the acts of omission and commission of the Registrar and Deputy Registrar have become the immediate rallying point, the issues that NEHU confront are much more complex and deserve a holistic look.

The present regime of Prof. Prabha Shankar Shukla, in fact, started on a promising note. After the six years of misrule by Prof. S.K. Srivastava and his coterie, everyone aspired for a change. Prof. Shukla made the right moves in the beginning by disassociating himself from the old coterie and holding meetings with all stakeholders. He listened to everyone patiently for hours and sought suggestions to improve the system. Prof. Shukla promised he would address all long pending issues in a time bound manner. In fact, he held Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) interviews for faculty and even held interviews for the open faculty positions, which were pending for over a decade. Different associations trusted him and cooperated with him for the first two years. They expected that other issues such as filling the non-teaching positions, improving the infrastructural facilities for students, completing the interviews for senior professors, etc., would be addressed soon. Had the administration taken up these tasks in the first three years, the VC could have amassed considerable goodwill and enabled him to take up other agenda in the next two years. But somewhere the administration lost direction.

Obsessed with implementing the NEP 2020 at the PG and UG levels, the VC directed his energies to push it without considering the difficulties of the teachers and the UG colleges. He took it as a prestige issue and sought to enforce the Four Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP) somehow without discussing in and taking approval from the Academic Council (AC). It was then that he had a confrontation with the Meghalaya College Teachers' Association (MCTA) and NEHU Teachers' Association (NEHUTA). Despite the violation of the ordinance, the AC cleared the

village members and NGOs. This woman had allegedly been running her narcotics business from Lower Paltan Bazar under the Shillong Cantonment Board for many years, even after multiple arrests, without facing serious consequences. She seemed fearless, as if the police would never take strong action against her. The main kingpin would recruit anyone in the locality she could influence to spread drugs around Shillong and beyond. It is well known that several of her relatives are still involved in drug peddling, further contaminating the environment of the neighborhood. In fact, many drug peddlers operated less than 300 meters from the police station, yet they continued their business without fear. Why did the Shillong Cantonment permit such criminal activity to persist in these areas for so many years? The Government must initiate a thorough investigation into this matter.

I also fully agree with the points raised in Gwali's latest article, "Drug Menace: Bold Decisions Needed or a Disastrous Future Awaits" (Nov 4, 2024). As he has highlighted, more and more young people are falling into addiction and drug peddling, often due to unemployment, bad company, and poor family upbringing. I believe the responsibility does not rest solely with the government; each of us also has a role to play as responsible citizens.

Gwali rightly emphasizes the urgency of the situation, pointing out the large number of young people already affected. I also wonder what might happen if this

implementation of the FYUP considering the difficulties faced by the students. But the VC did not take the opposition he had to encounter in the AC in the right spirit. He denied Deanship to a professor who was critical of the NEP 2020, and reappointed a person who served the office earlier as the Dean, ignoring many other qualified professors who have better academic records. Distancing himself from senior colleagues, the VC relied excessively on deans and select teachers. Direct access that the heads and faculty members had with the VC stopped, as the administration insisted on everything to be processed through the deans. Positive interactions between the VC and the teaching community became minimal and superficial.

Meanwhile, the problems of the non-teaching staff have multiplied over the years. Many officers have retired from service, but there was no recruitment and internal promotion for years. Because of limited staff, the quality of administrative work in different departments was severely affected. The non-teaching association is demanding from the University to fill in the staff vacancies. But there is not sufficient staff in the administration even to process the applications for recruitment. Similarly, the students have their own grievances and demands regarding the infrastructure, grading and other facilities. In such circumstances, it would have helped the university had the VC not delayed the appointment of officers who have the experience of working in academic institutions. But Prof. Shukla considered a bureaucrat more efficient than an academician, and appointed Col. Omkar Singh first as the Controller of Examinations (COE), and then as the Registrar. It may not be that the Colonel does not have required academic qualifications and experience to hold the post. But such persons become misfits in the public academic institutions where teachers and students resent bureaucratic ways of functioning. All these years, in NEHU, the officers are easily accessible to the stakeholders. Not knowing the tradition, the Registrar seems to have behaved in a manner that ruffled the teachers and students, leading to the demand for his expulsion.

The continuous decline in ranking of the University is

number continues to grow, from 300,000 to 400,000, and then to 600,000. This is a serious crisis that demands immediate action, especially from the government, starting with increasing manpower in the police department. Without additional police resources, little can be achieved. I hope the Government takes this concern seriously, in the interest of our future generations.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

India should take a cue from US Polls

Editor,
India needs to learn a thing or two from the American election. In spite of being the leader among technologically advanced countries, the United States of America falls back on ballot paper voting to root out any suspicion of foul play stemming from voting through EVM.

Over the last two decades, the United States of America has gradually moved back from electronic voting machines to paper ballots. Given ballot paper voting, unlike EVM, builds confidence among voters and opposition party members, it undoubtedly strengthens democracy.

Another highly commendable step the USA election authorities have taken is that they have printed the ballot papers in all major languages of a state, depending on its demography. While a voter in New York can choose a ballot paper in Bengali instead of English, Chinese, Spanish, and

another point of contention agitating the minds of everyone in NEHU. Initially, people were made to believe that implementing the NEP would improve the ranking. But the hurried implementation of the NEP did not help in the ranking. For, the University ranking depends on multiple factors. Two important causes cited for the poor ranking of the University are inadequate academic publications and poor peer perceptions. It is necessary to probe why a University formerly acknowledged as the University with the Potential for Excellence some fifteen years ago has come to this status today. Many academically inclined senior professors in different departments retired. But the positions they vacated were not filled for years. Some professor positions which became vacant in 2005 have remained vacant till date for different reasons. Failing to hold CAS interviews for promotions at regular intervals and rectify anomalies in the date of promotion also demotivates the teachers. It may be true that a few teachers who have little academic ambitions stopped publishing after becoming professors. But there are also professors who kept doing good work. Many retired from service without securing recognition as senior professors. When the teachers find that they have little opportunity to grow, their interest in academics diminishes. Other factors such as abrogation of UGC-SAP, cut in the allocations, non-availability of funds for research, seminars, laboratories, books, etc., also have an indirect effect on the academic performance of the departments and the faculty.

Peer perceptions about the University depend partly on performance and partly on how the University could project itself at national and international levels. A public university cannot adopt dubious methods that private universities follow to gain popularity. It can change peer perceptions only through positive means by creating vibrant academic and creative interactions. That requires more and more offline lectures, seminars, workshops and conferences where the university students and faculty can meet and interact with their peers from other universities and states. It is over a cup of tea and

breakfast that the peers come to know about others' research and publications. We can leave a positive impression about us only when others know us and interact with us. Unfortunately, the UGC's cut in funds for such academic interactions becomes an obstacle to improve the public perceptions about the University. In the name of austerity measures, the University has stopped even inviting the external experts to the Board of Studies and School Board meetings. Even the Ph.D. viva-voce are conducted in recent years online through Google meet.

The University has completed 50 years of its existence. NEHU could have celebrated the Golden Jubilee Celebrations in 2023-24 in a befitting manner. We could have invited all former VCs, teachers, alumni and other important stakeholders in the country and in the region, and had brainstorming sessions on what NEHU should do. Unfortunately, the Golden Jubilee year just passed by without a murmur. Barring a couple of cultural events, non-academic talks, and sports events, nothing memorable happened during the Golden Jubilee Year. NEHU could not even hold the Convocation that year as we kept waiting for politicians to grace the occasion, but our celebrities in Delhi were busy with general elections and had no time for NEHU. As such, NEHU missed a golden opportunity to involve all stakeholders and for rebuilding its image as a premier institution in the region.

It is said there are a thousand and one reasons for the death of Karna, a mythical anti-hero character in the epic, the Mahabharata. What is happening in NEHU today should be viewed as the culmination of factors and events involving different actors - past and present. All the dissatisfaction and disappointments accumulated over a period of time are now taking the form of public protests. True, the VC is not responsible for everything. But he also cannot disown his responsibility. If the stalemate continues for long it is not good for the stakeholders. In times of crises, we often miss the woods for the trees, and misdirect our energies on secondary issues. Hope, good sense prevails and the contending parties focus on the basic issues; enter a dialogue and address the core problems. It is everyone's responsibility to bring NEHU back on the right path.

(Prof H. Shrikant is a senior faculty of NEHU)

Lit-fests must have space for youth and local authors

Editor,
With reference to the news report, Are Literary Festivals Dying a Slow Death In Meghalaya (ST November 5, 2024) there are a few points I would like to mention.

Firstly, I am delighted to read about the students and young people in Shillong who seem to be avid readers and who understand the importance of books, who are actually mourning about the lending libraries closing down. In the UK, JK Rowling suddenly appeared and drew thousands of children back into reading. We need a JK Rowling here in Shillong. I say this in all seriousness. A few suggestions I have to offer are - Book Clubs should be encouraged headed by local authors who can hold small Lit-fests for local talent and once in a while, also invite well known writers from outside to give that exposure and glamour. Special sessions for aspiring writers and poets are a must in literature festivals big and small.

On a regular basis reading and story-telling sessions can be organised by well-known local authors who are committed and who understand and enjoy them. Music is important - very few of us can do without music but it should not totally replace literature. Just as we need both legs and both arms to be fully functional, similarly literature and music are inseparable parts of the creative world.

I wish the Shillong Literary Festival all success.

Yours etc.,
Bijoya Sawian,
Via email

Donald Trump's second presidency is globally disruptive but damage may be contained

For India, impact bad on economy, but positive for Modi's politics at the moment

By Nitya Chakraborty

Finally, the U.S. election results are out. The Republican candidate Donald Trump has swept the polls by winning convincingly in the presidential contest as also leading the Republican Party to majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. There is no grey area. It is apparent that the majority of the American voters have shown confidence in this political maverick who has promised to Make America Great Again. For the Democratic Party, the 2024 elections results have brought some uneasy questions to the fore. The party leadership has to go into it after full results come out.

Now what is going to be the global impact of the second presidency of Donald Trump? To start with, it has to be mentioned that Donald Trump will officially take over the president's position on January 20, 2025 and so there are 75 days left between now and January 20 next year. During this intervening period, the Biden government will be having a lame duck character, the president will not be able to take any major decision.

In a normal circumstance, there is no problem in such a transition. But right now, two major wars are going on in West Asia and Ukraine. The USA is very much involved with both. Its decisions matter. Trump said in his election speech that, if elected, he would stop the Ukraine war in 24 hours by talking to Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. This was a rhetoric in an election campaign speech but it will not be surprising if Trump makes some major moves on both Israel-Hamas war as also in Ukraine. Even before his takeover officially as the President on January 20, he can informally convey his views to the secretary of state and ask him to proceed accordingly. Good or bad, some change will take place on the two war fronts, possibly even before January 20, 2025.

It is apparent that the allies of the USA, especially NATO and the European Union are panicky. Even before Trump crossed the majority figure-270, French President Emanuel Macron telephoned Trump and congratulated him and also assured that he would be happy to work with him. This is diplomatically inappropriate by international standards. Yet, the European leaders are just lining up to prostrate before the second term President by assuring that they are friends and not anti-USA.

The Prime Ministers and the Presidents of the European countries have noted with concern what Trump said in September this year in his election campaign in Wisconsin. He said: "We have been treated so badly mostly by our allies, our allies treat us actually worse than our so-called enemies." Then he mentioned: "In military, we protect them and then they screw us on trade. We will not let that happen anymore." The signal is very clear from this. Trump advisers say in the policy paper on the second term that there will be no compromise on the issue of trade. The European nations along with China and Japan have to suffer the brunt. The US has borne it for too long.

In his last term, Trump withdrew from a number of international agreements including the Iran Nuclear Deal and the Paris Climate agreement. Trump wanted the NATO member nations to share the expenses as per the norms. There was some last minute understanding and Trump did not substan-

tially cut the US funding. But now, in his second term, he is more confident, he takes decisions on the basis of his own understanding. He has a great authoritarian streak and has scant respect for Pentagon bosses. For the peace movement workers, Trump can be an enigma, he can give a 24 hour deadline to contending forces for a ceasefire or he can take a position to finish one side. Trump is a disruptor in a status quoist international bureaucracy. The results may be good or bad. The Republican President will be more unpredictable in his second term.

What about India? To start with, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has reasons to be pleased for political reasons but the impact on the Indian economy will be adverse. Modi has some commonality with Trump. They both share the same streak of authoritarianism and Islamophobia. But Narendra Modi is a cool person and not a maverick like Trump. India will get some relief in the latest diplomatic tangle with Canada and US agencies. Trump's personal help to Narendra Modi will be of big value at this moment.

Then there is the issue of Bangladesh. The head of interim government of Bangladesh Dr. Muhammad Yunus was desperate to meet the Indian PM at the UN assembly session in New York in September this year, but Modi avoided it. Modi also was waiting for the US elections. Trump has made his position clear about Dr. Yunus in his message on Diwali. Now the days of Dr. Yunus are numbered. He is known as a friend of Hillary Clinton. He is a pariah to Trump. The US policy will change drastically in Bangladesh and that will be done in consultations with the Indian Prime Minister. So that way, Modi will get some relief from this eastern neighbour.

What is the impact on the Indian economy? Trump is basically a businessman. He understands politics from the prism of business and economy. In his second term, he will initiate a trade war — primarily with China but also with India, whom he described on 17 September as a "very big abuser" of bilateral trade. The tariff hike will impact Indian exports. Pharma exports will be further hit as Trump is committed to disband or dilute provisions of Obamacare.

The US is India's largest export destination, and received 18 per cent of Indian exports in 2023-24, up from 12 per cent a decade ago. For India, maintaining the export growth to the USA and even increasing the level are of crucial importance for the domestic industry. Trump's higher tariffs on imports by the US will have an impact on the US consumers also. A good section of US industry is not in favour of higher tariffs on Chinese imports as their manufactured products will be more costly. The Trump policy has its own drawbacks also from the overall perspective of US economic growth. The policy can be calibrated later.

In all, the Trump 2.0 world will be a trying period for both the leading nations like China, Russia, EU nations as also India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi can make use of his personal rapport with Trump to offset the impact of some measures. Even within a tough policy frame, there is scope for calibration. The Indian Prime Minister has to do that to protect India's economic interests under the second term of Donald Trump. (IPA Service)

"Mystery creates wonder and wonder is the basis of man's desire to understand."

— Neil Armstrong

The Shillong Times

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NEHU: State Govt Intervention Crucial
POLITICS and political partisanship is the last thing that should poison the atmosphere at the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU). The NEHU Students' Union (NEHUSU) is right in warning political forces, in this instance, the Voice of the Peoples' Party (VPP) from interfering into what is an internal matter of the University. If the Shillong MP had come in his capacity as the people's representative who could also put pressure on the central government to take action to defuse the crisis, it would have been a separate matter. The problem arises because several letters addressed to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the President of India who is the Visitor of the University have remained unanswered even while the students' hunger strike the questions arises as to whether things can be allowed to further deteriorate or for the State Government to step in and speak to the Education Ministry citing loss of precious study hours and classes at a crucial juncture in the life of students when exams are nearing. The mental turmoil of the striking students can only be felt by those who have been carrying the burden for the past four days with some students being admitted to Civil Hospital Shillong.

On Friday the NEHU Teachers' Association and the Meghalaya Tribal Teachers' Association (MeTTA) met Governor CH Vijaya Shankar who is the Chief Rect of the University to apprise him of the situation. The Governor has given a patient hearing and it is expected that he would take up the matter with the concerned department in Delhi and even with the Prime Minister and President. This stalemate cannot continue without matters reaching a point of no return. The fact that the Vice Chancellor has shown no empathy with the student's fast and only much later deigned to address the striking students, but is unwilling to budge from his position, only shows that he is being supported by forces he knows will bail him out of the present predicament. The example of Manipur where the death of over 300 people and a continued impasse has continued for over a year even while the Central Government looks the other way is enough indication that what happens in India's North East is the least of its concerns. This is a disturbing trend that the people of the region should be exercising their minds on, cutting across political party lines. Politics cannot be allowed to divide the people of this region as there are serious consequences in doing so.

Politics is an indispensable part of a democratic system but it should not enter the premises of a University, any University in fact. All appointments from the Vice Chancellor down to the lowest rung of the administrative staff should be transparent. Merit should be the only criterion and not affiliation to any political ideology. That NEHU has come to this point in its history shows how political interference in appointments of vice chancellors has soiled the academia.

The unhinged Human-Hunter/Menshohnoh

By Daphunlin M. Warjri

The fact about with our state is that there has been this blood shedding ritual killing that has been going on since time immemorial. The locals called these murderous criminals "menshohnoh", and for the non-locals the translation would be "male hunters". These "menshohnoh" as the correct connotation, would hunt down any person for extracting human blood; but blood only of the indigenous Khasi people of the Khasi Hills, a small region in the state of Meghalaya.

These blood-hunting criminals do so because they are harbouring a serpent, which the Khasi call "U Thlen", who only wants Khasi blood, and in return, it gives them immense wealth and luxury to those families. However they are bound to never break the deal. And they would have to sacrifice one of their family members if they fail to quench the thirst of the serpent.

The question arises as to why this serpent wants only the blood of the local indigenous Khasi, but not the outsiders' blood. The fact is that the serpent is unleashing its vengeance, particularly on the Khasi community, because it has been betrayed by them.

The story dates back a long time when it was said that this serpent was caught in one of the caves in the region of Sohra popularly known as Cherrapunjee, in the region now called, the "Kshaid Daiñ Thlen" (translation of this would be "the waterfall where they severed the serpent") - where one lone courageous man went inside the cave and with a hot iron rod poked into the insides of the serpent and killed it. After that the village kept a feast, and decided to cook and eat the meat of the dead serpent with friends and families.

One woman however, out of love for her son kept chunks of meat for him to have when he returned from work. She kept the meat in the cupboard but forgot about it and the days passed by. Then after about a month, she heard a voice calling out her name. She was terrified and trembled as there was no one else at home.

"Who could be calling out my name when there is no one at home?", she was scared out of her wits. She realized that the voice was coming from the cupboard,

and shrieked. The small serpent started to crawl from inside and spoke again with a voice so terrible and devious,

"Woman!, what is it that you fear so much?", "Is it the fear that the villagers will find out?" "Or is it that you fear me?" The woman was speechless and numb.

"Did you not know that I can help you gain so much from this world? the serpent said. The woman trembled and mumbled, "Why are you still alive when we have killed you?"

"You weak and foolish humans would not have the power to comprehend. Your men have slain me, because of their cowardice but yet I still speak to you now! Just obey and do whatever I tell you. I will spare you and your family, and give you all that you desire," replied the serpent.

The woman exclaimed, "What is it that you want from me?"

The serpent responded, "I want the blood of your kind, for it had entrapped and killed me in a very dishonourable manner. I want their souls, and it is the only way I can regain my full power."

"What if I don't fulfill what you want?", the woman replied hesitantly.

"Then you and your whole family will suffer, perish and rot!", the serpent reprimanded in a voice so terrible that darkness engulfed the whole house.

"Okay, I shall do it! But please spare me and my family!", the woman begged.

The serpent spoke, "Today I make a covenant with you that I shall spare you and your family, with a pact that in every season you shall give me the blood of your kind, and in return, I shall give you wealth and power. But if you fail to do so, I shall drink the blood of your family members each time you do not concede to my wants."

"But how can I do that? My family and I are good, reputable people of the village, I would not even dare to kill a fly, how would I do it?" the woman asked.

"You do not need to worry about it, I will give power to you and your sons to draw blood from men and women and if you cannot do so I only require human hair, or piece of garment, or fingernails,"

said the serpent.

From then on, the woman sealed the pact of blood. And the murder of small children, women and men who went out to the fields in desolation and isolation started and till this day the incidents of finding dead bodies with their bloody nose and fingernails extracted would be heard every now and again.

In reality, some people even have experienced strange dreams at night, and when they ignored these signs they started to have medical conditions that science or medicine cannot cure. They would become malnourished. The locals believe that these are the signs that the serpent is slowly swallowing them. The only thing the Khasis who have experienced these would do is to go to a certain clan called the "Syiem," (it is believed that the man who went alone inside the cave to kill the serpent was from this clan; hence the reason why this is the only clan which can kill the effect of the serpent's curse). Those people who failed to meet the Syiem clan for the required ritual would lose their family member to the serpent's curse. The majority of Khasis believe this legend to be true, except those who had never experienced it themselves. Just as in other Indian states and communities elsewhere have black magic and voodoo, so also the Khasis of Meghalaya have this kind of mysterious dark magic and curse.

The problem with a society that only relies on scientific intervention and knowledge is that these supernatural realities are a mystery to them. The law does not or cannot define this supernatural phenomenon. Law enforcement calls it a superstitious belief and backwardness. The sad part is that the State's law enforcement agencies have failed to investigate and to break the pattern of these criminals ("menshohnoh"). The ruthless killings by these criminals with the same pattern of killings are a mockery and a disgrace to the entire police force and the legislature as a whole.

What made these human-hunters/menshohnoh so de-ranked and dangerous, is that the locals believe that before their hunt they would drink an alcoholic substance called

the "Kyiad kyntangsnem", meaning an "alcoholic drink which has been ritualistically consecrated by praying to a dark entity. But one may question as to how they could perform such organized killings when they are under intoxication. The only way we could find answers to this one is not by ourselves but by specialized agencies known as "criminologists". These criminologists specialize in understanding the psychology of criminals by either investigating the crime scene or by interrogating a criminal himself. But the sad truth is that India does not have a separate department for criminology. It is a matter of concern because India is a vast country where resources are scarce and with a huge population is also burdened with crimes of different nature. Such organised crimes are bound to rise while the law enforcement agency is still very unorganized in the manner of providing service. There is not much real investigation for crimes and when criminals are apprehended the judiciary would again lag in their way of providing equality and justice. Proper investigation should be conducted and night patrolling should be initiated on a daily basis.

Inspiration should be taken from cases like the Manvath Murders which happened during the 1970s and were solved with careful investigation. In this case the gruesomeness of the crimes had sent shock waves across the nation where women and children were killed or one can say sacrificed to a tree deity for fertility and prosperity. The Maharashtra Police Force did a fantastic job in disentangling every notion of impossibility to crack the case. Just recently also one boy was sacrificed to bring success to the school in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh and all the culprits have been arrested and are undergoing trial.

The sad reality is that if in other states these ritual murderers are being arrested and punished, what is stopping our state from doing so? Is it the lack of resources or the lack of resourceful people? What is the whole point of surveillance machinery when we can't get access to it to find the robbers? The State's security and safety cannot be jeopardized any longer just because we are a backward region.

Prosheshon-bah : Down memory lane

By Barnes Mawrie

Come November! It is a month of excitement for the thousands of Catholics in Khasi-Jaintia Hills. The second Sunday of this month has always remained an important day in the liturgical calendar of the Catholic Church in the Archdiocese of Shillong. The event we are talking about is the Prosheshon-bah (Grand Eucharistic Procession) which is a religious festival for the Catholics of Northeast India. This religious festival has its origin in the early 1900's initiated by the Salvatorian missionaries as a popular devotion to the Holy Eucharist. The founder of the Salvatorians, Fr. Jordan, was a great devotee of the Holy Eucharist and so he infused this devotion among his followers. This popular devotion was introduced by the Salvatorians in Khasi-Jaintia Hills in the form of an annual procession on the feast of Corpus Christi. Of course, in those early years, it was a humble function with a handful of believers participating in it.

With the arrival of the Salesian missionaries in 1922, this popular devotion got a boost and with the growing number of believers, it became a notable event in the city. When Fr. Constantine Vendrame (now a servant of God on the path to sainthood) took over as the parish priest of Laitumkhrach in 1925, he gave great importance to it and turned it into a grand religious festival. The common practice was a three-day preparation which is known as triduum (in Latin meaning three days). In those days when there were no motor cars, people had to walk on foot. Therefore, the believers coming from distant places to participate in the Prosheshon-bah, would arrive in Laitumkhrach early in the week. They were then put up in the classrooms, in the parish hall and in other nearby institutions like Don Bosco Technical School, St. Mary's School etc. The days of triduum were well organized consisting of catechesis, prayers, fun and games and religious bioscopes in the evening. In fact, there used to be a lot of noise during those three days and Laitumkhrach would go hussy buzzy with the throng of people who were there.

In the 1970s when I was a small boy, I still recall how we were all excited when the Prosheshon-bah drew near. It used to be customary that on this day our parents would buy us new clothes and new pairs of shoes. During the weekdays before the event, Laitumkhrach and Police Bazaar would be thronged by thousands of people from villages who would come shopping for the great event. When finally the day arrived, the whole of Laitumkhrach would witness a sea of people. In those days there were not very many vehicles and so the roads were entirely free. The procession would commence at around 1.30 pm from the Cathedral ground and it would go along Dhankheti road passing through Fire Brigade ground, Police Point and then back to the Cathedral. The procession would take roughly two hours in those days when the crowd was not as massive as today. The procession would converge at the Calvary and it would conclude with the Benediction service usually presided over by Bishop Stephen Fernando himself.

Some usual humorous scenes during these processions would be village people in particular who would carry their new pairs of shoes and walk barefooted because the new shoes pinched their feet; mothers attaching their children to themselves with safety pins so that they may not be lost

in the crowd. Then invariably some children would be lost during the procession and announcement would be made at the end of the function followed by an emotional reunion between the parents and their crying children. It was customary too that at the end of the procession the parents would give their children a treat in the restaurants before they went home.

The Prosheshon-bah has seen a great evolution today since the days it started. Some of the notable developments are first of all, the growing size of the crowd. From a few thousand people, today it has reached a few lakhs. In spite of the trifurcation of the archdiocese, the crowd has not diminished at all. The streets have become jam packed so much so it is almost impossible for anyone to get through. Because of the mammoth crowd the procession is taking more time than usual. Secondly, there is a greater display of multi-culturalism. During the Prosheshon-bah today, we witness different ethnic groups of Catholics hailing from different parts of Northeast India who come to participate in it. This has added more beauty and elegance to the event and it manifests the universalism of the Church. It is beautiful to see different groups in their traditional costumes, praying and singing in their own languages. Therefore, the Prosheshon-bah has evolved from being a local event to being a regional event. This religious festival has got sociological, ecclesiological, economic and cultural implications. Sociologically, it can be viewed as a manifestation of the community spirit that exists within a Church. Ecclesiologically, it is a strong vindication of the sensus ecclesiae where different ethnic groups profess the same faith in one place and at one time. Economically, this religious festival serves as a great means of income for the hundreds of hawkers, street vendors, restaurants and eateries. With the growing number of both pilgrims and tourists, this economic aspect is growing stronger each year. Culturally, the Prosheshon-bah is a manifestation of the blending of cultures and the multi-cultural characteristics of the Church.

The most important aspect of the Prosheshon-bah is the fact that it has become the most well-known Catholic religious festival in Northeast India. The event still retains its religious characteristics of being a peaceful, prayerful walk of faith. It is inspiring to witness such a multitude of people walking together, praying and singing together and with such discipline. In spite of the mammoth crowd, we have never heard till date any report of stampeding or any unruly behaviour. We have seen in the news of stampedes and death of persons in religious events like the Kumbh Mela and Kedarnath Yatra, but thanks to the sense of discipline of the Catholic communities, no such incident has ever taken place here.

The Prosheshon-bah is a great manifestation of the strength and unity of the Catholic Church in our region. The only point of concern regarding this annual event, is the growing number of participants and the lack of space - an issue which the Church along with the Government can possibly address. Probably, this religious event has crossed a century and it has become a sacred heritage of the Church of our region. On Sunday November 10, this great event is going to take place once again and as usual parents and children are excited about it.

Letters to the Editor

Bamboo Mission Meghalaya: The enabling factors

Editor,

It was with great interest that I read the piece "Bamboo Mission Meghalaya - The Enabling Factors" (ST November 6, 2024) by the much respected Bah Toki Blah.

My interest lay heightened by a few factors - firstly, I was born in Shillong and consider it my home, irrespective of the fact that my progenitor took me away when I was just a decade old to live in the northern part of the country. Secondly, that I was a bamboo designer/entrepreneur in the past and thirdly as I was independently associated with the National Bamboo Mission, initiated at the turn of the Millennium by the Department of Science & Technology, Government of India.

Bah Blah's association with agriculture and farming is well known and I more or less agree with what he writes, provided there can be the necessary synergy between the District Councils, the intermediaries and of course the farmer.

However, I have always believed that for any State Government and this holds

especially true for the North East, where the majority of India's bamboo stock grows, to develop a successful and sustainable 'Bamboo Economy' is dependent on getting the matrix of the material and it's optimal usage absolutely spot on. So maybe one should speak about the usage part.

Village & Craft - The traditional usage of the material, from the gigantic baskets which hold betel nuts during the water soaking process in villages lower down from Pynursla, or the intricately woven shangs or the traditional rain shield (knup) or the "khoh" are ubiquitous, but care needs to be exercised that they are not pushed out of the market by much cheaper plastic alternatives. Here I need to tell a story - The United Nations Development Programme was deeply involved in The National Bamboo Mission and sometime during the first year of the Millennium, gave me, at my bidding, a design project to be executed in a few villages off Mawsynram. The skill and ability of the craftsmen to produce what I designed, led them to be associated with chain stores like Fabindia and Westside for close to seven years. But then nothing good lasts forever and the surfeit of imported fibre crafts and rising transportation costs put an end to the venture.

It might therefore be a good idea for governance to encourage and develop

a base of urban and rural craft entrepreneurs who will look at developing markets beyond the tourist shops of Khyndailad or be dependent on governmental craft procuring agencies.

Industrial - Since the focus of the National Bamboo Mission was completely geared towards developing a large-scale industrial usage for bamboo, it encouraged and supported a large number of machine manufacturing entities in various parts of the country to develop an array of machines to process bamboo, which are now easily available. Such processing machines can give a whole new dimension to usage of the material ranging from knock down furniture, wall and false ceiling panning, etc. However, the implementation of such a process will have to be well thought out either through urban entrepreneurs or rural based societies. The whole gamut of support through finance, design, marketing support, etc., will need clear thinking.

In essence, other than the ecological benefits of encouraging bamboo farming to help farmers to increase incomes, no sustainable benefits will happen unless one finds ways to sensibly use the material itself. This has been well proven by some of the leading so-called 'Bamboo Economy Nations' of South-East Asia.

Yours etc.,
Shahriyar Moin Choudhury

Camp : Pinewood Hotel, Shillong

NEHU crisis reaches breaking point

Editor,

Several days have passed since the hunger strike and protests organized by NEHUSU and KSU against Vice Chancellor Prabha Shankar Shukla. Despite numerous meetings and multiple attempts to engage with him, the issues facing the University remain unaddressed. After more than fifty hours of hunger strikes, with fasting members being hospitalized, and after the Vice Chancellor secretly attended fairs and held private press conferences, he finally managed to squeeze in a few minutes to meet with the students. However, this meeting ended in indecision yet again.

The current outcry did not stem out of nowhere but is a direct reflection of accumulated frustration over several months. The entire University has come to a standstill, with NEHU's Non-Teaching Staff, the NEHU Teachers' Association, and the NEHU Students' Union all expressing their deep dissatisfaction with the Vice Chancellor's handling—or lack thereof—of University matters. Once hailed as the pride of the North East, NEHU's ranking has now dropped below 100.

While one of the main sources of discontent lies in the illegal appointment of the Registrar and Deputy Registrar, this letter seeks to highlight other important issues plaguing the campus, issues that further underline the Vice Chancellor's neglect of the University. The demands of NEHUSU are not limited to the lack of transparency in administrative affairs but also address several vital concerns that hinder the student body's ability to excel.

Students in central universities across the country, such as those in Delhi and Hyderabad, enjoy privileges and facilities that NEHU students are deprived of. Some of these facilities should not even need to be demanded; they should be provided by the University authorities as a basic standard. The demands put forth by NEHUSU include the enhancement of library facilities, the extension of library deadlines, better placement opportunities, and increased access to e-resources, among others.

If one were to walk around the NEHU campus, one would be greeted by the glaring absence of streetlights after dark and the unsightly potholes that mar the landscape. These are not minor inconveniences; they are glaring indicators of how disconnected the Vice Chancellor is from the reality of campus life. His continued refusal to engage

meaningfully with students and his inability to address their concerns have reached a breaking point.

The most recent Academic Council meeting in October was disrupted by a mass walk-out by NEHUTA and NEHUSU members, a clear sign of the widespread discontent. His failure to offer solutions led to a public demand for his resignation. Yet, did the Vice Chancellor take any steps to rectify the situation? No. Instead, he continues to evade questions and ignore the concerns of students—even as they protest outside his office, starving, with their health at stake.

It is high time the Vice Chancellor shifts his focus toward the holistic development of the campus and stops trivializing the concerns of NEHUSU. His dismissive attitude and arrogance have eroded the trust of the student community. As NEHUSU General Secretary Tonihoh Kharsati aptly stated, "A University is nothing without its students... The time has come for the Central Government to make a choice between an incompetent Vice Chancellor and the future of the students."

Yours etc.,
Arpita Saikia, NEHU

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

Communication problems can be sign of mental health disorder

Human interactions are complex and come with their share of disappointments. This can be the case, for instance, when a loved one doesn't react to our distress or joy the way we wish they had. Communication accidents happen! Psychiatry teaches us, however, that if these mishaps occur over and over with the same person, it might not be because the person lacks good intentions. It could be the result of a change in their social cognition.

A growing number of studies are establishing a link between social cognition and different psychiatric conditions. Reactions that are normal for most people, such as showing concern for a person who expresses sadness, may be absent in others.

For some, a situation or interaction that seems very basic might lead to a misinterpretation, which in turn could provoke behaviour that is inappropriate or inadequate. If these kinds of errors happen often, this might be due to impairment of a key cognitive skill: social cognition.

Social cognition is mainly about our ability to decode emotions and understand the beliefs and intentions of people around us. Determining whether this cognitive skill has been affected by a psychiatric illness, or by another disorder, is essential in order for the person to be able to respond appropriately to the problems they encounter, and to limit potential harmful effects.

An emerging field of research

An assistant professor of psychiatry at McGill University conducted research on psychiatric disorders in order to study cognitive impairment, its impact and possible solutions. The work is part of a growing field of research into the relationship between social cognitive disorders and mental health disorders such as depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Varying degrees of impairment of social cognition have been observed in all these disorders.

The different signs of impaired social cognition must be taken seriously. The problem not only affects an individual's understanding of the world, but disrupts communication with the people he or she meets every day.

It's possible to spot these signs when interpreting a real-life situation or a fictional film. Someone suffering from cognitive impairment may be the only one who doesn't understand the innuendo of the main



character in a favourite TV series, or the double meaning of a remark made during a discussion between colleagues.

An impact on everyday life

A literature review that was carried out a few years ago showed that there were connections between impairment of social cognition in people living with bipolar disorder, and how they functioned in everyday life. In other words, the more social cognition is impaired, the less likely the individual will be able to function well in everyday life.

Since then, the work, as well as that of other teams, has shown that social cognition impairments mediate the relationship between cognitive problems (e.g. memory) and clinical symptoms. Indeed, in disorders such as schizophrenia and certain types

of bipolar disorder, memory is frequently affected.

These impairments occur early in the course of the disease and are associated with loss of motivation, withdrawal and difficulty expressing emotions. Impairments of social cognition, such as difficulty identifying one's own emotions and those of others, and in understanding oneself and others, are at the heart of this process. It's through understanding these that the researchers can propose care solutions.

Improving cognitive skills

Several proposals have been developed to support and improve these skills.

Some interventions, for example, include exercises to improve social cognition and memory. These may involve the patient cor-

rectly recognizing emotions expressed by another person, or correctly interpreting the beliefs or intentions of others, which then enables him or her to read more complex situations.

Other interventions allow the patient to become aware of the way he or she thinks, by integrating social cognition. An exercise may present a story in which the characters' motivations are only gradually revealed.

For example, a young girl offers chocolates to an elderly woman, who thanks her with a smile.

Once the girl has left, the lady expresses disgust and throws the box in the garbage can. After a few months, the girl returns with a new box of chocolates. The questions will then focus on the girl's beliefs and the reaction she could expect from the

elderly lady.

This type of exercise, where the complexity increases, can help an individual gradually become aware of his or her difficulties and then find strategies that lead to solutions. Such a program, initially developed for schizophrenia, has proven effective and is now recommended for a number of psychiatric disorders. For schizophrenia, a recent meta-analysis showed sustained improvement over one year in symptoms, self-esteem and functioning.

Most of these programs take place in a care environment in the presence of a therapist. Practical exercises then enable people living with social cognitive disorders to introduce these skills into their daily lives. Indeed, interventions that support social cognition involve rapidly applying the proposed strategies in everyday life, so that they are useful and sustainable over time.

Accessibility to be improved

Numerous efforts are being made to make this type of care available to a wider public, notably through the use of digital tools. For example, since the pandemic, the research team has proposed videoconferencing groups for people with severe mental health problems as part of a research project. The people who took part in these remote interventions found them both feasible and satisfying, and their well-being improved as a result.

For the loved ones of a person living with a mental health disorder, a better knowledge and understanding of these processes is also useful. It is important for friends and family to understand that they are not dealing with a malicious person who is deliberately trying to hurt or misinterpret them, but with a person who is suffering.

Schizophrenia is one of the most incomprehensible disorders for families, so programs exist to help improve intra-family communication (e.g., AMI Québec). These programs support the maintenance and quality of relationships, even if they do not specifically target social cognition.

A great deal of research and clinical work is being carried out to understand the mechanisms of social cognition and help people living with a mental health disorder to recover. Although a lot of work remains to be done in adjusting to individual situations, real advances are being made. *(The Conversation)*

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, NOVEMBER 10, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon sextile Venus on your solar chart and it will prove to be a very good combination. You will get mental satisfaction as your desires will get fulfilled. Your self-confidence and your talent will be your biggest weapons this year. You will remain cool under all circumstances and will take well thought out decisions. Your efficiency and capability will come out before the people. And they will acknowledge your talent. The expansion plans at work will take place without any hurdle. There are chances of investing in fixed assets/mutual funds. Your elders will keep blessing you. The understanding between husband and wife will be quite good. Despite your busy schedule you will be able to give time to your family. Auspicious functions will keep taking place.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) The planetary configuration indicates some unexpected profits in profession and career. You will enjoy good health. Education and study matters will be highlighted. Family life and relations with friends will be better. Take care in regards to matters of conflict so that it may not interfere in deals in business or profession. Glamour and charm in your personality prove to be very fruitful in dealing with people; you will make new contacts in public. You will be creative and able to change your imagination to reality. Avoid being angry and be peaceful in order to have success in every field.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You should remain caring regarding the health of a family member. Professional and career also need your attention. In business or profession be careful that someone should not betray you. So go slow in matters related to your work and do the needful with a strict watch over circumstances. Financial problems will be dealt with patience and bearing a peace of mind. Take care in travel. Imaginative power of mind will prove to be beneficial in dealing with clients. Keep away from conflicts which may arise due to misunderstanding in communication.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) At this time, combination of stars will give you mixed results. You may enjoy with family, friends and loved ones and spend some time full of entertainment. It will be advisable to take care of your health. You may get some uneasiness in family life too. Your monetary matters and matters of finance will be solved now. Do not take part in any debate or conflict related to matters which involve dealing with property. Invest wisely in some of the long term beneficial plans. Take a timely step to rule out ill relations and keep away from bad company. Spouse may need some help in emotional matters and help wisely and in a positive way. Utilize money wisely and economically.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) You may have chances of finalizing marriage in your favour which will prove to be long lasting and joyful. The position of stars indicates a good time to have a romance or love affair. Health of self or a relative may need some attention. You have good chances of promotion of spouse if due. Take care of luggage and belongings in travel. Your health will remain stable. Money may come suddenly while some expenditure may occur in household or in the purchase of luxury items. Family and relations with friends need some attention. Think positive and do not indulge in making contacts with people of a negative image.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) You may make up your mind for a career in education or research work. You are courageous and full of vitality at work. Take advantage of this good time to improve your position. You may have contacts with good friends which will be profitable for you to extend relations with influential people. Amidst your powerful imagination and creative power, you may be able to start a new venture of profit making deals and you may fetch new contracts. Monetary profits are at your door step. Your family and children may need some help.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) This is a time of mixed results as predicted from your stars position. This period concerns may arise over health, diet and nutrition. You should keep some changes or modifications in mind for better care and for good health.

Spend more time with children and family to have peace of mind and stability in thoughts. Good time for educational work to be carried out. To start a profitable profession in a field like computer software, cosmetics and jewelry may be beneficial. Take care of your old hidden enemies. Your mind may be crowded with some unhappy thoughts. Deal wisely and with patience to resolve these matters. Avoid rash decisions related to friends and family.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) The position of stars in this phase indicates some mixed results. You may face some unexpected expenditure which may disturb your budget. There is a scope of a new property or investment in real estate. If you pay timely attention to your business, you may get good returns. Health may create some problems in the coming days. You would be much loved in your family. Children need attention in their educational matters. You will have plenty of work to be disposed off. So think and work with patience and the results will bear sweet fruits. Your intellect and creative thoughts will give you courage and vitality in achieving your goal.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) Your attention towards personality development will prove to be helpful in giving a boost to your career. Money matters will be solved if you try for some advances or loan; and it will be granted. Some religious plans are at your disposal so take them up and the desire will be fulfilled. It is a time for good earnings in long term investments. Your family members may need some attention in health related matters. You will be making quick decisions and it will prove to be beneficial in matter regarding your career. Some of the family members will help you whenever needed.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) It is a time to be punctual and stick to your daily routine. You will have to work hard to achieve your goals in respect of matters related to your profession and career. You may get proper guidance from elders in monetary matters. Your influence among people at your work place will be remarkable. You may seek guidance for starting a new project from someone who is intimate to you. Awareness in the paper work and early planning is needed to make progress in money matters. Family health and happy environment will help to refresh you; so make the most of it.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) There will be mixed results in this period. Achievements in career and profession may be good but with this some hurdles will disturb the momentum. You will have to spend more than anticipated. Education of children may need some extra attention. Keep away from any conflict and avoid getting entangled in some anti social work. There may be a chance for a tour or outing but keep yourself in tune with your family. In order to have affection and love among family members keep calm. Meditation will help you.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) Your general image in public will improve. Now it is time to examine and watch your investments and money related matters. You must incorporate some regular exercises to maintain and have good health. Sources of entertainment within your family members and loved ones will open new avenues to improve your relations with them. Your friends will admire you as you make strides in furthering your public relations. The company of friends will help keep away stress. Spend quality time with children as they need more attention.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) It is a good time to go ahead in your chosen profession and career. You will be satisfied at your work place or in business. Stress should be avoided in matters related to family matters. Be aware of rival and competitor activities to counter any of their activities and plans. Avoid any collaborations or partnership with unknown people. Expenditure should be watched properly and think before you buy a luxury item. Health will be good and you will enjoy taking part in sporting activities.

Part science, part magic: an illuminating history of healing with light

For millennia, humans had one obvious and reliable source of light - the Sun - and we knew the Sun was essential for our survival.

This might be why ancient religions - such as those in Egypt, Greece, the Middle East, India, Asia, and Central and South America - involved Sun worship.

Early religions were also often tied up with healing. Sick people would turn to the shaman, priest or priestess for help. While ancient peoples used the Sun to heal, this might not be how you think.

Since then, we've used light to heal in a number of ways. Some you might recognise today, others sound more like magic.

From warming ointments to sunbaking

There's not much evidence around today that ancient peoples believed sunlight itself could cure illness. Instead, there's more evidence they used the warmth of the Sun to heal.

The Ebers Papyrus is an ancient Egyptian medical scroll from around 1500 BCE. It contains a recipe for an ointment to "make the sinews [...] flexible". The ointment was made of wine, onion, soot, fruit and the tree extracts frankincense and myrrh. Once it was applied, the person was "put in sunlight".

Other recipes, to treat coughs for example, involved putting ingredients in a vessel and letting it stand in sunlight. This is presumably to warm it up and help it infuse more strongly. The same technique is in the medical writings attributed to Greek physician Hippocrates who lived around 450-380 BCE.

The physician Aretaeus, who was active around 150 CE in what is now modern Turkey, wrote that sunlight could cure chronic cases of what he called "lethargy" but we'd recognise today as depression: Lethargics are to be laid in the light, and exposed to the rays of the Sun (for the disease is gloom); and in a rather warm place, for the cause is a congelation of the innate heat.

Classical Islamic scholar Ibn Sina described the health effects of sunbathing (at a time when we didn't know about the link to skin cancer). In Book I of The Canon of Medicine he said the hot Sun helped everything from flatulence and asthma to hysteria. He also said the Sun "invigorates the brain" and is beneficial for "clearing the uterus".

It was sometimes hard to tell science from magic

All the ways of curing described so far depend more on the Sun's heat rather than its light. But what about curing with light itself? English scientist Sir Isaac Newton knew you could "split" sunlight into a rainbow spectrum of colours.

This and many other discoveries radically changed ideas about healing in the next 200 years.

But as new ideas flourished, it was sometimes hard to tell science from magic.

For example, German mystic and visionary Jakob Lorber (1800-1864) believed sunlight was the best cure for pretty much anything. His 1851 book The Healing Power of Sunlight was still in print in 1997.

Public health reformer Florence Nightingale also believed in the power of sunlight. In her famous book Notes on Nursing, she said of her patients: second only to their need of fresh air is their need for light [...] not only light but direct sunlight.

Nightingale also believed sunlight was the natural enemy of bacteria and viruses. She seems at least partially right. Sunlight can kill some, but not all, bacteria and viruses.

Chromotherapy - a way of healing based on colours and light - emerged in this period. While some of its supporters claim using coloured light for healing dates back to ancient Egypt, it's hard to find evidence of this now.

Modern chromotherapy owes a lot to the fertile mind of physician Edwin Babbitt from the United States. Babbitt's 1878 book The

Principles of Light and Color was based on experiments with coloured light and his own visions and clairvoyant insights. It's still in print.

Babbitt invented a portable stained-glass window called the Chromolume, designed to restore the balance of the body's natural coloured energy. Sitting for set periods under the coloured lights from the window was said to restore your health.

Indian entrepreneur Dinshah Ghadiali read about this, moved to the US and invented his own instrument, the Spectro-Chrome, in 1920.

The theory behind the Spectro-Chrome was that the human body was made up of four elements - oxygen (blue), hydrogen (red), nitrogen (green) and carbon (yellow). When these colours were out of balance, it caused sickness.

Some hour-long sessions with the Spectro-Chrome would restore balance and health. By using its green light, for example, you could reportedly aid your pituitary gland, while yellow light helped your digestion. By 1946 Ghadiali had made around a million dollars from sales of this device in the US.

And today?

While some of these treatments sound bizarre, we now know certain coloured lights treat some illnesses and disorders.

Phototherapy with blue light is used to treat newborn babies with jaundice in hospital. People with seasonal affective disorder (sometimes known as winter depression) can be treated with regular exposure to white or blue light. And ultraviolet light is used to treat skin conditions, such as psoriasis.

Today, light therapy has even found its way into the beauty industry. LED face masks, with celebrity endorsements, promise to fight acne and reduce signs of ageing.

But like all forms of light, exposure to it has both risks and benefits. In the case of these LED face masks, they could disrupt your sleep. *(The Conversation)*

"Work gives you meaning and purpose and life is empty without it."

—Stephen Hawking

The Shillong Times

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Left in the lurch

COMMUNISTS have been in the forefront among various parties to periodically analyse and admit their mistakes. Correctional steps might or might not follow. All these are, however, not helping the CPI and the CPI-M to grow. Rather, they are on a downhill ride in recent years to the extent that their presence in parliament is near zero now. This, for a (united) party that acted as the principal opposition in the initial years after Independence is quite a downfall. The CPI-M's political review report, adopted at the party's central committee meeting in Delhi in the run-up to the Party Congress in Madurai in April next, is a fresh example of the party's open admission of the errors in its organisational and tactical approaches.

The report admits that the party's activities against communalism – mainly at the behest of the BJP-RSS entities – were "confined to conventions and some limited campaigns." It also noted, rightly, that the RSS is using the growing sense of "religiosity" among the Hindus to "woo them." The Left parties, it adds, "should have an approach on how to reach out to believers to make them understand how faith is being misused" by Hindutva forces. A problem, however, is that the Communists reached such a pass that they are no longer in a position to wage a campaign, let alone a battle, against the RSS-BJP. Even in the best of times, the Communists were confined to West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala. They retain power and considerable influence in Kerala but lost out almost fully in the other two states – and have not been able to build their organisational heft in any other state. The BJP is strong and running governments in the Hindi belt in particular, and this is where its clout is majorly seen. The Communists are a non-entity in these states. Hence, any campaign against the BJP-RSS and their perceived misuse of religion can be possible only with the help of other like-minded parties. The Congress still has strong secular credentials. But, the Communists are maintaining a distance with the Congress too, rather than joining hands with it to neutralize the RSS-BJP outreach to people on religious lines. Admission of guilt by itself will not take the Communists forward. What is required is solid action and joint fights at the ground level.

The CPI-M report has also pin-pointed the Sangh Parivar's resort to the outdated Manuvadi concept to deny rights to women and to lower castes among the Hindu framework. Notably, despite claims by the Congress that it upholds secularism as an article of faith, it also is often seen to be soft-peddalling the pro-secular campaigns to avoid irritating the core of the Hindu society in the Hindi belt. United action by secular forces is the need of the hour.

Cultural Shock -2: The Touchdown

By HH Mohrmen

On landing at Heathrow Airport, Christine Hayhurst was waiting for me at the exit with my name on a placard. When I think of it now, I wonder what would have happened to me if nobody had been waiting for me at the airport exit. Back then, there were no mobile phones; in fact, people had just started using car phones in the UK, and only yuppies in their swanky cars could afford one. The car phones were so big that they covered the whole face of the caller when he uses the phone. I had a contact number in London, but fortunately, I didn't have to use it because Christine Hayhurst was there waiting with my name on the placard.

I Was Rich with 20 Pounds in My Pocket

While taking me to their home in the car, my host, who was in charge of my travel, asked me how much money I had. I audaciously answered, "Twenty pounds sterling." Perhaps she noticed the pride on my face, as she then asked me another question, "Do you know how far twenty pounds sterling will take you?" Honestly, I didn't have a clue. "It won't really take you anywhere," she said, and I now remember that even a simple breakfast cost 5 pounds back then. There were no credit cards or ATM cards, and travelers cheques were out of reach for my family, who were too poor to afford them. So the twenty pounds sterling I exchanged at Delhi Airport was my most precious possession and all I had in my custody.

Upon reaching Christine's house, I had some food. I couldn't really tell if it was evening or morning, but as it was my first experience with jetlag, I went to sleep anyway. The morning of my first day in England, Christine took me with her to London, where she worked at the office of the General Assembly of the Unitarian Free Christian Church UK. The headquarters of the Unitarian and Free Christian Church is located on Essex Street, which is also close to Fleet Street in London. I knew of Fleet Street beforehand because of its connection with newspapers and the press; which aligns with my longstanding interest in media.

Two incidents at Essex Hall are etched in my memory. The first was when they saw my belongings and asked if that was all I had. I answered in the affirmative. I had a little over a one-and-a-half square foot leather bag, and they were shocked at how little I had. It wasn't that I liked to travel light; my entire belongings for my stay in England fit in that one small bag. Inside were a jacket, a few shirts, trousers, and the only pair of shoes I had, which I wore on my feet.

I didn't understand it at that point, but after staying in the country for some time, I realized how many belongings people in the Western world had—how many pairs of shoes, pants, shirts, or other clothing items they owned to ensure they had enough clothes. People in our country aren't used to owning a lot of clothes, as reflected in the contents of my bag. To this day, I still try to keep my belongings minimal. Another thing I wasn't prepared for was the weather. I knew it would be cold during winter, but I wasn't prepared for the intensity. I arrived in August without any warm clothes, which was fine because it was still summer or rather the beginning of autumn. One evening, after dinner, while we were sitting on the lawn at Luther King House, I was surprised to see light outside even late in the evening. I hadn't brought warm clothes, as I was unaware of how cold winter could get, so I certainly wasn't prepared for England's harsh winter, which would begin in a few months. Eventually, my friends took me to a used clothing store, where I bought my warm clothes.

In the middle of winter my leather shoes were too thin to protect me from the cold winter so I went to buy myself a pair of shoes but was not successful. It turned out that we went to the wrong section. I was able to get the shoe size that fit me only when I visited the boys section of the shop.

Rain in Manchester and Meghalaya

The second incident was when they asked me if I had brought an umbrella, to

which I again answered in the negative. It hadn't crossed my mind that I would need one, or perhaps I was just optimistic. They said, "But you're going to live in Manchester, the city which receives the heaviest rainfall in England." When I asked them how much rainfall the city received in a year, they said around 40 inches. I thought to myself, "Now it's my turn to outsmart the Brits." When it was my turn to respond, I replied, "Well, you know, I come from the place that receives the heaviest rainfall in the world, an average of 500 inches per annum," to set the record straight I concluded. Therefore, I said I didn't think I would have much trouble with rain, and, of course, Manchester would be plain sailing." I concluded. Indeed, I didn't even need an umbrella during my entire stay in the city because it was mostly just drizzles.

Simply Copying Others' Table Manners is Embarrassing

Later that same day, I traveled from London with Rev. John Clifford in his van to Edinburgh, Scotland, where I dined with his family at his residence. But first, let me tell you that I hadn't had any training in table manners before I left for England, and, dear me, I didn't even know such a thing existed. The incident that happened at his residence taught me a valuable lesson. At the dining table, I sat next to Naomi, his daughter, and when everything was laid on the table and dinner was served, I thought I would wait for my next move. I wasn't aware of dining table etiquette or which hand to hold the fork in, or the knife. Caught in an embarrassing situation, I thought I was smart and did what anyone in my position would do. John saw me copying everything from Naomi, including which hand to hold the fork and which the knife. Then he asked, "Mohrmen, are you left-handed?" I replied, "No, I'm not." He then said, "Well, Naomi is." That was the first and most memorable lesson I had on table manners, albeit learnt in the most awkward way.

Another embarrassing experience with table man-

ners happened during dinner at Luther King House. The first course was a bowl of soup, which I can't remember exactly, but I ate very quickly. As soon as I finished, I passed the bowl while everyone else was still having theirs. A colleague at the same table was visibly unhappy because of this. It took time for me to learn table manners and how to use a knife and fork properly. Another interesting discovery at the Luther King House dining hall was that I had to fill my stomach with potatoes instead of rice. Back home, potatoes were considered vegetables, not something you ate to fill your stomach. Talking about rice, whenever it was served, it was always just a handful. Friends sitting at the same table, knowing I came from a rice-eating culture, would always pass all the rice to me.

Revolving Door Experience

Another memorable trip in Scotland was a visit to a famous museum in Glasgow. Two incidents really stood out during this visit. The first was seeing the famous painting of Jesus on the cross, also known as Christ of Saint John of the Cross by Salvador Dali. What was special about this painting was its unusual angle, with a top-down view of Jesus on the cross. It depicted Christ in a darkened sky, floating over water with a boat and fisherman below. This unique perspective seemed like a modern-day drone shot of Jesus on the cross from above.

The embarrassing incident at the museum happened at the revolving door as we exited. I had never walked through a revolving door before, and with so many people around, I was afraid of getting lost in the crowd. Not wanting to lose sight of my host, I entered the same slot of the revolving door with him, which was meant for one person and bam—we were both thrown out. The security guard rushed over, and my host had to embarrassingly explain that I was a visitor who hadn't experienced a revolving door before.

While in Glasgow, my host also took me to Loch Ness and told me about the legend of the Loch Ness Monster. The story of this mysterious monster believed to be in Loch Ness is still shared to this day.

NEHU at the Crossroads: How allegations of bias & maladministration are destroying the University's future

By Erwin K Syiem Sutnga

The present situation that has developed in NEHU the premier University of Meghalaya and the North East is of far reaching consequences. Herein lies the problem of the incompatibility of the mindset and ideological differences that we have with parochial mindsets. It also reflects the clash of value systems and the way persons who come from different cultures seem to take things for granted that we as stakeholders in NEHU will take things lying down. The North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), founded in 1973, has historically been a beacon of higher education in Meghalaya and across the northeastern region of India. Established by an Act of Parliament to serve the states of Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram, NEHU has long been recognized for its commitment to academic excellence in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Its influence has been instrumental in driving regional development, and its reputation as a distinguished institution has made it an educational cornerstone for Meghalaya. However, recent administrative controversies under Vice-Chancellor Prof. Prabha Shankar Shukla have cast a shadow over its legacy, with stakeholders raising concerns about NEHU's direction and inclusivity.

Appointment of Prof. Prabha Shankar Shukla

In July 2021, Prof. Prabha Shankar Shukla, a professor specializing in Seed Science and Technology from G.B. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology in Uttarakhand, was appointed as Vice-Chancellor (VC) of NEHU. His selection over Prof. S.M. Sungoh, a Khasi scholar and an internal candidate, stirred immediate concern among local communities. Prof. Sungoh's extensive regional expertise was viewed as an asset to align NEHU's academic direction with the cultural and social context of the northeastern states. In contrast, Prof. Shukla's appointment was seen as externally motivated, raising questions about the University's future emphasis on regional representation.

Controversies and allegations during Shukla's tenure

Since his appointment, Prof. Shukla's administration has encountered various controversies, including accusations of nepotism, anti-tribal practices, and mismanagement.

1. Allegations of Anti-Tribal and Anti-Local Bias: The NEHU Teachers' Association (NEHUTA) has accused Prof. Shukla of sidelining qualified local and tribal candidates in key appointments. One prominent example is the appointment of retired Colonel Omkar Singh as Registrar, a former Controller of Examinations. Singh's tenure has been contentious, with reported delays in result declarations affecting students' academic and career prospects. NEHUTA argues that such appointments reflect an anti-local bias, as candidates from outside the region are preferred over qualified locals, impacting the university's alignment with regional needs. (theshillongtimes.com)

2. Administrative Decline and Lowered Rankings: Under Prof. Shukla's leadership, NEHU has seen a noticeable decline in national rankings, falling from 59 in 2021 to 136 in 2024. Critics within the university community have attributed this drop to administrative inefficiencies and mismanagement, indicating that the current administration's approach may be adversely affecting NEHU's academic standing and reputation.

3. Controversial Implementation of the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020: The Joint Action Committee (JAC), consisting of NEHUTA, the NEHU Non-Teaching Staff Association (NEHUSU), and the NEHU Students' Union (NEHUSU), has expressed concern that NEP 2020 was implemented hastily, without sufficient consultation with stakeholders. Despite this, Prof. Shukla defended the implementation, citing regulatory compliance and benefits for students, though the debate over its execution remains unresolved.

4. Political and Public Backlash: The Voice of the People Party (VPP) has openly criticized Prof. Shukla, accusing him of a "dictatorial attitude" and anti-local policies, even demanding his resignation. The political pressures underscore the level of dissatisfaction with his leadership among regional groups.

5. Investigations into Allegations: Amid mounting complaints, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) referred grievances against Prof. Shukla to the Ministry of Education and the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST). Prof. Shukla has publicly stated his willingness to cooperate with any inquiry into the alleged illegalities under his administration.

ABVP's Growing Influence and Alleged RSS Links

Concerns about Prof. Shukla's ties to the RSS have also surfaced, partly fuelled by the increasing presence of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) at NEHU. The ABVP, a student organization affiliated with the RSS, has reportedly become more active on campus during Prof. Shukla's tenure, which critics view as an indication of RSS influence within the University.

In March 2024, an incident involving ABVP members during a Holi celebration organized by the World Organisation of Students and Youth (WOSY) turned confrontational. Members of NEHU Students' Union (NEHUSU) clashed with ABVP participants, and some students sustained injuries. The Hynniewtrep Youth Council (HYC) condemned ABVP's activities, arguing that the RSS was attempting to infiltrate NEHU through the ABVP, which could disrupt the university's traditionally secular and inclusive environment. Although no concrete evidence directly ties Prof. Shukla to the RSS, perceptions of his administrative actions suggest an ideological shift that has unsettled many within the University.

Impact on NEHU's Legacy and Future

The controversy surrounding Prof. Shukla's tenure and the rise of ABVP's influence on campus pose questions about NEHU's foundational ethos of regional inclusivity and academic freedom. Stakeholders fear that the current administration's perceived biases and mismanagement might compromise the university's reputation, diminishing its role as a regional educational leader.

As NEHU reaches its 50th anniversary, it faces critical decisions regarding its direction, inclusivity, and academic standards. The university's ability to uphold its legacy amid these challenges will depend on transparent administrative practices, dialogue with regional stakeholders, and a commitment to its founding principles. Whether NEHU can maintain its stature as a premier institution in Meghalaya and the Northeast remains to be seen, but the present controversies underscore the urgent need for introspection and reforms.

For want of a bridge, inflation skyrockets

Editor

What sort of a welfare state is ours that it takes care of one welfare at the cost of another? The statement made by the Government that the Umiang bridge is more important for the welfare of vehicles, while the public suffers the inflation which has touched the 40% mark is ridiculous. If the Government officials put themselves in the shoes of the general public then only will they feel the brunt of the inflation which affects common people who are the real sufferers and feel the brunt of inflation with their fixed income. Even the prices of vegetables in Shillong are not below Rs. 100 per Kg whereas the prices of the same vegetables are comparatively lower in Guwahati than Shillong. Why were no steps taken at the time of retrofitting to make the bridge capable of taking more than 9 MT load.

The other road which is constructed is not at all fit for even small cars and LMVs so why were no steps taken to improve that road in spite of having taken more than six months time and the Government now says that it may take more time to improve the road. In this gap of time another bridge over the dam could have

been built taking advantage of the Ministry of Surface & Road Transport under Union Minister, Nitin Gadkari who said to have assisted the Government in building another bridge across the Umiang Dam much more worthy than the present one.

We ask the Government to take steps to ameliorate the difficulties of the general public.

Yours etc.,
S L Singhania,
Shillong

Untouchability the silent terrorism

Editor,

When I read the news report that the Vankhadeshwar temple in Kanpur was washed with "1,000 litres" of Ganga water on November 2 to "purify" the temple because a Muslim woman had entered and prayed at the temple, the words of BR Ambedkar came to my mind, "Untouchability has ruined the untouchables, the Hindus and ultimately the nation as well."

Untouchability morally kills victims and spiritually destroys perpetrators. It is akin to suicide bombing. Swami Vivekananda rescued himself from momentary lapses that could have taken him to the ugly trap of untouchability. He realised that if he failed to take untouchability head-on, it would have cost him all that he learned from Sri Ramakrishna

and his human soul.

One evening, Swami Vivekananda was walking along a village street in northern India. When he came near a small cottage, he saw an old man smoking a hookah. Swami Vivekananda asked the old man if he would give him his hookah. The old man said, "Oh, Swami, I am a scavenger, I am an untouchable. How can I give you my hookah?"

Swami Vivekananda said to him, "I am sorry. Alas, I won't be able to smoke." Vivekananda left him and continued walking.

A few minutes later he felt miserable. He said to himself, "What am I doing? What have I done? Did not Thakur teach me that wherever there is a human being, there also is Lord Shiva? Each human being embodies God. This is what I have learned from my Master, Sri Ramakrishna."

I have given up everything. I am a sanyasin. So, I am one with the rest of the world by virtue of my renunciation. Yet, although I have renounced everything, still I have preserved this sense of discrimination. Here is a cobbler; here is a scavenger; here is a Brahmin; here is a Shudra. Low caste, high caste—how can I have the heart to distinguish? Are they not all God's children? The sense of separatism, of superiority and inferiority—how can I have that kind of feeling?"

Vivekananda then went running back to the old man and said, "Please, please, give me your hookah. Each

man is God Himself." The old man hesitantly gave the hookah to Swami Vivekananda who smoked and then said to the old man, "I am divinely happy, supremely happy, for two reasons. My human desire is fulfilled. I am able to smoke. My divine desire is fulfilled because I have been able to realise my inner vision of universal oneness. My Supreme Lord abides in all. This vision of mine I have been able to manifest today by smoking here from your hookah at your house. God is for all. I shall remain ever grateful to you, for it is through you that my Lord has taught me the supreme lesson that we are all one, we are all equal, we are all children of our Absolute Lord Supreme."

Not only did Swami Vivekananda rescue himself from the abyss of untouchability, but he showed to the world that there should not be any place for untouchability in Hinduism by worshipping and touching the feet of a Muslim girl as Goddess Durga in Kashmir in 1898.

We should not let the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda be watered down by not protesting against the naked display of untouchability. Public display of untouchability is silent terrorism. Such an act is against the Constitution of India in general and Article 17 in particular, which says, "Untouchability" is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden."

Prompt legal action must

be taken against those who indulge in untouchability.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Public roads not toilets for pet dogs

Editor,

It is indeed good news that the Shillong Municipal Board has finally announced mandatory registration for pet dogs, along with a requirement for dog tags for identification "Pet Registration." (ST, November 6, 2024). Dog owners are also advised to keep their pets from roaming freely in public places. In fact, this was a much sought-after demand by the public.

There have been numerous cases of pet dogs causing havoc in many neighborhoods. Nine months ago, a young girl was attacked by a pet dog that had been let loose by its owner. When her distressed parents knocked on the owner's door for help, they were met with a "tetchy" hostility. Instead of empathizing with the victim, the owner arrogantly barked back, blaming the parents and suggesting they should have taught their child to walk more carefully on the road.

Here's another chilling incident: about two years ago in Upper Mawprem, an apparently rabid pet dog bit more than a dozen people, including children, over the span of three days, sending shockwaves through

the neighbourhood. Many families were forced to go around begging for money to afford vaccinations. Situations like this highlight the urgent need for responsible pet ownership—not only for the safety of other residents, but for everyone's peace of mind.

Equally disgusting is the behavior of certain pet owners who seem to think public roads are appropriate "toilets" for their dogs. This is truly outrageous. In some neighbourhoods, many roads have become so littered with dog excrement that pedestrians, especially children, find it nearly impossible to avoid stepping on it and unknowingly tracking it into their living rooms and kitchens. This has, in fact, become a serious concern. The Municipality should make 'poop scoopers' mandatory for pet owners who take their pets out. Our town should not look so dirty and messy. It's high time we struck a balance between compassion for animals and basic public decency. Let's keep barking for a cleaner, safer, and more responsible Shillong! Kudos to the pet owners who also care for and feed stray dogs.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwal, Shillong

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.

"Strategy requires thought, tactics require observation."

— Max Euwe

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Gambegre : High stakes by-election

THE Gambegre by-election is unique in that the spouses of two prominent politicians – Conrad K Sangma and Zenith Sangma are in the fray. While Mehtab Chandee is the wife of Chief Minister Conrad Sangma, Sadhiarani Sangma is the wife of Zenith Sangma of the TMC who lost the 2023 election to NPP candidate Subir Sangma from Rangsakona. Sadhiarani Sangma is also the sitting MDC of the Garo Hills District Council. She also contested the last Assembly election unsuccessfully from Gambegre which elected Saleng Sangma of the Congress. This time Bernard Marak of the BJP who is also sitting MDC is contesting the Gambegre polls while the Congress has fielded a close associate of the outgoing MLA Saleng Sangma. Two Independents are in the fray too.

As in all elections in Meghalaya and elsewhere development or the lack of it is the only plank on which candidates and their political parties harp on. Saleng Sangma who is now the Lok Sabha MP stated that people of Gambegre were very poor at one time and wanted money to buy essentials such as rice but now they are more self-sufficient and are not poverty stricken. The fact of the matter is that life in Meghalaya's villages is blighted by lack of motorable roads or roads that are in a pathetic condition. Health services too are not easily accessible. This is not a recent phenomena but a carry over from previous governments whose priorities have always been the urban hubs of the state. This is not difficult to understand. Most or all MLAs don't reside in their constituencies. Those from the Khasi-Jaintia Hills are all residents of Shillong and only visit their constituencies when invited for functions. It is the same with the MLAs of Garo Hills. Now most of them own a home in Shillong and they cannot really fathom the plight of their constituents.

Development is the only promise that all candidates make before elections but what has been demonstrated time and again is that nothing much changes. As of today even the roads within the capital city of Shillong are in a state of disrepair. Never have roads in Meghalaya deteriorated to such an extent. Some more than others have been left in a decrepit state. Take National Highway 6 the lifeline between Assam-Meghalaya-Mizoram-Tripura and the state in which it has been for the past 6 months. Granted that a national highway is the brief of the Union Ministry of Surface Transport but the State Government must draw the attention of the central authorities as a major stakeholder. But that has not happened. Roads in large swathes of Garo Hills remain unattended or poorly constructed. What is worse is that people take it in their stride because they feel they have no voice. Let's hope Gambegre throws up an MLA who will address the needs of the constituents there and also contribute their mite to the overall development of the state. May the best candidate carry the day! The only hope is that people will vote wisely and not for short term material gains.

Reforming and Streamlining the Role of the Dorbar Shnong

By Fabian Lyngdoh

The dorbar-shnongs had existed in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills as modern indigenous grassroots institutions before the formation of the state of Meghalaya. However, they functioned only as informal and non-statutory local bodies. Statutory village courts under the acts of the district councils are not constituted at the level of the modern dorbar-shnong, but only at the level of the Raids and British villages, with the daloi, sirdar, syiem raid, basan, or lyngdoh, as the chairman. Till today neither the state government nor the district councils could exercise effective regulation on the functioning of the dorbar-shnongs whose rules of procedure widely vary from one village to the other.

The Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Village and Town Development Council) Act, 2021, was enacted to provide for the constitution of the village development council (VDC) and town development council (TDC), for planning and implementation of developmental activities within the village and town. The Act provided that these VDCs and TDCs shall be under the administrative control not only of the dorbar-shnong, but also under the control of the Raids and Elaka/Hima's functionaries. It provided that whenever a VDC is constituted in the village, the dorbar-shnong shall report to the district council through the chief of the Hima/Elaka, for approval. The annual account of the VDC shall be audited by the auditor appointed by the chief and his dorbar or by the dorbar-raid. The VDC shall place the audited report annually to the chief and his dorbar. According to the Act, the district council shall constitute a local area planning council (LAPC) in every district council constituency to be headed by the incumbent MDC, as chairman to consolidate the plans prepared by the VDCs and TDCs and to prepare a draft development plan for the whole constituency. The Act particularly says that the chief(s) of the elaka(s) shall compulsorily be included as a member of the LAPC along with all the chairmen of the VDCs and TDCs.

I wonder why this obsession with the traditional chiefs, most of whom are hereditary functionaries, or even if elected, they have to belong to certain clans, and to be elected by representatives of a few clans as the electoral college. When the traditional hereditary chieftainship in Mizoram was abolished in 1956, new constitutional village councils were established in every village in the Mizo Hills, and all the powers of the chiefs were transferred to the village councils. In Nagaland too statutory village councils were created for the administration of land and customs. For implementing socio-

economic welfare schemes and developmental projects, village development boards (VDB) were created, where women too have the right to participate. These tribes are able to maintain their cultural and ethnic identities as well as move forward with the changing world. How can the KHADC along with the traditional chiefs jump in between, to increase the number of stakeholders, as well as complicating the already unwanted and saturated levels of power-centres in the society? Traditional hereditary chiefs cannot be intermediaries in the flow of funds from the central government, state government or the district councils to the village councils for the purpose of implementing socio-economic welfare schemes or development projects.

The Act states that the district council shall also constitute a district development planning council (DDPC) to consolidate the plans prepared by the LAPCs, and to prepare a draft development plan for the whole district. The DDPC shall consist of the CEM, Deputy CEM, EM i/c Finance, EM i/c Development and other members nominated by the district council. All grants, funds, and other financial assistance received from the central government, state government or any other agency for the purpose of socio-economic development and poverty alleviation shall be spent only through the development department of the district council as the nodal agency, and monitoring and evaluation of all the works shall be done by the officers appointed by the district council. Does the district council possess the expertise to undertake such a huge task? This will only create multiple problems. It will bring what social scientists say 'institutional dissonance' by the multiplicity of stakeholders and power-centres. The village functionaries are exhausted enough running day after day to the different line departments of the state government. Now the process shall be longer, from the villages to the chiefs of the Raid and Hima, then to the district council, and again back to the C&RD Block office. Is the KHADC intending to take over the C&RD Blocks as well? If everything is to rest on the weak shoulders of the district council, what else does the state government have to do?

The Act states that in areas where there are no dorbar-shnongs, the district council after consultation with the chief and his dorbar or with the dorbar-raid as the case may be, shall constitute the VDC in such villages. 'Areas where there are no dorbar-shnongs', means the villages inhabited by non-

Khasis, such as Karbis, Garos, Tiwas, Rabhas, etc. This implies these non-Khasi communities living within the territorial jurisdiction of the KHADC have no dorbar-shnong, and have no right to constitute dorbar-shnong. VDCs in these villages shall be constituted directly by the traditional chiefs and the district council. Isn't that parochial and divisive? If the Dima Hasao Territorial District Council, in North Cachar hills is kind enough to reserve an MDC seat for the Khasis living in Jatinga, why should we be so apprehensive about permanent non-Khasi inhabitants constituting their own village councils or development councils in their localities?

The dorbar-shnongs today are not traditional institutions since time immemorial, but they are post-colonial modern indigenous institutions that have been quite successful in implementing the civic welfare schemes, and the socio-economic development projects of the state government through the line departments as well as through the C&RD Block office and the district level development agency. The state government, through executive guidelines, has constituted village employment councils (VECs) in the villages for the implementation of the NREGS development programmes. Overall, the programmes have been successful and the people are happy with the exercise. Women are actively participating in the meetings of the VEC, and the secretary of the VEC is compulsory to be a woman. The state government guidelines do not require the chairman of the VEC to be a rangbah-shnong with a sanad from the Basan of the Raid or Syiem of the Hima. Any person elected by the job card holders of the village can be the chairman. But in most cases, the rangbah-shnong is elected the chairman for convenience, and smooth process of the works. Indeed, the dorbar-shnongs have their day to day relationship with the state government departments for various aspects of administration and development programmes. There is no administrative relationship with the district council other than the MDC schemes which are nothing but nuts, compared to the overall needs of the village. There is also no day to day administrative relationship between the dorbar-shnong and the dorbar-raid or dorbar-hima, except in occasional judicial matters; and that too not because of any cultural spontaneity, but because there is no other option as the modern law through the Sixth Schedule has structured that relationship.

Analysing "The KHAD (Village and Town Develop-

ment Council) Act, 2021" reveals that it is just another form of the Village Administration Bill, 2014", passed by the KHADC on 1.7.2014. The same provisions for the constitution and functions of the village development council are found in both of them. The attempt is to derive direct funding from the central government through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments which empower the village panchayats, and nagar palikas in urban localities as local self-governments. But the approach is laced with perennial apprehension about thoroughly adopting the modern democratic process. A wise adage says, "You cannot have your cake and eat it too."

There is no uniformity in the functioning of the dorbar-shnongs. The rules or village laws vary widely from one village to another. Fees for judicial proceedings, no objection certificates, etc., are not uniform. Some villages charge Rs 20,000 as dorbar fee for whatever the purchase price of land is. While in some villages, the fee might be 5 percent, 10 percent, 15 percent, or even 20 percent of the purchase price of land. Sale and purchase of land for the permanent and absolute private ownership by individuals did not exist in Khasi tradition. As such, sub-clause (a) of clause (1) of paragraph 3 of the Sixth Schedule empowers the district council to make laws only with regard to the allotment, occupation or use, or the setting apart of land, but not on matters relating to transfer of land. The KHADC enacted "The Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Regulation and Administration of Land) Act, 2021" to provide for regulating and administering the allotment, occupation or use or the setting apart of land for the purpose of agriculture, residential and other purposes. But it is questionable whether this KHADC Act can apply for the transfer or selling and buying of land by private parties. The state government can enact laws for the constitution of village development councils for the implementation of modern development programmes, providing civic welfare services to the citizens and maintenance of law and order in the villages and urban localities. On the basis of "The Meghalaya Transfer of Land (Regulation) Act, 1971", the state government can also make rules for the regulation of selling and buying of land in the villages. There is an urgent need to reform and regulate the dorbar-shnong on a constitutional and democratic line. The district council and the state government are both concerned with the administration of the Sixth Schedule areas by virtue of Article 244(2) and Article 244A respectively.

Geopolitics in the Era of Trump 2.0

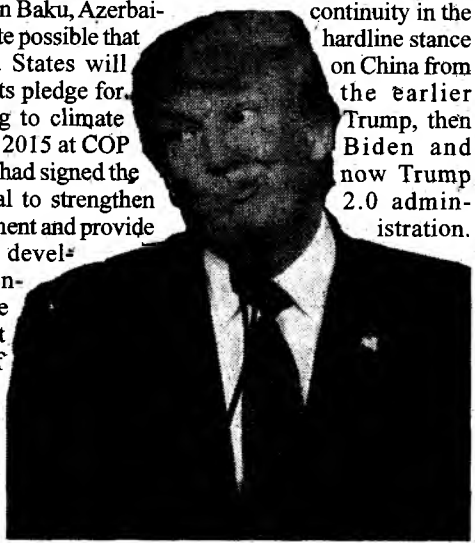
By Ajit Ranade

The election of Donald Trump for a second presidency is a turning point for the world. The outcome was decisive even as the reasons can be debated and inconclusive. Was it anti-incumbency which hurt Kamala Harris or was it the irresistible charm of Trump and his promises? Or was it due to third party hacking of the election by social media and big money? The latter is improbable, because the Harris campaign raised and spent more money than their rival. What is clear is that President Trump will fulfil some of his headline promises and create disruption in global geopolitics. The possible impact on global affairs and on India is briefly described below.

The first is on climate finance. As the 29th Conference of Parties (COP 29) gets going in Baku, Azerbaijan, it is quite possible that the United States will renege on its pledge for contributing to climate finance. In 2015 at COP 21 the U.S. had signed the historic deal to strengthen its commitment and provide finance to developing countries. One of the first decisions of President Trump in 2016 was to walk out of the Paris agreement. Collectively since COP 15 i.e. from the 2009 Copenhagen conference, the developed countries had pledged to provide a 100 billion dollars every year toward climate finance assistance to developing countries. In the past fifteen years this pledge has been fulfilled only once fully. The U.S. has not met its financial pledge between 2017 and 2020. As such the U.S. had dragged its feet for a long time, but nevertheless has not abandoned being part of the negotiations. Under President Trump the commitment is bound to reduce and will weaken the collective resolve of developed countries to finance climate change mitigation and adoption of renewable energy. Since developed countries have been and continue to be major contributors to greenhouse gases, the discussion of finance and repair is one of "climate justice". President Trump will deflect or deny the charge of climate injustice even as the U.S. reneges on its pledge. India stands to lose, since to get to net zero by 2070 the funding requirement is more than 10 trillion dollars. And much of this has to come from multilateral sources including America. The second big issue is immigration. It is worth noting that it was during his campaign that President Obama first coined a new term and verb, "my job got Bangalored". He said, "Say no to Bangalore, say yes to Buffalo". This notion that jobs are moving to outsourced locations has agitated Trump supporters. It is a misleading assertion, because every outsourced job creates more profit, and efficiency for the U.S. corporation, and that eventually leads to new job creation. But the person who loses his or her job points a finger at Bangalore. Under President Trump 2.0 the deportation of illegal immigrants may be done on a big scale. And there is likely to be some reform of the H1-B visa process, making it harder for Indian workers to locate to America to provide software and related services. As it is the H1-B new visas as well as renewals have become a lottery with only one third of the applicants succeeding. The rest will have to leave. Even though tech companies will resist any restriction on hiring foreign talent or on moving jobs offshore, President Trump will have enough political

clout to push through. The mood of the labour force who are his supporters is to bring back the jobs onshore to Americans.

The third issue is on trade tariffs. Trump has already announced Robert Lighthizer as his trade chief. Lighthizer is known to be a hardliner and protectionist in his approach. We may find that the U.S. will impose high import duties on imports from not just China and Russia but also India, the European Union, Korea and Japan. Perhaps only Canada and Mexico and other free trade agreement partners might have tariff free access to the American consumer. This could result in a tit for tat trade war of escalating tariffs, some of which we saw in the first presidency of Trump. The anti-China sentiment is strong, and there is continuity in the hardline stance on China from the earlier Trump, then Biden and now Trump 2.0 administration.



We will see the tech cold war play out much more, as the world gets divided into a Sinosphere and America dominated sphere, as far as tech is concerned. How is this to be reconciled with still strong US - China trade (currently 800 billion dollars), and the substantial presence of American companies in China (like Apple, Tesla, General Motors) remains to be seen.

The fourth issue is on America's support for wars in the Middle East and Ukraine. Trump once described Ukraine President Zelenskyy as a super salesman, since every time he came to America he walked away with a 100 billion dollars of military and other aid. That could have been campaign rhetoric, but Trump's next presidency might reduce support for Ukraine. Of course, arms aid and sale both to Ukraine and Israel has helped the fortunes and stock price of defence-related companies. But a relook is bound to happen. This also means that President Trump may push America towards isolationism i.e. decrease its role as global policeman. This is due to the perception of American people that they do not seem to benefit adequately with all that global spending on arms and security across the globe. American national debt is 35 trillion dollars, and high interest rates are making it difficult to sustain the burden. Hence the more inward-looking stance away from global involvement. This means more volatility, instability in various conflict zones, including the seas around Taiwan and China. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in an excellent recent piece, has warned against this tilt toward isolationism. She served under a Republican President Bush. But whether Trump will heed that warning remains to be seen.

The U.S. must brace for very high debt, continuing high interest rates, high inflation aggravated by Trump's hike in import tariffs and a still not strong economy. India's relationship will likely become more transactional with the United States in President Trump's second term as he makes domestic issues a high priority.

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

Letters to the Editor

Energy Conservation Building Code (ECBD)

Editor,
On November 4, 2024, the Cabinet amended the Meghalaya Building Bye Laws in order to regulate the construction of buildings in industrial zones in New Shillong Township and across the state. The energy consumption of buildings inside these industrial zones will rise along with their requirements. Meghalaya being a power deficit state, it will be imperative to regulate and optimize energy consumption in such structures to ensure sustainable development. With the National Energy Conservation Day coming up next month on December 14, 2024, it is fitting to bring up the energy efficiency measures taken up by the Government of India in this regard.

Clause G3 of the Meghalaya Building Bye Laws,

2021, effective from March 9, 2021, states that Buildings or Building Complexes having a connected load of 100KW or more will be regulated as per the Energy Conservation Code (ECBC) 2017 for commercial buildings. The Energy Conservation Building Code was prepared by the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE), in line with Clause 14(p) of the Government of India Energy Conservation Act 2001. The Code was formulated to streamline the design and operation of buildings, with the primary objective of reducing their energy demand and consumption. It establishes the minimum energy performance standards for buildings in India. The Code addresses key components of buildings, including the envelope (comprising walls, roofs and windows), lighting systems, HVAC systems, water heating, water pumping and the electrical power system. The State Government can also amend the Energy Conservation Building Code to suit the regional and local climatic conditions, in

line with Clause 15(a) of the Act. In 2009, BEE initiated the Star rating scheme for commercial buildings in India.

Clause 15 (d) of the Energy Conservation Act 2001 states that the State Government may, by notification in consultation with BEE, designate any agency as State Designated Agency (SDA) to coordinate, regulate and enforce provisions of the Act within the state. Accordingly, the Senior Electrical Inspector was nominated as the SDA within the state of Meghalaya. The State Government is also mandated to make Rules for the Energy Conservation Building Code, in line with Clause 57(2)(a) of the Act. Many states have notified their Energy Conservation Building Code Rules. If Meghalaya has notified the Rules, it is not available on line.

The Ministry of Power, Government of India notified the Energy Conservation Building Code Rules, 2018, dated, February 13, 2018. Clause 7(2) of the Rules states that the owner of a

commercial building shall engage Empanelled Energy Auditors (Building) who will develop the building design and other energy conservation measures, in order to meet the requirements laid down in these rules. These are to be submitted to the concerned authority for clearance before construction. The Empanelled Energy Auditors (Building) is a firm consisting of a Certified Energy Auditor certified under BEE (Certification Procedures for Energy Auditors and Energy Managers) Regulations, 2010 and Certified Energy Auditor (Building), and empanelled with the BEE.

Clause 9(b) of these Rules states that the SDA, who is the Senior Electrical Inspector for Meghalaya, is to ensure that every commercial building having a connected load of 100KW or above is in compliance with these rules. Private hospitals, education institutions, hotels, shopping complexes etc coming up in future across the state with connected load of 100KW or above are to comply with

the Energy Conservation Building Code. Now that the KHADC has adopted the Meghalaya Building Bye Laws, 2021, it is expected that they too will seek compliance for commercial buildings having connected load of 100KW or above, coming up outside the Municipal Areas. I pray that someday our state will boast of Star Rated and Green Buildings, perhaps somewhere in the New Shillong Township.

Yours etc.,
L.M.F. Sohtun
Shillong-4

Salute to a hero!

Editor,
The people of Meghalaya are filled with deep anguish and sadness for the family of Late Aibok Madur who was attached to the Fire and Fury Corps of the Assam regiment. He was a true braveheart and a hero to have put his life on the line while on duty at the Siachen Glacier. It is very unfortunate and

distressing that there is no statement of condolence from the State Government which in all cases offers its sympathy and condolences to a soldier who dies in action in the service of the nation. No cabinet minister or the Chief Minister or even the local MLA and-MDC, leave alone the top level officials were present during the last rites of this martyr. Compare this to other states where top government officials are always present on such sad occasions. I pen this column with utmost gratitude to the Defence authorities and the Village Dorbar for shouldering the responsibility of giving a befitting farewell to this great martyr who will be remembered for generations to come.

Yours etc.,
Dominic S. Wankhar,
Via email

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"Trusting our intuition often saves us from disaster."

— Wilson Schaeff

The Shillong Times

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Growth, stagnation

IT is no secret that many take India's Growth Story -- as is projected by the establishment -- with a sense of cynicism. The growth is not reflected in the lives of the three-fourths of the population in any significant way while the top layer -- the upper middle class and the rich -- is jet-set and they are swarming the urban hi-flying eateries, shopping malls and branded shops. The dichotomy is all too glaring yet produces no social upheaval as had been the case in the long past. A noted economist, who was with the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Committee, has zeroed in on this by saying, "India shows all signs of a failed middle-income country." He points out that, for the past 15 years, incomes of ordinary people are stagnating while some 10 per cent of the young uneducated people -- 120 million -- are simply lazing their time. The share of manufacturing in GDP is at its lowest level in 30 years. The average resident of Bihar or Uttar Pradesh "earns less than" the average Bangladeshi or Nepali. This, says Rathin Roy, can land India in the middle-income trap that nations like Brazil have fallen into. The way forward is to create employment opportunities in backward regions -- by producing mass consumption items there.

People can now afford to spend much less than what they could during the pre-pandemic period, reflecting the odds or a stagnation in the purchasing power of the ordinary masses. Investment is low and so is productivity, with the result, "India can produce shirts for the rich but imports shirts for the poor." People who do not have enough money are patronising the wayside eateries. This encouragement to the informal economy is what failed Brazil and Thailand, while the reverse is happening in successful economies like China and South Korea. In an economy where people's purchasing power increases, they move away from cheap goods and patronize quality items. Here, the 'patronization' of the poor by governments through a subsidy raj since the 1990s meant people are getting things from the government and spend very little in the market. "This is a reflection of the governments' failure to create universal prosperity."

A failing economy is the antithesis of a buoyant economy. The present analysis is a true reflection of the ground realities that the governmental heads refuse to accept and acknowledge. An ailment can be overcome through proper treatment at the right time. A delay in addressing issues could worsen one's health. It is fine to aspire for a super power status or a sharp jump for the national economy in the global sphere. But, a state of hallucination is unacceptable. The central government must address these issues with a sense of urgency and seriousness.

Democracy and its discontents: Lessons from US polls

By Deepa Majumdar

That democracy is the best form of government is the common wisdom of our times. But is it? To answer this question, we must first understand the heart and essence of democracy. Each political system has its essences, in addition to structure. While a degree of structure is necessary to prevent chaos, a system loses its heart and soul when structure becomes its essence. The more worldly a system, the more it will focus on structure at the expense of essence.

Modern democracy has varying structures -- from the unicameral systems of the Scandinavian nations, Ukraine, etc., to the bicameral systems of India, USA, UK, etc. But besides their individual essences, all democracies share a universal essence, which defines democracy as such. What is this quintessence? It is a variant of friendship. Yes, democracy is, in quintessence, a variant and offshoot of friendship. If mutual respect and trust dispel power to forge friendship between people -- then they also dispel power to forge bridges of friendship as the quintessence of democracy -- at least in theory. In practice, however, democracy can range from cultish narcissism, which obscures friendship -- to reasonable forms of altruism that radiate the freedom of friendship.

American democracy is based on a cynical model of human nature that uses a system of checks and balances to thwart dictatorship (its nemesis). To model democracy with the sole aim of preventing dictatorship, is itself a problem. For, there are many shades in between these two extremes. Besides, democracy itself can be dictatorial. In fact, dictatorship is most effective when window dressed as a democracy.

To this we may add other defects of the American system -- such as inordinate attention on structure and rules, at the expense of heart and soul (or essence). More egregious, however, is its hypocritical nature, which is why one author describes it as a "democris" (combination of democracy and hypocrisy). After all, what can be more hypocritical than spreading democracy internationally, from the barrel of a gun (the most undemocratic means possible) -- through war or regime change? A domestic democracy that is a global policeman has to be hypocritical. In fact, even on the domestic front, a democracy that favors tax breaks for the rich, while refusing to raise the minimum wage from its starvation level of \$7.50 an hour, is hypocritical. Moreover, a democracy that relies so much on campaign funds, and voter influence -- through billionaire endorsements, celebrity approval, etc. -- dilutes itself to

a pale shadow of friendship. Decimating voter volition -- a bulwark of true democracy -- an endorsed and influenced system, becomes, at best, a caricature of the real thing. Finally, how can democracy be true, if its budget is undemocratic? Is it any longer a democracy, if its elected president uses hard-earned tax money to wage war -- without consulting taxpayers? Americans have little to say in how their government spends their tax contributions. American presidents never thank taxpayers on April 15th (the tax deadline) each year. At the macro-level, therefore, America is more a plutocracy than a democracy.

But at its micro-level, America is a thriving democracy that expresses its quintessence of friendship very effectively -- through a basic respect for all persons, irrespective of station or stature. Swami Vivekananda who witnessed this impressive egalitarianism -- lamented the stark contrast with India, where the "don't touchism" of caste destroyed and still destroys society through rigid, impermeable hierarchies. Although a bastion of global capitalism, America, therefore, de-classes Indians. Instead of a servant culture or the caste system, here they witness a billionaire and janitor riding the same bus. But this egalitarianism, at the level of basic humanity, does not translate into true brotherhood, or equal rights in crucial areas, like healthcare and education. Instead, equality applies where it does not belong -- by giving every voter equal voting power.

The main problem with structured democracy is that it ignores that which should be the very fount of its quintessence -- namely the character of its people. Democracy presupposes individuality. But what if this individuality is worldly and selfish, as is inevitable during darker periods of history? What if its people lack critical thinking -- which is viveka, or the power of discernment in Indian religions? Do all voters deserve equal power of voting? Should all votes be weighted equally? Are people literally equal in their powers of judgment, moral acuity, and truthfulness? Of course not.

The world is yet to see a true democracy -- a system that shines with its quintessence, using structure as a mere vessel to hold this inner light of friendship that expresses itself at all levels -- from the budget to healthcare. Such a democracy fosters that brotherhood which ties citizens into a whole, without resorting to the twin banes of identity politics and blind nationalism. What the world has witnessed thus far, is a worldly, suspicious democracy

that obscures its quintessence of friendship, beneath the debris of structure, complex rules, and a cynical system of checks and balances that presupposes an inherent and irredeemable will-to-power in human nature. At best, this American model prevents a worldly democracy from being more dangerous to itself and the world. It does not translate to the altruism that overcomes the alienation inherent in a culture of rights without responsibilities.

What then is the chief lesson to be learned from the 2024 American election, which brought about Donald Trump's triumphant return -- with a four-year litigious exile in between? The "basket of deplorables" who voted for Mr. Trump, basically used the democratic process to destroy democracy, by voting into power a known despot -- a twice-impeached, convicted felon, and insurrectionist, who has openly threatened vengeance on enemies -- a delusional megalomaniac who has spread lies about Haitians eating their neighbor's pets. A loathsome misogynist, Mr. Trump has openly bragged about sexually demeaning women. Nevertheless, his voters adore him. Why? Because he represents all that they long for -- wealth, women, power. What do his voters see in him? They see what they themselves would like to be -- utterly "unwoke" -- immoral, politically incorrect, wealthy, openly misogynous, racist -- and possessing unlimited power granted by a system meant to check power. Given his fascist talents and cultish character, Mr. Trump used his perpetual snarl, but also honeyed words, to stoke his voters' fears for personal gain. Pitting Americans against each other, he spurred hatred against the perpetual other -- whether the poor, the liberal, women -- or the LGBTQ community, immigrants, etc. For, Donald Trump, all by himself, stands as the historical colossus that opposes all liberal leftwing progressive ideals.

This election was extraordinary -- not just because we had a sitting vice-president and former prosecutor (a multi-racial "woman of color") -- pitted against a convicted felon ("whitemale") who represents the worst nightmare of the progressive activist -- but because it revealed the main risk of the structured democracy -- vulgar voters. This election spoke more about the voters who voted for Mr. Trump, than about him. Ignoring his palpable character flaws, several sexual misconduct allegations, and four criminal cases (with 88 criminal offenses) -- they prioritized the economy and monetary issues above moral principles, to crown a despot --

using the democratic process to destroy democracy. So far, the American democracy has been shaken -- not destroyed. But Mr. Trump can misuse the powers (all of them legitimate) granted to him by this election to forge a democratic dictatorship. Although imperfect, even the pallid-but-functioning structured democracy should be cherished, if the alternative is naked despotism. The ground is already trembling with the aftershocks of this election. Some European leaders have already kowtowed with craven deference to Mr. Trump. Today, a young man told me his friends felt suicidal. Back in 2016, before Mr. Trump's first term, American youth spoke of escaping to Canada -- not suicide.

Again, what are the chief lessons to be learned from this memorable election? Besides the death of all genuinely progressive political causes, what else does it portend? The lessons all point to the flaws inherent in structured democracy. First and foremost, this election proves that not all voters deserve equal power of voting. It proves that majoritarianism comes with inherent risks of populism, mob rule, and crass subjectivity. It proves that voters can be unworthy of voting, when they are emotional, self-projecting, irrational, and delusional. This election proves that a populace gets the ruler it deserves. It proves, as well, the inadequacy of letting voters select their ruler. Prima facie this feature of modern democracy -- that voters get to choose their leader -- sounds like a humbling check to the will-to-power. But is it adequate? I would say it expresses a minimal level of democracy that produces despotic voters who are as power-hungry and egotistic as despotic rulers. Allowed to express their franchise only during elections, voters become despotic. Instead, the worthier voters should, by law, be consulted on all major decisions -- through referendum, polls, and surveys.

Above all, the main lesson to be drawn from the 2024 American election is the fact that the structured democracy derives its moral quality more from that of its voters, than its candidates. The post-election MAGA violence against women, liberals, and others proves that voters can be as despotic, if not worse, than the despots they vote into power. If free-will comes with the risk of evil, then structured democracy comes with the risk of despotism. It, therefore, cannot be the best polity. Far better is a moral republic, which prioritizes voters with proven ethical records, using them more as authoritative leaders than representatives at the mercy of their electoral base.

NEHU needs to rise up again and build

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

The NEHU logo says 'rise up and build'. Anyone looking at it would conclude that the logo shows a rising sun. On the flip side, it can also be pictured as a setting sun. It is a matter of perspective. Contemporarily there is this sickening feeling of a setting sun. This writer has seen four full-time Vice-Chancellors at the University and every one of them has had to face varying degrees of protest and agitation from the students, teachers and non-teaching staff. It also marks a decline in NEHU's ranking from top 20 in the year 2010 to currently in the bracket of 101-150. Where does the problem lie and can the stakeholders do something about it?

A misalignment of arms

For any educational organization to function effectively a number of components need to supplement one another. These arms are in the form of the management, the core processes and the support systems. The management is the Office of the Vice-Chancellor which possesses authority and responsibility to run the University. The core are the teachers and students in terms of what they do in the teaching-learning process, in practice, research and extension. The support systems comprise of the office staff at all levels from the top to the very bottom. The most important arms are the teachers and students as no management can effectively function without carrying them along. NEHU today suffers from two basic problems -- power distance and trust deficit. These problems result in a misalignment of arms. There has been a distance between the management and the teachers and students of the University for some time now and the current agitation is an outcome of this power distance. Dialogue also seems difficult as there is a trust deficit between both arms. When both sides are unwilling to budge, the only solution lies on the wise judgment of the Hon'ble President of India and the Ministry of Education, GOI. While the agitation is localized but the solution will only come from the Central Government. The earlier the solution, the better as the health of the students who are undergoing hunger strike is worsening by the day. The NEHU agitation also needs a more proactive involvement of the State Government which to date has been lukewarm and a mere spectator.

Non-teaching staff issues
The NEHU soft infrastructure is crumbling from within. Many office sections in the University are understaffed. Some busy and critical office sections have only two or three employees. This is hampering the smooth functioning of the University. The non-teaching staff are an integral part of the University as they are the key support systems. For instance, the university will stop functioning if the transport department and the cleaners stop working. This is the reason why the support systems are considered as a crucial part of any educational organization. We need to realize that without them the management, teachers and students are handicapped. Yet, the attention given to them at NEHU is abysmal. The majority are contractual and daily wage workers, ad-hoc, etc. Some of them have served NEHU for years together but without regularization of their services. It has been more than a year since the regular non-teaching posts of the University have been advertised and as a result many have applied. But, there is no sign of any effort to hold even the written test. It is stuck in bureaucracy and red-tape. It is to be factored here that a University is an education hub from top to bottom and not a govern-

ment office. NEHU needs to start functioning as such again. Red-tape and delays are killing the University from within and causing a lot of inefficiency in its functioning.

Society perception

NEHU exists for the society and both are in need of one another. Many senior professors of the past who have now retired used to speak at length on the very humble beginnings of the University and how it has scaled challenges and all types of highs and lows to reach its respectable position in the 2010s. In the experience of this writer those were the best of times at the University. Society looked up to NEHU and the University did deliver back to the society. This delivery was across verticals from graduates to scholars to future teachers to all types of employment to liaison with the colleges, etc. On many occasions, the State Government looked up to NEHU to offer solutions to societal and even governance problems and the University was also functioning as a consultant in many areas. Those golden days are gone. Today any academic-research engagement with the government/society is mostly done at an individual teacher level. But, this is not how things should be. Society should see the university and its contributions in a holistic manner and not just individual teachers. For this to happen, the three arms of NEHU must all function together in tandem again. NEHU has hit its nadir. But, the best thing about hitting the nadir is that from there the only way is up. NEHU needs to rise up again!

Legacy of NEHU

Recently a colleague from Mizoram narrated a heartfelt account on how NEHU has been a blessing for her state. She explained how most of the senior/retired officers and leaders of Mizoram were all having one degree/qualification or the other from NEHU and how the current state of affairs of the University is also a cause of concern and distress in Mizoram. If this narration can be taken as a prototype, then this is true for all the states of northeast India. This is the lasting legacy of NEHU which will be remembered through the ages. The problem is the state of affairs of recent years. When the current generation looks at NEHU they do not see any ray of hope where the University can play a transformative role in society. NEHU has become more of a transactional University where teachers and the administration just get on with the routine affairs of the day and close up only to return the next morning. If this continues and there is no transformation in its functioning then NEHU would not be able to create any lasting legacy any more into the future. These are really sad days for the university and it is even sadder that the students have to resort to a protest like a hunger strike to just make their voices heard.

In the end, NEHU needs to become an inclusive educational organization again. The principle of 'if the matter concerns all, then it has to be decided by consulting all' needs to be revived. Any policy, decision, strategy, etc concerning its functioning must take the entire university community into confidence. This will help in stemming the recent history of agitations that has been happening at the University. Everyone needs to remember that the organization is bigger than the individual. With this realization, NEHU needs to rise up again and build!

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

Letters to the Editor

Issue of unattended animal waste in Laitumkhrah

Editor,

I am writing to draw attention to an issue that, while perhaps trivial to some, has a significant impact on the quality of life in our neighbourhood - the growing problem of dog owners neglecting to clean up after their pets.

Matters such as these belong far away from the editorials of a newspaper; if anything, they are simply to be flushed down opaque pipelines and never spoken about. But in Laitumkhrah, you can find such matters in every street and lane aplenty, and a conversation of some kind is necessary.

This progressive hub of style and sophistication is home to many individuals for whom the cleaning of animal excrement is too crummy a business to meddle with, even when the animal is a beloved member of the family. Certainly, I am writing about the countless canine faeces discharged on neighbourhood lanes by domestic dogs belonging to owners who conveniently refuse to train them for the benefit of all. I stay in a relatively proper area; what I mean by that is, it is quiet, gives a nice view of the sky, and is highly sought after in terms of accommodation. However, an everyday walk through our serene little lane will require skilful maneuver, lest one steps on the incompetence of some dog owner.

While I acknowledge that there are few who ensure that their pets empty their bowels in designated areas within the limits of their compounds, it cannot be refuted that many others simply do not care. Requests to neighbours have only resulted in cold wars that bring nothing positive. Seat sticking to car tyres, spurring water on areas outside gates, shielding noses, and chasing dogs mid-crap have become daily affairs. We are sick and we are tired!

It is relevant that I mention that in many parts of the world, dog owners clean up after their dogs, using methods that help keep surroundings healthy for everyone. Bags for proper collection and disposal of excreta, odour neutralizers, and above all, training for pets, are what separate responsible dog owners from their divergent counterparts.

I write this with hopes that dog owners who notoriously let their dogs out to finish their business and return home, and those who take their dogs on walks while letting them relieve themselves anywhere, find some sense to rethink their ways. It is high time they recognise that their recklessness is not only a disturbance to the community but also a serious health hazard for those forced to endure it. This is also an appeal to the erudite leaders of Laitumkhrah, who, I believe, read newspapers and listen to the people's concerns voiced in columns such as these. Whether legislator, Rangbah Shnong, Rangbah Dong or nongpeit-dong, I request that they treat my letter with utmost seriousness. If the

deceptively trivial nature of this situation inspires a peal of laughter in their offices, then let an order be effected with a cackle!

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Supreme Court's directive on disabled a welcome step

Editor,

The Supreme Court's directive to the Centre to establish mandatory accessibility standards for persons with disabilities with the apex court setting a three month timeline for the Centre to implement legally enforceable standards is encouraging. Moving beyond the current self-regulatory approach and with a firm yet forward-looking stance, the three-judge bench has underscored the importance of 'meaningful access' to public spaces for persons with disabilities because accessibility is not merely about compliance with legal standards but about honouring the dignity and autonomy of the disabled who are being ignored at every stage of life by officials at the helm of affairs.

A few days ago such a decision was also delivered by the Punjab and Haryana High Court which has directed the States of Punjab and Haryana to rectify infrastructural deficiencies in court premises to ensure compliance with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act. The direction includes ensuring the avail-

ability of necessary apparatus and facilities for differently-abled persons at all court premises, from sub-divisional and district courts to the high court and it is expected that all courts should provide similar facilities in their respective courts and should not wait for separate instructions for their courts.

The Court's directive came after amicus curiae Tanu Bedi, representing the High Court submitted a tabular report "revealing the extent of deficiencies in minimum infrastructural requirements necessary for differently-abled persons mandated under the Act. The ruling by Justice Harpreet Singh Brar of the Punjab and Haryana High Court while hearing a petition of a 60-year-old "disabled" woman unable to walk as her right leg was amputated while her left leg was infected. She was seeking transfer of her case from the first floor courtroom to the ground floor at Malerkotla. She approached the High Court after Sangrur District Judge, vide order dated November 17, 2023, dismissed her transfer application. Pointing to the lack of appropriate infrastructure in judicial complexes, Justice Brar asserted the right to life enshrined in Article 21 of the Constitution of India was not limited to mere animal-like existence. It included the right to live a meaningful life with dignity "In the truest sense of the term".

India has made significant strides in disability rights over the years, yet physical and social barriers persist in almost every public domain. People

with disabilities encounter significant challenges when trying to navigate cities, access public services, or even participate in everyday activities due to poor infrastructure that fails to accommodate their needs. This landmark Supreme Court ruling acknowledges this reality and takes a definitive step toward reshaping how India addresses the rights and needs of this community. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, of 2016, was a transformative law aiming to ensure equality and inclusivity for persons with disabilities. However, one major flaw in implementing the Act has been the reliance on non-binding guidelines and self-regulation. Without a concrete, legally enforceable set of standards, progress has been inconsistent and painfully slow. This lack of progress prompted the Supreme Court to step in, demanding that mandatory standards replace vague guidelines. The Court's directive now mandates that these standards be both specific and legally binding, setting a "non-negotiable" baseline. This shift from general recommendations to a robust framework is essential for transforming intent into action, particularly in a nation where infrastructural disparities are pronounced.

The Supreme Court has laid out a two-pronged approach to addressing accessibility. First, it mandates retrofitting existing public infrastructure to meet accessibility standards. This is a crucial step, as many of India's public spaces, transport facilities, educational institutions, and workplaces

were designed without consideration for persons with disabilities. Making these spaces accessible will involve structural changes, adaptations, and modifications-a task requiring technical and financial commitment. Second, the Court's directive emphasises that all new infrastructure projects be designed inclusively from the start. This principle of "universal design"-the idea that spaces should be usable by all people, regardless of age, disability, or other factors-is not only efficient but cost-effective. The directive thus sets India on a path toward building a future where accessibility is ingrained in the foundation of infrastructure development. To ensure compliance, the Court has recommended mechanisms such as withholding completion certificates for non-compliant infrastructure and imposing fines. These measures represent a practical approach to enforcing standards, as they create direct consequences for entities that fail to meet accessibility requirements.

Courts have undoubtedly delivered many disabled-friendly decisions but the disabled continue to face many problems. It will take a long time before disparities are done away with, but a beginning has been made.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan,
Via email

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"A goal without a plan is just a wish."

— Antoine de Saint

The Shillong Times

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Health & Education Need Pairing

A country that is able to fix its education and health system succeeds better in all other parameters. The Principal Secretary Health, Government of Meghalaya in his recent interview has spelt out a series of interventions which could reduce maternal and infant mortality. However, as far as teenage pregnancy is concerned it is not just a public health issue but a social dilemma which can be addressed by education. A young girl who can be retained in school at least up to Class 10 is more likely to proceed to Class 12 and undergraduate school. Girls who fall between the cracks and drop out at Classes 5-8 are the ones most vulnerable to teenage pregnancies which because of lack of spacing finds a girl becoming a mother or 3-4 children even before reaching the age of 20. In such cases the health of both the mother and children are compromised.

There is ample empirical evidence to support the argument that educational programs and policies are crucial public health interventions. Concepts of education and health are developed side by side to ensure that school education also deals with adolescent health and wellness. Basic educational expertise and skills, including fundamental knowledge, reasoning ability, emotional self-regulation, and interactional abilities are critical components of health. Moreover, education is a fundamental social determinant of health – an upstream cause of health. Programs that close gaps in educational outcomes between low-income and higher-income groups are needed to promote health equity. Public health policy makers, health practitioners and educators, and departments of health and education need to collaborate to implement educational programs and policies for which systematic evidence indicates clear public health benefits.

Education is both a process and a product. From a societal perspective, the process of education imbues children not only with knowledge but reasoning skills, values, socio-emotional awareness, control and social interaction, so they can grow as engaged, productive, creative, and self-governing members of a society. From what is evidenced in Meghalaya education institutions fall short of these goals, and too many students fail their grades, are socially dysfunctional and sadly suffer lifelong disadvantages. Education – the product and personal attribute acquired – is both a critical component of a person's health and a contributing cause of other elements of the person's current and future health. There is enough evidence to prove that a person who lacks the basic elements of education is not fully healthy. It is therefore time to push in health education not just as a subject but a practical application in day to day living. Health education comprises sex education too but the pedagogy adopted is marked by diffidence instead of straight talking. It's time children learn to name their body parts without any shame because it is the secretive nature of our sexual discourses which leaves the young ignorant and therefore vulnerable. Managing emotions is also a skill since sex among young people is purely an emotional impulse with long term consequences.

Letters to the Editor

One way road access from Pynthorbah market to Vishal Mart, Demseiniong

Editor,
I thank the Shillong Traffic personnel for implementing the one-way system on the road from Pynthorbah market to Vishal Mega Mart, Demseiniong. Initially, I thought the road restrictions were due to its poor condition and the need for construction. Given the previous two-way traffic that caused regular gridlocks, the one-way decision has helped reduce congestion.

However, within less than a year, the newly constructed road has again deteriorated. Although there's now reduced traffic, this route has become inconvenient for two-wheeler commuters.

I request the authorities to consider allowing two-wheelers to make a left turn onto this road from Polo to Pynthorbah Market. This limited access would not disrupt the main traffic flow from Polo to Demseiniong, as long as it prohibits two-wheelers from entering diagonally from Demseiniong to Pynthorbah.

Currently, two-wheeler commuters heading to Pynthorbah are forced to take a much longer route via Polo Market and Golflinks, or through the under-construction, poorly conditioned road at Nongmensong. Additionally, the shortcut road from

Nongmensong to Pynthorbah has also been sealed, being a locality road, due to its poor condition and narrow width, further limiting options for commuters.

Allowing two-wheelers to enter the one-way road towards Pynthorbah would alleviate some of this inconvenience. I hope the authorities will consider this request to improve ease of access for two-wheelers without compromising traffic flow.

Yours etc.,
B Laitphlang,
Via email

India caught in middle income trap!

Editor,
The editorial "Growth, stagnation" (ST November 13, 2024) made interesting reading. One cannot disagree with the points raised in the editorial on growth and stagnation. But what exactly is a middle-income trap? The middle-income trap is a situation in development economics where a country experiences rapid growth and reaches a middle-income level, but then struggles to progress to a high-income status. This can happen due to five factors:

Loss of competitive edge: As wages rise, the country may lose its competitive advantage in exporting manufactured goods, but it may not yet be able to compete in high-value-added markets.

Low investment: There might be insufficient investment in infrastructure, education and innovation, which are crucial for moving up the

Weapons, arm bearers and tactics of Ancient Khasis

By Toki Blah

There have been many expert comments and write-ups on the undocumented past of the Khasis, so I too thought I should try my hand at something that has never been tried before – that is to reconstruct the sort of weapons used by the ancient Khasi – Jaintias; the type of military formations maintained by them and the tactics used by my ancestors. Let me be crystal clear from the very onset that there is very little documented literature on the subjects mentioned above. My whole essay is based on conjectures since even the Jayantiya Buranji fails to throw any light on the subject. These conjectures are nothing short of assumptions based entirely on circumstantial evidence that is available with us today, but they are the only material we can work on, so here goes. First there has been a lot of romanticization of our past history so much so that it is generally believed that our forefathers lived in a so-called "Juk Ksiar" or Golden Age. It is imagined that it was an age where peace, unity and social harmony prevailed throughout the length and breadth of the land of U Hynniewtrep. Well, based on knowledge and experience of human nature, and that our ancient Khasis were nothing but practical, hardcore humans of the first order, I would take that sort of romantic imagery with a large pinch of salt. Taking the lawless nature of those times; the lack of basic civic infrastructure, I would imagine our forefathers as communities continuously engaged in short, sharp, brutal skirmishes and fights with each other and with their neighbours in the plains. Definitely nothing angelic about such existence!

Let us now examine the sort of weapons used by our ancestors. First let us look at the most common weapon and that is the Khasi Bow and Arrow. Ours is small, light and short; made of bamboo and nothing in comparison with the English Longbow or the bigger bows used by other tribes in the Indian mainland. Our arrows too are designed to fit into the overall curvature of the Khasi bow which is designed to shoot straight for a short distance of not more than 25 to 30 meters. Khasi arrows are not lobbed high

into the air as by the English Longbow, but shot straight at the target! The arrows used by the ancient Khasi warriors are certainly not the pointed versions (Nam sop) used for target practice or by modern day 'teer archers'. Ancient Khasis used the wicked barbed (nam pliang) for their wars and for hunting. The 'nampliang' inflicted terrible wounds on the victim and because of barbs on both sides of the arrow head, was very painful if not impossible to extract. These arrows, as mentioned above, were used for short sharp encounters,

likely to be used in slashing and hacking. A machete with a sharp pointed end can also be used effectively as a blade to stab in close quarter fighting and this suited the guerilla, hit and run, attacking behind enemy lines, tactics of the ancient Khasis. For those not acquainted with the term guerilla, it means a member of a band of persons engaged in warfare not as part of a regular army but as an independent unit making surprise raids behind enemy lines. It describes the ancient Khasi warriors to a T! The small rounded shield used

"Then there is the Khasi sword (wait) so romantically displayed in the cultural dances and romplings of present day Khasis. This is aptly named as the 'wait shad' and this definition clearly differentiates it from the real sword used by Khasi warriors in the battlefield. The only real conception of the sword used by ancient Khasi warriors in warfare is to be found in the motif used in the Mait Shaphrang movement of Bah Michael Syiem."

highly effective within a short shooting distance of not more than 40 meters. So what does this tell us? It simply means that Khasis specialized in ambush tactics or guerilla warfare. Shooting at an unsuspecting enemy from dense cover; creating panic and confusion in the ranks of the enemy and then rushing in for the final kill. These are lethal tactics common to all other hill tribes in NE India and other South East Asian countries.

Then there is the Khasi sword (wait) so romantically displayed in the cultural dances and romplings of present day Khasis. This is aptly named as the 'wait shad' and this definition clearly differentiates it from the real sword used by Khasi warriors in the battlefield. The only real conception of the sword used by ancient Khasi warriors in warfare is to be found in the motif used in the Mait Shaphrang movement of Bah Michael Syiem. This motif in the Maitshaphrang emblem depicts a short thick bladed but pointed sword or in other words a typical machete, colloquially called 'ka wait -ia-pom'. A machete is more

by the Khasis also simply enforces the argument in this essay as it is designed to ward off blows or to simply push aside impending bushes and small branches that get in the warrior's way as he charges ahead in battle. It is unlike the bigger broader and bulkier shields claimed to be used by other tribes.

Then we come to the type of armies employed by the Khasi and Jaintia rulers. Among the Khasis of the Khasi Hills I doubt if any regular army existed for this immediately brings in the issue of maintenance and upkeep of such army. It brings in the availability of funds and as the Syiems or Chiefs of the Khasis do not impose taxes on their citizens, funding then becomes a problem. This also makes the argument for a guerilla force all that more convincing. The force is assembled as and when the occasion demands and once the objective of a raid is completed, the forces disperse and their members go back to their normal day to day lives. This however might be different in the Jaintia Hills where a King with a kingdom stretching up to the plains of Sylhet ex-

isted. In the Jaintia kingdom taxes were collected and the King maintained a regular army. This was an army that had close interaction with other armies of the plains and therefore their knowledge and use of firearms was not unlikely. Actually the Jaintia Kings had knowledge and did use small canons and musketry. It simply means that the Jaintia Kings did maintain an army armed with modern firearms of those times but that the hot polloi retained the common use of the bow and arrow as well as the sword. That the Jaintias were well versed with modern firearms is documented in the fight of the Pnar martyr - hero U Kiang Nangbah against the British invaders. Kiang Nangbah in his fight against the British did use muzzle loaders and this fact plus his resort to guerilla tactics, made him such a thorn in the flesh of the English, that they went all out, by hook or by crook, to eliminate him.

There are some who speak of the Khasi spears, and some statues of Khasi Jaintia heroes depict these persons with spears in their hands. However one has yet to encounter the popular use of such a weapon unlike the universal recognition given to the broad bladed, stabbing oriented Naga spear for instance. Nor are we familiar with ancient Khasis using the axe or war club in long forgotten fights and battles. These weapons might have been used on an individual capacity but there is nothing to suggest that they formed part of the general arsenal used by Khasi fighting forces.

From the very start I had made the disclaimer that this is not a researched thesis on the subject under discussion i.e. Weapons, arm bearers and tactics of ancient Khasis. On the other hand it is based on observations of what is used today and presumptuously linked these observations to what likely happened in the past. I justify myself and my actions simply on the fact that we have neither documentary proof to deny or confirm such observations. Having said that, I will be the first to welcome any critical analysis to prove my observations wrong. Otherwise let us all continue to live in the blissful wonder of our mysterious past!

removed, and normalcy restored. I have all respect for the administration but to call a spade a spade, the city administration failed the public on the 13th. Let us hope this act is not repeated.

Yours etc.,
Marban Dkhar,
Shillong-2

Rule of law basis for economic growth

Editor,
This year's Nobel laureates in economics - Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson - have demonstrated that societies with a poor rule of law and institutions that exploit the population do not generate growth or change for the better. Their findings echo the warnings of Tagore who penned in his poem, Apamanita (Insult), "Those whom you push down will tie/you down also/ those whom you have kept at the/ back will pull you back."

There is no wonder that exploitation ultimately hinders growth and development. As a matter of fact, any kind of exploitation ends in a disaster. Exploitation of nature leads to a number of negative consequences. Even overuse of a machine can cause explosions.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Loud, Garish Music...!
A very stringent anti-conversion law that will ensure zero religious conversions in Maharashtra will be enacted once the Mahayuti comes to power... Times of India, 11th Nov

Was driving down a silent road, when I heard the sound of loud music, and found another car drawing up close, with windows down and music-full blast. Suddenly the peace I was enjoying was broken by the cacophony of noise, and as the car drew abreast, I found people laughing, jeering, and scoffing those outside!

The sound from the other car was garish. It's not that I disliked their songs, but the volume was meant to disrupt, meant to intrude, and cause disharmony and tension.

The car passed and slowly the sound grew less.

I looked at my music system. It was certainly the best. If I had wanted to, I could have out-drowned the noise from their car, but I had chosen to let them move on.

Today, as the rhetoric increases in the country, as

And as state governments in India pass laws on religious conversion, and political leaders create disharmony by talking about allurements and inducement in changing religions, in my imagination I saw a poor man who had converted from the religion of his forefathers to that of a so called foreign god, stood in front of a judge in a courtroom somewhere in India wearing a dhoti and a torn, worn out discarded shirt from someone else's wardrobe.

The judge looked at him sternly and asked, "Did you change your religion out of your own free will?"

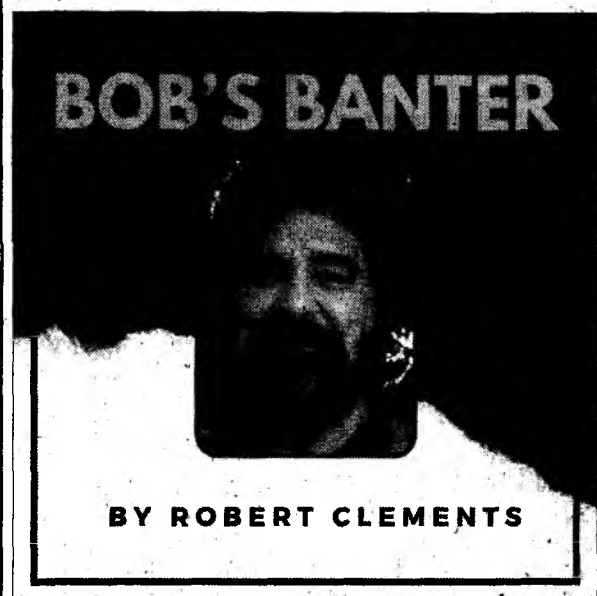
"Yes, your honour."

"Was there any allurements or inducement that made you do so?"

"Yes, your honour!" said the poor man and the courtroom buzzed with excitement.

"What was the inducement offered?" asked the judge, peering at the poor villager and getting ready to close the case.

"The promise of an attractive spiritual life and of a God who listens to me!"



ministers who should govern, instead, threaten and provoke so they can win a few more votes from the unsuspecting people, I feel we need to look at our powerful music systems and realise the energy and volume they carry, even though today, we choose to be silent.

That music system is the power of our Voting Finger, which with one sonic blast of sound, can put any other loud noise to rest. But that is not its way.

It's method is to allow the ones who shout and mock, jeer and threaten, to continue doing what they are good at doing, and then in silence on voting day show it's majesty and dominion.

Look at those who drove in the car with the loud noise. Why did they want their music so loud that their own eardrums could have been at the point of bursting?

Why couldn't they have listened to their music with windows closed and still have enjoyed the volume without others outside finding their quietness disrupted?

Why? Because, they wanted to provoke the silence outside.

Today, the ones who provoke make the loudest noise.

And what is the provocation we hear from our politicians today?

Offering protection against imaginary foes, who they tell the people will steal their religion from them. protection against menfolk from other communities who will steal their womenfolk from them.

The loud noise I heard in the quietness of the night was that of bullies, telling others outside how powerful they were, through the noise they made.

But was that noise required? Wasn't there peace and quiet, calm and tranquility outside?

And that is what the 'voting finger' needs to realise; that there is no enemy to fear, from whom you and I need protection.

Don't get moved by the loud music, instead, ask relevant questions. Ask about cheaper food, affordable housing, money for clothes to cover yourselves and why this disturbing inflation.

The real power is ours, as long as we don't give in to the garish music!

"Was there no other inducement?"

"No, your honour, I was not offered any money to change my God, as I was offered by all the candidates in the last elections to change my vote! And your honour?"

"Yes?" asked the judge.

"When political parties offer free TV's, free electricity, cheap rice, free housing and money in the bank, free transport for women..."

"Yes, yes I know!" said the judge.

"Isn't that allurements and inducement?"

"I am the one asking the questions!" said the judge.

"I am sorry your honour. And your honour?"

"I told you I am the one..."

"I am a poor man..."

"Yes, I know," said the judge.

"Poor and uneducated!"

"I know that!"

"Starving and hungry!"

"What are you leading up to?" asked the impatient judge.

"Despite being all this, you have still given me the freedom to vote!"

"That is the right of every citizen of this country!" said the judge proudly, "and it is my duty to see that no one stops you from exercising this right!"

"Thank you your honour!" said the poor man and there was a hush in the courtroom as he drew himself to his full height of five feet four inches and said, "If I, your honour, can be trusted with the right to vote a government out of power, then why your honour can't I the same poor man be trusted to change my religion?"

And that is how we should respond to the loud garish music being played by political leaders and others in our nation...!

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

When people are very damaged, they can often meet the world with a kind of defiance." — J. K. Rowling

The Shillong Times

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Phones and reforms

INDIA'S telecommunications sector has evolved over the years. The latest from the state-owned BSNL is the launch of the nation's first Direct-to-Device Satellite Connectivity that can be availed by its users/subscribers across the country. This solves the long-standing issue of lack of connectivity in remote areas and in odd times. Users can connect their device with home, office etc even from and to locations where cellular or WiFi networks used to be unavailable. Dial anytime to anywhere would be the new slogan for the premier communications agency that had faced a lot of flak for its undependable services in the past.

From undependable landlines to mobile phones was a major step forward for India's telecommunications sector, which was done a while before the turn of the century. The conditions for this were created by reforms introduced in the sector during the term of Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister. Indian technocrat Sam Pitroda, who had a stint with premier technology firms in the United States, spearheaded this reform here in his capacity as adviser to PM, also during the period of Manmohan Singh. He boldly dumped the nation's antiquated telecommunications equipment and led an upgrade since the late 1980s. In all, he led six technology missions related to various fields under the Congress rules, all of which have served the nation well. That he met with stiff resistance from the corrupt establishment in effecting forward-looking changes in various sectors is no secret. Under Rajiv Gandhi, however, Pitroda's word was law when it came to the telecommunications sector. Without Pitroda, the mobile phone revolution would have taken ages to materialize here. Today, there are over 1.12 billion active mobile phone connections in the country, covering some 80 per cent of the population. Even banking services and cash transactions are done now through mobile phones, signifying the importance of both the telecom reforms and mobile revolution in the country.

Before the onset of the mobile phone age, the scenario was chaotic. It used to take months or years to get a landline connection up until the 1990s. The telecommunication staff used to play hide and seek, also in situations when a connection developed snags. After the arrival of mobile phones, there were irritants of other sorts. Lack of accessibility/connectivity in remote areas was one problem. Different service providers, both BSNL and private entities, quoted different rates. The number system itself caused difficulty and confusion under such circumstances. The migration from one to another raised issues. Connectivity during travel was a problem. Yet, admittedly and appreciably, this sector has evolved and progressed by leaps and bounds since the 1990s. Notably, the arrival of Jio services reduced tension related to rates. Direct to Device Satellite Connectivity to subscribers will majorly address the existing issues and make telephone calls and internet access easier.

The Tenure of Turmoil

By Deepak Kumar Shahi

The ongoing protest in NEHU, Shillong against the VC Prabha Shankar Shukla has been ongoing since the past week. Some students are on hunger strike and a few have already been hospitalised. Students have made their demands clear in a 16-point memorandum which the VC has agreed to resolve but the Union no longer wants P S Shukla as the VC. Before the NEHUSU protest, the non-teaching staff have also gone on an indefinite strike against the VC, and before them, NEHUTA has been in a tussle with VC over several issues. In fact, strikes have occurred regularly since P S Shukla took charge as NEHU VC.

Strikes and protests are one of the key features of any democratic space and resonate even more with academic institutions. However, it is also important to look into various aspects of strikes and protests and analyze if he events promote student's interests and benefit the University as a whole. This article explores the causes and factors behind the ongoing strike which has put the campus and academic activities on hold for the past week. Here, the different stakeholders, their demands, and particular interests have been taken into consideration. At the same time the future of NEHU and higher education in general is discussed. The tenure of Prof. Shukla as NEHU VC has been analyzed by focusing upon the major events in the past three years.

The Appointment

It is important to look into the background of Prof. Prabha Shankar Shukla and his tenure to understand the current state of NEHU. Prof. Shukla took charge as NEHU VC in 2021 succeeding Prof. Shrivastava. If we look at the appointed VCs in the history of NEHU, the surnames infer a Brahmin hegemony which has been at its peak in the past decade. However, the Brahmin stronghold over the high positions in the academic institutions is not restricted to the VC's post only. In this regard, it is important to mention the Hindi Department at NEHU which for the longest period was monopolized by the Brahmin Professors. Even today, the Brahmins dominate the department with their sheer majority, experience, and high positions. Having said that, it is important to note that the recent recruitment under the tenure of VC Shukla, which has some serious discrepancies and because of which the issue has been in court. The status-quo of the Hindi Department changed and among appointed candidates, two belonged to the ST and OBC category each.

The non-teaching staff, particularly the ad-hoc cleaners went on strike against the VC within the first year and demanded upgrada-

tion to a regular scale. The strike continued for months and students were the worst affected in the hostel and the departments as well. Unfortunately, the cleaners received little to no support from others and the strike ended with almost no achievements. This explains the situation of the lowest class which serves society the most without getting its due and recognition either from the authorities or the common people.

The other big move taken by the VC within a year of his tenure was to vacate the two Ph. D. student hostels, Sohpetbneng and

tion from them. Therefore, he attempted to manufacture support by pushing his candidate. In the process, merit, specialization, and required credentials were sidelined in order to appoint certain candidates. Nevertheless, the appointment remained a non-issue for either NEHUTA or NEHUSU up until recently.

Prof. Shukla became over-confident and appointed an individual named Rohit Prasad bypassing all procedures for the post of Technical Assistant. Within two years Prof. Shukla had built an image of an autocrat and it was duly noted by employees and students at NEHU.



Chhinglung as they were declared inhospitable. The two functional hostels at the time had about sixty resident scholars out of the capacity of seventy. In May 2024 the students were asked to vacate the hostels and allotted rooms in the remaining two hostels Umngot and Japfu for PhD students. For the past two years, there has been no attempt to renovate the hostels or to construct new buildings. Again, the students are at the receiving end as they have to wait for years to see a liveable hostel. This has led to discrepancies and irregularities in the hostel allocation process, where students, especially those with no connection and from poor economic backgrounds suffer most. The Bamboo Hut hostels which were initially given to selected students are now being allotted only to the teaching officials.

The Recruitments

In the same year, the VC appointed teaching staff where several allegedly non-eligible and non-capable candidates were preferred over competent ones. The other nepotistic aspect of the recruitment was in giving priority to candidates from upper castes and also from a particular region. This has been a general trend across the country under the current political dispensation for the last decade. Prof. Shukla needed support from teachers but he did not get coopera-

Rohit Prasad's case led to a massive protest against the VC in 2023. This led to Rohit Prasad leaving NEHU without completing his term and again with the winter vacation, the temperature at NEHU dropped too. However, the arrogance and unapologetic stubbornness of VC Shukla became evident to all. The first half of the current year remained relatively quiet. Meanwhile different appointments happened including that of Registrar and several others. This is said to be the ultimate issue in the ongoing protest.

Apart from that, Prof. Shukla has been intervening excessively in the functioning of departments especially when it comes to appointment of guest faculties. The implementation of the New Education Policy and CUET are other major issues for the University and departments have struggled with the academic calendar, new syllabus, admission process, etc. Enforcing the political agenda of the Centre is another blame on Prof. Shukla as he has insisted on the participation of teachers and students in programs such as Mangalyaan 3, G-20, Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, etc. Moreover, under his tenure, NEHU has been falling successively in NIRF Rankings and with that losing its reputation too.

The Protest

The involvement of NE-

HUSU in the current protest appears to be haphazard, unplanned, vague, and orchestrated by NEHUTA, to say the least. Students at NEHU have been suffering for a long time. The NEHU VC holding the senior most position in the institution has consistently overlooked student's issues. However, not all the student issues go to the VC directly but the professors, departments, hostel wardens, the DSW, and so on can solve some of the student problems themselves. At the same time when the Hostel fee was hiked directly double this year, students hardly received any support from NEHUTA nor did NEHUSU hold any protest against it.

About the ongoing protest of NEHUSU which started on November 5, the lack of clarity regarding the issues of students in general is due largely to the lack of planning, interaction, and discussion before the protest. Rather than making decisions on the advice of others, NEHUSU should have interacted with fellow students and discussed the issues with them. Students also have to ask their representatives whether the call for protest is in their interest or someone else's. Student representation is another issue at NEHU if one looks at the demography of students and the background of the representatives. NEHUSU has to decide if it wants to emerge as a strong independent force representing the interests and agenda of students or wants to be in control of NEHUTA and other administrative officials. It must decide its modus operandi and whether it wants to get involved in academic activities and improve the conditions of the University by working for some real, progressive and reformative causes or just organizing some recreational events. It has to be wary about the interests of some teachers who are vocal and active in this protest against the VC on grounds of irregularities and corruption when they are themselves causing huge problems to their students by keeping them waiting for their Ph. D. Viva-voce for more than a year which is clearly against the guidelines of UGC.

The nature of the protest is another issue which NEHUSU has to be clear about. Any person with minimum integrity would resign looking at the apathy from employees and students in general on the campus. The obstinate nature of Prof. Shukla implies how immoral, self-centered, and power-hungry a person he is who hardly values public image and self-respect let alone the integrity and reputation of an Institution like NEHU.

(The author is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of History, NEHU, Shillong.)

NEHU Crisis Deepens Hunger Strike, Legal Mandates & Growing Calls for Vice-Chancellor's Resignation

By Erwin K Syiem Sutnga

The unfolding crisis at North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) has reached a critical stage, with the indefinite hunger strike led by the NEHU Students' Union (NEHUSU) and the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) NEHU unit now in its second week. The students are resolute in their demand for the resignation of Vice-Chancellor (VC) Prof. Prabha Shankar Shukla, attributing his leadership to the decline in NEHU's standards and a pattern of administrative mismanagement.

In response to this escalating situation, the Union Education Ministry recently announced its intent to mediate and resolve the crisis. This intervention has raised concerns among the university community, who worry that an external resolution might not address the underlying grievances related to NEHU's regional and cultural representation. Meanwhile, the Meghalaya

meeting to appoint two new Pro-Vice-Chancellors. This decision has been met with skepticism, as stakeholders question the legality of holding such a significant meeting virtually. NEHU's Act and Statutes typically mandate that Executive Council meetings for crucial decisions, such as appointments, be conducted in person to ensure transparency and adherence to governance protocols. The move to make these appointments online, without clear statutory authorization, may constitute a procedural violation, further eroding trust in the current administration.

The Meghalaya High Court's intervention on November 8, mandating a November 20 deadline for administrative response, places additional pressure on Prof. Shukla's administration. The court order emphasizes the need for "meaningful dialogue" with student leaders and requires a thorough

Ironically, NEHU's leadership crisis is juxtaposed with recent academic achievements that showcase the institution's potential. On November 5, 2024, two NEHU scientists—Prof. Timir Tripathi from the Department of Zoology and Dr. Shruti Shukla from the Department of Nanotechnology—were honoured by Meghalaya's Governor after being recognized among the top 2 percent of scientists globally, according to a Stanford University ranking.

High Court has issued a specific timeline, requiring the NEHU administration to engage in constructive dialogue with the protesting students and submit a comprehensive report on measures taken by November 20. This deadline adds a layer of urgency, setting expectations for a concrete resolution to be in place within days.

Recognitions Amidst the Unrest

Ironically, NEHU's leadership crisis is juxtaposed with recent academic achievements that showcase the institution's potential. On November 5, 2024, two NEHU scientists—Prof. Timir Tripathi from the Department of Zoology and Dr. Shruti Shukla from the Department of Nanotechnology—were honoured by Meghalaya's Governor after being recognized among the top 2 percent of scientists globally, according to a Stanford University ranking. This recognition underscores NEHU's capacity for excellence even as administrative controversies threaten its standing and reputation.

Mounting Discontent with the Vice-Chancellor's Leadership

The current crisis has deep roots, stemming from Prof. Shukla's appointment in 2021, a decision that bypassed a local candidate, Prof. S.M. Sungoh, and sparked immediate concerns among stakeholders. The NEHU Teachers' Association (NEHUTA) and various student and staff groups have since accused Prof. Shukla of favoring non-local appointments and failing to consult adequately on key policies, including the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which was implemented with limited input from university stakeholders.

Critics argue that the Vice-Chancellor's leadership has led to a dramatic decline in NEHU's national ranking, from 59 in 2021 to 136 in 2024, a drop attributed to what many see as ineffective and dismissive management practices. Moreover, Prof. Shukla's continued absence from campus during this period of unrest has further deepened mistrust, with students and faculty feeling that his distance reflects a disregard for the University's well-being.

Legal Mandates and Controversial Appointments

Adding to the complexity, the Executive Council recently held an online

report on the actions taken to address the issues raised by the university community.

Statutory Guidelines: The Role of NEHU's Governance Framework

The NEHU Act, Statutes, and Ordinances provide clear guidelines for the university's governance. Section 10 of the NEHU Act describes the Vice-Chancellor's role as the primary executive and academic officer, charged with maintaining discipline and overseeing university operations. Section 8 of the Act grants the Visitor (the President of India) the power to remove the Vice-Chancellor if it is determined that their actions are detrimental to the university's interests or if they fail to fulfill their duties effectively.

Furthermore, Statute 12 assigns the Executive Council oversight of NEHU's affairs, highlighting the importance of transparent and participatory decision-making processes for the university's well-being. These governance protocols make it clear that NEHU's leadership must be responsive and engage constructively with stakeholders to maintain institutional integrity.

A Path Forward: The Call for Resignation

The growing intensity of the hunger strike, combined with legal mandates and public scrutiny, has left NEHU at a decisive crossroad. The current Vice-Chancellor's tenure has led to a climate of division and dissatisfaction, raising questions about his ability to restore unity and trust. In light of the High Court's mandate and the mounting calls for change, it appears that genuine dialogue and a path toward resolution may only be possible if Prof. Prabha Shankar Shukla acknowledges that his position has become untenable. His immediate resignation could create an opening for meaningful reform and allow NEHU to appoint a leader whose vision aligns with the institution's unique cultural, academic, and regional values.

The coming days are crucial for NEHU. As the November 20 deadline approaches, stakeholders across the university—students, faculty, alumni, and regional leaders—must advocate for governance reforms and work toward appointing a Vice-Chancellor who embodies the aspirations of Meghalaya and the Northeast.

Letters to the Editor

Have we lost all sensibilities?

Editor,
Shillong is in the midst of a huge celebration with international music icons straddling the stage even as our own students in North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) are on a fast since Wednesday November 6, 2024, to protest the Vice Chancellor's acts of omission and commission and his not abdicating his post even after a protracted demand from the students' union—NEHUSU. So while one section of the population rocks and gyrates to loud music another section is withering away in a hunger strike. Other students' organisations are also supporting the NEHUSU demand and rightly so since this is a case that directly affects the student community. The present VC, PB Shukla has appointed a registrar of his choice and other officials of the University without following due procedure. There are many NGOs and social organisations in Meghalaya

but all of them are silent on this critical issue affecting the future of so many of our students now and in the years to come. Why do we take things lying down like this and are held hostage by an indifferent central government which believes it has a complete hold on our lives? Where is the autonomy of Meghalaya as a State when a University in the State is forced to accept a person who does not merit to occupy that position?

Outgoing Governor of Meghalaya, Satyapal Malik once while addressing a gathering at NEHU said, "This Government has appointed Vice Chancellors who are not fit to even be principals of schools." Although Malik looked at the VC and said, "I am not talking about you," the message was amply clear. The NEHU VC was sitting right there unmoved. As a teacher of this University, I hold myself equally accountable for not speaking up when the need arose to speak up, for that moment in time never returns and things only get worse. Our collective silence

right from the time of the former VC Shrivastava has now come full circle. Sadly, it is the students who are bearing the brunt of our conspiratorial silence. When I think about them and consider the fact that it seems like a no-win situation since neither the State Government nor the Governor as Chief Rector are willing to take a stand on behalf of the students, my heart weeps at the utter helplessness we find ourselves in. When will this gridlock end and at what cost?

I appeal to all the people of Meghalaya to stand in solidarity with the NEHUSU and extend your support to the cause of this University. If we continue to bow before insolent might of the Brahminical hegemony we are going to lose whatever little autonomy we have to speak up against all forms of authoritarianism. I am not so sure that we have not already lost most of our freedoms but I dare to hope that we will reclaim those lost spaces by standing together in solidarity with a cause bigger than our petty political differences.

The other day the VPP members led by the MP Ricky Suchiang, a former faculty of NEHU, met the VC. We are not aware of the conversation they had but they appeared with the VC to appeal to the NEHUSU to agree to a discussion. The students got agitated because it took the VPP members to bring the VC out to address the students. As the head of the Institution could he not have come personally before things took a turn for the worse and appealed to students to come to the negotiating table? Why did it take a political party to drag the VC out of his office?

And now the appointment of two Pro-VCs at this juncture does not help the cause. This should have been done immediately after he had joined in 2021. Perhaps the VC wanted to fill these two posts too with his hand-picked people. A University is a place where ideas are churned out for the greater good of society and the world at large. At this rate how can such ideas be seeded and take roots when the mind of students

and faculty is perennially agitated.

People of Meghalaya, unite now or forever be doomed. The NEHU affair is a test of our patience which is mistaken for a laid back, couldn't care less attitude. If we lose this battle, I fear the future that awaits us.

Yours etc.,

Name withheld on request, Via email

Acute drinking water problems in Mawbah

Editor,
Through your esteemed daily, I would like to draw the attention of the Rangbah Shong Mawbah PHE Department and Municipal authorities regarding the water problems faced by most of the households residing in lower Mawbah area near Ganesh Mandir due to poor supply of water from the tank situated at Lower Mawbah beside Bappi shop. This tank was constructed after replacing an old iron tank. But due to faulty construction work

or may be due to other reasons, the residents of the area are not getting proper supply of water from this tank. The CPVC pipes installed at the outlet point of this tank are causing difficulty for plumbers to do repair works. Water is seeping out and flows into nearby drains.

The supply pipes connected to CPVC outlet pipes could not fetch water from this tank. The problems cannot be resolved unless the CPVC pipes are removed and replaced by traditional GI pipes and unless the RCC tank is not properly reconstructed.

I therefore request the authorities concerned to kindly take necessary steps in repairing the particular tank in a proper and efficient way so that people of the locality may not face water scarcity in future.

Yours etc.,

T Khan,

Via email

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

"Your intellect may be confused, but your emotions will never lie to you."

— Roger Ebert

The Shillong Times

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Hunger Strike: Ultimate Form of Protest

THE NEHU Student's Union (NEHUSU) entered the 10th day of their hunger strike for a list of demands, one of which is the removal of the NEHU Vice Chancellor, PS Shukla for a range of reasons, foremost among which is his nonchalance about student grievances. The NEHU Teachers Association (NEHUTA) is supporting the students' hunger strike and are present keeping a keen eye on the students and their deteriorating health conditions. For those at the site of the hunger strike it is evident that the students are on a downhill path as far as their health condition is concerned, more so those with underlying ailments such as gastritis. The problem with a hunger strike is that it takes a toll on those who undertake the ethical path of fasting or Satyagraha as exemplified by Mahatma Gandhi during the freedom movement. The British found it hard to deal with this non-violent mode of protest.

A hunger strike is generally used by those who have no other form of protest available -- usually prisoners. Such actions are often aimed at protesting prison conditions, achieving a policy change, or bringing attention to a certain case or cause. But health practitioners worry that long-term refusal of food can affect most organs and systems in the human body. This leads to muscle weakness, vulnerability to infections, psychological problems, and, eventually, organ failure. While people can survive up to several weeks without food under certain conditions, physical and mental impairment can begin within two to three days. Due to a lack of carbohydrates, the body switches to its fat and protein reserves and starts using them as its main source of energy.

The only thing that the hunger strikers are ingesting is water and glucose but this is hardly enough to sustain them. Besides there is the winter cold to reckon with since the strike is in an open space. The student protestors are of the view that the Central Government is testing their resilience to the limits and that the appointment of a 2-member enquiry committee comprising rank outsiders, no matter their qualification is fraught. They feel that a senior, unblemished professor from NEHU should also be part of the enquiry committee because it is important to understand the nuances of the NEHU imbroglio to arrive at a meaningful outcome. Students feel that the enquiry committee could be just a tactic by the central government to buy time, with the assumption that students would call off their strike once the Committee begins its work. But that too seems like a failed strategy. What is imperative, however, is to break the deadlock and get students back to the classroom. This will require wisdom and sagacity from the part of the senior professors of NEHU to guide the students on the best path forward which will be a win-win situation for all. The health of students should be a matter of concern for all.

Letters to the Editor

Fee collection announced on locality PA system!

Editor,
Through this column I would like to draw the attention of the law enforcers and the authorities concerned on what is going on at the ground level when it comes to the functioning of the local Dorbars. As many writers through this newspaper have expressed their views on the history, role and functions of the traditional Dorbar system in modern times and also about the legal ramifications on its existence, I am appalled at the lack of clear instructions from the government on how the dorbar should function especially when it comes to collection of money from the public.

I visited a friends place at at Nongrimmaw locality in Laitumkhrah and roughly at about 7.45pm there was an announcement made on the locality PA system saying there will be collection of monthly fees from all the residents of Nongrimmaw and registration of tenants and shopkeepers for the year 2024-25 on Saturday at the Dorbar Hall." The announcement was made for about 20 minutes both in Khasi and English. This prompted me

to ask my friend what was this collection all about? She told me that it started a year back and all residents were asked to make monthly payment where house owners are to pay Rs 50 and tenants Rs 30. The registration fees for new tenants was Rs 50. It is further learnt that this collection was meant for civic maintenance of the locality that was taken up by the Dorbar Shnong whereas the locality was under the administration of the Shillong Municipal Board for maintenance of civic amenities to which household taxes are levied by the Board. I was also told that those who do not pay the fees do not get any assistance from the locality. I was also told that those who don't pay the stated fees would be penalised in that no announcement would be made over the PA system if someone from their family passes away. So I asked my friend who installed the PA system and was told that it came through the local MDC scheme.

Since this topic on Dorbars is interesting, more so after reading several articles on its role and functioning in this newspaper, I then asked if the money was collected by the Dorbar Shnong of Laitumkhrah to which she replied in the negative. The money was apparently collected by the Dorbar Dong and collected

by the Rangbah Dong and his men there. I wonder under which authority of the law is the Rangbah Dong allowed to make a public announcement on the PA system for collection of money from the residents? Is this not broad daylight extortion? People's voices are suppressed so they cannot even voice their concern only because of the Rangbah Shnong's diktat. It seems those who refuse to pay are not given any assistance or certificate wherein even fees for certificates are collected separately it seems. And the amount to be paid for sale and purchase of land there is hefty.

We read so much about the Dorbar Shnong and that they do not have the mandate of law to issue diktats to residents according to their whim and fancies. And here we have localities in the heart of the capital making public announcements on illegal collections and no one dares to take any action. Nor does the police take suo-moto cognisance in such cases. Does the district administration endorse such collections to happen under its nose? Citizens of Laitumkhrah are paying their household tax to the SMB and simultaneously are also being forced to pay to the Dorbar Dong? Since when has the Syiem of Hima Mylliem issued a Sanad to the Rangbah Dong or Dorbar Dong? And why is the Rang-

bah Shnong of Laitumkhrah silent on this issue?

The district administration on several occasions issued advisories on illegal collection of money by non-registered organisations. Are the Dorbars not required to obtain permission from the district administration to collect money from the public? Are the Dorbar Shnong above the law? How are even such announcements allowed on the PA system of the locality? Is this not an open endorsement to extortion? Who will bell the cat?

Yours etc,
Ibalamon K. Naor
Shillong 1

Don't bulldoze justice

Editor,
How can an authorised structure, a home of a person, be demolished by the administration to punish an accused or a convict? It is said that a person is innocent until proven guilty. So, no punitive action should be taken against an accused until the person is proven guilty. Now, what if the person is a convict? Even in this case, the executive cannot add more punishment to what was given by the judiciary. Moreover, can a wife be punished for the crime committed by her husband? Should the administration

an outcast or my own home no longer exists—that is, I am homeless.

Another important feature of the Khasi matrilineal system is that the husband's lineage does not change after marriage; instead, the child takes the mother's surname. This is also a highly respectable tradition. In patriarchal societies, like that of the caste Indians, if one changes their surname after marriage, then the husband and wife would technically belong to the same lineage. But wouldn't that make them siblings? I am not aware of any culture that views incest favorably. This concern does not arise in matrilineal societies, which are both sensitive and logical about such matters. Therefore, any bemusement should not be directed at matrilineal customs but rather at patrilineal customs, which are, in many ways, quite puzzling.

The Khasi now follow a custom of matrilocality, meaning that husbands come to stay at the wife's house. This appears to be a more recent custom that may have begun just before or shortly after the arrival of colonialism in the hills. But how do we know that the present practice was not the original one? The answer may be found in another matrilineal community—the largest in the world, in fact.

The Minangkabau are the largest ethnic group on the island of Sumatra, Indonesia, with their traditional homeland in the west-central highlands. What is most interesting about this community is that, although predominantly Muslim, they follow matrilineal customs, tracing descent and inheritance through the female line. Like the Khasi, most of whom now follow a patriarchal Middle Eastern Christian religion, the Minangkabau also follow a related religion, Islam, but have chosen to maintain their traditional customs. In this culture, traditionally, a married couple stayed in the house of the wife's maternal relatives. The husband, however, was considered a guest who visited his wife at night. So, what is the connection between the Khasis, Mosuo, and Minangkabau? And when was that connection severed? Today, these three communities are found thousands of kilometers apart.

It is interesting to note that these three communities belong to three distinct language families: Khasi (Austroasiatic), Mosuo (Sino-Tibetan), and Minangkabau (Austronesian). It is, therefore, quite surprising that all three would have such similar customs. The answer may lie in their original

homeland. The Mosuo are currently found in southern China, which was also the homeland of Austroasiatic-speaking people who later migrated to Southeast Asia and South Asia (i.e., the Khasi and Munda). The Austronesian language family, on the other hand, traces its origin to Taiwan, which today is a flashpoint between China and the West, with China claiming the region as its own. This follows a familiar pattern in which the land of indigenous people is appropriated by non-indigenous populations through violence and later claimed as their own. A related example would be how illegal European immigrants took the land of indigenous Palestinians and are now committing genocide against them. Returning to the Austronesians, their origin in Taiwan and the fact that some Austronesian groups practice matrilineal customs suggest that matrilineality was either widespread throughout central and southern China or was acquired as they migrated through South Vietnam and further into Oceania. Today, Austronesian-speaking indigenous communities in the Solomon Islands still follow matrilineal customs. Given that the Austronesian groups left southern China around 6,000 years ago, matrilineal customs must be at least that old. Curiously, a few years ago, I met a Minangkabau woman and a tribal chief from the Solomon Islands—both from matrilineal societies—in Rome. It was a wonderful experience.

From all this discussion, it is important to understand that the phrase "time immemorial" is meaningless as a justification for excluding certain groups, such as women and non-Khasis, without a true understanding of our cultural and traditional facts. We are a mixed community—genetically (with both Southeast Asian and South Asian ancestry) and religiously, with indigenous faith practitioners, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and atheists. Yet the defining feature of our identity is our matrilineal customs. However, even this must be understood in its proper context; one cannot simply make claims or invent traditions out of thin air, especially those that seek to disenfranchise parts of the community. Recently, the KHADC has allowed women to be part of the Dorbar Shnong, a change that was long overdue. In the future, we will need further changes, and "time immemorial" cannot be used as an excuse to prevent them.

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

due process as prescribed by law... it will be totally unconstitutional... The executive cannot become a judge and decide that a person accused is guilty and, therefore, punish him by demolishing his residential/ commercial property/ properties. Such an act of the executive would be transgressing its limits."

Now, those who have lost their homes because of such a transgression should be given fair compensation. It will indeed be a mockery of justice if the executive blurs the line of the separation of power and assumes the role of the judiciary for the sake of instant justice.

The Supreme Court has rightly said that a bulldozer demolishing a building made a "chilling sight" and it is a "lawless state of affairs". There should not be any leeway for such actions. An innocent family member of an accused or a convict should not be deprived of her or his right to shelter, which is a fundamental right and a part of Article 21 (life and personal liberty) of the Constitution of India.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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When Will Meghalaya Be Self-Sufficient?

By Barnes Mawrie, SDB

Perhaps of all the states in India, Meghalaya is one state that is totally dependent on the central government's annual allotment. Should the centre stop giving us financial aid, our state would run dry and the people would go hungry. When it comes to food sufficiency our state fares miserably, for we do not produce enough cereals, vegetables or fruits to meet the needs of the inhabitants. Even eggs and fish need to be supplied from Andhra Pradesh and other states. The question we should ask is: Is our state not fertile enough to produce the food supply that we need? The answer to this is in the affirmative. Our state is capable of producing more than sufficient food required by the inhabitants. The principal reason why we are not able to do this is because our people have not realized the importance of agriculture. Many of the paddy fields and other cultivable plots in the rural areas are left uncultivated because the younger generation have abandoned their villages for the vain attractions of the cities. Therefore, what we witness today in rural areas are the old folk trying to cultivate whatever they can, using the old traditional methods which require more manpower but yield very little. The young generation who are educated and who could put to use their scientific know-how of modern farming, are reluctant to return to their villages and to undertake agriculture. They keep on lingering in Shillong looking for jobs even though those are no longer available. Shockingly, they prefer to live from hand to mouth in the city than grabbing the potentiality of generating wealth in their own rural areas.

I have not heard of any educated youth hailing from rural areas who has gone back to undertake agriculture on an extensive and modern way. In western countries, farmers are among the richest because they cultivate vast tracks of land, using modern technology. Sadly enough, in our state most farmers still have recourse to manual digging, planting and harvesting and as a result they are unable to cultivate larger plots and thereby produce very little. We often watch with envy how farmers in our neighbouring states, like Punjab, Andhra Pradesh or Assam, are able to use modern technology so effectively so as to produce abundantly thereby adding to the Gross Agricultural Product of the country.

Another sad phenomenon in our State is the rampant destruction of our farm land by it in the urban or rural areas. Let me cite an example of Pynthor-Umkhrah and Langkyrding in the heart of Shillong. Six decades ago, these areas used to be rich fields where farmers used to grow paddy and vegetables. It was a vast stretch of field made of a very rich alluvial soil. As a young boy I remember how during the months of October and November these fields would be covered with the golden colour of ripened paddy and in spring season they used to be green with potatoes and other vegetables. Watch what they have become today. Urbanization has encroached into these fields and today we see hardly 20% of the field left cultivated. There are other examples which I could cite here. Even the so-called Dhankheti earlier was a paddy field and that is why it got that name. Today, we probably need to change the names of these two localities as they do not reflect reality at all. This dangerous trend is being seen in the suburbs of Shillong or Tura where in the name of expansion, many fields are lost for good. This will continue to happen because unlike in Assam and other states of India, there is no law in Meghalaya which prohibits people from encroaching into cultivated land. Destroying fields and

cultivated land is like snatching away the rice plate from a person; it is depriving people of their daily food and cutting off the lifeline of the state. It is disheartening to see how land owners sell off cultivated plots to estate dealers who in turn sell the land plot by plot. Consequently, agricultural land in our state is fast shrinking and this should be a point of concern for the state.

Recently, we have heard of the Government talking about increasing fish production in the state by encouraging citizens to invest in this enterprise. The aim was to make Meghalaya self-sufficient in fish supply and not depend on Andhra fish which is often ridden with fear of contamination. Unfortunately, this effort of the Government has failed miserably since the goal has shifted from "providing" to "amassing." A few days ago, as I was going towards Nongstoin, somewhere after Bynther, I was shocked to see a massive crowd of anglers sitting in long lines on the banks of the fish ponds. I reckon the number would not be less than a few thousands. The owner of those fish ponds, whoever they are must have collected lakhs of rupees on that day. This trend of making fish ponds for angling contests, is picking up very fast and thus we see thousands of ponds popping up everywhere and there are no dearth of anglers flocking to them, ever ready to shed away their hard-earned money for a few hours of pleasure. The pond owners definitely do not seem to be interested in the government's project of making Meghalaya fish self-sufficient. They are bent on making huge bucks for themselves often at the cost of the poor.

It is common knowledge that fishing competition has become a new kind of gambling in the state and so many have become addicted to it. Imagine if the thousands of fish pond owners were to grow fish for the purpose of meeting the state's demand, we would probably not need to import fish from anywhere else. But the reality is that fish growing has become only another method of personal wealth accumulation.

People in Meghalaya need to change their mindset from being economic introverts to being economic extroverts, in other words from being accumulators to becoming suppliers. Farmers in our state need to think bigger, which means that they should cultivate not merely for meeting their personal needs but produce on a commercial scale.

In conclusion I would like to cite the example of Israel. When Ben Gurion took over as the first prime minister of the new state of Israel in 1948, he told his collaborators "we shall beg for arms, we shall beg for medicines but we shall never beg for food." In fact, the Israeli government then undertook agriculture on a war-footing and within a short period of time they had converted the deserts into fertile land. Today Israel has become one of the greatest agriculturally developed nations in the world. They are now exporting food as well as their agricultural technology to other countries. Sadly, our state of Meghalaya is going in the opposite direction for we are turning paddy fields into estate grounds and our cultivated land into wastelands. Buildings are cropping up in places where crops should have appeared. If we go on in this manner, we shall become perpetual beggars for food and sustenance from other states. Hope we will be able to see statesmen like Ben Gurion who would motivate people to make agriculture a major profession in the state so as to make Meghalaya self-sufficient in food supply. God save our beloved state!

Reliable evidence shows social media harms young people

The Australian government is developing legislation that will ban children under 16 from social media. There has been a huge public debate about whether there is sufficient direct evidence of harm to introduce this regulation.

The players in this debate include academics, mental health organisations, advocacy groups and digital education providers. Few step back to look at the entire research landscape.

Social media has become integral to everyday life. Not many teens want to be extensively researched, so studies are pragmatic, require consent and findings are limited. As a result, we tend to hear that the effects are small or even inconclusive.

For the public it's crucial to understand all research studies have limitations, and must be interpreted within the context in which the data was collected. To understand any report, we must scrutinise the details.

Several mechanisms are at play

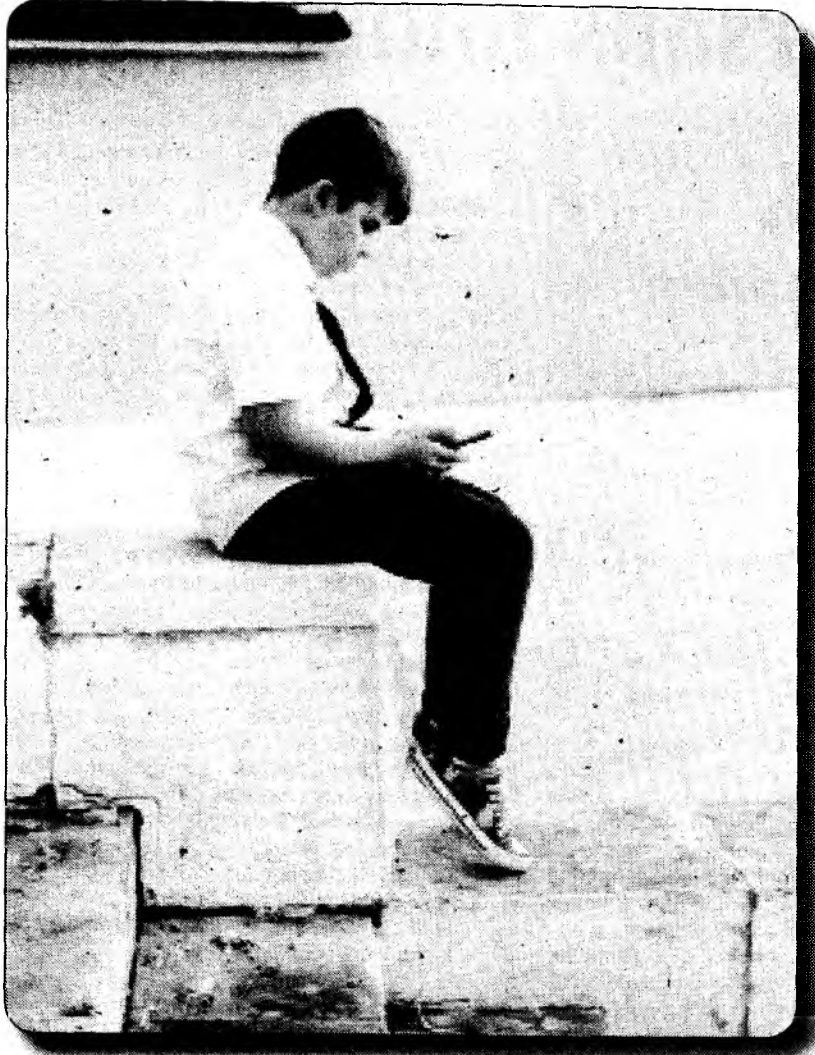
In recent years, anxiety has been on the rise among children and young people. Understanding why young people are anxious, depressed or overly focused on themselves is no easy task.

When it comes to the potential negative impact of social media, several mechanisms are at play. To unpack them, data is needed from many angles: examining mood while online, examining mental health over several years, school relationships, even brain scans, to name just a few.

Despite all this complexity, the public tends to mostly hear about it through splashy headlines.

One example is the "small and inconsistent" result from an umbrella study of several meta-analyses totalling 1.9 million children and teenagers.

However, it's important to recognise this umbrella study included many research papers from an earlier time when researchers couldn't



measure social media use as accurately as they can now.

One influential data set asked people to leave out time spent "interacting with friends and family" when they estimated their time on social media. Yet in 2014 to 2015, sharing photos, following, and interacting with people you knew was the main use of social media. The findings appeared within a larger study a few years later, resulting in one headline that stated: "screen time may be no worse for kids than eating potatoes".

With so many sources of error, it's no wonder there is vigorous debate among researchers over the extent of social media harm. Limitations are par for the course. Worse,

researchers are often not given full access to data from social media companies.

That's why we need to pay more attention to big tech whistleblowers who have inside access.

Meanwhile, these companies do have access to the data. They use it to exploit human nature.

Focusing on debates between researchers is a misdirection and makes us complacent. There is enough evidence to demonstrate excessive social media use can be harmful to young people.

Here's what the evidence shows

One argument you may hear a lot is that it's not clear whether depression and anxiety cause higher



screen time use, or higher screen time causes more depression and anxiety. This is known as a bidirectional effect - something that goes both ways.

But that's no reason to ignore potential harms. If anything, bidirectional effects matter more, not less, because factors feed into one another. Unchecked, they cause the problem to grow.

Harms of social media use are shown in studies that examine the effects of sharing selfies, the impact of algorithms, influencers, extreme content, and the growth in cyberbullying.

Social media activates envy, comparisons and fear of missing out, or FOMO. Many teens use social media while procrastinating.

It is through these mechanisms that the links to depression, anxiety, low self esteem and self harm are clear.

Finally, until the age of 16, increased time on social media is associated with feeling less satisfied with appearance and school work.

There is also reliable evidence that limiting social media use reduces levels of anxiety, depression and FOMO in 17-25-year-olds.

We ignore this evidence at our peril.

The evidence is sufficient

Understanding the intricacies of how every aspect of modern life affects mental health will take a long time. The work is difficult, particularly when there is a lack of reliable data from tech companies on screen time.

Yet there is already enough reliable evidence to limit children's exposure to social media for their benefit.

Instead of debating the nuances of research and levels of harm, we

should accept that for young people, social media use is negatively affecting their development and their school communities.

In fact, the government's proposed ban of children's social media use has parallels with banning phones in schools. In 2018, some critics argued that "banning smartphones would stop children gaining the knowledge they needed to cope online".

Yet evidence now shows that smartphone bans in schools have resulted in less need for care around mental health issues, less bullying, and academic improvements - the latter especially for socio-economically disadvantaged girls.

It's time to agree that the harms are there, that they are damaging our community, and that we need strong, thoughtful regulation of social media use in young people. *(The Conversation)*

6 things to do if your child's weight is beyond ideal range - and 1 thing to avoid

One of the more significant challenges we face as parents is making sure our kids are growing at a healthy rate.

To manage this, we take them for regular check-ups, where vital measurements, including their weight and height, are captured and compared to an "ideal" range. But how accurate are these measurements? And what should you do if your child's weight falls beyond the ideal range?

How children's weight is measured

It's important to help our kids maintain a healthy weight. Around 80% of children who are obese when they reach adolescence will struggle with their weight for life.

Medical professionals regularly measure a child's height and weight and use growth charts to visualise their growth over time. They typically use two charts, covering:

1. birth to two years, which adopts World Health Organization standards. These were developed using studies in six countries measuring the growth of healthy, breastfed infants
2. two to 18 years, which adopts charts from the US Centre for Disease Control for children and adolescents' weight, height and body mass index (BMI).

These charts use percentile lines to plot a child's measurements as a growth curve, which is then compared to the expected - or ideal - range of weights and heights taken from children of the same age and gender.

A child's growth is considered healthy when their measurements track consistently along percentile lines. Poor growth is characterised by a child's weight or height measurements trending downward across percentiles.

In children under two years of age, a weight-for-age above the 85th percentile is considered in the overweight range, and a weight-for-age above the 97th percentile is considered in the obesity range.

In children aged over two, a BMI above the 85th percentile is considered overweight and a BMI above the 95th percentile is classified as obesity.

But growth charts and BMI aren't perfect

Growth charts provide a simple but effective indication of our child's growth and development. They can help health-care profes-

sionals detect potential medical issues early for investigation by a specialist.

But growth charts can cause parents a great deal of anxiety and stress because they fail to recognise that every child will grow and develop at a different rate.

So it's vital to assess trends and changes in weight over time and not to react to measurements that might be an outlier.

1 thing to avoid if your child is above the ideal range

Don't restrict your child's food intake or limit their diet if they're outside the ideal range. While this may succeed in helping them lose weight initially, it will be detrimental later. Imposing a diet on a young child affects their ability to metabolise food and their innate ability to regulate their food intake as they grow and develop. This can affect their relationship with food and accelerate their weight issue over time.

Fixating on a child's weight can also lead to anxiety, low self-esteem, eating disorders and body image issues.

6 things you can do

If your child's weight is measuring outside the ideal range, continue to monitor their growth over time and focus on enabling them to "grow into" a healthy weight. You can do this by:

1. Focusing on health, not weight

We each have a predetermined weight: a set point, which our body protects. It's programmed in the early years of life - particularly during the first 2,000 days of life - from conception to five years of age.

Our genes play a role in programming our weight set point. Just as DNA prescribes whether we're shorter or taller than others, we're born with a tendency to be slimmer or bigger. But our genetic make-up is just a predisposition, not an inevitable fate.

Modelling healthy habits and positive attitudes towards food, exercise and body image in the family home will support your child having an optimum body weight throughout their life.

This includes: teaching your child about nutrition, covering the importance of the foods we eat and why certain foods are only eaten sometimes - making time for daily activity that focuses on the enjoyment of movement and not exercising to lose weight or change how we look - being mindful of how we

talk about our bodies and avoiding making negative comments about weight or appearance.

2. Reaching for nature first

Expose your child to plenty of "nature's treats" - for example, fresh fruits and veggies, honey, nuts and seeds. In their natural state, these foods release the same pleasure response in the brain as highly processed junk and fast food, and provide the nutrition their body needs.

3. Eating the full rainbow

Offer your child a wide variety of foods of different colours and textures. Cook family favourites in different ways, such as lentil spaghetti bolognese as an alternative to beef spaghetti bolognese. Being a more adventurous eater helps develop children's palates and ensures they get the nutrients their bodies need for healthy growth and development.

4. Making mealtime relaxed and fun

Get the whole family involved in mealtimes. Improve your child's innate appetite regulation by slowing down and eating together at the dining table. Slowing down your eating means there is enough time for appetite hormones to be sent to the brain to tell you you've had enough.

Mealtimes that are relaxed and fun also help create positive associations with healthy eating, and help overcome food fussiness.

5. Playing every day

Consider the national activity guidelines to understand your child's exercise needs at each stage of their development. This is around 60 minutes of physical activity or energetic play for most age groups, and can be broken up into several smaller bursts.

Schedule regular time for activities that incorporate movement and a sense of play, such as active games together, exploring sports, and going on family walks and bike rides.

6. Revisiting screen time rules

Ensure your child has a healthy relationship with screens and has good sleep health by modelling healthy tech habits and implementing simple rules such as making mealtimes and the bedroom at bedtime screen-free zones.

Create positive entertainment alternatives that bring the family together. *(The Conversation)*

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, NOVEMBER 17, 2024

'Birthday Forecast'

Moon is opposite Mercury on your solar return chart and this is a very good combination. The year will turn out very favorable for you. You will be interacting a lot more with people. You will use your communication skills to the best of your advantage. And get your work done. You will also enjoy the spot light that you are getting. You will also develop lot of professional/social contacts and will also come in contact with influential person who will prove to be beneficial for you. Your name and fame will also rise. You will remain popular at your workplace and win the confidence of your bosses. You could start a new business or expand an existing one. Job offers will keep coming. Romantic ties can lead to marriage. Loved ones will come closer. There will be joy and bliss in family ties. Your partner/spouse will support you fully.

'This week for you'

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You are likely to form new relationships or connections that further your spiritual growth. This period brings for you socializing, romance and stability at the work place. Any unresolved educational matter or a deep relationship may create a rift in your life, take a softer approach in your interactions when comes to family related matters. Your actions and emotions are balanced as you bring more accuracy in your work area. Economy at home and management of business and work are important issues. Professional relations are satisfying and you have plenty of goodwill and friendships around you.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You tend to attract people with your conversation and wit. You may change your style of dressing to present a glamorous image. Your social life would be busy as you would be popular among your circle of friends. Domestic relationships and the home environment would be harmonious and peaceful by the sensitivity and care that you exhibit. Communication abilities will largely be applied to professional world ambitions where knowledge and education are pursued in order to enhance career prospects and financial matters. There may be a minor health ailment that bothers you as you need to give more attention to your health.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) An optimistic, but not necessarily a realistic attitude would take precedence. You may feel a vague restlessness and discontentment with life as it is. Excellent work opportunities for those working with overseas connections come up. There would be work related travel too. At times you feel fun loving, energetic, and willing to explore new ideas. Financial benefits may come your way this week. Stress may crop up at unexpected turns and this would require you to look at some lifestyle changes and even incorporate some techniques like exercise and meditation.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) Events take place in which you feel like you are moving forward and growing into a new phase of your life. You feel a sense of fulfillment as you move towards your long term goals. People in authority regard you favorably. You will be making new contacts through learning, communicating and mental pursuits. This indicates an intellectually stimulating time in which the exchange of ideas with others figures prominently. You would expand your social circle and make more contact with groups and friends. Health will take a turn for the better. You display great skills in sports, competitive exams, physical activities and this wins appreciation and upbringing of new opportunities.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) This is a phase of power and accomplishment. Actively seeking to expand, taking educated risks, and moving forward are highlighted. This is a week of opportunity, particularly in the material and business world, and opportunities need to be seized. It's generally not a time to find a new love partner, simply because the focus is on the material world and your place in the world. This is a problem-solving phase in which you can expect real, tangible results. Take action, plan ahead and make the most of opportunities. Some of you may find that your career is moving towards a more service-oriented direction. You have more faith in general regarding your career and the direction in which you are working. You need to develop a certain amount of self-confidence.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) You are more friendly, optimistic, and big-hearted than usual. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation from others. This is a sociable, and perhaps self-indulgent, time when the pursuit of pleasure is one of your high priorities. Communicative abilities will largely be applied to

further your professional and financial ambitions. Lifestyle changes augur well to create a positive outlook. Self development is the keynote during this period. Your social life would be busy as you would popular among friends and associates. This is a time when you free yourself of personal inhibitions that may have been part of your life in the past. Stick to regular exercise routine and regular pattern of nutritious diet.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) You may solidify a romantic relationship under this influence, or become involved with a sensible and like minded partner. You are likely to spend time in different places and work closely in new associations as you combine good luck and good management. Self-confidence and action are highlighted and you tend to instinctively know the right course of action to take in most situations. Stress may crop up at unexpected turns and this would require you to look at some lifestyle changes and even incorporate some techniques like exercise and meditation.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) It promises to be a busy, dynamic, and significant time in your life. There would be a turning point in your professional life and also in terms of personal growth. Your emotions run high towards family and mood swings are possible. There may be some kind of conflict in your life arising from a great urge to do something different. You need space and contact with others in order to feel content. Financial benefits may come on your way this week. You would impress people with your attitude and win their confidence and trust. You are blessed with intuition and foresight which lead you in the right direction. You are relaxed within and relate well with others at home and work.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You could find that you are more open and trusting with friends and lovers, and that you easily win family's trust. Healthy speculation is favored. Financial benefits may come your way. Some people fall in love under this influence of current planetary configuration. Certain elements of your social and financial life are stabilized, secured, and more reliable. More loving and appreciative relationships with your children may also figure. This is an especially spiritual time for you, this is a time when you renew your energy and consider what things are important to you.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) Authority figures, elders, parents, or influential people in your life tend to support and respect you. They are more willing to help you on your road to success. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. More freedom is likely to be experienced in your career. Integrity and honesty will get you the much awaited enhancement in image now. The more willing you are to put yourself in the limelight, the more positive the rewards. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities and family relations. You would be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) This planetary influence indicates favorable outcomes when it comes to legal affairs, education, exams and travel. You are more accepting and understanding your friends and loved ones. Contentedness in love is likely to figure and to attract positive circumstances and people into your life. You are bound to enjoy increased social opportunities as well as a boost in your personal popularity and magnetism. Friends and lovers are looking on you favorably. You would think more creatively and express yourself with more sensitivity, compassion, and warmth. This is an excellent time under which you bring more harmony and pleasant interactions to your relationships with loved ones.

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

"The Universe is under no obligation to make sense to you."

—Neil deGrasse Tyson

The Shillong Times

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Shrinking middle class

FINANCIAL experts and market analysts are citing a shrinking of the middle class segment that forms a third of India's population. This should be cause for serious concern and would effectively rubbish the Modi government's claim and citations of a fast-paced economic growth. When the nation grows, its people grow. When its economic strength rises or diminishes, the 'trickle down' effect reaches up to the last man in the bottom of the society. Fact on the ground is that there is no palpable improvement in the lives of the ordinary people in recent years. Wages are not increasing in most sectors – and this is not simply a post-pandemic phenomenon. The middle class that depends on wages is hard-pressed. Money circulation is reducing in markets. This is the anti-thesis of a growing economy. Worse, food inflation is "squeezing" middle class budgets while the poor survive on subsidized or free ration. The growth is artificial and limited to the upper 15 per cent of the society – comprising highly paid executives, governmental functionaries and the business class. The rest are forced to have a hand-to-mouth existence. "Urban consumption" of goods in the market has come down while the rural markets are less affected. The middle class in India's teeming cities – that forms more than one-third of the population – is bearing the brunt.

Significantly, the analysts note in media reports published this weekend that people in urban spaces have less money to spend and are moving away from branded products to cheaper goods. Rather than creating more employment opportunities and creating conditions for periodic upward revision of salaries, the government is adopting short-cuts. An example is the national rural employment guarantee scheme, MGNREGS, under which the government spends a whopping Rs 100,000 crore a year to provide work to villagers on minimal wages. This, complemented with free or subsidized ration, keeps the poor "voiceless." To interpret or project this as a sign of people's satisfaction or of national growth is far from true. The government is failing in industrialization. Investments are not picking up due to the red tape and massive corruption in the establishment. The Modi government has no panacea for such ills.

Analysts are clear when they say the "key macro-drivers" of the economy remain "unfavourable." Food inflation was cited above 8 per cent, and retail inflation has hit a 14-month high of 6.2 per cent. Every government has a way to claim it is a performing establishment and "doing the best." Claims are made about economic super power status for the nation in the near future. It is time the government stops bragging and takes a close look at ground realities. India's poor and ordinary masses that form three-fourths of the population deserve a better deal from their governments.

Letters to the Editor

Cherry Blossom 2024: A celebration to remember

Editor,

The recently concluded Cherry Blossom Festival at Madan Kurkalang, Bhoirym-bong, was a grand success, drawing an overwhelming number of visitors from various regions. The large turnout, however, led to overcrowding, emphasizing the need for a larger venue for future events. The food and beverages were reasonably priced, adding to the event's appeal. Kudos to the Tourism Department for organizing such a vibrant event that highlights the state's cultural richness.

However, significant traffic congestion marred the experience for many. A typically one-hour, 35-kilometer journey from the city stretched to four hours due to the influx of vehicles from all 12 districts and neighboring states. Improved planning, including advance information about travel times and preferred departure windows, could have helped manage the traffic better.

A lesser-known alternative route from NEIGRI-HMS via Mawkasiang, Tynring, and Mawpdang to Bhoirym-bong offers a faster travel time of approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes, de-

spite being slightly longer. This wider new road could be promoted as an option for future events to ease congestion.

Long-term solutions are also essential. Proposals such as expanding the Damsite-Mawiong road into a four-lane highway are impractical due to existing congestion. Instead, upgrading the New Mawlai Bypass to a four-lane road seems more feasible, as the area has fewer constructions. Constructing a flyover near ISBT could also be a game-changer, facilitating diagonal traffic flow without disrupting traffic toward Mawiong. Additionally, the stretch from Damsite to ISBT could be widened to four lanes, as it has fewer residential structures.

Addressing these infra-structural challenges will ensure smoother travel and better experiences for attendees at future events.

Yours etc.,

B Laithphlang,
Via email

Rising inequality in India

Editor,

The Indian rupee has fallen below 84 per-dollar. It is a matter of grave concern that the rupee has rapidly been going down against the dollar for the last ten years. While Rs 59.44 could get one dollar on May 15, 2014, now one

has to spend more than Rs 84 to get one dollar. The ruling party at the Centre needs to pay heed to inclusive growth. Only growth in GDP cannot improve a common man's lot in a country where inequality is widening by the day.

India has become the third highest country in the number of billionaires. But large sections of people in our country cannot afford to get education, health care and nutrition. The common people of our country are like the rupee, which is becoming cheaper every day in terms of their wealthy counterparts, who are like the dollar.

There is a strong connection between the rising inequality in India and the rising gap between the value of the Indian rupee and the US dollar. This year's Nobel laureates in economics have demonstrated that institutions that exploit the population do not generate growth or change for the better. No country can prosper by neglecting human development and inclusive growth.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Via email

Need to control prices of essential items

Editor,

There is a need to control the prices of the essential items otherwise it can create unrest in the country when

A study of ancient tribal history is always a challenge. Historians will always ask for evidence, and by that, they mean written sources. The common question is: do we have secondary data? Can we expect written records of the history of people whose language was put into writing only in the nineteenth century when the British set foot on these hills? Or, the most important question is, if we continue to rely only on written evidence to study tribal history, will we not limit ourselves only to the records and accounts about us made by outsiders?

The most important and critical question is: if the study of ancient tribal history is based only on written records, are we saying that the people have no history because there are no records? Or, because the outsiders have no records of their existence, does that mean they did not exist?

Our History is in Stories, Stones & Traditions:

This is the subject of my thesis. If we do not consider these elements as sources, then one might as well consider us non-existent prior to the arrival of the British. We may have some records about the people in the chronicles of the Ahoms, but these are mostly about the relationship they have with the Jayantias, the rest are records by the British. The stories in the tribal context are not just myths and traditions; they have elements of history in them. Monoliths are not just standing stones; they, too, have stories to tell and there is information even in some natural phenomena.

Our History in Stories

Recently, I suggested to a postgraduate student of history from a certain university, who is from the War Jaiitia region, to study for her master's dissertation the 'Thmi Thadkhiar', which we literally translate from the War Jaiitia dialect as, "the battle that tore or broke the fence." The young scholar abandoned the idea due to a lack of secondary data. If we are not in favor of studying the topic just because nobody has written about it, the question is: who will write our stories? Who will document our traditions if we do not do it ourselves?

For the uninitiated, it is just a story, a fable at that. But scratch a little below and you will find that it is more than a

mere bedtime story. The *elekas* in Jaiitia hills are divided as per region, and generally, the villages under the same *eleka* are contiguous to one another. The regional divide is also based on the dialect they speak and the festivals they celebrate. For example, the *raids* under Jowai *eleka* celebrate Behdieinkhlam, *eleka* under Raliang and Shangpung celebrate Pastieh Kopati, and the *raids* under *eleka* Nongtalang celebrate Ka Rong Khusi.

The only exception to this is the Jowai *eleka*, the area of which extends to Padu, Pamchadong, Amlarem, Twahudiah, and Jonguchen villages under the Amlarem block. How can one explain why the Daloi Jowai's control extends to these villages, which are dominated by War people who speak a different dialect than the people under Jowai *eleka* will not understand? They also celebrate different festivals and follow traditions distinct from those practiced by people under Jowai *eleka*. The villages are also not contiguous because, between Jowai *eleka* and these villages in War Jaiitia, there is Amwi-Sohmynting *eleka* which is another *eleka*.

If one were to study this unusual historical phenomenon by looking for written history, it would be like looking for the key to your house near the lamp post on the street because that is where the light is, even though you lost your keys inside the house. The answer to these questions lies in the story of *ka Thmi Thadkhiar*, which tells us about the rivalry between Padu and Pamchadong on one side and Nongtalang on the other. These villages were originally part of *eleka* Nongtalang, but because of the battle, they seceded from the Daloi Nongtalang and joined the Jowai *eleka*. That is also the reason the battle is called *Thmi Thadkhiar*—the battle that tore or broke the fence of the Daloi Nongtalang. These are facts that exist to this day. Do we still think this is a cock-and-bull story?

Our History in Traditions

To understand the *raid* formation, one should also know the stories of the first settlers of each respective *raid*. One would not understand the *raid* formation in Jowai if one does not know the story of the four sisters

known as *ka Bon*, *ka Tein*, *ka Wet*, and *ka Doh*, who were the first settlers of Jowai.

How do we know that the Challam were originally Mukhim and related to the Shabong? It is from the story of the origin of *raid* Jowai. A man from the Mukhim clan married one of four sisters and became Challam, and another man from the Thangkhiw clan, who had five sisters, married another sister.

The second part of the story tells us why the Thangkhiw are related to the Pariat, Shylla, Pde, and Blah, and how the five sisters were the progenitors of the San Syngkhong clan. Only when one understands these stories can one relate to why certain clans can occupy certain traditional offices in the *raid* Jowai and others cannot. This is true not only of the *raid* Jowai. In fact, to understand the traditions in all *raids*, one has to understand the stories of the first clans who settled in the area. Similarly, one will understand the different traditions under the *raid* only when one understands the stories behind the traditions.

Our History in Stones

On the way from Amlarem to Padu, near Pamchadong village, there is a collection of monoliths called 'Lymbrem'. The literal translation of *Lymbrem* is "a crowd/collection of stones," but these stones have a story to tell, and like most stories in the Khasi-Jaiitia tradition, this is also a tragic one.

It is the story of an old lady known as *ka Talang Basiah*, who married a man from the Dhar clan. One day, the entire family went to the field, except the youngest daughter who was due to deliver her baby, and the father stayed at home. The daughter delivered the baby and was too weak to do anything. As usual, on their way back home, the family bathed in the stream near the village. Upon reaching home, the family members were extremely happy because they were blessed with a new baby.

After they rested, they began their meal. It was a pleasant surprise to see a pot of meat near the fireplace. Without asking, they partook of the food, only to later discover the meat was, in fact, the placenta from the birth of the baby. They cried and

wailed in despair because eating human flesh is not only taboo but also the gravest tragedy—to consume part of one's own family.

The incident was 'ka Apot Sepsngi'—a tragedy that had never happened before – an incident so shocking it could not be accepted. They felt they could no longer look each other in the eye and decided to part ways. One daughter trekked down to Nongtalang, and her descendants became the Lyngdoh Talang of Nongtalang. Another moved upward to the plateau, halted at Skhentlang, then moved forward and later became the Lyngdoh Talang of *raid* Chymrang. A sister who moved eastward, crossing the Myntdu River, became Nongtdu, while another who went to the Satpator area became Buam. The youngest decided to stay and, despite the tragedy, chose to look after her father. She was called Nialang, which, in the War Jaiitia dialect, means "those who cried together." They cried together before they parted ways and moved in different directions. Are we saying these are all made-up stories? This account is translated from a booklet by Rev. Carlywell Lyngdoh.

The Importance of Non-Written Sources

I am not saying there are no problems in using traditional sources. There are plenty of them, like the parallel stories about *ka Lukha* and *ka Lunar* with *ka Umiam* and *ka Umngot*, and the stories of *u Marphalangi*, *u Bir Nongpoh*, and *u Rang Niantgi*. At times the stories may be considered as fairy tales and even sound absurd, but they also contain so much information that are historically important and factually correct.

The nearest cases in point are the stories of our heroes. The truth is, if we rely only on written sources, then *u Tiro Singh*, *u Kiang Nangbah*, *u Pa Togan Sangma*, *u Kiri Daloi*, and *u Mon Bhut* would all have been labeled trouble-makers, if not criminals and murderers. But it is through oral narratives that we know they were, in fact, heroes who fought for our freedoms.

Our history is not just written in books and journals; it is etched in stones, woven into traditions, and narrated in stories. The need of the hour for the scholar is to sift through the stories and traditions, separating fact from fiction.

An escape and an "attack" later, conditions at NEHU remain tense

By Arpita Saikia

"When cherry blossoms paint the campus pink, NEHU fights to RISE UP AND BUILD"

The NEHU protest has now entered its 12th day. The tents in front of the Vice Chancellor's office still stand tall, much like their determined occupants. Their faces, though shrunken from exhaustion, continue to inspire onlookers, as they did the writer of this piece. Much has unfolded in the past few days: the VC's residence was vandalized; certain news portals took full advantage, twisting and sensationalizing the story; and people on campus were left wondering how such an incident could occur, especially given the heavy security around the VC's residence even on regular days. The whispers about his "flight" from campus had barely settled when a surprising piece of news surfaced: he appointed two Pro-VCs for the Shillong and Tura campuses—not from his office, but from an "undisclosed" location. Instead of calming the crisis, this move only intensified it, infuriating both students and faculty alike. And in his most recent move, he applied for leave from November 17, resulting in the appointment of Prof. Saha as the acting VC. These moves by the

University, one who does not turn a blind eye to the adversities.

A few words on NEHUSU and the genesis of the protest

The protest led by the NEHUSU and KSU NEHU Unit is unprecedented in the history of the University. They have exhibited remarkable courage and bravery, especially in initiating an indefinite hunger strike. Their non-violent approach emphasizes their willingness to respect the rules while standing firm on their demand of bringing the much needed changes for the betterment of the institution.

One of the key efforts of the present NEHUSU has been to bridge the gap between the Union and student community. It is evident from their meetings held on November 4, with the hostel prefects where they briefed them on the situation as well as from the speech of Tonho Kharsati, the GS of NEHUSU on the November 5; to the gatherings of the students in front of the Central library where he highlighted the issues and challenges that the University faces. They had a clear goal: to engage in a meaningful dialogue with Prof. Prabha Shankar Shukla. With the effort proving futile



Vice Chancellor shed light on several troubling aspects of the University. First and foremost, it has been mentioned repeatedly how the Vice Chancellor is frequently absent from campus for long periods, to the point that important discussions are delayed to fit his schedule. This action serves as living proof of how he manages—or mismanages—the campus affairs by deliberately not being there.

It appears that he continues to disregard the students' concerns, showing indifference to the situation, while exercising his power, despite the open disapproval of both NEHUSU and NEHUTA, who have expressed a complete lack of trust in his leadership.

Prof Sungoh, appointed as Pro-VC for the Shillong campus, revealed that she received her appointment notice via WhatsApp— an approach that is extremely unprofessional. The notification was signed by one Devendra Kumar Biswal, Assistant Registrar (Planning, I/C), whose appointment to a professorship from a non-teaching role is currently under intense scrutiny. This raises serious concerns about the transparency and integrity of administrative processes at NEHU. Allowing such a person to sign an important notification like that of Pro VC appointment is a mockery of the system and undermines its credibility. Both the Pro VCs have declined the posts.

The situation at NEHU shows no signs of improving. Neither students nor faculty are willing to compromise on their demands. The Vice Chancellor has had numerous opportunities to engage with the stakeholders, but it is now too late. Both students and faculty have lost their trust in his leadership, which was further cemented by his departure from campus. NEHU is craving for a leadership that's rooted here, a VC whose heart, mind and soul are dedicated to the

the protest was escalated with the declaration of an indefinite hunger strike, demanding the removal of Prof. Shukla from his position of the Vice Chancellor due to his inaction.

Throughout this period the NEHUSU has made efforts to keep the student community informed. They have also actively sought individual grievances through Google forms, ensuring that the voices of the students are heard.

While it is true that NEHUSU's strategy may not be free of flaws, it is important to consider the broader context. A significant majority of the student body has shown solidarity, while a smaller group has either remained indifferent or found it easier to critique from the comfort of their rooms. However this group remains a minority and should not overshadow the efforts of those leading the protest. It is also crucial to remember that the members of NEHUSU and KSU NEHU Unit are students themselves, and they are also gaining experiences in leadership and learning along the way. This protest is about bringing positive changes in the University and their actions reflect their desire to make a difference despite possible imperfections.

As I write, another fasting student is struggling in the health center with complications. It is worth noting that the Governor is yet to visit the protesting students. NEHU is in turmoil. Classes have been disrupted, and the fact that students are forced to sacrifice their health and well-being in order to demand a better campus is nothing short of dystopian. As a student of NEHU, I find myself torn between my academic responsibilities and the moral and ethical duties. But again what is education if it is devoid of morality and ethics?

(The writer is Research Scholar Department of History NEHU)

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.

"He who has a why to live can
bear almost any how."

— Friedrich Nietzsche

The Shillong Times

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VIP Cult and Complacent Citizens

THE death of a young man at the prime of his life allegedly because the two-wheeler he was driving along with a lady pillion was rammed by a VIP cavalcade has raised the hackles of all who read or watched the news. A pall of gloom overshadowed the Cherry Blossom event at Ri Bhoi where celebrity performers apparently set the stage on fire. Large sections of the audience present at the rock show were however unaware of the tragedy until they saw the news. The media also reported another death at the bridge near Dwar U Ksuid the same day and the youth was apparently from Sohra. The question therefore is whether Meghalaya is ready for such a mega event where getting into the venue was in itself a huge exercise in body movement with vehicles being parked a kilometer away or further from the concert venue. While the organisers – the Government and event manager/s are well-intentioned, there is need for expert views on whether a crowd of that magnitude could be contained in what appears to be a constricted space. And in all of this, one important aspect is being hotly debated currently which is the VIP right of way. Why should VIPs enjoy the right of way to an entertainment event? Surely there was no emergency for them to reach the venue since they were not conducting any government business.

While Tourism Minister, Paul Lyngdoh whose security convoy allegedly rammed down the two-wheeler has denied the allegations, an enquiry is called for since a life was lost. Human life is precious and this incident cannot be brushed aside. Besides, there is such a thing as planning for a journey and allowing buffer time for traffic. A VIP cannot expect to take less time than the common citizen to reach a destination and therefore start late for an event with the knowledge that he/she can push through heavy traffic jams. This is inconsiderate, rude and downright arrogant.

Within Shillong city limits the buzzing of VIP siren breaks the silence every now and again. This is evident particularly around the Secretariat area where VIPs zip by every minute. Do they really need their cavalcade of security personnel to push through the slow-moving traffic? No, they don't! The siren is an ominous reminder that a VIP has the right of way even if that means bulldozing through traffic jams. Interestingly, that same VIP becomes a common citizen and professes to be a servant of the people once every five years before being elected. There are other VIPs too but their movements are restricted to certain timings. They don't need to move around to attend functions the way politicians do. Hence they are inobtrusive. The question for citizens to ponder therefore is if they will continue to remain complacent sufferers or fight for their right to end the VIP cult. Is this incident going to result in a citizens' movement against the VIP culture? If not now, then when?

Race Relations in Shillong

— A brief survey

By Avner Pariat

When one looks at the relative prosperity of the Khasi people (relative to the national average) over the past 50 years, it is truly remarkable. Over the past century, the Khasis have managed to carve a special niche for themselves not just in India but internationally too. How many Indigenous Communities can boast of having such pre-eminence? Are the Iroquois or Apache or Aina dominant like we are? Is there a capital city anywhere in the world which has such a vibrant society of Indigenous people? There may be a handful but Shillong surely stands apart. Our rise as a community is a testament to the vision and perseverance of our forerunners. We leveraged our strengths in the turbulent political age of the early 20th century and have reaped the harvest of that success ever since.

That said, there has always been a dark side to this shiny exterior. There were always rumblings underneath the surface. From the very beginnings of our political awakening and mobilization there was a growing discordance between Khasis and non-Khasis, particularly non-tribals. This might have its origins in the mutual distrust that the communities had for one another especially in the ancient tussle for resources, land and assets. But that is not unusual.

Perhaps the tensions escalated when the British created Shillong. Yes, Shillong was a British creation despite what our Khasi uber right wingers want to believe. The creation of Shillong must be seen as standard operating procedure in their city planning without the nostalgia hiding it. Similarly, for every other city built from scratch, immigration was a prerequisite. Hence the British brought in immigrants and encouraged immigration into Shillong. Many Khasis might find that hard to digest nowadays but that is the objective truth. One can safely assume that this did not sit well with a lot of Khasis even at the time. I recall reading a rather revealing essay penned by my granduncle, SJ Duncan, in a souvenir celebrating 100 years of Shillong. He wrote about how as a child he had witnessed tribal farmers being forced to dump their wares because a non-tribal businessman would not agree to their prices. SJ Duncan was born in 1897! They felt it was an insult to take a low offer and instead threw their vegetables angrily into the gutter. So, the rumblings amongst the communities were definitely there. Add to this the propensity of immigrants to not engage and interact with the host community and you can see where this was headed towards.

Here I would like to compare this particular story of tribal and non-tribal conflict with that which was possibly the norm prior to the arrival of the British. As the NEHU historian Binayak Dutta has observed in his paper "Predicament of a Partitioned Homeland", most times the sites of transgression between Khasis and other groups were at the borders demarcating their's and British held territories. Hence the violence of the raids carried out against the British were usually directed at the villages along these borders and most targets were – in all probability – non-tribals.

This "ideal situation" however, changed completely when

the Jaintia and then the Khasi kingdoms were conquered and brought directly under British dominion. Suddenly the non-tribal was no longer a distant target in terms of physical proximity nor even in imagination; he was no longer at the borderlands but became part of our lives within the civil stations of Cherrapunji, Jowai and eventually, Shillong. And despite the desire to expel the outsiders, British guns and swords kept the people in check. With time, it must have dawned on the local Khasi activists and intellectuals that a new type of non-tribal was now imminent. This was no longer the villager nor farmer they encountered along the borderlands. The new settlers had skills that made them invaluable to the 'new lords of the land.' Skills that were part and parcel of a new capitalist and imperialist system. These skills involved jobs like clerical and peon services, food and civil supplies, construction, urban maintenance and of course, to ensure everything ran smoothly – through the threat of violence. Hence the system also created a number of military and paramilitary jobs. If one looks at the list of jobs one would notice a pattern. Each job type might be seen as compartments for particular ethnicities or communities to serve in under British rule.

The history of Shillong is viewed in this manner because for the British, it was the standard operating procedure for their settlements. For peons and clerks they needed Assamese and Bengalis; for food supplies and logistical support the Marwaris and Sindhis; for urban maintenance, Mazhabi Sikhs. For military and paramilitary support? Nepalis. Actually, Shillong residential localities reveal this sharp compartmentalization. Marwaris, Sindhis lived closer to the bazzars which were their sites of interests, Bengalis resided closer to the court, jail and sites of government, Mazhabi Sikhs were accommodated between Iewduh and Police Bazar. Till date a majority of Nepalis reside close to military and paramilitary settlements. Now where did the Khasi fit into this new scheme of things and more importantly how did he feel? For the first 50 years or so of its existence as a settlement, precious little autonomy was given to the people of Shillong (tribal or non-tribal) but the Government of India Act 1919 changed all that. A great Khasi awakening at that time ignited by modern educational systems instituted by the British ignited the spark the aspirations of political self-determination which had been rumbling for a long time. The Khasi now felt that he could become master of his own domain, again through the instruments of politics.

The reforms of 1919 brought Indigenous voices upfront and the resounding chorus was for economic and social mobility. The way ahead was clear. The educational system set up by the British gave Khasis the same advantages granted to the Bengalis and Assamese. As earlier mentioned, clerical work was crucial to the functioning of the Imperialist Capitalist system and it was in this field that the Khasi middle class's fortune were forged. It

was also the source of much contention. The desire for "Kam Sorkar" (government jobs) was the seed for the Khasi's liberation from the drudgery of back-breaking labour and the hardships of farm work but it would also lead to conflict with those who had preceded us in those positions. It was this desire for a better and more comfortable life that would lead to direct conflict with the Bengalis and Assamese who had earlier dominated government offices.

Previously, Khasi participation in government was limited to minor roles such as caterers and meal providers in the numerous offices and departments in Shillong as narrated in Dienjat Ki Longshuwa by Joseph Bacchiarello. The story is from the early 20th century and was written by an Italian Catholic priest who went on to help establish Khasi literature! On a side-note, I have to remark how multicultural and diverse the urban landscape of Shillong has always been. This era also saw the meteoric rise of Joy Mohon also known as JIM Nichols Roy. Now many people might have their grouses against Bah Joy Mohan but when one reads his memoirs, edited by Rev O L Snaitang, the man was a nationalist and an "integrationist." He might be seen as a bulwark (albeit temporary) against the otherwise destructive forces of parochialism and communalism which existed back then. Bah Joy Mohan was believed in empowering tribal groups in the NER but he did not believe that empowerment should come at the cost of others. He declared his love for his own people in his writings but nowhere did he state that he hated non-tribals. That is the difference between his brand of politics and the contemporary situation we find ourselves in.

So the Khasis were now on the ascendancy. Once the iota of autonomy was granted historical records state that people were galvanised by the possibilities of self-determination. Politicians like JIM Nichols Roy, AS Khongphai Macdonald Khar-kongor (sometimes mentioned as Macdonald Kongor in SK Chaube's Hill Politics in North-east India but not in the 1999 edition) rushed to grab this golden opportunity. Khar-kongor was a very interesting figure. He was pivotal in establishing the Congress party in Shillong after Subhash Chandra Bose's 1938 visit. Bose was then President of the INC and had urged Khar-kongor to galvanise the party within Shillong city. For nearly a decade, Khar-kongor toiled away for the INC only to have his well-earned ticket given to JIM Nichols Roy in the Provincial elections of 1945-46! This angered him but he was convinced that he would succeed in mobilising voters due to his years of work at the grassroots level. Alas Khar-kongor secured very few votes. He blamed the Bengalis for his defeat. He had thought they would support him as he had been active with and known to them. He thought they would vote for him based on his personality and not party affiliations. Thereafter he wrote a now forgotten but important pamphlet on why the tribals (not just Khasis) needed their own (hill) state; A Case of the Hill

Tribes of the North East Frontier of India (June 1946).

Interestingly the genesis of this now well-known demand for "a hills' state" which was effectively used by multiple parties and individuals in subsequent years emerged out of one man's personal disappointment. One can dismiss this narrative as a mere anecdote but it illustrates how powerful certain personal narratives are in shaping collective political reality over time. We must now retrieve the amber from the past few decades. It will be a painful but crucial task.

To politically mobilize and galvanize populist sentiment (a situation I have become intimately acquainted with!) an over-simplified narrative is sold to the people. Eventually the quest for self-determination led the masses to consider the Bengalis and the Assamese as rivals that needed to be countered and removed from the discourse. These two groups prevented the Khasi from becoming a Middle Class being and that was unacceptable! This was perhaps a major underlying reason d'être for conflicts between the Khasis and different groups.

Presumably this was not purely a case of "politics as an end in itself" but as a means to and end and that end was for social and economic uplift comparable to anything a non-tribal might attain. Instead of framing these legitimate desires for social mobility and self-determination as something that could be achieved over time and with patience, many politicians and activists of the late 1970s and 80s sought to create bogymen instead and stoked violence in the state.

The Bangladesh Liberation War and its subsequent refugee crisis accelerated the process but by then this narrative had found a strong footing within Khasi society 50 years earlier. According to Chaube, after the 1936-37 Indian provincial elections, when a coalition government was formed with Mohammed Saadullah as leader and JIM Nichols Roy as a minister – a minor Khasi Bengali riot broke out. What triggered this is unsure as it appeared that both sides had got what they wanted for their own respective camps. Perhaps back-grounding the religious angle might be useful to understand this rather simplistic assertion of SK Chaube. Over the decades however, especially after the death of JIM Nichols Roy, the fear of being outmaneuvered by non-tribals was surely insignificant compared to the fear of being overwhelmed, by which I mean the refugee crisis of two events – Partition and the War of Bangladesh Independence. Suddenly the threat must have seemed to the average Khasi as no longer merely political but downright existential! This political manipulation started back then continues to exacerbate ethnic divisions. Leaders and parties have used ethnic identities to maintain control, sometimes stoking ethnic divisions to distract the public from the real economic issues and to prevent a unified opposition to nepotism and kleptocracy. Perhaps the easiest group that can be co-opted in this project is the middle-class, as they are by definition in the middle – between rich and poor. They have the most to lose out of any group and the most fear to extract.

When privilege runs over public rights

By Rayner Kharkrang

The tragic road accident on Friday near the ICAR complex in Meghalaya that claimed the life of Huddersfield Rymbui and left another critically injured has once again put the spotlight on the troubling VIP culture that prioritizes the convenience of a few over the safety and dignity of the many. As the victims were en route to the Cherry Blossom Festival, their motorcycle was struck by a police escort vehicle leading a VIP convoy. The incident not only caused immense grief but also sparked public outrage over the reckless and arbitrary nature of VIP convoys in our state.

While the necessity of providing security arrangements to VIPs is acknowledged, it is imperative to stress that citizens are entitled to fundamental rights that must not be infringed upon by such arrangements. The right to undisturbed travel, the right to dignity, right to life and the right to safety are sacrosanct and cannot be undermined to accommodate the privileges of a selected few. Moreover, citizens deserve equal treatment under the law, irrespective of whether they are elected ministers or ordinary individuals.

This troubling trend also goes against the ethos enshrined in Article 38 of the Indian Constitution. Article 38 directs the state to eliminate inequalities in status, income, and opportunities among individuals. However, the glaring disparity between the privileges extended to VIPs and the plight of ordinary citizens on the roads reflect a blatant disregard for this principle. The unchecked VIP culture, which prioritizes the comfort of a few at the cost of public safety and dignity, is in stark violation of the Directive Principles of State Policy that seek to promote social justice and equality.

That unfortunately, it is pertinent to note that this is not the first time, such an incident has occurred. Instances of Meghalaya Police escort vehicles causing harm have been a recurring issue in the past. In January 2022, the driver of the then Meghalaya Home Minister's escort car was suspended following a similar accident. The accident occurred in the Khera area, where a police vehicle escorting the Home Minister's car-cade at the tail collided with a motorcycle coming from the opposite direction. The crash killed the rider on the spot and left the pillion rider seriously injured.

The circumstances of this particular incident also raise pertinent questions. Was the minister in the convoy on Friday traveling to an urgent or unavoidable engagement? If not, why was such reckless speed and blaring sirens justified? Such practices reflect a blatant abuse of power, eroding public trust in governance. It is unacceptable that the ordinary citizen should live in fear of

being shoved off the road or subjected to indignity due to the overzealous enforcement of VIP travel protocols.

According to Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad Sangma, 103 VIPs in the state are provided security under categories outlined in the Ministry of Home Affairs' "Yellow Book." This includes Z+, Z, Y, and X categories, with protections ranging from high-level armed escorts to minimal cover. While security classifications are necessary for those genuinely under threat, the sheer number of protected individuals in a state as small as Meghalaya raises questions about the equitable allocation of resources and priorities. With 103 VIPs crisscrossing the state under heavy escort, the odds of collisions and similar incidents are distressingly high if such convoys continue to operate with impunity and disregard for public safety.

Possible solution
It is time for the state to reassess its approach to VIP security. There must be a balance between safeguarding individuals who genuinely require protection and ensuring the rights and safety of the public are not compromised. Strict enforcement of convoy protocols, enhanced driver training, and greater accountability for reckless actions by escort vehicles are non-negotiable. Public safety must take precedence over the optics of power.

To address the issue effectively, the government must adopt a multi-pronged approach to balance VIP security with public safety. This includes mandating specialized training for drivers of escort vehicles to ensure they adhere to traffic regulations and prioritize safety. Stricter enforcement of convoy protocols, such as limiting the size of convoys, can minimize disruption to public movement. Accountability measures, like penalties for reckless driving and Departmental Proceedings/Inquiries into incidents, should be robustly implemented. Additionally, a re-evaluation of the necessity for VIP convoys for non-critical engagements could reduce their frequency, thereby mitigating public inconvenience and safety risks. Such measures would align governance practices with constitutional principles, ensuring that public welfare is prioritized over the privileges of a select few.

The untimely death of Huddersfield Rymbui is a wake-up call. If the state fails to act now, it risks perpetuating a culture where the lives and dignity of its citizens are secondary to the privileges of a few. This is not merely an issue of governance; it is a matter of justice and humanity.

(The writer is a practicing lawyer at various judicial fora in the North East and can be reached at raynerdkhar88@gmail.com for comments).

Letters to the Editor

The VVIP Syndrome: A Drastic Cure Eludes

Editor,
During the height of armed insurgency in Meghalaya, former Chief Ministers B.B. Lyngdoh, E.K. Mawlong, and F.A. Khonglam were not provided with heavy security cover. A simple pilot and an escort vehicle were sufficient to take them to any destination, and there was no fear even when they traveled with a convoy of three vehicles.

However, during Mukul Sangma's tenure as Chief Minister, there was a drastic increase in security measures. The number of vehicles accompanying Sangma grew significantly, and he had a justification for this expanded security: the threat posed by the GNLA and other militant groups, who were heavily armed. In earlier times, Cabinet Min-

isters were not provided the privilege of travelling with a pilot or escort vehicle, except when travelling outside the state capital, and even then, it was rare.

Over the years, however, thanks to the precedent set by Mukul Sangma, such extensive security has been extended to almost everyone, leading to road accidents, including fatalities of motorists and pedestrians. It is shameful that lives are lost simply because someone else is in a rush to reach their destination. The VVIP Syndrome infuriates every citizen, and it is entirely reasonable for the public to be angry.

The outrage against the VVIP Syndrome resurfaced on November 15 after Huddersfield Rymbui, a young man, lost his life along the Shillong bypass road when he was allegedly struck by a police vehicle escorting State Tourism Minister Paul Lyngdoh. The minister's convoy was headed to Madan Kurkalang, Bhoirymbong, the venue for the Cherry

Blossom Festival. To date, there has been no apology or statement from the state government regarding this tragic incident. The government likely believes, as it often does with such issues, that it will soon fade from public memory. Sadly, they may be right, as citizens tend to forget. We will remember Huddersfield Rymbui only when another life is lost due to the VVIP Syndrome. Perhaps Huddersfield's demise will be in vain, given people's short-lived memory. It will only be left to his family, friends, and loved ones to mourn his passing.

A life was lost, but the VVIPs won't care. They will continue to enjoy their paraphernalia without consequence. It is up to the people to demand change, to make every VVIP—known or unknown—think twice before using or misusing pilot and escort vehicles. VVIPs should be held accountable for their actions. Enough is enough.

In solidarity with Huddersfield Rymbui's family,

and with all citizens who want the VVIP Syndrome to be put to an end once and for all, it is crucial that we continue to raise our voices. No life should be sacrificed at the altar of privilege and entitlement. The demand for accountability must echo loud and clear, not just for Huddersfield, but for all who suffer because of the reckless misuse of power. Only by standing together can we hope to bring about a change that values the lives of ordinary citizens over the comforts of the privileged few.

May Huddersfield's soul rest in eternal peace.

Yours etc.,
R. Pde,
Shillong – 1

Time - The greatest revealer

Editor,
Just days after the Voice of the People Party (VPP)

revealed the names of candidates for the ensuing Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Councils polls, voices of dissent were raised. Well, it is normal for dissenting voices to rise in any "democratic" party. But to the party's embarrassment, its vocal legislator from North Shillong, Adelbert Nongrum, didn't mince words while expressing his displeasure over the candidates chosen by the party to contest from Jaiaw and Mawkhah-Pynthorunkhrak constituencies. Being a two-time legislator and member of the District Council, Bah Adelbert was apparently sidelined by the party's election committee. Well, most were not surprised. They were only waiting for this moment to arrive. And time is the greatest revealer.

The formation of the VPP in 2021 was a reminder of the launch of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) by so-called anti-corruption crusader Arvind Kejriwal in

2012. Now, just 12 years into politics, no political party has seen more leaders languish in prison over corruption charges than AAP. The party, which was an offspring of one of the biggest anti-corruption movements in the country, had to witness its leaders spending time in prison over corruption cases. It's perhaps the greatest irony! Well, the cases could be politically motivated. But until the final judgement arrives, we are forced to presume that AAP did indulge in corrupt activities, not forgetting the media reports on Kejriwal's lavish home, which sent shockwaves across the country. From an Aam to a Khaas Aadmi... the stunning somersault of Kejriwal.

Coming back to the VPP, it was seen as a political renaissance. Its debut in the Meghalaya Assembly with four legislators was widely applauded. Since then, it has gained traction at the cost of other established

political parties. We may not agree with everything the VPP says or does, but it has become a force to reckon with. In the Lok Sabha polls, the party secured a decisive mandate – an astonishing outcome for the other contestants, and it will be remembered for a long time to come.

The party's win bolstered its confidence for the District Council polls. From the list of candidates, it was clear that the party banked on new and young faces. The tried and tested were discarded, except for one of the constituencies in Jowai, where a known party hopper was given the ticket. But as winning is the only criterion for any political party when selecting its candidates, perhaps the ardent VPP fans will forgive the party's choice for this constituency.

The rift in the VPP may die a natural death in the days to come before it blows out of control. However, it has indicated that, contrary

to the tall claims of the VPP, not everyone is actually equal in the party, and some may be more equal than others. As a party that indulges in pontification, it has to look within rather than outward. Megalomania is now a keystone in any political party. The VPP, strangely, is indulging in a megalomaniac culture, where anyone who questions its leadership or the party is branded as "anti" this or "anti" that. For a young party with many old faces, it is dangerous to tread the path of megalomania. However, megalomaniacs and narcissists will never hear the voice of the people, as they are too obsessed with themselves. Well, time is the greatest revealer.

Yours etc.,
Lang Lyngdoh,
Shillong – 1

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

"Nearly everything you do is of no importance, but it is important that you do it."
— Mahatma Gandhi

The Shillong Times

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Exit results today

THE battle of all battles in the recent round of assembly polls in various states is waged in Maharashtra, where the Mahayuti alliance led by the BJP is pitted against the Maha Vikas Aghadi consisting of the Congress-NCP(Pawar)-Shiv Sena(Uddhav) parties. With polling taking place today in all the 288 constituencies, both sides are hopeful of a win. All eyes are on exit poll results, also involving Jharkhand, which could be expected shortly after the end of the polling.

The elections in Maharashtra are crucial for both the BJP and the Congress. The Congress narrowly missed the bus in Haryana, where the BJP retained power even as exit polls predicted a Congress win. If the Congress (alliance) loses the larger state of Maharashtra, the effect will be most demoralizing to the grand old party. If the ruling alliance involving the BJP and the rebel Shiv Sena - NCP factions retains power, it will be a reinforcement of the BJP clout in Maharashtra, where it had emerged the single largest party in the last assembly polls too. A win for the BJP will reinforce the relevance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi too, as votes were sought by the BJP mainly on the strength of his public appeal, apart from regional issues. The clout of the rebel Shiv Sena led by chief minister Eknath Shinde, who had broken away from the parent party two years ago to side with the BJP, will also be put to test. Equally important is the tally for the Shiv Sena (Uddhav faction), as this is the first time the party is facing a major electoral test after the split. NCP leader Sharad Pawar's clout too will be under test after his nephew Ajit Pawar split the party and joined hands with the BJP and Shinde to run the present government.

The appeal of the regional leaders is significant in Maharashtra. Pawar, the old warhorse, still keeps his powder dry by virtue of his immense hold over the Marathas in western Maharashtra. Whether his nephew managed to wean away a major section of the NCP is a big question while Sharad Pawar's daughter Supriya Sule is seeking to establish her clout in the parent party. NCP has the tag of a hugely corrupt political establishment, but regional support for elder Pawar remained strong. During the campaign, the BJP and PM Modi faced charges of "favouritism" to Gujarat at the expense of Maharashtra, in terms of faster economic development at the behest of the central government. The BJP claims PM Modi has managed to win OBC support for the Mahayuti alliance while the chief minister sought votes by raising the slogan of Mahji Ladki Bahin to woo women voters. A division in the Shiv Sena votes this time might be an added advantage to the BJP.

Letters to the Editor

Condemnation of the reckless police escort & call for justice for Huddersfield Rymbui

Editor,
I, write to express my deepest condemnation regarding the tragic death of our beloved colleague and friend, Huddersfield Rymbui, on November 15, 2024. His untimely passing is not just a personal loss for us, but a tragedy that has shaken the entire community.

It is with great sorrow and frustration that we point out the reckless actions surrounding this incident, which were directly linked to the so-called VIP culture. The police escort assigned to the Tourism Minister, as part of the VIP protocol, was conducted in an irresponsible manner and led to the fatal accident that claimed the life of our dear friend. We cannot allow this culture of privilege to continue at the cost of innocent lives.

I strongly condemn the reckless handling of this police escort, and I believe that such incidents should not be tolerated under any circumstances. The tragic loss of Huddersfield Rymbui highlights a systemic issue that demands urgent attention: the dangerous, unchecked nature of VIP movements and their negative impact on public safety. This must end, and I call on the government to take immediate steps to prevent such incidents in the future.

As the founder of the West Jaintia Hills District Adventure Sports and Mountaineering Club, I demand justice for our brother. We stand united in our grief and our call for accountability. The government must act swiftly to ensure that the reckless VIP culture, which has cost us so much, is abolished, and that no more lives are lost because of it.

We say a firm no to the VIP culture that endangers the lives of ordinary citizens, and we urge the authorities to ensure that this never happens again. Our thoughts are with Huddersfield's family, and we stand together in demanding justice.

Yours etc.,
Sambor Surong
Founder,
West Jaintia Hills District
Adventure Sports and
Mountaineering Club
Via email

NEHU crisis: Addressing assumptions

Editor,
Apropos of the article by Deepak Kumar Shahi titled, "The Tenure of Turmoil" (ST Nove 12, 2024), while I commend Mr Shahi for presenting facts in the sections "The Appointment" and "The Recruitment", I find that the information in the section "The Protest" is based on assumptions, which I believe unfairly, undermines the efforts of those leading the protest.

Firstly, Mr Shahi claims that the protest was, "orchestrated by NEHUTA to say the least." There is no evidence to support this assertion. He provides no substantial proof but continues to suggest that NEHUSU is under the control of NEHUTA, a claim not supported by facts.

Second, he argues that the involvement of NEHUSU

in the protest is "haphazard, unplanned and vague". The word "involvement" is inappropriate as NEHUSU is leading the protest. Is Mr. Shahi implying that NEHUSU is merely a figurehead while someone else is running the protest? I also find it unfair to describe the protest as "haphazard" when the possibility of such an event was clearly communicated through a meeting with the hostel prefects on November 4.

Third, Mr Shahi argues that NEHUSU did not protest the hostel fee hike. However, after speaking with NEHUSU representatives I learned that the issue was raised as early as 2022 during the tenure of the then NEHUSU and was approved by the Academic Council in 2023. Initially it applied to only the new students but later it was extended to all students. The current NEHUSU brought up the issue again but its repeated attempts to resolve the matter with the DSW remained unsuccessful. Hence the focus was shifted to improving the hostel conditions. Its continued sub-standard condition forms another point of contention.

Mr. Shahi points to lack of communication and

similarity that runs across all these countries which they share with Meghalaya – the populations of these regions are predominantly Christian. This begs whether it is not the matrilineal culture but it was the introduction of Christianity (a highly patriarchal religion) which created the conditions for broken families subsequently leading to the phenomenon of single parenthood. Some argue that correlation does not equal causation, meaning that just because all regions with high rates of single parenthood are predominantly Christian, it doesn't mean Christianity is the cause. But those who know a little of statistics will also know that correlation is the first condition for establishing causation. Let us examine who is to be blamed for the broken families in our state, the matrilineal customs or Christianity.

Although not heard anywhere, the original marital customs that must have been in vogue among the Khasi were like the concept of 'walking marriage' among the Mosuo people of Southern China. The husband or partner, treated as a guest by the woman's family, only comes at night and returns to his maternal home at daybreak. PRT Gurdon corroborated the existence of this custom in his 1914 book 'the Khasis'. In the 'Marriage' section, he described that among the Synteng (another name for the Pnar), the husband visits his mother-in-law's house only after dark. While there, he does not "eat, smoke, or even partake of betel-nut there... because none of his earnings go to support this house, therefore it is not etiquette for him to partake of food or other refreshment there." Jowai residents, specifically the Synteng/Pnar, reported this, claiming their niam (religious ceremonies) were purer than those of other Khasis. They believed their practices were closer to ancient traditions. That the matrilineal Musou of China and Minangkabau of Indonesia have similar customs, husbands treated as guests in their mother-in-law's house and not a permanent resident proves that the information reported in the book was indeed accurate. The culture of 'walking marriages' was indeed the most pure form of matrilineal customs.

In this original form of matrilineal custom, there is no possibility of a broken family leading to single parenthood because a single parent always made up the family. The mother, assisted by her brothers, mother, and grandmother, raises the child. Critics often argue that fathers play a very limited role in this arrangement, and they are only seen as "breeding bulls." But what people downplay is the role of a Khasi man towards his sister's children because they belong to the same kur rather than his own, who belong to his wife's kur. Therefore, which role, uncle or father, is considered more important depends on which culture, Khasi or Middle Eastern Christian, is prioritized.

In a Middle Eastern (Semitic) Christian worldview—encompassing cultures such as those of the Jews and Arabs—marriage, blood, or adoption defines family. Unlike the original Khasi culture, where husbands and wives do not live together, a Middle Eastern Christian worldview demands married couples to remain together. This then creates the condition for domestic strife. Khasi men who criticise matrilineal customs often complain that after marriage, they must move to their wives' homes, where they often face disrespect, particularly from their mothers-in-law. However, no one acknowledges that women often face similar treatment when they move to their husband's house. So why is a woman's mistreatment not given the same importance as that of men? Does this again not show the influence of a patriarchal Christianity according to which a wife submits to her husband who has authority over her? So, it is more of a complaint from men who view Christianity as more important than Khasi customs.

Another big problem that has plagued not just our society but also many others throughout the world is that of domestic violence against women. Such a situation would not arise in traditional Khasi society because the husband and wife are not staying together. So, the 'misunderstanding' that leads to the man assaulting the woman actually emerges from a patriarchal system which treats one gender as more superior to the other. A woman being the one who is dependent on the husband is the one who usually suffers from the violence. However, in a matrilineal society mothers and uncles share the responsibility of raising children and managing the household in a matrilineal society, resulting in equal treatment. Also, since they are living in the same house, they are not strangers who have become part of the family but have always been family; unlike in a patrilineal system where a woman leaves her house to come and stay with her husband,

do. For instance, one female hostel had to seek help from NEHUSU to address a mentally and physically inhospitable environment. It led to a letter being sent to both the VC and DSW. Similarly, a department sought funding for journal publication and approached the VC for the same which was denied. These are just a few examples that highlight the extent of power the VC holds in NEHU and his reluctance to offer assistance. A failed leadership creates chaos and this is precisely the situation NEHU is currently facing. NEHUSU's decision to take a stand is hence commendable despite any possible flaws. No movement is flawless. As students they are also navigating a complex system. It is not uncommon for movements like these to attract unfair criticism. However, this should not overshadow the genuine efforts of NEHUSU.

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

Yours etc.,
Arpita Saikia, NEHU,
Via email

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

While it is true that not all issues require the Vice Chancellor's attention, many

Broken families: Unveiling the role of patrilineal and matrilineal systems

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

Bob's Banter

By Robert Clements

Of Eyes and Necks..!

Eyes and necks, you ask, what are you talking about Bob? Have you become a medical doctor today? Ah well, let me explain:

Some of the richest people in the world are those who saw opportunity while others had not noticed anything. The others had eyes but couldn't see!

A woman took her 14-year-old daughter to an oldies concert which was music from the 60's and 70's and felt lucky to get front row seats. When they returned home, her daughter said, "During the show, I looked back and saw hundreds of little lights swaying to the music. At first, I thought the people were holding candles, then realized the lights were the reflections off all the eyeglasses in the audience. Mother, could you all really see what was on stage after wearing glasses?"

"Of course we could," said the mother, "and we enjoyed it!"

"You all must be blind," said the daughter, "It was so boring!"

And necks that stick out!

A family stood near a roller coaster ride. Each one had a different look. The teenage son looked at the cars coasting around with glee; he was just waiting, I could make out for his share of fun; the mother looked a little worried and the father was grinning till he saw his small daughter crying.

"What's wrong?" he asked and I strained my ears to hear the conversation.

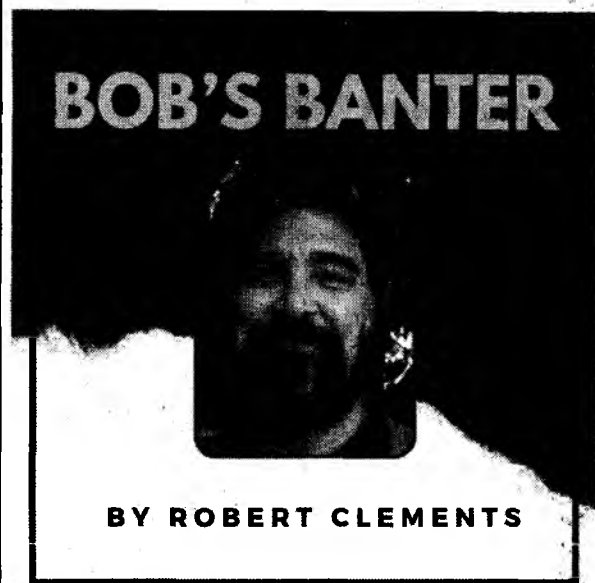
"I'm afraid dad!" she said, "I don't want to get on the roller coaster!"

"Sissy!" cried the teenage brother.

"Don't be a spoil sport!" said the worried mother.

The cars were slowing down as I saw the father take the little girl's hand, "Go for it!" he said with an impish smile, "go for it, even if you're scared! Then one day you'll laugh and tell everyone how you were afraid but went for it!"

The little one gave a nervous grin, but stepped into her car. I heard her screams as the cars went twirling; but



And as we laugh at the little girl, wondering who was blind, the mother or daughter, I know incidences were we older folk also act blind: I went for a business meeting the other day to a fancy club and the old man, a businessman turned to me and said, "I don't do business with internet people!"

"Internet people?" I asked, puzzled.

"Yes people who get orders online! I believe in going personally to an office, meeting the customer, shaking his hand, then getting down to business!"

"And by the time you do that the man who is Internet savvy would have cracked ten deals!" I thought to myself.

These are those who have eyes but can't see.

There are numerous stories of people who lacked vision. A Hollywood producer scrawled a curt rejection note on a manuscript that became "Gone With The Wind." He had no vision that the movie would break all records.

On December 17, 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright finally succeeded in keeping their homemade airplane in the air for 59 seconds. They rushed a telegram to their sister telling of this great accomplishment. The telegram read, "First sustained flight today fifty-nine seconds. Hope to be home by Christmas." Their sister was so excited she rushed to the newspaper office and gave the telegram to the editor. The next morning the newspaper headed the story: "Popular Local Bicycle Merchants To Be Home For Holidays." The hapless editor saw the obvious but missed the real story.

Vision is never about seeing the obvious. It's about looking ahead, about seeing what is not there – yet, about seeing the potential that is yet to come.

Like spotting the potential for success in a child who, as is obvious to everyone else, will likely fail. Or recognizing the potential for something good to come from a situation others are writing off as lost!

Have eyes that see.

they were screams of joy!

A writer Dave Barry says this about his father: "My dad... he'd try anything – carpentry, electrical wiring, plumbing, roofing. From watching him, I learned a lesson that still applies to my life today: No matter how difficult a task may seem, if you're not afraid to try it, you can do it. And when you're done, it will leak." (And then you'll pay somebody even more to fix it than if you'd called him in the first place.)

But I learned from my parents the value of "going for it." "Nothing ventured, nothing lost," is the motto of too many of us. Many people are so afraid to fail that they never venture beyond the familiar. "Better to be safe than sorry" has trapped too many unhappy people in the cocoon of their comfort zones.

I remember a few years ago, during a water shortage having a well dug for the people in my colony. The water gushed out, but many in the colony said that the water was not fit for consumption. So, I, along with the secretary of the colony, drank the water as it gushed out, and soon people allowed the connections to their houses to be made, allowing water to be carried to their tanks.

This saved them from a water crisis that year, but if I had not stood near the pipe, drinking the water, nobody would have allowed the connection, despite the shortage.

Someone had to stick their neck out.

"Behold the turtle," says James Conant. "He makes progress only when he sticks his neck out!"

So no, nothing about human anatomy here, to qualify me as a doctor, but it's all about seeing farther than others and having the courage to stick your neck in any situation..!

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

"Work is hard. Distractions are plentiful. And time is short."

—Adam Hochschild

The Shillong Times

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End of fast; the struggle endures

ON the 15th day of their hunger strike against what is considered a cavalier attitude of the Union Education Ministry, the NEHU Students' Union (NEHUSU) suspended their fast, with the rider that the demand for removal of the Vice Chancellor, PS Shukla would continue. At this point it is important to analyse the conduct and attitude of the NDA Government at the Centre towards the different issues plaguing the North Eastern States. The strike by the NEHU students should have been taken seriously by the Union Education Minister if he considers education to be a matter of importance and its disruption unwarranted because it would affect the future of students each day they remained out of the classroom than inside it.

This is the first time perhaps in the history of Meghalaya where concerned youth have taken the route of a peaceful protest against what they consider as a grave injustice in the manner of functioning of the Vice Chancellor. The NEHUSU must be appreciated for adopting this silent but powerful mode of protest. Considering that hunger strike (satyagraha) was first adopted by Mahatma Gandhi to protest British high-handedness and to force them to grant India its independence, it is ironic that this mode of protest should still be needed in a free and democratic India. Clearly the British are not the only imperialists. In 21st century India, the elected who form the government soon assume the role of modern autocrats who are deaf to the agonies of the "subjects." This unequal relation between the rulers and the ruled continues in the present independent and democratic India. This is visible in how Manipur is dealt with by an apathetic Centre where killings are carrying on even today – 16 months after the first bout of violence. Instead of sending in more para-military forces, the most justified step would have been to impose President's Rule and bring the situation under control.

Apart from the continued loss of lives in Manipur, the reality is that thousands of lives have been disrupted and children are experiencing this utter helplessness inside the refugee camps. But does anyone care? The NEHUSU have shown incredible maturity by adopting the moral high ground of enduring personal hardships to draw attention to their demands. The students have evoked empathy from a cross section of civil society who have come to check on their health statuses and appealed to them to suspend their hunger strike. Sadly this 15-day hunger strike has not made it to the national news because the upcoming election in Maharashtra is occupying prime space and the mind-space of the Prime Minister and his cabinet colleagues. Be that as it may, the act of a hunger strike carries a powerful symbolism. It demonstrates the depth of the protester's conviction and the seriousness of the issue, potentially galvanising public opinion and support, which it did. Hopefully the students' will continue to pursue the path of peaceful protest in the future too. Who knows when the tide will turn!

Letters to the Editor

Need for concrete steps to enhance the Cherry Blossom Festival

Through your esteemed publication, I would like to express my views regarding the recently concluded Cherry Blossom Festival in Shillong. While the festival has gained popularity, attracting tourists from far and wide, it is disheartening to see the lack of sufficient cherry blossoms in the city, leaving many visitors disappointed.

It is no secret that most of the cherry trees seen in and around Shillong have grown naturally, with little to no visible effort from the government. Over the years, despite the festival's growing significance, there appear to be no concrete measures undertaken to ensure a flourishing population of cherry trees.

I recall a sapling plantation drive along the Mawiong damsite stretch some time ago. Unfortunately, many of these saplings did not survive due to soil dumping during road-widening activities. This reflects poorly on planning and management. Instead of such half-hearted measures, why can't the Government adopt a dedicated hill or land area to plant cherry trees exclu-

sively?

The defence establishments, such as the Eastern Air Command in Upper Shillong, offer another opportunity. These areas could host massive cherry tree plantations without compromising operational needs, as these trees remain small and unobtrusive. A collaborative effort with the armed forces could create an impressive showcase of blossoms, benefiting both tourism and the environment.

To truly make Shillong the Cherry Blossom capital, the Government must step up its game and take visionary steps. Initiating large-scale plantations, maintaining them, and protecting them from urban developmental activities can ensure that the festival lives up to its name.

Yours etc,
Abirang Gogoi,
Via email

AFSPA: A thuggish law or Damocles' sword?

In August 2023, the Caravan magazine carried an in-depth story on the Manipur imbroglio, 'Ethnic Cleansing in Manipur,' putting more focus on the reportage from the ground and as to why the BJP government at the Centre did become and still is a silent

All children must be given the chance to be all that they can be.

Our education system is, at best, wounded, a victim of cataclysmic neglect; at worst, it is a cognitive holocaust, wrecking lives and livelihoods, far from future-proofing our children! All children will be more likely to become all they can be if their families have access to high quality care (meaning, they are lovingly nourished and nurtured), especially during their early years, access to high quality education from pre-primary school to university, and access to good healthcare throughout their lives. All this is crucially linked to the mandarins in positions of governance ... or should I say, the present MIS-governance! Is red tape all that is holding our societies together?

Education transforms lives and must exist at the heart of a human mission to build peace, eradicate poverty and drive sustainable development. We are facing unprecedented challenges – social, health, economic and environmental – driven by accelerating globalisation and a faster rate of technological innovations. Yet, those forces are providing us with myriad new opportunities for human advancement...even in the face of 'artificial intelligence' impelling the genesis of the world's first non-organic life forms! Our educational institutions must reskill and upgrade themselves to prepare our children for jobs that have not yet been created, for technologies that have not yet been invented, to solve problems that have not yet been anticipated. It will be a shared responsibility to seize opportunities and find solutions. To navigate through such volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous, and turbulent scenarios, students, and educators, will need to develop curiosity, imagination, resilience and self-regulation; they will need to respect and appreciate the ideas, perspectives and values of others; and they will need to cope with failure and rejection, to move forward in the face of adversity.

Crucial challenges that confront 'education' today

- (1) Information Overload;
- (2) Low Speed of Information Processing;
- (3) Poor Retention and Recall: Memory Logjam;
- (4) Frozen Status Quo: inability to break from the pack!
- (5) Inability to Adapt to Competitive Challenges: Famine of Ideas!
- (6) Inability to Read: fast, deep, wide, and with varied extensivity;
- (7) Poor Idea Generation capabilities;

spectator. There is so much at stake in the Northeast, and when foreign players watch this unfold, they would be interested in working their strategy on this grand chessboard to change the geopolitical climate for furthering their vested interests.

Political masters at 7, Race Course Road are detached from realities, and it's clear that the fog of war has clouded the minds of strategic experts at the National Security Council, causing them to continue supporting the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), 1958. David Kilcullen, a former counter-insurgency advisor to General David Petraeus in Iraq during 2007 and 2008 for stability operations, pressed on the need to defend and secure the population because the people are the centre of gravity. The need to understand the civilians, addressing their frustrations and expectations. Securing the trust of the population should be the larger part of the mission parameter, but with AFSPA in the wrong hands, this could spiral into a Bosnian type of massacre.

Sudeep Chakravarti's 'The Eastern Gate: War and Peace in Nagaland, Manipur and India's Far East' should be an essential reading for all policymakers and military planners to understand the very complexity of regional dynamics as time is the es-

- (8) Unawareness of Strategic Visioning imperatives;
- (9) Meagre Knowledge of the Human Brain;
- (10) Inability to Move Ahead from Stress, to Strength, to Success!

There is mounting evidence of the benefits to humankind of an inclusive societies' approach when we cast our eyes on the following areas of concern:

The positive evidence of 'inclusivity' embraces a broad range of societal outcomes. Development benefits of inclusive societies are increasingly present in donor policy thinking and global dialogues, including the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals framework. The desired impacts encircle economic benefits, social cohesion, and sustainable peace.

Economic Growth, Productivity and Employment

There is mounting evidence of the impact of inclusive growth approaches on reducing poverty and inequality, prejudice and bias, discrimination and bigotry, xenophobia and apartheid, when excluded groups gain greater access to education, employment, and business opportunities.

There is panoramic evidence that gender equality can catalyse economic growth, with positive impacts on macro-level growth, human capital, resourcefulness in deployment of labour, and in agricultural productivity.

Other Development Outcomes, Including Societal Wellbeing

Greater efforts must be made in encouraging free expression, to ensure the impact of voice, empowerment, and accountability approaches towards broad development outcomes, to ensure the advance from harm to harmony.

The education of women and girls is crucial for 'spurring economic empowerment. It has already contributed to postponed marriages, lower fertility rates, and improved health and education outcomes for future children.

In-depth qualitative case studies demonstrate the strong positive effect of efforts to make services more inclusive and improve progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, benefiting broader swathes of society.

Social Cohesion, Peace and State-Building

There is research pointing to the positive relationship between peaceful societies and more inclusive states with state-society relations based on legitimacy rather than coercion, and greater associational life that generates trust and inter-group cohesion.

Evidence suggests inclu-

sive political settlements and broader political processes are essential for fostering peaceful societies.

Social cohesion is a positive force in terms of transforming consciousness and consciences, so that we can heal our wounded planet and establish sustainable societies that deliver outcomes in alignment with the Triple Bottom Line of Sustainability: Economic Prosperity, Social Justice, and Environmental Wellbeing.

The winning outcomes towards future-readiness via applied imagination

- Self-Efficacy in and across the teacher-learner-leader culture.
- Teachers become Super-Teachers! Their Employability Quotient soars!
- Children become SuperLearners! No more cramming! No more panic!
- Leaders rise to Statesmanship!

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has launched The Future of Education and Skills 2030 project. The aim of the project is to help countries find answers to two far-reaching questions:

- What knowledge, skills, attitudes and values will today's students need to thrive and shape their world?
- How can instructional systems develop these knowledge, skills, attitudes and values effectively?

Teachers, students, families, and the citizenry at large, will need to be imbued with motivation that will be more than getting a good job and a high income; they will also need to care about the wellbeing of their friends and families, their communities, and all life on the planet.

Some factors that should make us think about the future of teaching:

• The majority of children in their first year of nursery school will enter careers that do not exist now, involving technologies and cultures that have not yet emerged.

• Employees will change professions, and careers, not just jobs, at least 4 or 5 times during their working lifetime.

• The majority of employees will work for companies having less than 200 people.

• The amount of information in the world is doubling every few months.

• When Year 2 students complete Year 12, the body of knowledge will have doubled almost 10 times since 1988.

• Today, engineers find that half their knowledge is obsolete in 5 years.

• Children born in the year 2025 will live to minimum 90 (or more) years old on average compared with 75 for children born in 1986 ...

pertaining to the 'developed' world.

• Graduates will have been exposed to more information in one year than their grandparents were in a lifetime.

• 90% of information and knowledge required in the year 2030 has yet to be invented.

• A weekday edition of the New York Times contains more information than the average person was likely to receive in 17th century England.

• There is more computing power in a musical birthday card than existed in the world in 1950.

• What we call "video gaming" today, will soon emerge as the most powerful learning medium in history.

Leaders in the Education Domain: Never let a democracy become a 'lootocracy'! Please rise to your highest possibilities, for the greatest good! Beware, and be aware! You can choose to be 'in action' or in 'inaction'. Are you 'looking' to win or 'overlooking' the prospect of victory? Think about this: we cannot be great unless we are a part of something greater than ourselves. We possess the entelechy to 'realise' with 'real eyes' our unique worth and value, but if we ignore our possibilities, our life shall be one of 'real lies'. Is that what we should wish for? Do we wish to be mere passengers in our life? If we have goals, we need to pursue them with laser focus and fervency.

Our custodians in positions of power and influence must lead not only by the example of their power but by the power of their example. The key to success is to stop conforming to other people's expectations and start performing according to our highest possibilities. We have to learn to work harder on ourselves than on our jobs. If we work on our job we will make a living. If we work on ourselves, we will make a life. STUDY, PRACTISE, TEACH, and help to heal our beleaguered world.

With great leadership, a new dawn can emerge for our citizenry across the planet, to enjoy physical health, emotional balance, mental clarity, and spiritual awakening. Everything rises and falls on leadership: learning leadership, and leading learnership! With a stainless conscience, may the civil servants perform with civility and 'crusadorial' commitment, the ministers in their ministries, with moral mindfulness, and the people at large, with open-hearted valour to fight against the malaise that presently prevails!

(The writer has authored several books including SUPER-CREATIVITY among others)

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Model College to Model Society

By Amitabha Sarkar

With the global higher education gross enrolment ratio having amplified from 19 per cent in 2000 to 37 per cent in 2024, 90 per cent of the countries in the world are still confronting a stark inequality in higher education participation. The access to education in higher studies is disproportionately determined by the variances of income, gender, geographic location and a range of social capital. In light of climate change and anthropogenic excessiveness, the importance of higher education in the global development processes has never been so strong. In this spirit, the agenda of equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality higher education by 2030 has been regarded as a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG target 4.7). In the aftermath of Covid pandemic, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) study on 'universities and social inequalities' (<https://cdn.unrisd.org/assets/library/briefs/pdf-files/rpb37-universities.pdf>) (kindly keep this link in both print and online version) advocated for crucial role of higher education in reducing socio-economic disparities in the global south and emphasised on long-term social policy intervention in this arena to address the goals of sustainability.

Debate in higher education

Higher education helps not just the individual excellence in life, but drives societal benefits as well. The expanding global circulation of the knowledge economy impels the governments in many parts of the world to change their higher education policy in accordance with the evolving social and economic demands. This has made the intellectual space of higher education to form two contradictory viewpoints. Is higher education just a conditional arrangement for skill enhancement of students to meet the economic goals of the nation-states? Or, it's an emancipatory journey to realise as well as appreciate the rich diversity of human coexistence with other world systems consisting of disciplinary exploration of the natural, applied, humanities and social sciences.

The eclectic reflection might summarise this debate as a binary narrative to perceive higher education either as an economic franchisee for developing future skilled entrepreneurs (like the IITs and IIMs), for both state and market needs, or a creative place to cultivate critical minds (per se, elite university spaces in India). Importantly, the viewpoints are analysed based on their positional postulates, but not on their relational terms with the students.

The entrepreneur's school considers students as an economic category, in contrast to the critical school's idea of students as philosophical beings. Labelling the higher education debate as the clash of two opposite viewpoints without acknowledging that differences exist in their qualitative definitions of students, risks ideological prejudices to run in analysis. While fiscal consideration to estimate return on investment in higher education is inevitable for any policy exercise, there are noble ways wherein higher education could nurture philosophical foundation amongst the students for navigating the path of nation's economic signposts.

Model colleges in Assam, a case in point

The establishment of Government Model Colleges (total six in different parts of Assam) in rural Assam is a notable public policy initiative. It has strategic advantages to repurpose higher education for tackling regional and other socio-economic disparities. A visit to one of these colleges, the Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Adarsha Mahavidyalaya (PDUAM), Tulungia (near Abhayapuri of Bongaigaon district), realised that students' critical thinking is a foundational requirement for socio-economic upliftment of communities in backward regions. The model college is an example of a strategic development asset that offers undergraduate degree courses in Arts, Commerce and Science streams to some 1200 odd students in geographically remote and underdeveloped areas.

Many countries are adopting policies to build small colleges in rural locations. These

are considered as social rural infrastructure for not only their spill-over benefits from campuses into local communities through traditional routes (like knowledge and economic), but also for uplifting the 'places' quality of life. The PDUAM, Tulungia is a vital example of future asset infrastructure in the North East of India where students could philosophically ascribe to these values to act rationally in real life for making welfare-enhancing sustainable choices. There are four distinct ways how a rural college could become a future asset infrastructure for human, social and economic prosperity in rural India.

Social development: The PDUAM, Tulungia's student community is demographically very diverse because of the region's mixed cultural, religious, and ethno-linguistic hues. This embodies the model college as a place of 'creativity in diversity' to develop the students as agents of meaningful change for local communities. Past studies found that critical thinking develops fast if classroom teaching uses more real-world examples taken from students' own environment. This would help the students to develop their human potency in local community development by understanding the importance of heterogeneity in social and ecological milieu and respect for equitable and sustainable utilisation of ecosystems services. This would make the civic participation more inclusive, consultative and harmonious.

Economic development: The recently introduced innovative courses in the undergraduate education, such as vocational, skill and ability enhancement, and multi-disciplinary courses, might open a plethora of opportunities before a remote college, provided the infrastructural requirements are well met. The strategic enrolment of students in these courses according to their interests and disciplinary orientation might help the college to train them as per the need of local workforce and entrepreneurial scopes. Similarly, the model colleges can make available its rich academic resources, for example the Management studies, for the local businesses and other community-based income generation initiatives to explore commercial viabilities of local products, assist in utilising government-supported schemes and promote eco-friendly business ideas through periodic trainings, workshops, and small-scale incubation platforms. Further, if acknowledged by the district governance the college may partake important roles in local economic planning and area development.

Recognising local public culture: Plurality and embrace of new culture are common traits of higher academic spaces. In rural society, the model colleges could serve as social institutions for forging local public culture through its outreach activities with local communities and institutions. This would give recognition to the local public sphere and help the backward places to find their own spots in the state's cultural topography.

Spearheading citizens science movement: Scientific consciousness of communities is a sign of progressive society. The college in remote areas may help in building citizen science movements by inspiring their students to understand their culture, local biodiversity and ecosystems through scientific reasoning. This needs innovative approaches in both teaching and learning methods to help students in fostering scientific values in community development, socio-cultural discourse and environmental decision making. These initiatives demand interdisciplinary planning in policy exercises and extraordinary long-term government commitments in maintaining the Model Colleges as social rural infrastructures to ward off social, cultural and economic inequalities of all forms. Enshrined in the principles of Tagore's educational philosophy, the model colleges could be a foreground of liberty, creativity, expressivity and unity with nature for local communities to graduate into a model society.

(The writer is Research Fellow, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, Geneva)

"The danger in promiscuity is that it's always barking at your heels."

— Rick Springfield

The Shillong Times

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Traditions, identity crisis

INDIA is seen by many as the 'conservative capital' of the world. Steeped in traditions, life goes on at its usual, slow pace in most parts though the elite in metropolitan cities like Bengaluru and Mumbai have largely transitioned to modern lifestyles. Not capital Delhi, though, where the mindset remains deeply traditional. This was evident also in the responses to the way a Kolkata model famously danced in a white towel at the iconic India Gate the other day. Media claims this sparked "widespread outrage" among the citizens in social media comments. This should look surprising as social media is straddled mostly, if not exclusively, by the army of educated youths. Notably, the video posted by the model on Instagram in celebration of International Day of Men fetched over two lakh views in a matter of a few hours. Her comment, "Happy International Men's Day, May you all continue to motivate others with your courage, kindness and empathy," should have struck a friendly chord with those who viewed the video, but several comments from the viewers were hostile in nature. This goes to prove that conservative mindsets do not change even through generations. A problem essentially lies also with the way the media projects such situations.

Notably, India has an identity crisis. The large numbers of youths who go abroad for studies – both boys and girls – are not keen on returning home to pursue their professions or take up jobs. Be they in the US, Europe or Australia, they are happy settling down there. The message is loud and clear. They feel suffocated back home; and they yearn for more freedom. However, the old mindsets are not easy to shed for those who are well-entrenched here. Political leadership comprises mostly of ageing men. They are mostly men who spent their lifetime in politics, hypocrites of a kind, who are game with the old modes of dressing in Parliament and outside. Their shady deals by the hour are camouflaged by their spotless white robes – the trademark of Indian politicians.

If India needs to embrace modernity, the first and foremost requirement is that its ageing leadership profile should change. More and more educated and forward-looking youths should enter public life and edge out the old guard. Among the top leaders, Rahul Gandhi is by far young. He has abundant exposure to the developed world outside. Yet, he too is caught in a time warp, acting like the quintessential Indian politician of his grandfather's time, though he often sports pants and T-shirts. The young leaders who got opportunities to run states, like a foreign-educated Akhilesh Yadav or those from the Lalu Prasad clan too have proven themselves to be below par, run-of-the-mill politicians. They lack the grit and determination to change India so that it is in tune with the changing times.

Letters to the Editor

When racism danced its way...

The meteoric rise of Shillong lad Steve Jyrwa after his scintillating performances in India's Best Dancer Season 4 has captured the imagination of many. The 17-year-old, who went on to become the champion of the reality show, has earned name and fame through his hard work, dedication, and discipline. He garnered tremendous support and love from his hometown. After dancing his way into the hearts of millions, Steve landed in Shillong on November 19, 2024, where his family, friends, and admirers came together to bless him. However, social media commentators had a field day taking potshots at the young boy just because his Khasi was not as good as his dancing techniques.

It is unfortunate that on the day the young talent returned home, the so-called "locals," who think they are more Khasi than others, made extreme racist comments against him. Since they couldn't find fault with his magical dancing skills, they chose to pounce on him simply because he was not fluent in Khasi. Some even went on to question his ethnicity. Be that as it may, Steve is as much a Shillongite as anyone else. He was born and brought up here. Just because he couldn't speak Khasi fluently, that doesn't make him less of a human or less of a Khasi.

Most of "our" people haven't changed. Perhaps they never will. Their prejudice against their "own" people who look and sound different, or anyone from outside their group, has not vanished. When will they grow up and learn to accept others? But

most of those who are in the habit of making racist slurs have probably never lived outside, and perhaps never will. We can't fathom how they would react if someone in other parts of India hurled racist slurs against them. We can only pity their narrow-mindedness. But yes, if Steve had been someone with 'phareng' blood or of English descent, he would have been spared, thanks to the slavish mentality and colonial hangover of most of "our" people. Nonetheless, a racist mind is omnipresent - it exists in an educated elite as much as it does in an uneducated lot.

For those who still possess a reasonable mind, please do not fall into the racist trap. Life is meaningful if we learn to co-exist amicably. We can choose our friends, but not our neighbours. Let us encourage others to become more unprejudiced towards those who look and sound different. Appreciate their talent. Cheer them with encouraging words. If we can't do that, we might as well do a service to humanity by keeping our mouths shut and our fingers away from the keypad.

Yours etc.,
B.R. Pde,
Shillong - 1

Is it possible to embrace AI's potential while maintaining ethical safeguards?

Editor,
In our rapidly advancing digital age, artificial intelligence (AI) has woven itself into the fabric of daily life, offering unprecedented convenience and capabilities. However, a closer examina-

As one amongst the first batch to get a graduate degree from North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) in 1974, I feel obliged to weigh in on the issues that have plagued the University over the decades. NEHU has the distinction of being the first central university of the region hence it should have established its credentials and only soared higher if it was efficiently and effectively administered. That NEHU would arrive at a point where students would have to undertake a hunger strike to press for their genuine demands is enough to inform those outside the University that things have gone horribly wrong and reached a point of no return. It would not be fair to say that the faculty and students did not have issues with former Vice Chancellors although these were men of integrity. There will always be dissonance between heads of institutions and the teaching and student fraternity on certain issues, but these are usually ironed out by a process of dialogue and not by confrontation.

The preamble to the NEHU Act, 1973 says that the University has been created, "to develop the intellectual, academic and cultural background of people of the North East." Whether this objective has been accomplished is a matter of debate but NEHU did show prospects to be a University with the potential for excellence and that was during the time of Prof Tandon as VC. What are the series of events since then that have plummeted NEHU to the lower rungs among universities. Surely there is a need for soul searching among those at the leadership position in the University. Instead of pointing fingers everywhere else the Academic Council, Executive Council et al should put their heads together, introspect and come up with a list of action plans on how to redeem NEHU from the quagmire it is in today.

However, this is not the only instance of NEHU being in turmoil. Dr SC Banwar the acting VC of NEHU was shot by "unidentified assailants" on October 30, 1980. He died a day later due to gunshot wounds. Five suspects including a senior professor, junior faculty, student and university staff were rounded up but as is the history of crime detection in Meghalaya, the killers were

never found and the suspects were released for lack of evidence against them. To that extent NEHU does have a sordid history of being run by people without any idea of the culture and sensitivities of people in this region. Such appointments belie the noble goal of establishing this University which is to help develop the tribal genius and provide the opportunities for research into the rich tribal cultures and histories which would have had no space in mainland universities.

Fifty years down the line, NEHU has produced a clutch of PhD holders many of whom are serving as faculty in the University today. The non-teaching and administrative staff too comprise a good section of local tribals. But till date NEHU has had only one local tribal Vice Chancellor, Prof Barrister Pakem who was an eminent scholar, an upright political leader and a man of integrity. Prof Pakem was a Gold Medalist in his Masters Examination from Guwahati University in 1963 and a Law Graduate as well. He got his Ph.D. in 1972 from Dibrugarh University. Dr Pakem was the first tribal from North East India to become the Vice Chancellor of NEHU and served for two terms from 1992-1998 until he resigned on account of ill health. Prof Pakem was a politician and MLA of Sutnga constituency, Jaintia Hills before becoming VC and held the Education portfolio. People remember him as the best Education Minister.

It took 18 years for NEHU to get a tribal VC and since 1998 the University has not been able to produce a tribal VC who is capable enough to lead the University. The point is not about communalising the position of VC. Merit should be the only criterion for selecting a person for such an important position but when Prof Sherwin Sungoh was among the applicants to the VC's post in the last selection, how did Prof PS Shukla score over her. What were the special qualifications that made him triumph over other applicants including Prof Sungoh? The fact that selection of individuals to head institutions of importance is shrouded in secrecy is what allows the ruling party and government in Delhi to leverage and dump

perilous health advice, including the nonsensical suggestion of consuming STONES daily. Its surprising but its true! Even more disturbingly in February this year, a tragic case emerged where a 14-year-old reportedly took his own life after allegedly being encouraged by a Google-designed AI bot, marking a chilling precedent of AI's potential to influence human life or end it.

These events underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive re-evaluation of AI's role in human society. As AI continues to develop at a blistering pace, the lack of adequate safeguards poses serious ethical questions. Chatbots today are not only enhancing their conversational skills but are also able to replicate human speech patterns, change voices, and simulate familiar personas, escalating the risk of emotional manipulation and abuse.

The breadth of AI's influence is astonishing. Over 52 million individuals globally have embraced AI companions, relying on conversational chatbots for companionship and advice. Astonishingly, the spectrum of human-AI interactions includes users seeking life advice, contemplating major life decisions like divorce, and even entering into marriages with AI entities. Such interactions, while intriguing and novel, raise significant ethical concerns about the nature of these relationships and their impact on the human psyche.

By Patricia Mukhim

the people of their choice in most academic institutions today. During the Congress regime, we didn't hear of such blatant politicisation of academic institutions. Now it appears that the BJP-RSS is hell bent on using campuses and classrooms to spread the saffron ideology. This is a surefire step towards stifling academic independence where ideas take root and free-thinking is encouraged. The present VC Prof Shukla is therefore not a free agent. He has to act according to the dictate of the Education Ministry and perhaps other agents too.

In May 2024, The Hindu carried an article by Philip G Altbach, American author and researcher, Professor Emeritus and Distinguished Fellow, Centre for International Higher Education, Boston College captioned, "The Hyper-politicisation of Indian higher education." The writer states that Indian higher education has always been political. He says politicians started colleges and universities to advance their careers and build support and that state and central government authorities sometimes placed new post-secondary institutions in politically advantageous locations. Many of them were established to cater to the demands of the electorate based on various socio-cultural factors as well. Altbach says even the naming and renaming of universities, especially by State governments are often influenced by politics and that academic appointments or promotions were sometimes made for reasons other than the quality of the professor, vice-chancellor or principal.

However, Altbach qualifies that overall, Indian higher education, especially in the universities, adhered to international norms of academic freedom and professors were generally free to teach without fear of being disciplined or fired for their views. They were able to do research and to publish their work freely, and to speak and write in public forums and the media. And while universities, while often mired in bureaucracy they also occasionally faced allegations of political interference in the recruitment of faculty members. However, they enjoyed relative autonomy when it came to

the promotion of existing faculty. Altbach says that since 2014 however academic institutions have been completely politicised. He warns that there is a grave threat to academic institutions, the academic profession and intellectual life in general.

Altbach couldn't have stated a more bitter truth. We are seeing this happen before our eyes and find ourselves helpless. But that being said, we must hail the NEHU Students' Union (NEHUSU) and the KSU-NEHU unit for taking the ultimate step of standing up against dominant powers to show that they will no longer take things lying down and that they will fight for the rights of students, for general academic freedom and for the rights of the non-teaching staff who are often voiceless. The students, who were on hunger strike have put themselves at great risk to but they have persevered for 15 long days. These students deserve our collective appreciation as a society that is still struggling to come to our own in a country where we are a dismal minority but not a subservient one. The youth have shown great valour in pushing the boundaries of struggle and have demonstrated incredible resilience.

Much has been written about the list of demands of the student community such as Wi-Fi connectivity in their hostels and better hostel facilities which have not been addressed for a very long time. Add to all that the manner in which the Academic Council meetings are being conducted leaves much to be desired leading to walk-outs by professors and students. The internal enquiry committee under the acting VC, Prof Nirmalendu Saha has allegedly unearthed huge irregularities which should be taken cognisance of by the 2-member enquiry committee appointed by the Union Education Ministry.

At this juncture it is important for the people of Meghalaya and its civil society that has supported this struggle for redeeming NEHU from the morass it is in, to remain united in the cause of the struggle. NEHUSU has to remind itself that it is the only students' organisation in the country that is fighting a battle for democratising the academic space and purging it of all political ideology.

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tennis player but as a great human being. His dangerous high topspin forehand shot, which made Roger Federer remodel his backhand to deal with it, may one day fade out from memory, but not his smile, grace, and wit with which he faced many awkward situations and questions.

I will never forget how promptly he rushed to his opponent to offer help in case of a muscle cramp or injury. If he noticed among spectators that a crying mother could not find her child, he immediately stopped his serve till the mother and child reunited.

When he heard a drunk spectator using abusive language against him, he just smiled. His smile, even after defeat, and his sportsmanship are unforgettable. I admire him not just for his exceptional tennis skills but for his humility, respect for opponents, and fair play. His greatness was reflected in his farewell speech as well, where he attributed his talent to his luck and hard work when he said, "Just a kid that followed their dreams, worked as hard as possible. I have been very lucky."

The 38-year-old Nadal told the crowd, "The titles, the numbers, are there, so people probably know that, but the way I would like to be remembered is as a good person from a small village in Mallorca." There are many great players who won many tournaments but only a few can match the goodness and simplicity of Nadal.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Rafael Nadal - A gracious sportsperson

Editor,
Rafael Nadal will be remembered not just as a great

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

What is corruption and why we should care?

By Dr Omarlin Kyndiah

Transparency International – the global coalition against corruption defined corruption as 'the misuse of entrusted public power or function for private benefit.' Corruption erodes trust, weakens democracy, hampers economic development and further exacerbates inequality, poverty, social division and the environmental crisis. Benigno Aquino III President of the Philippines once said, "When no one is corrupt, no one will be poor." This is no mere slogan – it is the defining principle that will serve as the foundation of our administration.

Corruption has been identified as "the topic most frequently discussed by the public" ahead of poverty and unemployment. Corruption has long blighted human affairs. Its definitions range from moral/religious to economic, political, and legal. Its effects are wide-ranging: corruption has been found to distort human judgement, warp the organizational cultures of business and government institutions, undermine economic and political development, increase poverty, compromise human rights, corrode the integrity of economic and political systems, cause extreme inequalities, destroy public confidence in government and markets.

Most people are familiar with the term "corruption" and have a general idea of what it means. People often associate the term with greed, dishonesty, secrecy, and crime, all of which are examples of unethical behaviour. They also rightly associate the term with concrete acts, such as bribery by businessmen and grand theft of public funds by politicians. Few people, however, advance beyond that point in their understanding of corruption, since corruption can go beyond bribery to include nepotism, neglect of duty and favouritism. Corruption, therefore, ranges in its manifestations from bribery and fraud to socio-political transformations of the greatest magnitude. Interestingly, the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) does not define corruption as such. It rather defines specific acts of corruption and urges States parties to criminalize these acts in their jurisdictions.

This decision is in part the outcome of the difficulty of defining corruption. It also derives from the fact that corruption ranges from a single instance of bribery of a low-ranking official to the transformation of a democracy into a kleptocracy i.e. government by corrupt leaders who exploit people and natural resources in order to extend their personal wealth and political power.

The effects of corruption are wide-ranging. Some of these effects are: economic loss, poverty and inequality, personal loss, public and private sector dysfunctionality, failures in infrastructure, rigged economic and political systems, human rights violations, public frustration and cynicism.

People lose trust in leaders, in social systems (public institutions), and sometimes even in society and ethics itself when they sense that corruption is widespread and corrupt actors are not being held accountable.

Corruption as a human act, done by a morally responsible individual carries with it a moral guilt, because it goes contrary to established moral standards accepted generally or by a particular society. The question of corruption then assumes a status of philosophical importance, first because it proceeds from the metaphysical nature of man as a being imbued with rationality and freedom. In other words, it proceeds from man as a moral agent. Corruption, because of its social effects, hits at the very foundation of the human being seen as a 'homo socialis' – social being. It threatens the very life of man in the society.

Since corruption works

against the common good, any act of corruption is a war against society and consequently a war against man and the metaphysical fabric of his existence.

Given the magnitude and pernicious nature of corruption affecting every aspect of society and economy, the Indian National Congress has been making concerted efforts to reduce corruption. A serious attempt at this was made in 1963 when the then-Jawaharlal Nehru government set up the Santhanam Committee. A notable outcome of this Committee was the setting up of the Central Vigilance Commission as an apex anti-corruption body. In addition, the government established the Comptroller and Auditor General of India in 1971 to audit key institutions' public finances and prevent incidences of corrupt practices.

This apart, offices of Lokayukta or civil commissioners were set up at the state level to tackle corrupt practices. The first office of Lokayukta was set up in 1966. Following this, a number of Indian states have set up their own Lokayuktas.

In response to the 2011 anti-corruption stir by Anna Hazare who demanded to have a Lokpal or Ombudsman, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government passed the Lokpal Bill in 2013.

Yet, what has done more to the anti-corruption crusade is the enactment of the landmark Right to Information (RTI) legislation on 15th June 2005 by Dr. Manmohan Singh's government. The right of access to information is an essential human right, necessary for the enjoyment of other human rights. From then onwards, Citizens of the country have been effectively using the Act to tackle corruption and also to make a transparent and accountable government.

The levels of corruption in India are still the same despite the existence of a relatively strong governance structure, institutions, legal framework, and policies. The 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) shows that corruption is thriving across the world. The CPI ranks 180 countries and territories around the globe by their perceived levels of public sector corruption, scoring on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). India's score on the scale is 39, down by just 1 since 2022.

There is an urgent need to put on priority to set up solid governance frameworks to prevent corruption by enacting a law that would be a mother of Right to Information (RTI) Act. The law that will successfully prevent corrupt behaviour at all levels of government.

Safeguards and integrity frameworks have to be put in place. Risk areas of corruption such as public procurement have to be specially scrutinised, in particularly large-scale infrastructure projects or major sports or cultural events. Apart from anti corruption laws, introduction of moral education in the educational curriculum can play a fundamental role in the context of anti-corruption policies.

Victor Dike has rightly remarked that: "To win the war on corruption, adherence to ethical standards in decision-making must be the foundation of the nation's policies. Without ethics in the conduct of the affairs of the nation (public and business), the apparent wars on corruption will not be successful. In other words, without ethics, any money budgeted towards fighting corruption is a thing cast to the wild cat. Nigeria has to make laws and implement them to the letter. As Aristotle insists the aim of ethical philosophy is practical – to make us better men."

Hence the foremost duty of citizens is to vote responsibly because we as voters play a central role in shaping the government and its very functions.

“We do not remember days,
we remember moments.”

— Cesare Pavese

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When Ignorance equals Insult
DEPUTY Chief Minister, Sniawbhalang Dhar has feigned ignorance about the pesky nature of the VIP cult even while covertly accepting that MLAs, ministers, IAS and MCS officers fall in the category of Very Important Persons (VIP). Dhar has in fact callously brushed aside the insolence and high-handed nature of the VIP culture where a few so-called dignitaries who forget they are public servants bully their way through traffic. Dhar in effect is insulting those asking him about the VIP culture with specious arguments. What has riled the public is the death of Late Hudderdfield Rymbui allegedly after his two-wheeler was rammed at by a VIP convoy – the VIP being Tourism Minister, Paul Lyngdoh near the ICAR complex on November 15 last. The Tourism Minister’s defensive stance is what has ignited public anger. He could have shown empathy and even expressed deep regret at the tragic incident instead of trying to defend his security convoy. When public emotions run high the least that the Minister could do is bring down rising tempers and stand with the grieving parents and relatives.

Of all the political parties in Meghalaya, only the Voice of People Party (VPP) has jumped into the fray to call out the VIP culture. It would be interesting to watch if the VPP would demonstrate its commitment to shun the VIP culture if it comes to power in the Autonomous District Councils and in the State Assembly elections in 2028 which is still a long way away. The VPP has pointed out that it is not just the high-ranking public servants – ministers, IAS officers, army and police officials who flaunt their VIP privileges but also their relatives, including their wives and children. At the moment even non-VIPs have sirens installed in their vehicles and use it to get past traffic. Another privilege is the use of black tinted glasses to hide the multitude of sins and also get past traffic even when the vehicle is privately owned.

The Khasi society was known to be egalitarian and there are enough elders who keep chanting this like a mantra without realising that things have changed drastically. Today a category known as the ‘high level’ class has emerged which takes for granted its VIP status and which filters down to every member of their families. That the society has remained silent on this cultural fault-line is what has emboldened the silent take-over of a caste system in the erstwhile classless society. With time this cult of privilege has only entrenched itself to a point where even those serving the VIPs flash their importance and expect the same privileges and courtesies. Public debate on this issue should continue. This issue like most others cannot be relegated to the backburner until another unfortunate death happens. One death should be enough to bring the much-needed equity in a society that shudders at the evils of a caste system.

Cherry Blossom Festival: A Celebration of Beauty, Culture, and Sustainability

By Gervasius Nongkseh

The Cherry Blossom Festival, celebrated worldwide as a symbol of spring, renewal, and the fleeting beauty of life, is a spectacle that holds deep cultural and environmental significance. Rooted in Japanese tradition, the festival has expanded beyond borders, transcending geographical boundaries to be observed in countries like the United States, South Korea, and India. In India, the city of Shillong, located in the northeastern state of Meghalaya, has emerged as a unique host for this celebration, featuring the blooming of wild Himalayan cherry blossoms (*Prunus cerasoides*). While the event is celebrated for its natural beauty, it also serves as a platform for cultural exchange, economic development, and environmental consciousness. However, as the festival garners more attention, it also faces challenges that require thoughtful reflection and sustainable practices to ensure its longevity.

Origins and Cultural Significance

The Cherry Blossom Festival is deeply entrenched in Japanese culture, where it is known as Hanami, or “flower viewing.” This tradition, which dates back over a thousand years, sees people gather beneath blooming cherry trees to appreciate their beauty and reflect on the impermanence of life. The short-lived blossoms, lasting only a few weeks, serve as a poignant reminder of life’s fleeting nature, symbolizing renewal, hope, and the cyclical nature of life and death.

In Shillong, however, the festival takes on a distinct charm. Unlike Japan’s springtime cherry blossoms, the wild Himalayan cherry trees of Meghalaya bloom in late autumn, from October to November, offering a unique visual and seasonal experience. This shift in timing gives the Shillong Cherry Blossom Festival its own flavour, attracting not only local visitors but also tourists from across India and abroad.

The festival, celebrated with much enthusiasm, showcases not only the blooming of the cherry trees but also Meghalaya’s rich cultural heritage. The festival becomes an amalgamation of nature and culture, offering a perfect balance between scenic beauty and cultural expression. For this reason, the Shillong Cherry Blossom Festival has earned a place on India’s tourism calendar and gained international attention.

Tourism and Economic Impact

The Cherry Blossom Festival in Shillong has become a significant event for tourism in Meghalaya, contributing to the local economy in multiple ways. The inflow of visitors during the festival provides a much-needed boost to local businesses, particularly in the hospitality sector. Hotels, restaurants, transport

services, and vendors all see increased patronage, while local artisans, musicians, and food vendors gain exposure to a broader audience. The festival provides a platform for these communities to showcase their talents and products, further enhancing the cultural diversity that the event celebrates.

The festival also serves as a means to enhance the visibility of Meghalaya on the global tourism map. With its stunning natural landscapes, favourable climate and cultural richness, the state’s tourism industry stands to benefit from the festival’s popularity. In addition to attracting domestic visitors, the event also draws international tourists, contributing to foreign exchange earnings and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Beyond its short-term economic impact, the Cherry Blossom Festival has the potential to position Meghalaya as a year-round eco-tourism and cultural destination, thus promoting sustainable tourism practices.

Environmental and Ecological Dimensions

The Cherry Blossom Festival offers more than just aesthetic enjoyment; it serves as a reminder of the deep connection between humanity and the natural world. The blooming of cherry trees is a celebration of nature’s cycle, highlighting the importance of biodiversity and environmental conservation. The festival needs to incorporate activities like tree-planting drives, nature walks, and workshops on sustainable living, aligning with global initiatives to combat climate change and promote ecological balance.

However, the environmental impact of the festival cannot be ignored. The influx of tourists during the event leads to increased waste, carbon footprints, and a strain on local resources. The issue of littering and pollution has been a concern, especially as the popularity of the festival grows. The scenic beauty of the cherry blossoms is sometimes marred by the careless disposal of plastic and other waste materials. Additionally, climate change poses a significant threat to the delicate ecosystem. Rising temperatures and erratic weather patterns can disrupt the timing and health of the cherry blossoms wherein we might have instances where the festival will be held without the blooming of cherry blossoms, undermining the core element of the event.

Cultural Preservation Amid Commercialization

While the Cherry Blossom Festival is a vibrant celebration of Meghalaya’s cultural heritage, the increasing commercialization of the event raises important questions about cultural authenticity. The rapid growth of the festival and its attraction to tourists can sometimes

overshadow the traditional aspects of the celebration. In some instances, the focus on entertainment, consumerism, and tourism-driven activities risks diluting the cultural and spiritual essence of the festival.

To preserve the authenticity of the event, there must be a careful balance between promoting tourism and safeguarding the festival’s cultural significance. Local artists, musicians, and artisans should be prioritized in the festival’s programming. Their involvement ensures that the festival remains rooted in the community’s traditions, offering them a platform to share their heritage with a wider audience. By incorporating storytelling, traditional music, and exhibitions on the history and significance of the cherry blossoms, the festival can deepen its cultural resonance and educational value.

Climate Change and the Future of the Festival

Climate change is a global concern, and the Cherry Blossom Festival, like other similar events worldwide, faces challenges due to unpredictable weather patterns and rising temperatures. The blooming cycles of cherry trees are increasingly affected by erratic rainfall and fluctuating temperatures. In Japan, for example, cherry blossoms are now blooming earlier each year due to climate change, disrupting the centuries-old tradition of Hanami. Similarly, in Meghalaya, the health and blooming patterns of Himalayan cherry trees could be impacted by changing climatic conditions, posing a threat to the long-term viability of the festival.

To address these challenges, proactive conservation efforts must be undertaken. Local authorities and environmental scientists need to collaborate on preserving cherry tree habitats and diversifying the species planted to increase resilience against climate change. Moreover, regular monitoring and maintenance programs should be established to ensure the health of the cherry trees. The festival itself can be a platform to raise awareness about climate change, encouraging attendees to adopt sustainable practices in their own lives.

Proposed Solutions for a Sustainable Festival

To ensure the long-term success and sustainability of the Cherry Blossom Festival, a multi-pronged approach is essential.

Eco-Friendly Practices: Introducing waste management solutions like recycling stations and composting, alongside the use of biodegradable materials, can minimize the festival’s environmental footprint. Educating visitors on responsible behaviours—such as reducing plastic waste—can further enhance sustainability.

Community Involvement: Involving local communities in festival planning ensures that benefits reach Shillong’s residents. Supporting eco-friendly accommodations, local crafts, and sustainable food options fosters inclusivity and makes the event more socially responsible.

Regulated Tourism: Managing visitor numbers through ticketing or pre-registration such as online ticketing can prevent overcrowding, ease local resource demands, and improve the experience for attendees while reducing environmental impact.

Infrastructure Development: Investing in green infrastructure—such as renewable energy, waste management systems, and sustainable transport—will reduce the festival’s environmental footprint and enhance its image as an eco-friendly event.

Climate-Resilient Strategies: Partnering with environmental experts to monitor climate change’s effects on cherry trees and diversifying tree species can help maintain the festival’s sustainability and resilience in the face of shifting weather patterns.

Cultural Education: Incorporating performances, workshops, and exhibitions on the cultural and historical significance of cherry blossoms ensures the festival is not just a visual celebration but also an opportunity for deeper cultural connection and learning.

The Future of the Cherry Blossom Festival

The Cherry Blossom Festival in Shillong has quickly become a hallmark of Meghalaya’s natural and cultural heritage, attracting global attention. It provides a platform for tourism, cultural exchange, and environmental education. Yet, for the festival to continue to thrive, it must embrace a long-term vision rooted in sustainability and responsible tourism. The beauty of cherry blossoms, much like life itself, is transient—a powerful reminder of the importance of cherishing and preserving what we hold dear. If managed responsibly, the Cherry Blossom Festival in Shillong has the potential to inspire both visitors and locals to cultivate a more sustainable relationship with nature, ensuring that this celebration of life continues to blossom for generations to come.

As the festival evolves, it is essential for Meghalaya’s government and local stakeholders to consider long-term plans that ensure its continued success without compromising environmental, cultural, and community interests. The legacy of the Festival depends not only on its beauty but also on its ability to adapt to the changing needs of society and the planet. The time to act is now, as nature’s gifts are fleeting, and the future of this festival depends on the choices we make today.

Round The States

By Insaf

Adani Bribe Scandal AP, states in eye of storm

The indictment of Gautam Adani and seven others in the United States involving bribes has stirred up a hornet’s nest! The timing couldn’t be worse for the BJP-led NDA government as it comes on the eve of the Parliament session beginning Monday! Expectedly, the Opposition, including Congress, TMC, NC, has already trained their guns and fired salvos. In Delhi, Rahul Gandhi has asked for the arrest of Adani while accusing PM Modi of protecting him: in Kolkata TMC MP Saket Gokhale questioned ‘Gol’s silence and how much is Modi & BJP’s involvement?’ In Srinagar NC Farooq Abdullah said the Centre must launch a thorough probe. On the backfoot, BJP has questioned the timing while asserting that ‘all States mentioned where government officials were paid bribes were Opposition-ruled during that time’!

The fact remains that Adani and company offered \$265 million in bribes for securing ‘lucrative solar energy supply contracts’ with state electricity distribution companies (in Odisha, J&K, Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh). Importantly, 85% of the alleged bribe was said to be given to a top-ranking official in Andhra Pradesh and all eyes are on how the NDA partner now will deal with it. Well, Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu has finally reacted and told the Assembly that the state government is in possession of the reports and shall take necessary action against any irregularities. More so as the brand image and prestige of AP has been hurt! But he passed on the blame to his predecessor, YSRCP regime from 2019 to 2024. However, Jagan Reddy has said the allegations are incorrect and ‘there’s no direct agreement between AP power distribution companies and any other entities, including those belonging to Adani Group.’ Predictably, all out efforts will be made to pass on the buck. The shenanigans will be worth a watch. It may turn out to be another round of Centre-State blame game!

All Eyes On Maharashtra

All eyes will be on Maharashtra as counting of votes begins today. Both ruling Mahayuti alliance and Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) constituents claim they will form the government. While a majority of exit polls have predicted the former shall retain power, a few have favoured the latter. Be that as it may, a nagging tension emerges on both sides as to who amongst their alliance would head the government. While the numbers at the end shall help decide, fissures may appear in the alliances. For one, Congress top brass has gone to Mumbai to work out possibilities if the MVA is victorious. Interestingly the MVA has decided to ‘house all its newly-elected MLAs together in Mumbai’ after poll results. This is a move aimed at ‘preventing poaching’ ahead of government formation. Indeed, something to worry about as past experience has shown that in the power game, every seat can be critical. The MVA is claiming it shall win 160 of the 288-Assembly seats and is at the same time looking at independents, who it claims have shown interest in joining the opposition camp. For the Mahayuti alliance, the Eknath Shinde camp feels he should retain the seat, but the BJP too is eyeing it. Guess, with no formula in place, each of the constituents will need to choose their leader.

Delhi’s Further Woes

There’s more bad news for Delhiites. If choking in polluted air was not enough, actions of MCD and Delhi Jal Board have led to ‘serious water pollution.’ On Wednesday last, National Green Tribunal imposed a

fine of over Rs 50 crore on the two agencies, observing: DJB failed to discharge its statutory duties in preventing sewage discharge into storm water drains which meet river Yamuna; MCD ‘acted beyond its authority to alter conditions and functional efficacy of a storm water drain in South Delhi.’ Worse, it wasn’t a case where DJB failure was noticed, condemned and castigated for first time “but various (previous) orders clearly show repeated directions were issued, time and opportunity granted but all efforts have failed.” Storm water drain system, said NGT, should carry rainwater, ‘nothing else to maintain ecology and environment’ and that raw sewage in storm water drains caused ‘serious water pollution’. Likewise, MCD was “wholly unimindful and illegal activity of covering a part of a drain to make additional parking land available, worsening the existing situation.” Will the two pay the fine or will action be taken against erring officials? Citizens should demand an answer.

Wrong Move In Jammu?

Kashmiri Pandits have received a jolt in Jammu. Instead of situation improving with an elected government in place, the winds of change don’t seem to be blowing for them. Undertaking a demolition drive on Wednesday last, Jammu Development Authority broke down a dozen shops near Muthi camp set up three decades ago in the city belonging to the displaced Pandits ‘without issuing notices.’ These triggered protests demanding action against the officials. While the Relief Commissioner claimed the land belonged to the Authority and that new shops would be constructed for them in the area in a new shopping complex, the Opposition, particularly BJP, jumped in. Said its spokesperson on X: “This visibly seems to be a revenge action soon after the return of the NC-Congress government headed by Chief Minister Omar Abdullah.” Others said, “This act further deepens their sense of alienation and loss.” Indeed, a bad call by the elected government. It could have waited for another month as the relief department is already constructing shops for the KPs within the camp. Surely, heaven’s wouldn’t have fallen!

Respect The Constitution

Three cheers to Kerala High Court. It has ordered a further investigation into alleged ‘insult’ to the Constitution by Kerala Fisheries Minister Saji Cherian. Disrespect to the Constitution, is clearly unacceptable and the minister’s speech (at an event in July 2022) had words which ‘can’t be terms of respect generally’. The HC’s direction has made Congress-led UDF Opposition and BJP demand Cherian’s resignation or his sacking. On his part, Cherian said he would take a call after going through the order. According to the judge, ‘it was a matter of common perception in Malayalam language that the words — kuntham (spear) and kudachakram (a type of firecracker) — “when spoken in collocation with each other, can’t be stated to be used in a respectful manner”. The words, he was firm, shows disrespect to the Constitution and ‘there can’t be two views on his statement.’ It contended that the investigating officer’s conclusion of no disrespect ‘is not legally tenable.’ Besides, the magisterial court erred in accepting the IO’s report. There is need for a fair probe, the HC asserted, while allowing a plea by a lawyer challenging magisterial court decision and IO report. And, it must be conducted by state crime branch and without undue delay. How soon, is the big question in God’s own country. ---INFA

Letters to the Editor

On VIP Culture

Editor,
One is thoroughly amused by Dy CEM, Sniawbhalang Dhar’s declaration that he is totally ignorant of the existence of a ‘VIP Culture’ in our state, (ST Nov 22, 2024). I for one entirely agree with him that perhaps there is no Very Important Person in our political menu but where only Ministers, MLAs and Chairpersons exist. Spoken like any blue blooded politician! Perhaps what Sniawbhalang Dhar meant is not Very Important Person (VIP) but the existence of ‘Villains in Politics’! Yes such villains do exist. They throw money during election time, buy votes or use muscle power to win an election. Then they claim that they have been elected through popular mandate and based on the oft corrupted slogan of “Vox populi, Vox Dei”, begin to act as God himself. Yes such people are many both in the State Assembly and in the District Councils. They either walk among us or simply whizz past us. Using the siren to shove you out of the National Highway; teach the common man and the pedestrian to be quick and nimble on their

feet or run the risk of being run over by a Government vehicle; setting by example how to make a substandard road that gets washed away with the first monsoon rains; use crores of public money under the Smart City Project to simply set up a few “Smart City” signboards next to heaps of stinking garbage; use Cabinet positions to siphon off hundreds of crores of public money for personal benefit. Yes I agree one hundred percent with Sniawbhalang Dhar’s definition of VIP. It does not stand for Very Important person. “Villains in Politics” is more appropriate.

Yours etc.,
Vanessa Khongdup,
Via email

Toxic masculinity at its worst!

Editor,
It is a shame that an 18-year-old MBBS student of a medical college in Gujarat’s Patan district died while being ragged by his seniors. The accused, all second-year MBBS students, allegedly made some juniors, including the victim, stand in a hostel room for more than

three hours on November 16 and subjected them to mental and physical torture.

It is a wrong notion that victims of toxic masculinity are only women. A 17-year-old Jadavpur University male student, who fell to his death from the second floor of the university’s main hostel, had allegedly been sexually assaulted and ragged by the senior students in the hostel before his death in August last year.

Those two male students are also victims of toxic masculinity. On the other hand, the perpetrator of toxic masculinity can even be a woman, like Lynndie England, whose photographs showing her torturing the prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison during the Iraq war shocked the world.

That toxic masculinity is gender neutral has aptly been shown by Konkona Sen Sharma in her film, ‘A death in the Gunj’. The main male character in the film, Shutu, becomes a victim of toxic masculinity at the hands of his relatives.

People should demand justice for those two male students who were killed in their alma mater after being ragged. A society needs to protest as much against the ragging-murder of a male student as against the rape-

murder of any female student. Both rape and ragging are ugly manifestations of toxic masculinity.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

Political populism hinders mindset change

Editor,
The editorial “Traditions, identity crisis” (ST 22, November 2024) made interesting reading. I found two important points raised in the editorial “Conservative mindsets do not change even through generations” and Indian politicians “lack the grit and determination to change India so that it is in tune with the changing times”. Conservative mindsets can persist through generations due to a combination of cultural, psychological and social factors. Values and beliefs are often passed down from parents to children. Families and communities play a significant role in shaping an individual’s worldview, and conservative values can be deeply ingrained through

this process. People tend to associate with others who share similar beliefs and values. This social reinforcement can create an echo chamber where conservative ideas are continuously validated and reinforced. Conservative mindsets often emphasize tradition and stability. Individuals with these mindsets may be more resistant to change and prefer maintaining the status quo. Familiar beliefs and values provide a sense of security and predictability. Changing one’s mindset can be uncomfortable and challenging, leading individuals to cling to their established views. Institutions such as schools, religious organizations, and political parties can also play a role in perpetuating conservative values. These institutions often have significant influence over individuals’ beliefs and behaviours. Change can be perceived as risky or threatening. Conservative mindsets may arise from fear of the unknown and a desire to protect what is familiar and known. These factors, among others, contribute to the persistence of conservative mindsets across generations.

As for the second point raised in the editorial, Indian politicians often face several challenges that can

hinder their ability to drive significant change as frequent party-switching undermines the stability and integrity of the political system, making it difficult to implement long-term policies. Many politicians are entrenched in traditional values and practices, which can resist modern reforms. There has been a decline in moral responsibility and accountability among politicians, leading to a reluctance to take bold actions. Then there is bureaucratic red tape and institutional inertia that slows down or blocks progressive changes. Politicians often face public pressure to maintain the status quo from various interest groups and constituents who may be resistant to change. These factors create a complex environment where driving significant change requires not just determination but also strategic navigation of the political landscape.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

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

Is it ever OK for scientists to experiment on themselves?

A virologist named Beata Halassy recently made headlines after publishing a report of successfully treating her own breast cancer by self-administering an experimental treatment.

Having previously undergone a mastectomy and chemotherapy, Halassy informed her doctors that she wanted to treat her tumour by injecting it with viruses known to attack cancerous cells. This sort of approach is called oncolytic virotherapy (OVT). OVT has not yet been approved for the treatment of breast cancer, but it is being studied as an experimental approach.

Halassy is a success story of self-experimentation in medicine. She joins other examples, like Barry Marshall, who won the 2005 Nobel prize in medicine following his work ingesting the *Helicobacter* bacterium to prove its role in gastritis and peptic ulcers. This work is estimated to have saved millions of lives.

Yet, self-experimentation is often viewed with suspicion. Concerns about self-experimentation are growing because it is no longer solely the domain of professional scientists.

The availability of biotechnologies, and the prevalence of open-source science has led to the development of “bio-hacking” communities engaging in various forms of self-experimentation.

Does self-experimentation raise ethical concerns?

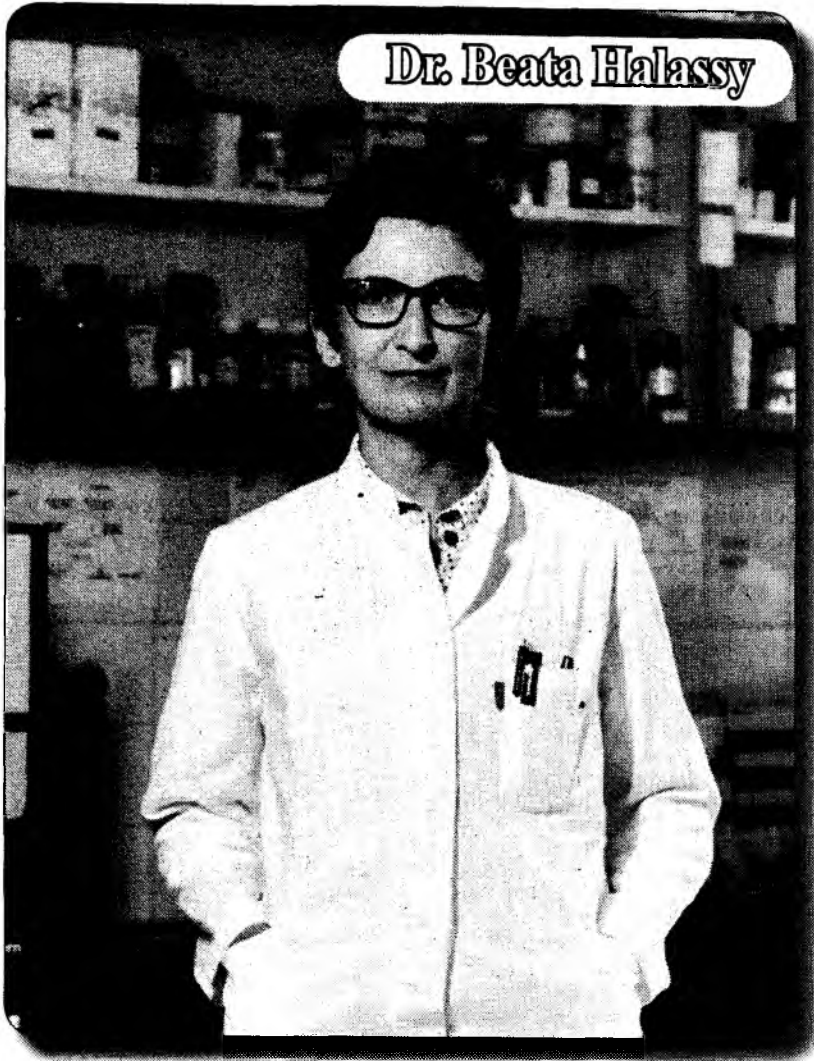
To answer this question, it is useful to return to first principles of research ethics.

Autonomy

The informed consent process is a crucial protection in medical research.

Researchers have to employ rigorous methods to ensure that individuals make a voluntary choice to participate in trials, and that they understand the risks and benefits of the experimental intervention (and alternatives).

Clearly, some self-experimenters can make informed choices to self-



Dr. Beata Halassy

administer unproven interventions. Halassy’s report makes clear that she gave informed consent. And her expertise in virology enabled her to develop a clear scientific rationale for her approach.

Still, there can be unknown serious side-effects with experimental treatments, so a second set of eyes is desirable.

Also, not all self-experimenters will be as well informed. There is a legitimate concern that unregulated forms of self-experimentation may not involve this important safeguard when members of the public experiment on themselves.

Reasonable risk to the participant

Informed consent is not the only

important safeguard in research ethics.

It is often claimed that even consenting adults should only be exposed to “reasonable risks” in research.

Ethicists often debate how to understand reasonable risk. But it is widely agreed that reasonable risks must be minimised to those that are necessary.

However, it is more complex to work out what counts as reasonable, when someone has a serious illness and is undertaking experimental treatment that might (or might not) benefit them.

Where an individual stands to benefit from receiving an experimental intervention, proportion-

ality” partly relates to how the experimental intervention compares to other therapies that doctors might use as the “standard of care”.

This is a relevant question in Halassy’s case. Notably, Halassy had already undergone a mastectomy and chemotherapy over the course of her treatment.

What’s more, the measles virus and the vesicular stomatitis virus she used in her experimental OVT had a good safety record.

In contrast, where the participant does not stand to benefit from receiving the intervention, it is sometimes claimed that it can only be proportionate to expose the participant to minimal risk. Others have argued that greater risks could sometimes be proportionate if the benefits of the research are sufficient.

One problem here is that self-experimentation often involves only one participant. That might mean that it is hard to generalise (or that it might even be misleading).

But as Barry Marshall’s case shows, self-experimentation involving just one person can sometimes generate incredibly useful findings.

However, we also have to con-

sider potential harms.

Harm to others

In Hollywood, the self-experiments of rogue scientists often go devastatingly wrong - think Jeff Goldblum’s portrayal of an eccentric scientist in *The Fly*. Sci-fi stories like these are often wildly implausible. But this should not blind us to the possibility of more credible harmful effects.

One concern is that other patients might be tempted to follow in Halassy’s footsteps and attempt an unconventional therapy, perhaps before using other standard therapies. To forestall this, it is crucial to be clear about the limited generalisability of her case, and to ensure that patients understand the tried and tested benefits of existing therapies.

A different concern is that adverse publicity from very risky experiments might make it more difficult to conduct important research. At least eight early self-experimenters died from their research, including the 29-year-old doctor William Stark who died from scurvy in the 18th century after severely restricting his diet.

There are other concerns to

consider in self-experimentation more broadly. Self-experimenters can now easily access powerful technologies like Crispr-Cas9 gene-editing tools.

In 2017, a biohacker named Josiah Zayner injected himself with a DIY Crispr-Cas9 gene therapy aiming to enhance muscle growth.

Crispr-Cas9 has the power to significantly benefit society, but it could also cause significant harm if misused through misunderstanding or malice. The worry about self-experimentation here is not just about the direct harm that misuse might cause. Cases of misuse might also undermine societal acceptance of the regulated efforts to safely develop this important technology.

It can be ethical for scientists to experiment on themselves. Such studies should at least sometimes be permitted, and certainly should be published so that others can learn from them. But it is a mistake to assume that self-experimentation only ever affects the individual involved.

Halassy embarked on her self-experiment without any ethical oversight. Things ended well for her, but that won’t always be the case. (*The Conversation*)



Self-experimentation went very badly for Jeff Goldblum’s character in *The Fly*. (X)

‘Star - Gazing’

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, NOVEMBER 24, 2024

‘Birthday Forecast’

Moon is opposite Saturn on your solar return chart will give mixed results. This is going to be a not so good time period for you. You will be tested to the fullest and made to work hard. Yet your plans will get struck. Your enemies will have an upper edge for the time being. You will be hopeless at times. Your colleagues will also suspect your intentions. Even your superiors would not support you. You will also find some persons turning inimical suddenly. Health of some elderly person in the family may also need medical attention. You will be kept busy. But the tide will turn gradually in your favour. You will get full support from life partner and children. Brothers/sisters will also provide you timely help.

‘This week for you’

Aries: (March 21 - April 20) You are expected to gain momentum and it will be a good time ahead. You will have good ventures in the field related to publishing, writing and education. You will use communication skills to attract the people which may be favorable for your professional life. Amid some minor misunderstandings your family life will be soothing and enjoyable. Health should be looked after. Stick to routine work and have a suitable diet. Matters related to your career will be sorted out soon. Be prepared and watch for the favorable time which will be coming soon to boost up your business and career. Enjoy with children and loved ones.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21) You may have mixed results as predicted from the position of stars. You may be facing a not enviable position at your work place. Cooperation and amity is needed in your behavior with superiors. Think before you speak and be careful in what is performed by you in your career. There may be a temporary conflict in between your family or may they be not satisfied with your thoughts so try to be very tactful with your family and loved ones. Take care of self and your luggage in travels. There may be some expenditure which may disturb your budget, so spend wisely. Take care of your health. Your friends may help and guide you in matters related to material gains.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21) The position of stars predicts that you may be in a position to care for the health of a family member. You may have to look after your family and loved ones. Your emotions and feelings about your children may bear fruit. They will work according to your desire. Professional and career matters will need more attention these days. You are clever enough to so decide well before you start a new venture. You may have to face some problems in love life or marriage matters. Avoid having contacts with unknown persons at your work place. Health will need attention. You may have to take some precautions and also take morning walk to avoid stress.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22) This position of stars will give you some mixed results. Financial matters and profits will grow slow. You may take steps for entertainment and betterment of health of your family and children. Education and progress in career may get affected so you may have to consult your elders to sort out problems related to these matters. Your health will be good and may enjoy some trip with your family and children. You may have to work hard in order to maintain your image in public. Your communication skills will give you desired results in improvement of relations with people. Dispute in some common sharing matters related to property, joint finances or other resources within the family are more likely at this time.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23) It is a time where you have chances of progress in profession and career. This is equally good for intimacy and friendship related matters. You may expand your social circle by image building and better communication skills. People recognize you by your talent and soft spoken words. You may have some sudden profits or achievements related to money, finance and real estate. You may have good opportunities for starting a new venture. Your marriage or love problems may get solved suddenly. Take care of your responsibilities and duties and let it not disturb your health.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22) Configuration of planets at this time depicts some mixed results. You may expect some uneasiness and unfavourable circumstances. Your friends and well-wishers may not support you at this time. Take up each matter related

Libra: (September 23 - October 23) A favourable combination reveals that there are good opportunities for you in regard to your job, work and investments. You may enjoy a time where your public image and business opportunities may get a new perspective of progress. You should keep yourself out of emotions and feelings and remain balanced and focused. Your family and children will enjoy your company in some outing. Love and affection with loved ones is assured. Sudden expenditure is expected and it may be for religious work. You may focus on utilizing this time in some important issues.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22) Stars depicts a time of monetary and financial gains for you. Take some wise steps in investments which will prove to be very beneficial for you in the long term. It may be a better time to carry your imaginations to a realistic stage. You will arrange to spend time with family, children or loved ones which will prove to be helpful in stability and peace of mind. Your courage will be remarkable and you will show your skills in order to have good combination of wits and health. Relations with friends will be good and you may enjoy good public relations. You could get involved in some charity work and improvement in social circle is also indicated.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21) You may plan to enjoy yourself and focus on matters related to entertainment and romance. You resolve problems of finance and money now. During this time you may buy products related to cosmetics, jewelry and clothing. You may give a change to your personality and outlook which may help you to be popular among friends and associates. You may engage yourself in some renovation at home or at your business place. Your vigour and courage will help you to achieve your goal. Many matters will go slow but these will be favourable for you. Health related problems may be checked in time.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20) Simply attending to your home affairs and making efforts for creating a loving environment and affection among your family members will give you satisfaction. Peacefully attend to your duties and give a bit more care to your professional work. You will prove to be good at making contacts in social life. You may take steps to take your career to new heights and achieving goals for success. Take care in travel and long journey for any injury. Health would need attention. Give due care to your children. Avoid showing some extra ordinary courage in matters related to friends and in public else you may get entangled in some conflict. Solve problems with a calm mind.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18) You may have some favourable scope in profession and career related to the armed forces. There are chances of promotion in your job. You may enjoy good health now. Financial and money problems will be resolved. If you are looking to start a new business you may go for it for profitable returns. You will enjoy interactions with relatives and friends. Marriage problems or children may get solved. You may plan for a long distance journey. Full efforts are required in love or romance affairs for stronger ties.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20) You will emphasize on improving your personal social image. You will get due regard from family and loved ones. This is a time where one should make efforts to make personal contacts within office or at your place of work. You will have wonderful relations with your family members and children. You may go with children and family members to an entertainment place or for religious trip. Spend time in creative ventures in order to have peace of mind. Keep up regular exercises in order to have sound and stable health. Money related problems will soon be resolved and gains are on the cards.

How do brains coordinate activity?

The brain is a marvel of efficiency, honed by thousands of years of evolution so it can adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing world. Yet, despite decades of research, the mystery of how the brain achieves this has remained elusive.

A new research, published in the journal *Cell*, reveals how neurons - the cells responsible for your childhood memories, thoughts and emotions - coordinate their activity.

It’s a bit like being a worker in a high-performing business. Balancing individual skills with teamwork is key to success, but how do you achieve the balance?

As it turns out, the brain’s secret is surprisingly simple: devote no more than half (and no less than 40%) of each cell’s effort to individual tasks. Where does the rest of the effort go?

Towards scalable teamwork.

And here’s the kicker: it was found that the exact same organisational structure across the brains of five species - from fruit flies and nematodes to zebrafish, mice and monkeys.

These species come from different branches of the tree of life that are separated by more than a billion years of evolution, suggesting we may have uncovered a fundamental principle for optimised information processing. It also offers powerful lessons for any complex system today.

The critical middle ground

The discovery addresses a long-standing debate about the brain: do neurons act like star players (each highly specialised and efficient) or do they prioritise teamwork (ensuring the whole system works even when some elements falter)? Answering this question has been challenging. Until recently, neuroscience tools were limited to either recording the activity of a few cells, or of several million.

It would be like trying to understand a massive company by either interviewing a handful of employees or by only receiving high-level department summaries. The critical

middle ground was missing.

However, with advances in calcium imaging, researchers can now record signals from tens of thousands of cells simultaneously. Calcium imaging is a method that lets researchers watch neural activity in real time by using fluorescent sensors that light up according to calcium levels in the cell.

Applying insights from the physics training to analyse large-scale datasets, it was found that brain activity unfolds according to a fractal hierarchy. Cells work together to build larger, coordinated networks, creating an organisation with each scale mirroring those above and below.

This structure answered the debate: the brain actually does both. It balances individuality and teamwork, and does so in a clever way. Roughly half of the effort goes to “personal” performance as neurons collaborate within increasingly larger networks.

The brain can rapidly adapt to change

To test whether the brain’s structure had unique advantages, researchers ran computational simulations, revealing that this fractal hierarchy optimises information flow across the brain.

It allows the brain to do something crucial: adapt to change. It ensures the brain operates efficiently, accomplishing tasks with minimal resources while staying resilient by maintaining function even when neurons misfire.

Whether you are navigating unfamiliar terrain or reacting to a sudden threat, your brain processes and acts on new information rapidly. Neurons continuously adjust their coordination, keeping the brain stable enough for deep thought, yet agile enough to respond to new challenges.

The multiscale organisation the researchers found allows different strategies - or “neural codes” - to function at different scales. For instance, the research team found that zebrafish movement relies on many neurons working in unison. This resilient design ensures swim-

ming continues smoothly, even in fast-changing environments.

By contrast, mouse vision adapts at the cellular scale, permitting the precision required to extract fine details from a scene. Here, if a few neurons miss key pieces of information, the entire perception can shift - like when an optical illusion tricks your brain.

The findings reveal that this fractal coordination of neuron activity occurs across a vast evolutionary span: from vertebrates, whose last common ancestor lived 450 million years ago, to invertebrates, dating back a billion years.

This suggests brains have evolved to balance efficiency with resilience, allowing for optimised information processing and adaptability to new behavioural demands. The evolutionary persistence hints that we’ve uncovered a fundamental design principle.

A fundamental principle?

These are exciting times, as physics and neuroscience continue interacting to uncover the universal laws of the brain, crafted over aeons of natural selection. Future work will be needed to see how these principles might play out in the human brain.

The findings also hint at something bigger: this simple rule of individual focus and scalable teamwork might not just be a solution for the brain.

When elements are organised into tiered networks, resources can be shared efficiently, and the system becomes robust against disruptions.

The best businesses operate in the same way - when a new challenge arises, individuals can react without waiting for instructions from their manager, allowing them to solve the problem while remaining supported by the organisation rapidly.

It may be a universal principle to achieve resilience and efficiency in complex systems. It appears basketball legend Michael Jordan was right when he said: “talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence win championships”. (*The Conversation*)

"Life without liberty is like a body without spirit."

—Khalil Gibran

The Shillong Times

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Saffron success

TWO long-standing family edifices have crumbled in the assembly elections in Maharashtra — one, the formerly fire-spitting communal outfit the Shiv Sena led by the Thackeray family; and the other the more corrupt Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) of Sharad Pawar. They have been routed but the rebel Shiv Sena led by chief minister Eknath Shinde and rebel NCP of Sharad's nephew Ajit Pawar outwitted their parent parties and won a substantial number of seats this time. Shinde who started as an autorickshaw driver in Thane is likely to lose his CM post by virtue of the fact that the BJP on its own has near-sufficient number of seats for a majority in the assembly. This leaves no scope for bargaining for both Ajit Pawar and Shinde. The electorate has ensured as much, keeping in mind the kind of filth that was swept up the surface by Sharad Pawar and Uddhav Thackeray after the last assembly polls. Another five years of stable rule by the BJP could sound the death knell for the outfits of both these leaders. Ageing Pawar is past his expiry date; Uddhav, father Bal Thackeray's prop, has proven time and again that he's not made for the rough and tough of politics. As was the case in 2019 too, the Congress had a poor show, winning 16 seats in a house of 288, signifying a lack of strong leadership for the party in the state.

In Jharkhand, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha has proved its worth yet again by winning 34 of the 81 seats and ally Congress 16 seats, ensuring the continuation of a stable INDIA alliance government there. The overall good show by the BJP in the current round of by-polls to 48 constituencies, winning 28 seats, was tamed however by the failure of the party to seize power in Jharkhand. That the Congress party got only seven of the 48 seats speaks volumes about its failure to reinvent itself, evident also from its recent defeat in Haryana and the present degradation in Maharashtra. Notably, the election of Priyanka Gandhi for her maiden appearance in Parliament as MP from Kerala's Wayanad should enthuse the Congress. Her victory in Wayanad vacated by Rahul Gandhi, who had retained his Rae Bareilly seat, is reassurance about the Nehru family's continued pan-India appeal. In Karnataka, the Congress won all the three seats. Mamata Banerjee reinforced her supremacy in West Bengal as the TMC won all the six seats. Yogi Adityanath saved his face with the BJP winning six of the 9 seats while the saffron party won all the five seats in Assam — a major credit to chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. So did Conrad Sangma with one seat for the NPP here. Overall, the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi seem mostly unassailable, at least for the present.

The Stars of My Destiny

By H H Mohrmen

Steve Jobs, in his address to the graduates of Stanford University, said, "Life can only be lived going forward but understood looking backward." This statement rings true: one needs to trust their gut feelings and move on in life, but one can only connect the jigsaw puzzle by looking back. Life cannot be understood in the present; it can only be comprehended with the benefit of hindsight. Bhagwan Rajneesh sums it up beautifully in his saying about life: "Life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived." Life is meant to be lived, and it is important to embrace it as it unfolds.

Like any ordinary life, mine hasn't been easy. Life, they say, is like a roller coaster, and I have had my fair share of ups and downs. There have been tumultuous times when I stumbled and fell repeatedly. At times, I couldn't even understand who I was or what I wanted to do with my life. It was during these tribulations that I embarked on an inward journey in search of life's purpose. While trying to understand myself, I discovered that, somehow, my name had given me direction. Yes, that's right—there is meaning in a name. When your parents give you a name, it carries more significance than just your identity. My identity is intricately linked to my name, and it has shaped my life's purpose.

Coming from a poor family, we had to work hard from a young age; collecting firewood, cooking, and washing our clothes were part of our daily chores. In fact, I started working during winter vacations just to help my parents buy us books for the next school year. We didn't have to pay much for school because we attended government schools and colleges, and if there was an admission fee, it was minimal. I tried my hand at every trade my parents and relatives were engaged in—selling tea with my parents at Jawmusing, helping my grandmother sell fish, and selling eggs, fish, betel nuts, and pan leaves with my aunt. As I grew older, I started my own venture selling betel nuts (waidong), cigarettes, and bidis and also worked as a day labourer during holidays to support my parents. Later, I considered ministry as a career.

When I decided to join the ministry, people asked me

about "the call." They would ask, "What is your call?" or "When did you receive the call?" My answer was simple: if "the call" means divine intervention, honestly, I didn't have such an experience. There was no lightning, no divine spark, no rainbow, and not even a bird in my story. Neither did a lucky charm intervene—I was on my own.

Having said that, I did experience an incident that gave me a sense of purpose of what I should do with my life. It wasn't an act of God or divine intervention but sheer coincidence, if you may call it that. Since then, everything I do in life has been influenced by that incident, and the image I saw that night remains etched in my memory.

It was the winter of 1987, and Meghalaya was preparing for the next general elections to the State Assembly, scheduled for February 1988. Along with several other youths, I was contracted by the election department of

"The villages assigned to me were remote, and reaching them was difficult. Trekking was often the only option due to the lack of proper roads. If at all we used a vehicle, we mostly traveled on four-wheel-drive trucks, often on rugged terrain."

Jaintia Hills District for an electoral roll enrollment drive. The job involved updating the electoral rolls for various legislative assembly constituencies in Meghalaya. The contract, initially for three months, required us to visit villages and register the names of young people who had just turned 18.

While the plan sounded good, implementing it was challenging. As they say, it looked good on paper, but reality was a different story. Like any government program or project, neither the village headman nor the villagers had time to entertain us. Even if we stayed in the village, we rarely met people because they left early in the morning for their fields and only returned before the sun set. By that time they will be too tired to even talk to us. What normally happened was, the headman would summon the elders to his house, where they counted the huts and tried to recall if the families had sons or daughters of voting age. Back then, no birth certificate

was required—the headman decided who was eligible. Often, they didn't even have the correct names because there was no electricity not to mention phones to verify details. We enrolled them anyway, even if the names were incorrect.

The villages assigned to me were remote, and reaching them was difficult. Trekking was often the only option due to the lack of proper roads. If at all we used a vehicle, we mostly traveled on four-wheel-drive trucks, often on rugged terrain. On one particular trip, I traveled on a Shaktiman, a condemned military truck. Sitting in the cabin with the driver and helper, I vividly remember climbing a hill so steep that it felt like we were sitting on a cockpit of a rocket and heading for the sky.

One journey required careful planning. I traveled from Jowai to Sutnga by bus, which was only possible on a market day to ensure transportation to the

villages. From Sutnga, I rode a bus to Semasi, where many houses still fermented rice beer. People were poor and primarily farmers, as coal mining hadn't started in the area then. We were advised to visit houses during the day because, by evening, it would be difficult to communicate with the residents. Semasi was a small hamlet with few houses, and we completed our task in one sitting with the headman.

From there, I walked to Pala, Ryngkoh, Khahnar, and other villages until I reached the last Pnar village. Beyond that, the settlements were inhabited by the Biate people of Kuki descent. At Semasi, we were also advised not to enter Pala on Saturdays or Sundays because the villagers were deeply religious and did not entertain visitors on Sundays.

The village of Kseh, now under Saipung Block, was a small hamlet with a few thatched huts. There was no electricity, and the village was near the Kupli River, which was then abundant

with fish. That night, the headman served us rice with fish from the river. The moon, following the rice harvest, was in its full glory, and its light transformed the village into a silvery wonderland. The thatched roofs, fences, trees, and ground shimmered under the moonlight, creating a surreal, postcard-perfect scene. The sight I witnessed that night was of a village glimmering with silvery light; everything was bright and beautiful.

While admiring the scene, I felt a deep connection to the place and a sense of peace. I thought, "This is it. This is where I belong." The hills, rivers, forests, and people became special to me. The star-filled sky and constellations seemed to connect me to the ground beneath my feet with the heavens above. That night was like a second birth for me. Though my mother gave me life, the surreal beauty of that scene shaped who I am today. From that moment, I knew what I wanted to do with my life: work with the people in the villages. That moonlit night, with its celestial beauty, became my "call."

This vivid memory has guided me ever since. I recall meeting a fellow student from Haryana at the University of Manchester who was studying engineering on a government scholarship. When I told him of my plan to return to India, he asked, "What for? Why do you want to go back? What is there in India?" He even called me 'bewakoof' (fool) for deciding to return. Another young man from Kolkata, who had also come to study theology, abandoned his plan midway and decided to stay in the country. Though I felt awkward initially, I knew where my heart lay and what I wanted to do with my life.

The image of that moonlit night, with its galaxy of stars, keeps flashing in my mind, calling me and connecting me to my destiny. I realized that staying in the UK would not allow me to contribute meaningfully to the world around me. Back home, there was so much I could do.

They say there's a star with your name written on it. As your mother gives birth to you, cosmic dust clumps together to form your star which will be your ultimate guide. In my case, I am fortunate to have a galaxy of stars leading me and showing me the way. Is this apotelesma? I don't know but these stars continue to guide me towards my purpose.

Civic Rights vs. Privileges and Personal Rights

By Gervasius Nongkseh

We are yet to come to term with the tragic accident where Huddersfield Rymbui succumbed to injury, after a VIP escort vehicle, as alleged, hit his motorcycle. The accident has sparked broader discussions on pertinent pressing issues affecting the city, including privileges versus fundamental rights, personal versus civic rights and the like.

In every city, balancing civic rights with personal rights and privileges in shared spaces has become an ongoing challenge. This issue becomes especially pronounced in crowded, narrow streets, where limited space must serve pedestrians, vehicles, vendors, and sometimes VIPs with special privileges. In Shillong, where roads are narrow and footpaths limited, the intersection of civic rights, privileges, and personal rights is visible daily, creating complications that echo across many densely populated areas worldwide. Understanding these challenges—and the innovative solutions that other cities have adopted—can provide a pathway towards more inclusive, accessible, and equitable urban spaces. At its core, the concept of civic rights implies that public resources and spaces—such as roads, sidewalks, and parks—are accessible to all. Civic rights ensure that everyone, regardless of status, can navigate the city freely and safely. However, these spaces are often shared by various groups with unique needs and challenges, including street vendors who rely on footpaths for their livelihoods, and VIPs who receive special privileges that inconvenience the public.

While civic rights are theoretically equal for all, the reality often differs. Some groups face restrictions on their right to access public spaces, while others enjoy certain privileges that can compromise this shared access. The street vendor's right to work, for example, sometimes conflicts with a pedestrian's right to a safe and unobstructed footpath. Similarly, VIP privileges, such as road closures or priority access, can disrupt the flow of everyday life, inconveniencing the public at large.

VIP privileges often mean certain people, particularly government officials and dignitaries, have exclusive access to certain routes, parking spaces, or buildings. This is often justified on the grounds of security or operational efficiency. However, in a city like Shillong with narrow streets such privileges can result in severe congestion, delays, and inconvenience to the public. The frustration of commuters stuck in traffic due to VIP motorcades or road closures is a common complaint in many cities, where the lines between necessary security measures and excessive privileges blur.

Globally, this issue has spurred various responses. In major cities across Europe, VIPs are encouraged to use public transport where feasible, reducing their impact on traffic flow. In London, even the Prime Minister can be seen using public transit, a practice that not only minimizes disruption but also demonstrates solidarity with citizens. In Singapore, traffic policies are designed to allow minimal disruption by prioritizing quick and efficient VIP routes without extensive closures. These practices offer insights for cities like Shillong, suggesting that a balanced approach could help mitigate the impact of VIP privileges on civic access.

Recently, I walked through Police Bazaar, ledwuh, and Laitumkhrah, and navigating the pathways felt nearly impossible due to the overwhelming presence of vendors. Sidewalks have essentially turned into makeshift shops, leaving pedestrians with little space to walk safely. The issue seems to be escalating quickly; just a few months ago, it wasn't this chaotic. Meanwhile, the government, syiem, durbars and village headmen appears to be standing by passively, observing the problem without taking visible action. This unchecked spread of vendors not only clogs pathways but also poses risks to pedestrian safety, highlighting the urgent need for balanced, effective regulation. In many urban areas, street vendors are a lifeline, offering affordable goods and services to residents, often in the very places where people live and work. However, the presence of street vendors on sidewalks and narrow streets presents significant challenges. Can the right to livelihood override the right to safety? The stalls obstruct pedestrian flow, force people onto the roads, and create hazards. Street vending is a crucial means of livelihood for millions, but it must be balanced with pedestrian access and safety, especially in crowded areas.

Worldwide, cities have implemented varied approaches to address this balance. In Bangkok, the government introduced "regulated vending zones" where vendors can set up stalls without obstructing footpaths. These designated zones help sustain vendors' livelihoods while ensuring pedestrian pathways are clear. Similarly, Mumbai has organized specific time slots and locations for vending, allowing footpaths to be used freely during peak hours and reducing congestion. Such solutions highlight a middle path that can be applied in Shillong, where vendors might be allotted specific zones or times that respect both their needs and those of pedestrians.

Here are some possible solutions that could be adapted for cities like Shillong: Walking on left side: One practical suggestion for balancing public spaces is to encourage pedestrians to walk on the left side of pathways, as is customary in many countries. This simple guideline can improve the flow of foot traffic, allowing people to move smoothly while leaving space for faster walkers. Adopting this approach could help reduce congestion and enhance safety, particularly in crowded urban areas with limited sidewalk space. Time-Restricted Vending: Street vendors could be allowed to operate only during non-peak hours, freeing up footpaths during rush hours. This approach has seen success in Mumbai, where vendors operate during designated times, providing pedestrian access during busy periods. Pedestrian-Only Zones: Certain streets, particularly those with high foot traffic, can be designated as pedestrian-only zones. Many cities around the world have implemented car-free streets, especially in market areas, to reduce congestion and improve safety. In Shillong, this could be implemented in popular areas during weekends or on specific days, creating a safe and accessible space for pedestrians. Designated Vendor Zones: Assigning specific, limited areas for street vending would allow vendors to continue their work without obstructing pedestrian pathways. By creating such zones, Shillong could emulate Bangkok's success with regulated vending areas that protect both vendors' rights to work and pedestrians' rights to safe pathways. Public Transportation Incentives: VIPs or elites, like ordinary citizens, could be incentivized to use public transportation, where feasible. In cities like Copenhagen and Zurich, prominent officials are encouraged to use trains or buses, which reduces road congestion and demonstrates solidarity with the general public. Improved Traffic Flow Management: Introducing one-way streets, synchronizing traffic signals, non-stoppage area and improving signage can help reduce congestion. Shillong could adopt this approach for certain roads, directing traffic in a manner that eases congestion and allows for better movement. Promoting Walking and Cycling: Encouraging alternative modes of transport, like walking or cycling, can significantly reduce traffic congestion. In cities like Amsterdam, bike lanes are integral to urban planning, offering a space-efficient, eco-friendly alternative to cars. Shillong could consider adding cycling paths or pedestrian zones that encourage walking and cycling within its narrow streets.

A truly balanced approach to civic rights and urban access requires input from all stakeholders. Vendors, pedestrians, local authorities, and citizens should have a say in creating policies that impact shared spaces. Citizen advisory councils, public surveys, and regular consultations can provide valuable insights that lead to practical, fair solutions. Urban spaces reflect the values of the societies that create them. By prioritizing fair access, safety, and shared responsibility, Shillong and similar cities can ensure that civic rights are respected and that public spaces serve as inclusive places for all. The path forward involves a thoughtful approach to urban planning that considers the needs of both individuals and the community as a whole. Only then will Shillong be termed a smart city. But do we have the vision? Do we have the will to act?

'Origin' of gunpowder & ancient Khasi weapons of war

Editor,

Commenting on the article by Toki Blah, "Weapons, arm bearers and tactics of ancient Khasis" (ST November 14, 2024), the Khasi battle sword is called 'ka waitlam' and also as 'ka wait sum'. Bah Toki has correctly described it to be used in slashing and hacking and with its sharp pointed end can also be used effectively as a blade to stab in close quarter fighting.

But the thought provoking article of Bah Toki brought back memories of a story once told to me many 'moons' ago. Besides the sword and bows and arrows, the Hynniewtrep people were known to have developed the art of iron smelting for hundreds if not thousands of years ago and in the process learnt the technique of making different sizes of canons called 'ki ramshangk'. According to this elderly Khasi gentleman whom I met many years ago, who has since passed away, these 'ramshangk' as he identified them, can be hand-held, or placed on the ground position for firing depending on the size of the cannon.

This gentleman also explained how the Hynniewtrep people came to develop the method of making gunpow-

der for use in the 'ramshangk'. He explained that when urine is passed in a particular spot of land for a long time, the earth on that particular spot becomes black. That blackened earth when dug out and dried and mixed with some other mixture becomes highly explosive/flammable. Now searching through Google we find that urine contains substantial amounts of phosphorus and potassium and we read that during the American Civil War in 1863, Confederate chemist Jonathan Harrelson figured out how to create more potassium nitrate by extracting it from human urine. Though the men were all away fighting, southern women could collect their urine from bedpans and pour it into a huge horse-drawn truck for the manufacture of potassium nitrate. A request was placed in the Selma Alabama newspaper: When A Lady Lifts Her Skirt, She Shoots A Horrid Yankee".

Getting hold of this information today one must acknowledge and appreciate the ingenuity of our forefathers then, which must remind us again of what our own philosopher poet U Soso Tham had written in one of his poems, "Jingstad ngi wad sawdong pyrthei, jingshai ka Ri ngim tip eiei" (Knowledge we seek around the world, wisdom of our own we know nothing of".

Yours etc.,
Michael N. Syiem,
Via email

Everyone gets a piece of the cake

Editor,

Who is truly responsible for the chaos on Shillong's roads—our government or the people of Meghalaya? Driving here feels like a free-for-all. There are no effective speed limits, and drivers seem free to honk wherever and whenever they please. The traffic officials, overwhelmed by their daily duties, can only do so much.

Small details matter when driving on the narrow roads of Shillong, yet reckless behaviour has become the norm. Bikers are among the worst offenders, weaving through traffic in a zig-zag manner and adopting dangerous trends like using mobile phones while riding. Some even wedge their phones into their helmets, talking, as they navigate the roads. This so-called "multitasking" defies logic. Balancing a scooter while texting should not be something to marvel at—it's alarming. If the city's CCTV systems were properly utilized, many of these violators could be held accountable.

Car drivers, too, contribute significantly to the chaos. Instead of sticking to the left, many drive in the middle—or worse, on the right—causing unnecessary inconvenience. It's common to see cars improperly signaling, using right indicators when they intend to pull over

to the left. This lack of basic road etiquette seems unique to Shillong, leaving one to wonder how driving licenses are issued here.

Bikers from neighbouring Assam add their own dangerous habits to the mix, such as overtaking cars from the left—a highly unsafe practice. Taxis, meanwhile, operate with reckless abandon, turning off their headlights at night to "save battery power," endangering other road users. They stop abruptly in the middle of the road to pick up passengers, with no regard for the disruption they cause.

Traffic personnel deserve appreciation for cracking down on vehicles with tinted windows, loud exhausts, and unlawful horns, but there is much more to be done. For instance, while the BJP government banned red beacons for VIPs in 2017, the allowance of sirens has become another source of noise pollution. Sirens should be reserved exclusively for ambulances and fire services. Ironically, the only advantage of these VIP convoys is that other vehicles can tail them, bypassing traffic jams.

Ultimately, we are all to blame. As citizens, we need to take responsibility for our actions. Driving safely and courteously isn't just about following the rules—it's about creating a road culture where everyone can coexist. Let's stop pointing fingers and ensure everyone gets their fair share of

accountability—their "piece of the cake."

Yours etc.,
B. Laitphlang,
Via email

Arbitrary functioning of local durbar!

Editor

It was no less interesting to read in one of the letters appearing in these columns under the caption of 'Fee collection announced on locality PA system!' (ST November 16, 2024) in Laitumkhrah written by Ibalamon K. naor. This write-up has indubitably unfolded the hitherto opaque can of worms where the local Dorbar under the duly elected Rangbah Shnong and other key incorporated members of the locality can fix the quantum of monthly money donations for purpose of civic operations and other extraneous exigent contributions in the event of death of the local residents to be given to the bereaved family collected from the docile residents, willy-nilly. Notably, such monetary collections have conveniently found spaces in many localities thick and fast. And the amount of subscriptions may differ from one locality to another at the discretion of those at the helm.

These monetary contributions, as described, are per se intended for the noble social services of the locality for civic purposes and other ex-

traneous manifold amenities of bona-fide residents. Nonetheless, based on the premises of the aforesaid letter, a pertinent question arises as to why such financial requisitions are being imposed upon the commoners given that the accountability of maintaining civic undertakings is being shouldered by the existing Shillong Municipal Board. For street lighting, MeECL is accountable; PWD is responsible for repairing roads at appropriate times, besides other public utility services which are to be addressed when there are public complaints.

The letter in question further reiterated that residents who fail to comply with the Dorbar's directive would have to face punitive actions such as 'no public announcement shall be made in case of bereavement in the defaulters' family,' and perhaps other retributive procedures may be imposed upon those defaulters. The said letter has gone on record to state that such contentious collection of money is nothing short of daylight robbery, and if that be so, the law abiding citizens may query, "will not the local Dorbars who resort to these most practices be actionable in the court of justice?"

Yours etc.,
Jerome K. Diengdoh,
Shillong-2

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"Trusting our intuition often saves us from disaster."

— Wilson Schaef

The Shillong Times

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Govt-run Rehab Centres Imperative

WITH the growing number of youth succumbing to substance abuse and drug dependency the need for government run rehabilitation centres is imperative. In 2023, Meghalaya Chief Minister said there are at least 3 lakh youth that are consuming drugs with about 40,000 of them being drug dependent. The only known drug and alcohol detoxification and rehabilitation centre in Meghalaya is SANKER which also treats patients with mental illness. This single institution while doing a commendable job is inadequate to house so many patients.

Alcoholism and drug addiction are both illnesses and need to be treated as such but with more emphasis on counselling and involving the inmates in productive activities. This involves human resources and medication apart from adequate space for physical activities because that is one way of keeping the inmates both physically and mentally busy to take their minds off the craving and help them get out of substance dependency which often is a long process. While psychiatrists and counselling psychologists say addiction is a treatable disorder, it often takes months and sometimes years for a drug dependent or alcoholic to be rehabilitated and even then they are called recovering addicts with the possibility of slipping back on the slightest pretext. Families are known to fall into bad times to pay for the cost of rehabilitation of their family members. Research shows that when treating addictions to opioids (prescription pain relievers or drugs like heroin or fentanyl), medication should be the first line of treatment, usually combined with some form of behavioural therapy or counselling. Medications are also available to help treat addiction to alcohol and nicotine. Medications are used to help people detoxify from drugs, although detoxification is not the same as treatment and is not sufficient to help a person recover. Detoxification alone without subsequent treatment generally leads to resumption of drug use.

For people with addictions to drugs like stimulants or cannabis, no medications are currently available to assist in treatment, so treatment consists of behavioural therapies. Treatment should be tailored to address each patient's drug use patterns and drug-related medical, mental, and social problems. To the question - can addiction be cured, doctors say that just as treatment for other chronic diseases such as heart disease or asthma, addiction treatment is not a cure, but a way of managing the condition. Treatment enables people to counteract addiction's disruptive effects on their brain and behaviour and regain control of their lives. All of this is time consuming and requires that the patient remain an inmate and has to follow the required protocols. This means long term stay in a rehabilitation centre where the cost of stay and medication is involved and which is a burden on the family. At present several families from Meghalaya have had to send their family members out of the state for treatment and rehabilitation which is even more expensive. This makes it incumbent on the State Government to think of one rehabilitation centre in each of the districts where substance abuse is rife. Else the future of Meghalaya remains bleak.

Letters to the Editor

The human quest for belongingness

Editor,

I am writing to express my deep gratitude for the faith-laden, poetic, beautiful piece, "The Stars of my Destiny," by H H Mohmen (ST, Nov 25, 2024). In these troubled times, with war, grand larceny, violence, and creeping authoritarianism, it was heartening to read a piece so vivid that the reader could experience (vicariously), the author's experiences. As I grew up in an anglicised identity bubble in Shillong, and since the separate state of Meghalaya did not yet exist at that time, I never got to know this beautiful land. But this piece helped me experience the raw rootedness of this state and its beautiful people.

Many of us who came to the west, came reluctantly, and stayed reluctantly -- not because the west was faulty, but because India back then was impossibly difficult to survive in, with any semblance of dignity -- unless one had well placed fathers and brothers, plenty of money, and played into the politics of patronage. For marginalized Indians (like Dalits, women, and others), it was difficult to call India home. The uncomfortable

truth is this: despite western racism, for many Indians, the west has been far kinder than India. They have felt more accepted here than ever in India. The allure here is one of freedom, dignity, everyday justice, everyday ethics, and a well-oiled, well-functioning infrastructure, less corruption -- everything that was and still is lacking in India. But because of its unique history and historical purpose, the west (especially America) is very rootless. Thus, despite these great benefits, which should never be taken for granted, and for which one should be grateful to the west -- the longing for roots does not disappear.

In my case, this longing has been, not so much for literal familial roots, which are now in Bangladesh (thanks to the partition of India) -- but for metaphysical roots -- a place in the universe I can call my own. I now understand that our real roots are always in the Divine, but our earthly roots also matter. If these terrestrial roots are to slake our thirst for a home, they cannot be tied to a village, language, or ethnicity -- but must lie in profound existential moments, exactly like that described in this poignant piece.

My thanks again to the author.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar
Via email

Single Motherhood in Khasi Matrilineal Society

By Fabian Lyngdoh

The concept of 'broken families,' which exists in the mind, and the prevalence of high percentage of single mother households which exists objectively in fact, appear to be the greatest socio-cultural problems that the Khasi society is facing today. Though fragmentary aspects of this socio-cultural riddle had been presented in my past articles, Bhogtoram Mawroh's article, "Broken families: Unveiling the role of patrilineal and matrilineal systems" (The Shillong Times - 20/11/2024), urges me to present the skeleton of this problem in a more coherent manner.

According to Khasi tradition, the social identities of individuals are subsumed in the identity of the clan (kur) to which they belong. The basic unit of the clan is the family of a woman and her children, with supporting and protecting maternal uncles. Men as maternal uncles were the builders of the clan economy, and the father's physical presence or absence had nothing to do with the cultural legitimacy, legality, honour, security, and social interactions of the family.

Husband and wife in the modern-day nuclear family stand as coordinating opposite sexes and genders. But in the Khasi traditional family, the status of a Khasi man as husband, and the status of a Khasi woman as wife, had little significance. In the Khasi traditional family, a man as maternal uncle, and a woman as mother, do not stand as persons of opposite sexes or genders. If the clan is an atom, then the mother and all female members are the nucleus, and the maternal uncles and all male members are the revolving electrons. The symbolism of this ideal can be seen in the Khasi cultural dances. So, men and women are closely bonded together in the clan organism. Their roles are not based on male and female as coordinating opposites, but on the distinctive roles they played in the life of the clan as complementary and harmonious elements. However, there is a riddle! A man's social status is ultimately based on his female clan members. Even if a man has numerous brothers, but has no surviving female clan members to advocate for, he ceases to be a full-fledged citizen; he loses social recognition, and no longer has any organic role or ceremony to perform in the Raid or the Hima however intelligent, wise or rich he might be.

A full-fledged basic Khasi community was composed of several clans (not less than three). These clans entered into marriage transactions as a way of multi-angular gift or exchange of the male procreative faculty between

them, rather than the concept of the exchange of females as in other societies. Khasi traditional marriage was a mutual recognition of the two respective clans to the reproductive relationship of a man and a woman, not merely for their personal pleasure or private relationship, but for establishing kin relationship between the clans through the birth of children. At the personal level, marriage was not a covenant at all, but only a cohabitation which can come to be, and end, at any time. But by the birth of children, an indissoluble social and spiritual covenant between the two clans was established which shall persist perpetually even after the death of both husband and wife.

As Bhogtoram Mawroh has rightly pointed out, the original marital customs of the Khasis were like the concept of 'walking marriage' or 'the visiting husband', where the husband only visited the wife at night for the basic purpose intended, and returned to his maternal home at daybreak. That was the original custom not only that of the Synteng or Pnar as generally opined, but of the whole tribe. The fact is that, all the clans in the Khasi Hills (Khyntiam) other than those that originated from non-Khasi mothers in the Khyntiam area itself, were groups of migrants from the east; that is, from the region which today is called Jaintia Hills, and Ri Bhoi. As the various migratory hordes proceeded further into the upper hills towards the west, the original tradition got diluted and modified in various degrees through generations. But the core of tradition remains.

Polygamy was not prevalent in Khasi society, but serial monogamy is permitted among the Khasis even today. A man or woman may take several spouses one after another, but not all at the same time. Every time a man or woman took a spouse with due recognition of the clans involved, whether it was the first, second, or third spouse, it was socially recognised as legitimate spouse, and children from all the spouses were recognised as legitimate children of the man or woman. All the woman's husbands or man's wives were equal in status, and all children were legitimate members of the wives' clan. Elements of this tradition are still alive even today. If there is a narrative contrary to that, it must be a new invention.

The concept of single motherhood did not exist in Khasi tradition. The idea of single motherhood in Khasi society today, comes from the superimposition of the modern nuclear-family con-

text, over the traditional clan (kur)-family context. In the past, when maternal uncles were constantly in the family to see to the socio-economic welfare of the clan, the prevalence of mothers without husbands was a perfectly normal phenomenon. The maintenance and security of the clanswomen and their children was the responsibility of the whole clan under the leadership of maternal uncles. On the other hand, even if a woman has a husband, there was a concept of 'sah kynthah khynnah', referring to a deplorable situation of woman who has no more clansmen to look after her and her children.

Social circumstances have changed. The clan ceased to be a social institution as it has become only an idea and a name for personal identity and proximate familial relationships. The nuclear family has emerged to perform the role of the clan. The nuclear family is not traditional as it is not based on the father's clan, or the mother's clan, but on the father, mother, and children, as individuals. Subsequently, a new narrative emerged saying that according to the Khasi tradition, the father is the head and the mother is the heart of the family. This is a new concept derived from other sources, and not from Khasi tradition. Traditionally, there was a strong social sanction against any man who leaves his clan (mother, sisters, nieces). The religious death rituals of such a man would not be performed by his clan, and it was believed that his soul would not enter into the peaceful spiritual abode; but he would linger as a ghost in painful sorrow and remorse forever on the earth. On the other hand, there was no traditional social sanction against a man who leaves his wife and children! But today, a Khasi father is being interpreted as the head of family, and expected to see to the family's economic and social well-being. But this expectation is still arbitrary and circumstantially imposed because it has neither been culturally institutionalized, nor legally sanctioned. Many Khasi men today do take full responsibility for their wives and children. But this comes from individual conscience instilled by new normative agents, and not from Khasi tradition. Khasi society today is under a painful cultural transition where women are thrown miserably in its course. As the traditional matrilineal system has almost totally vanished, and the father's role as head and provider of a nuclear family is yet to be culturally institutionalized, a great number

of Khasi families became disoriented. In this situation, if the father leaves the family, the burden falls on the shoulders of the woman, especially among the poor. That's how single motherhood emerged and becomes a curse! Culturally speaking, this misery is not due to the breakdown of the nuclear family which is still in the process of evolution; but it is due to the breakdown of the traditional matrilineal clan system. It is not because the husband deserted his wife and children, but because due to vicissitude of history, Khasi men have to leave their clans and strive to become integrated as fathers in the nuclear families of their wives. That is the riddle! A Khasi man today is culturally and legally without a bounden duty towards the welfare of his children, and without a bounden duty towards the welfare of his sisters and nieces. Though he is conscientiously bound, he is practically free! Social problems cannot be solved by inventing new narrative of traditions, but they have to be stricken at the roots.

Though drastic changes have taken place, remnants of traditions still linger, dictating and controlling the minds of people. There is a lingering perception of security in the traditional clan system. With the emergence of single motherhood, homelessness, orphans and landless, and the wide gap between the rich and the poor, the Khasi society is no longer a clan-based tribal society. Modern attempts to constitute 'sengkur' (clan association) is a new phenomenon which might deliver some service, but it would not be able to replicate the traditional matrilineal clan institution. It can only operate as a welfare or charitable social organisation, but it cannot be a statutory institution. The society has to undergo gradual process of cultural transformation to overhaul collective consciousness and rearrange cultural priorities according to the present circumstances. We cannot blame the matrilineal loopholes, or patriarchal incursion, or Christian influence. It is an unavoidable part of human history that none can escape. As the Khasi man has been circumstantially relieved of his responsibility towards the clan, he has to learn to assume the role of a responsible father, and the woman too has to learn to re-look into clan priorities and adjust herself with the hard facts of the nuclear family. There is no possibility for turning back; if the Khasi society has to survive and prosper, it has to rediscover itself not on the clan-based tribal society, but to begin riding and moving forward on the vehicles of the nuclear family.

Reading the Maharashtra Verdict from a Fiscal Lens

By Ajit Ranade

Maharashtra at 14 percent has the biggest share of the nation's economic output. Its capital Mumbai is also the commercial and financial capital of the country. From this maximum city, the nation collects a whopping disproportionate share of direct taxes comprising corporate and personal incomes. Mumbai's real estate is more precious than gold. The State's Jawaharlal Nehru Port is India's busiest container port handling about 60 percent of all containerised cargo, and among the top five ports in terms of total tonnage in the country. It is seamlessly connected to the dedicated freight corridors, with the eastern leg already functional and western leg to be operational soon. Hence it is crucial for India's exports. The proposed Vadhavan port at the northern end of Maharashtra will be state-of-the-art, and among the top ten ports in the world when completed. Mumbai's 22-kilometer trans harbour bridge, commissioned earlier this year, is a crucial link between the island city and the mainland. This will lead to resurgence in real estate activity on both sides of the bridge and give an impetus to commercial activity.

There are several roadways, metro and other infrastructure projects underway which will all add to Maharashtra's mighty economic heft. In fact, it has the ambition of becoming India's first one trillion-dollar sub-sovereign economy in the next few years.

So naturally forming the government in Maharashtra is a big prize for any political party. The Bharatiya Janata Party led coalition Mahayuti achieved a stunning victory in the Assembly polls last week winning 234 out of 288 seats. This is their third consecutive victory, a hat trick for the BJP in three Assembly elections, in what was once a mostly Congress-ruled State. The sweeping victory, and generous verdict by the voters of Maharashtra who gave 49 percent of all the votes cast to the Mahayuti, is as sound an electoral mandate as you can get. No fringe party can now wield any ransom like power to form a coalition government. This spells good for political stability. The victory was all the more remarkable because it came barely five months after the BJP-led Mahayuti fared very poorly in June in the Lok Sabha elections. Thus, despite an anti-incumbency factor, farmer distress in regions of Marathwada and Vidarbha, prices dipping below minimum support price for cash crops like cotton and soybean and the perception of corruption, the Mahayuti pulled off an amazing victory. This will have national reverberations and will also lead to political realignments in the State.

Every electoral outcome prediction and then postmortem is a matter of intense debate, theorising and is endless. Depending on one's prior beliefs one can fit any model or theory to fit the observed behaviour. No one theory or explanation is however sufficient. Even the exit polls have gone horribly wrong in their prediction. The recent decisive victory of President Trump for the second time in the USA is an example of an outcome which many believed was not possible or was very remote. It is clear that what motivates or animates voters is not subject to clean and simplistic explanations. The determinants of voter preference are not purely economic, or even driven by narrow self-interest, as public choice theory would have us believe. It could be purely an emotional response at the ballot box. With the increasing influence of religion-based propaganda and caste identities, it becomes an

almost impossible puzzle to crack as to which is the decisive factor.

However, one cannot deny that the Majhi Ladki Bahin (my beloved sister) scheme launched barely three months before the State's elections has had a significant impact on voter behaviour. This was passed by the Assembly well before the model code of conduct kicked in. In its somewhat hasty implementation, the eligibility checking might not have been as rigorous as needed. As a result, 25 million women now receive 1500 rupees per month as direct cash benefit. After elections the entitlement will go up to 2100 rupees as per the poll manifesto of the Mahayuti. The total extra burden on the exchequer will be around 63000 crore per year, exceeding the amount spent on the National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme or the free food grain scheme for beneficiaries in the State. Already Maharashtra's finances are such that 67 percent expenditure is on "revenue items" comprising salaries, pensions and interest payment on past debt. That debt will climb to 7.8 lakh crore by next year, making the annual interest payment burden alone nearly 50,000 crore. This interest burden cannot be defaulted or postponed.

The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) in its report to the government in May has warned about rising debt burden. Even without the Ladki Bahin scheme, the State has to plan repayment of past loans which are due in the next seven years. That amount is 2.75 lakh crore, which is roughly 40,000 crore to be provisioned every year from now on. All this extra debt burden would have been manageable if the growth rate of the State (and hence tax revenue) were to rise. But at least this year the growth rate is expected to be 5.5 percent, below the national GDP growth. This is well below the 12 percent needed to achieve a 1 trillion-dollar economy. The State which had a revenue surplus in 2019 now has a revenue deficit projected to be 0.5 percent, and fiscal deficit of 2.6 percent of the State's GDP. The total debt is getting close to 20 percent of the State's GDP, which is considered the maximum limit under the combined fiscal responsibility framework for States and the Union government.

Seen from this fiscal lens, the short-term benefits of a direct cash transfer scheme have led to a future burden on the taxpayer. The Ladki Bahin (LB) scheme has not eliminated others. Indeed, there are more sops such as zero electricity bill and 15,000 rupees for farmers, 10000 rupees for students and so on. The LB scheme has been a successful formula which was used in Jharkhand as well and is part of at least a dozen other States which offer cash or kind benefits targeting women. It pays electoral dividends by increasing female voter participation. But what it does to the fiscal situation, and consequent drag on growth, inflation and interest rates as well as future tax burdens is not well examined.

Poll myopia needs an antidote of responsible fiscal leadership for long term sustainable growth. Otherwise, populism is a race to the fiscal bottom. And the path to a future Universal Basic Income and unconditional cash transfer scheme is jeopardised.

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

Shillong Literary Festival cheered up countless hearts

Editor,

Under the blooming cherry blossoms of Shillong's idyllic Ward's Lake, the fourth Shillong Literary Festival came to a successful conclusion. This three-day celebration of literature and culture transcended mere entertainment, becoming a platform for "deeper" reflection, creativity, and inspiration. Through a series of enthralling sessions, thought-provoking discussions among celebrated writers, scholars and media journalists from across the country, and an elegant display of art and culture, the festival highlighted the profound power of words to reflect society and expand human horizons. It also demonstrated how words can paint a picture of our world and push the boundaries of what we truly know. As attendees shared stories, recited poems, and engaged in animated conversations, they found themselves seeing life through new lenses and forming deeper connections with one another.

In today's digital age, where fleeting interactions and frivolous chats on social

media often replace meaningful engagement, Shillong Literary Festival emerged as an oasis of profound connection and intellectual depth. It brought together young and old, reviving a communal love for books and storytelling -- undoubtedly a vital ingredient for personal growth and societal progress.

Yes, this Literary Festival has also played a "pivotal" role in unlocking the "untapped" creative potential of young people, like a literary locksmith for the mind. By offering a space for interaction with top authors and poets, it has provided invaluable insights into the art of storytelling, character creation, and the significance of creativity in writing. These moments of learning never fail to "motivate" young minds to discover their hidden talents and pursue their creative passions.

Above all, this festival has perhaps reignited the passion for reading, a fundamental pillar in nurturing skilled and imaginative writers. Minister and poet Paul Lyngdoh, along with Chief Minister Conrad Sangma, have left no stone unturned to make this event unprecedented. Delivering his speech amidst the beauty of nature, Paul Lyngdoh poetically dwelt on the "gap" between God's perfect creation and man-made chaos, aptly

insisting on addressing this issue through "profound and thoughtful writing" for the larger interest of society. It deeply touched the hearts of the audience. Perhaps it was for this specific reason that Henry David Thoreau retreated to the woodland and brought out the masterpiece Walden, and T.S. Eliot wrote "The Waste Land". Both geniuses strove to make the world understand that unless humans turn towards nature or look within and strive for self-evolution, all man-made achievements might prove disastrous.

The ongoing climate catastrophes, capable of engulfing entire civilizations in flames, are a glaring example of such a reckoning. To everyone's applause, both the Chief Minister and Bah Lyngdoh sincerely assured that they would provide every possible support to motivate and inspire those literary talents who desperately need such nurturing and encouragement.

Yes, sessions like The Power and Magic of Oral Storytelling and Indigenous Voices of Northeast India brought to life the richness of oral traditions and the importance of protecting and preserving indigenous narratives. In a compelling dialogue with Bikash Roy Debbarma, Anil Kumar Boro, and Basan Marak,

Streamlet Dkhar emphasized the critical need to preserve and document indigenous languages and stories. By doing so, the festival fostered an incredible respect for cultural diversity and pastoral narratives while igniting creative passion in participants, including school and college students.

It is no exaggeration to say that perhaps a Shakespeare-like genius is tending to rice fields in a quiet Ri-Bhoi village, while a Wordsworth-like poet crafts verses with whistles beside springs in Kongthong. The Shillong Literary Festival should also hold the promise of discovering and nurturing these "unseen gems". By providing them with a platform to shine, the festival ensures that creativity from every corner of the region flourishes, enriching the world with its beauty and wisdom while ensuring that no one feels left out. Truly, where stories and poems from the heart are nurtured, humanity thrives under the blessings of divinity.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

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*"If you want to see the sunshine,
you have to weather the storm."*

— Frank Lane

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Socialism, secularism

THE system of democracy owes its existence and draws its inspiration from the Constitution of a nation. Without a Constitution, there can be no democracy. The Constitution of each nation reflects the people's collective will. So too with India, where the Constituent Assembly finalised its framework and contents shortly after Independence and this was brought into force in 1950. The Constitution remains as the fundamental governance document with periodic changes being effected by elected governments. Its sanctity should be protected and preserved.

The Supreme Court decision to uphold the changes effected to the Constitution in 1976 is seen in this light. The apex court upheld the inclusion of the terms, Socialism, Secularism etc., in the amendment made by the Congress government led by Indira Gandhi in 1976. Those who challenged the changes in court cited the point that these were incorporated at a time when the government was on an extended term – the Emergency period when no election to Parliament was possible – and hence its legal validity was 'questionable.' The Court rejected the argument and noted that Parliament had deliberated on these matters in 1978 when the next elected government took office. Both socialism and secularism, the court rightly noted, ensured equality and equal rights for all citizens, which is appreciable for all times to come. Socialism need not necessarily have to have a bearing on the financial aspects of governance. Notably, even before these words were incorporated into the Indian Constitution, successive governments from the time of the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had given eminence to such concepts. India as a nation was comfortable with both these ideals though the era of Liberalization arrived and the socialist concepts changed vis-a-vis the nation's financial governance. At the same time, the concept of equality prevailed in the government's engagements in the social sphere.

Secularism is a modernist view set against the fundamentalist obsessions of Islamic nations. Neither the Americas nor Europe, under democratic systems, entertained a fundamentalist/religious coating for their governing systems. Islamist nations' where individual freedom is a casualty are bedevilled by anarchy other than in the dictatorial, oil-rich Gulf region. In India, the RSS had never been comfortable with the concept of secularism and sought to undercut it in order to establish Hindu supremacy over the nation. That this is the only Hindu nation of prominence in itself cannot justify the attempts at import of religious fundamentalism to its governing systems. Creating social wedges in the name of religion is reprehensible. The BJP government led by Narendra Modi has over the past 10 years treaded carefully and mostly sought to function under the dictates of the Constitution for the simple reason that the public mood is pro-Secularism. It must remain so in order to ensure and promote a fraternal feeling among the entire citizenry.

Tragedy Befalls an Ideal

The government of Meghalaya supposedly had a grand idea when it came up with the People's Colleges Grant-in-Aid Scheme to improve the state's higher education system. Addressing the systemic flaws in Meghalaya's academic landscape required challenging but important goals, such as recruiting skilled educators, improving institutional infrastructure, and providing fair access to quality education. Unfortunately, this plan has turned into a fertile environment for political patronage, favoritism, and nepotism—as is typical with many well-intentioned plans that fail to materialize.

What started out as a way to encourage meritocracy has turned into a tool to keep inequity in place. College Governing Bodies (GBs) are now able to use their position to promote allegiance above competence, rather than ensuring justice. The outcome is a system that undermines education by giving more power to those who aren't qualified while promoting those who are. The purpose of this essay is to use a Foucauldian lens to critically examine the scheme's execution, illuminating the power dynamics involved and their wider implications for the educational future of Meghalaya.

The Intersection of Power

A persuasive foundation for understanding the operation of the People's Colleges Grant-in-Aid Scheme is Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge. Power, says Foucault, is constructive rather than repressive because it builds knowledge systems that support its legitimacy. The Governing Bodies' ability to influence the hiring process is a key component of this strategy. These groups do more than just choose educators; they also dictate terms like "merit" and "qualification," molding discussions about educational standards to fit their agendas.

Take the Mawsynram Border Area College as an example. Here, an exceptionally qualified candidate—the senior faculty member in her field and a doctorate holder—was rejected for appointment. Her denial was due more to the Governing Body's favouring of less competent candidates with stronger political ties than to any objective evaluation, according to an RTI investigation. This incident shows how authority works by discrediting people's qualifications in addition to excluding them. Their power is intrinsic to the information they generate, which includes determining who is "fit" to teach.

Lack of Responsibility in Surveillance

Another way to look at Jer-

By Napoleon S Mawphniang

emy Bentham's Panopticon is through Foucault's examination of it. Prison architecture known as the Panopticon, in which an invisible watcher watches over inmates at all times, serves as a metaphor for contemporary forms of control. The Governing Bodies of Meghalaya's colleges play the part of the watchdog, keeping tabs on the admissions procedures while avoiding responsibility for their actions.

Their replies, or lack thereof, to RTI questions demonstrate this imbalance. Under this strategy, several schools either don't answer questions regarding their hiring processes or give just partial answers. Not everyone responds; some see transparency regulations more as annoyances than mandates. As a result of not holding anyone to account, bias is free to thrive. The Governing Bodies' control over information allows them to avoid accountability and maintain their domination, which in turn strengthens their authority.

Time and Its Weaponization

The lack of established deadlines for finishing the hiring process is one of the scheme's most obvious flaws. Appointments might take as little as eight months at some schools and as long as two years at others. This discrepancy goes beyond a simple administrative error and exemplifies what Hannah Arendt may term the "instrumentalization of time" in the service of power.

Indefinitely extending recruiting processes allows Governing Bodies to favor selected candidates through manipulation of outcomes, all while preserving the appearance of procedural legality. Qualified candidates are demoralized by the temporal uncertainty since they are left wondering if their applications will ever be examined. Those in control use time as a tool to strengthen their grip on power while undermining faith in established systems.

Structured Violence as Nepotism

In this system, nepotism functions as a kind of structural violence, an unseen but ubiquitous factor that unfairly benefits some groups at the expense of others. A prime example of the transformation of political capital into academic capital is the disclosure that one Governing Body of college had set aside a teaching position for the wife of a member of the legislature. The transaction was rationalized as a token of appreciation for receiving funding through the scheme, which exposes the appointment's transactional character.

In addition to being moral-

ly reprehensible, these actions have serious consequences for educational equality. Students lose out on good education when incompetent teachers are hired for personal connections instead of merit. Appointments like this also send a discouraging message to future teachers: that political support is more important than talent and hard effort.

In systems where nepotism is rampant, comparable trends have been noted on a global scale. In the 1990s, colleges in post-Soviet nations were ruled by local elites who valued allegiance more than expertise, and they treated them like fiefdoms. Those in power would often redirect donor-funded educational changes in sub-Saharan Africa without proper supervision systems, causing schools to deteriorate. In the absence of immediate remedial action, Meghalaya runs the danger of following these paths.

The Exclusionary Epistemology

The idea of testimonial injustice put out by philosopher Miranda Fricker, in which people are demonized because of their bias, provides another perspective from which to examine this plan. Existing power systems devalue the credentials of qualified candidates without political connections, which results in their systematic exclusion from consideration, regardless of their merit. As a result, power dynamics take precedence over knowledge, leading to what I call 'an epistemology of exclusion'. People in power shape the criteria used to evaluate candidates in order to maintain their dominance. As a rhetorical tool to hide systemic injustices, meritocracy becomes an illusion in this setting.

The Paradox of Bureaucracy

According to organizational theorist Michel Crozier, there is a "bureaucratic paradox" in the function of the Education Department of Meghalaya. The Department is ostensibly in charge of carrying out this plan, but it is lacking in both the means and the determination to guarantee equity. As a result of its vague regulations and lack of oversight, Governing Bodies are free to do as they choose.

This department's immunity from accountability and the maintenance of established power structures are both achieved by the institution's current state of inertia. Because of this system, injustice becomes the norm, and people no longer speak out against it but instead quietly participate in it.

Suggestions:

Several changes are required to fix these systemic

problems and rebuild public faith in Meghalaya's higher education system:

1. Reorganizing Institutions
 - External specialists should be involved in recruitment panels in order to limit the influence of Governing Bodies.
 - To avoid power dynamics from becoming entrenched, implement a system of rotating leadership within Governing Bodies.
2. Systems that Promote Openness
 - Require that all hiring processes and outcomes be made public.
 - Form autonomous monitoring bodies to examine hiring practices.
3. Regular Schedules
 - Set firm due dates (say, six months) for all universities to finish the hiring process.
 - Institutions that do not meet these deadlines should face penalties.
4. Addressing Dissatisfaction
 - Establish a separate appellate body wherein disqualified applicants can contest rulings.
 - Ensure that those who report instances of corruption or favoritism are protected.
5. Conformity with NEP Requirements
 - Verify that all scheduling adheres to the standards set out by the National Education Policy (NEP).
 - Programs for professional development should be made available to newly hired educators.

In conclusion, the People's Colleges Grant-in-Aid Scheme serves as a lesson in excess of its own good fortune and a chance for change. Because of the absence of accountability and transparency in their execution, even well-intended policies can be swayed by powerful interests.

"Where there is power, there is resistance," Michel Foucault wisely says. The difficulty is in turning this opposition into productive action, which necessitates adjustments in both procedures and the basic power dynamics within educational institutions. That is the only way we can restore education to its rightful place: a vehicle for fostering inclusion rather than exclusion, for creating more just futures rather than preserving existing inequalities.

Keeping this in mind will help us keep in mind that education is not merely a policy issue, but a moral obligation that reflects our shared dedication to human flourishing and fairness.

Let us make sure that our inaction against injustice and the erosion of our state's educational system will not be remembered by the generations to come.

(The writer is an Advocate and Humanist)

High unemployment, poor quality jobs, real concerns of Meghalaya's economy

Dr. Rajib Sutradhar

A working paper titled "Relative economic performance of Indian states over 1960- till 1923-24" released recently from the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council (PMEAC) casts the economy of Meghalaya in a very poor light. While the report has identified the entire North Eastern states as a laggard, Meghalaya turns out to be the worst performer among them. Authored by Sanjeev Sanyal, member of the PM-EAC, and Akansha Arora, the paper showed that the per capita income of Meghalaya was always lower than the national average, but the gap has widened post 2010s. As a share of national average per capita income, the state's per capita income has declined further from a lowly 81% in 2011-12 to 73.3% in 2020-21, before recovering slightly to 74.3% in 2023-24.

A bigger worry comes when one looks at how the labour market has performed in the state. The data from Annual Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2023-24, released from National Sample Survey Office, Govt of India, shows that the state is a basket case even within the North Eastern region, with all the indicators of labour market performance, flagging off alarm bells for the region. To begin with, the state has reported a very high dependency ratio of 59.4%, vis a vis the average below 50% reported by most other states (except Nagaland) in the region and all India. High dependency ratio implies the opposite of what one terms as a phase of demographic dividend, as most resources go into supporting consumption and maintenance of the dependent population, leaving the state with a limited share of resources for accumulation and investment for further growth. Such a high dependency ratio is primar-

76%, meaning among the eligible workforce, 3 out of 4 are either employed or are looking for jobs. However, at a more disaggregated level, labour market participation at 57% is much lower in urban Meghalaya. Despite being a matrilineal society, the female labour force participation in the urban areas (57.85) varies significantly from the rural labour force participation (75%). Urban Meghalaya has not only witnessed lower female labour force participation but also reported a very high unemployment rate at over 20%, which is higher than any North Eastern state and compares poorly with national average of 8.7%.

At over 5% unemployment rate overall, Meghalaya has reported unemployment rates higher than national average in both rural and urban areas. However, the situation is particularly alarming in the urban areas. At 14.3% of unemployment rate, urban Meghalaya has reported much higher unemployment rates than any other North eastern state and compares poorly with the national average of 6.7%.

Quality of jobs is another dimension of the labour market. There are three types of jobs in the labour market—self employment, regular/salaried work and casual work. Typically, regular /salaried jobs are considered better, followed by self employment and the worst in the category is casual work. Self-employment is itself a heterogeneous category as someone may just work in their own account enterprise or simply as a helper. Share of workers engaged as self employed is much lower in both urban (32.1%) and rural areas (56 %) of Meghalaya compared to any other state in the North East or overall all India level which reports corresponding figures of

Poor labour market participation means that discouraged by the dimming prospects of the labour market, people may withdraw from it altogether. Labour market participation in the state is high and stands at 76%, meaning among the eligible workforce, 3 out of 4 are either employed or are looking for jobs.

ity the result of high fertility rates, another marker of underdevelopment. As per the National Family Health Survey -5, the state has a fertility rate of 2.89, the highest next to the poorest state Bihar, whose fertility rate stands at 3.02 %.

Sectoral allocation of workers shows that more than 50% of the workers in the state are still in agriculture, though the sector contributes only 23% of the state GDP, indicating a very low level of income derived by those involved in the sector. Despite the ban on coal mining, the share of state's workers involved in quarrying and mining stands at 2.45% much higher than the national average of 0.23. In contrast, the share of workers involved in the manufacturing sector is at 2.45 %, the lowest among all north eastern states and compares very poorly with the national average of over 11%. Typically, the manufacturing sector is associated with jobs that are steady and relatively better paid.

Going beyond sectoral allocation, the health of the labour market in a state can be assessed by looking at three indicators – labour market participation, unemployment rate and quality of jobs. Estimation of unemployment rate does not include those who are not looking for jobs. Low unemployment rate means nothing if few participate in the labour market, either as employed or are searching for jobs. Poor labour market participation means that discouraged by the dimming prospects of the labour market, people may withdraw from it altogether. Labour market participation in the state is high and stands at

48.7 and 64.2% respectively. However, the poor condition of the labour market in the state manifests in a very high level of casualization in both rural and urban areas in the state. Casual labour accounts for 31.5% of the urban jobs and 19% of rural jobs in the state, much higher than both all India average and any state in North East India.

The dipping economic fortunes of the state and the poor condition of its labour market have translated into high poverty rates. A NITI Aayog discussion paper titled 'Multidimensional Poverty in India since 2005-06' released in early 2024 reported that with 27.8% multi-dimensionally poor, the state ranks next to only Bihar and Jharkhand. High labour force participation in the state has to be also taken with a pinch of salt as the poor can't afford to remain at home, waiting for a better job.

When the labour market performs as poorly as one in Meghalaya, it is not surprising to see the frustration and anger among the youths taking its ugly turn towards outsiders who are often portrayed as the cause of all the maladies in the every-day life of ordinary citizens in the state. Given the situation, the State Government has its hands full. It not only needs to perform well in terms of better growth, but also needs to take initiatives to record job rich growth – growth that translates into good quality jobs that give its citizens mobility in their lives.

(Dr. Rajib Sutradhar teaches at the Department of Economics, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong Campus.)

Letters to the Editor

Ordinary citizens pushed aside

Editor,
With great power comes great responsibility, Spiderman says. Indeed! Though fictional, yet this superhero dedicates his life to protect the helpless and the destitute. Alas! This is mere fiction. Reality speaks differently. Yes, our representatives are no super-heroes yet they are certainly elected and vested with the power and the will to do good, at least for those that have elected them. Sadly, this is not the case with our representatives. For them with great power comes a feeling of greater importance and arrogance. A feeling of being different and at an altogether different level.

If only those in power understand that because of the power vested in them, they are expected to be more responsible towards those who have placed them in positions of authority. However, reality speaks otherwise. Power is no longer the ability to utilise one's power for the good and the welfare of all. Instead power is used to ensure one's personal growth both in terms of wealth ranking and the right of way by bulldozing fellow drivers on public roads.

As far as Meghalaya is concerned, there is little to no progress and development at all. Have governments in the past and the present one done anything concrete and

substantial for the state and its citizens? Those of us living in Shillong, are still fortunate. But what about our fellow citizens living in the villages? Can the government conveniently remain blind to their difficulties? These are people who cannot access even the basic necessities, leave alone the other comforts of life. Do they have proper roads, schools, hospitals and better health care? NO!

While our representatives are indulging in the VIP culture they are also shielded from the travails of being weary at not receiving proper health care, of being stranded in traffic or not finding a parking space or of reaching their destinations on time. Now we have the convoy escorting our VIPs even hitting and killing those driving on the public roads. Then we have the hawkers who are still not being relocated; the Chief Minister visiting the students on hunger strike at NEHU as a citizen and not as the Chief Minister of the state, and many more such examples which show that things are not working for the ordinary citizens. In all of this it is us lesser beings – the ordinary citizens that constantly face difficulties and lose out. Is there hope for a better tomorrow? Well, all that we have is hope.

Yours etc.,
Jennifer Dkhar,
via email

Civilised VIPs

Editor,
Some years ago I was

watching a football match in the U.K. and on the big screens the camera panning the crowd suddenly stopped and then zoomed on to a gentleman sitting with a young lad by his side - it was none other than the then U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron and his young son watching their favourite team. The Prime Minister sat amongst the crowd in one of the public galleries with no signs of black or grey 'cats' anywhere to be seen and no special seats and no signs of any VIP treatment. The crowd, it appeared, also accepted him as one of the spectators and treated him so. When the match was over, the Prime Minister and his son shuffled out of the stadium together with the crowd with no signs of preferential treatment and with no disturbance to the public at all. I remembered the wonderful feeling I had on seeing such civilised behaviour and my mind recalled the way our so-called VIPs back home behaved and who, on being elected, thought that they walked on air and while on the road, make their escorts shove other lower mortals out of the way. It is time that our so-called VIPs learn some decorum and respect for the public who elected them and they should learn a lesson from the hit and run incident at the Cherry Blossom festival which defied all sense of civilised and humane behaviour.

Yours etc.,
D M Pariat,
Shillong

Vidyasagar and a remarkable coincidence

Editor,
September 2024 witnessed a remarkable coincidence. On the Patna High Court judge's comment that a widow has "no need to put on makeup", the Supreme Court said that the remark, "is not commensurate with the sensitivity and neutrality expected from a court of law." Interestingly, the Supreme Court made this observation on September 25, which is a day before the birth anniversary of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who got the Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act decreed in 1856 after withstanding steep obstacles from regressive forces.

Just after Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the name of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar comes to mind as a pillar of Bengal Renaissance that showed the light to India. As a matter of fact, Ishwar Chandra complemented Ram Mohan. Raising his life, Raja Ram Mohan Roy fought against the practice of sati, and he was able to reclaim Hindu widows' right to live. Whereas Ishwar Chandra won for the widows the right to live according to their choices.

Bengali prose got its life at the hands of Ram Mohan. Vidyasagar complemented it by adding beauty and flow to it. Raja Ram Mohan Roy believed that education was a tool for social change, and all should have access to it.

Whereas Vidyasagar championed women and backward castes' right to education.

Unfortunately, those with a vested interest always try to brainwash us into believing that the past was good and the present is bad, so we need to go backwards. So long as we get great reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who do not hesitate to strike hard at the age-old prejudices that denied girl's and Dalit's right to education and widow remarriage, the agenda of the regressive forces will not meet with success.

I learnt the Bengali alphabet through Ishwar Chandra's book 'Borno Parichoy' (Introduction to the letter) and Sanskrit through his books 'Upakram Monika' and 'Vyakaran Koumudi'. He was a philosopher, academic, writer, social reformer, translator, printer, and publisher. But more than that, he was an 'ocean of kindness' (Dayar Sagar) as had aptly been described by the poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt.

He did everything for women's education, starting from establishing schools for girls, to door-to-door campaigning, requesting parents to send their daughters to school. He was as good as his words. Not only did he fight for the widow's remarriage, but he also arranged for his son to marry a widow. This shows that there was not an iota of hypocrisy in him.

Sri Ramakrishna was another one who walked the walk and talked the talk. Sri

Ramakrishna embraced Islam and religiously followed its path. Then again, he embraced Christianity and did the same. Actually, he practiced what he preached, "Many opinions, many paths."

Vidyasagar means ocean of knowledge. But to know about the man behind this name, we need to understand the words of Sri Ramakrishna who said when he came to meet Vidyasagar, "Today I have come to the ocean. Until now I have come across canals, lakes, and rivers. Now I see the ocean." When Vidyasagar humbly retorted, "Then, sir, you are welcome to take some salt water." Sri Ramakrishna refuted him by saying, "No, my dear sir, you are surely not the salt ocean. You are not the ocean of avidya. You are the ocean of vidya, the ocean of milk!"

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's statue was destroyed by a saffron-attired group, on May 14 2019, at Vidyasagar College in Kolkata. But no one can destroy Vidyasagar, who neither bowed his head to the colonial mindset of high-ranking British officials' nor to inhuman rituals. The Supreme Court's recent observation on the eve of Vidyasagar's birth anniversary shows that he is still showing the light to us.

Yours etc.,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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"A great man is one who leaves others
at a loss after he is gone."

— Paul Valery

The Shillong Times

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Smart City Conundrum

IT'S a travesty to imagine that a city that's unplanned and built up over decades without adhering to any regulations and where building by-laws are regularly flouted can be transformed into a "Smart City." The neon-lighted Smart City signboards up in different parts of the city have become a sick joke. Much has been invested in the Smart City project including so-called storm drains which are supposed to carry water but many of those drains continue to house water pipes that share space with the drain water. Just how unhygienic this can be imagined when some homes surreptitiously release their septic tanks into public drains. It is a tough call to regulate a society that is wayward and bent on breaking the rules. Civilised societies are measured by the compliance levels of the citizens to the rule of law. This is far from possible in a state with multiple authorities pulling in different directions. That there is no elected Municipal Board is a surprise to many who visit this state and learn of this distinct phenomenon. Within the same city there are areas beyond the ambit of the Shillong Municipal Board where civic services are managed by the so-called traditional institutions which function in a whimsical manner and with each one having its own set of administrative practices. No two Dorbar Shnong function in the same manner.

Since there is no civic authority in areas beyond the 10 sq km radius, taking Police Bazar as the centre, the roads and drains are unswept and unkempt. Is there a smart city whose residents empty their septic tanks and kitchen waste water directly into the river? Is there a smart city where vehicles are allowed to be washed in the river? The existence of the State Pollution Control Board (SPCB) is itself suspect since every violation under the planet takes place without any punishment being meted out to the violators. While citizens cannot be policed 24x7 yet punitive measures are important to deter regular offenders. An important characteristic of a Smart City is its roads. Can that be said of the roads in Shillong city? Repair of a road/culvert that is less than a kilometer in Langkyrding next to an international school has taken over a year with no end in sight. This is true of most road repairs. Never in the past have Shillong roads been so dilapidated so what are the indicators of Shillong's claims to being a Smart City.

The essence of a Smart City is retrofitting - which means planning in an existing built-up area to make the existing area more efficient and liveable. Depending on the existing level of infrastructure services in the identified area and the vision of the residents, the cities will prepare a strategy to become smart. Clearly this consultation has not happened in Meghalaya. Without citizen participation how can the Government execute anything? Is that a Smart move?

Letters to the Editor

Secularism the cornerstone of India's unity in diversity

Editor,

The editorial "Secularism, socialism" (ST November 27, 2024) made interesting reading. The Constituent Assembly initially omitted the terms "secular" and "socialist" from the Constitution for several reasons. At the time, the term "secularism" was considered ambiguous and potentially misunderstood as being opposed to religion. The Assembly wanted to avoid any misinterpretation that might arise from including such a term. DR B.R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Constitution, opposed the inclusion of "socialist" because he believed it would restrict the democratic process. He argued that defining the state's economic policy in the Constitution would limit future governments' flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances and the will of the people. The Assembly prioritised the inclusion of fundamental rights and establishment of a democratic framework that would ensure equality and justice for all citizens. They believed that the principles of secularism and socialism were inherently reflected in these rights and did not need to be explicitly stated in the

Preamble. Over time the interpretation of secularism and socialism evolved in India.

These two terms were later added to the Preamble through the 42nd Amendment Act, 1976 to the Constitution, reinforcing these values explicitly despite challenges regarding their legitimacy and timing. Article 368 empowers Parliament to amend the Constitution, including the Preamble. In 1978, the Indian Parliament deliberated on the terms "secular" and "socialist" in the Preamble of the Constitution. The aim was to reinforce the values of secularism and socialism in India. The debate in 1978 was part of the broader discussions on the Constitution's 42nd Amendment Bill, which retained these terms after extensive parliamentary discussion. The Supreme Court later upheld the inclusion of these terms, emphasizing their widespread acceptance and clear understanding by the people of India. It also recognised the Constitution as a living document, adaptable to society's evolving needs. India is a democratic and secular state and therefore creating social division based on religion is deeply harmful and goes against the principles of equality and unity. It can lead to discrimination, conflict and a breakdown of social harmony.

In a diverse society like India, where multiple reli-

gions coexist, fostering mutual respect and understanding is crucial for maintaining peace and progress. The Indian Constitution enshrines the values of secularism, ensuring that the state treats all religions equally and does not favour or discriminate against any. This principle is vital for promoting social cohesion and protecting the rights of all citizens.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh
Shillong

Wanted meaningful development

Editor,

Through your esteemed daily, I would draw your kind attention to the callous killing of individuals in the past which has slowed down the pace of development. As a result our state is reeling under a serious crisis and this can be attributed primarily to the personalized politics and poor educational infrastructure. Today everyone talks about development and equates it to construction of roads, multi-storied buildings, shopping malls etc. whereas meaningful development is through educational enlightenment. This in turn will promote individual freedom, empowerment and yield important developmental benefits. Unfortunately, many of us

who have undertaken that responsibility, particularly the elected, have deviated from the primary objective of ensuring quality education that is affordable, free and fair besides other more constructive approaches towards nation building.

Education is the foundation for enlightened minds that can add to the quality of development. It will also be worth mentioning that even after 52 years of statehood Meghalaya could not have its own state university to cater to the needs of educational institutions. I would further add that many of our children are dreaming to study in the much touted Shillong Medical College which was supposed to be set up through public private partnership. Sadly the status of that medical college is unknown. It is also a fact that the Central Government has a vision to set up new educational institutions for Meghalaya and perhaps many more in other fields but due to lack of initiative these are yet to materialize. Even hydro electricity projects are at a standstill though our state is blessed with abundant power potential.

The vision of a developed nation can only materialise when social illnesses are corrected and the present young generation are empowered to lead the state and bring about suitable social reforms for which they need to be good human beings first

and others what the status of women in the Bible is. Is she an equal to a man and does she have similar rights to a man? Can we interpret the Bible to support women as heads of households and holding important social, religious and political positions? This is a very important discussion because in a nuclear family set-up, gender relations are going to be still important. Who is the weaker sex in this set-up will determine how the husband and the wife treat each other? Is the strength of the sex (man or woman) determined by the earning capability of a certain gender? That again depends on who may be allowed to go out and work.

Now there's also same-sex relationship where partners will belong to the same gender, man-man or woman-woman. What happens in this situation? There will be those who will oppose, Fabian Lyngdoh, included but wouldn't this undermine the logic of a march of modernity to which we have to adjust? If there's an argument for going back to the traditional (?) logic of a marital union being between man and woman, why can't there be an attempt to go back to the original matrilineal custom of walking marriages? Why give preference to Christianity over other traditions?

I am skeptical of going back completely or in the future blindly while ignoring the choices that are available to a community in how it wants its future to be. We need to move forward but unless we confront the patrilineal logic which treats one gender (man) as superior to another (woman), whether it's the inevitability of a nuclear family or return to traditional (?) Khasi or Christian) broken families are always going to be a big problem. Recently, there was news that a woman was set on fire by her husband in Jaintia Hills. I thought I was reading a story from the mainland. Would this tragic incident have happened if the woman was staying with her own family, surrounded by her brothers and other members of the family? Is modernity important in the lives of such women? Feeling sad after the fact will not bring justice to the countless women who suffer at the hands of patrilineal customs. Removing such customs is the only solution.

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

Yours etc,
Krishnendu Deb,
Via email

Secularism: hallmark of the Constitution

Editor,
Kudos to the editorial, "Socialism, secularism" (ST, November 27, 2024). In its recent judgement, the apex court rightly said that both Socialism and Secularism ensured equality and equal rights for all citizens, which is appreciable for all times to come. Some people have been trying to banish the words Secular and Socialist from our Constitution by spreading half-truths that as these two words were not in the original Constitution, therefore they are not at all a part of it.

It is true that those two words were not in the Preamble when the Constitution was adopted and enacted on 26 November 1949 or when it came into effect on 26 January 1950. It was incorporated in the Preamble of the Constitution by the

42nd Amendment Act in 1976. But it cannot be said that the ideals of Secularism and Socialism were not an intrinsic part of the original Constitution. Part IV of the Constitution of India dealing with the Directive Principles of State Policy (from Article 36 to 51) was a part of the original Constitution. It is totally based on socialist principles such as the welfare of the people, legal aid, the right to work, and the right to education.

On the other hand, Secularism had been embedded in the Constitution at the moment of its birth, in the form of Article 25 to Article 30, which has been regarded as one of the basic structures of the Constitution. While Article 25 has given every citizen equal entitlement to freedom of conscience and free profession, practice, and propagation of religion; Article 25 (2) has made religion under the control of the State, and not vice versa.

So, we need to highlight the fact that our Constitution is Secular and Socialist in every inch to counter the false information based on a half-truth.

Yours etc,
Sujit De,
Kolkata

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I am skeptical of going back completely or in the future blindly while ignoring the choices that are available to a community in how it wants its future to be. We need to move forward but unless we confront the patrilineal logic which treats one gender (man) as superior to another (woman), whether it's the inevitability of a nuclear family or return to traditional (?) Khasi or Christian) broken families are always going to be a big problem. Recently, there was news that a woman was set on fire by her husband in Jaintia Hills. I thought I was reading a story from the mainland. Would this tragic incident have happened if the woman was staying with her own family, surrounded by her brothers and other members of the family? Is modernity important in the lives of such women? Feeling sad after the fact will not bring justice to the countless women who suffer at the hands of patrilineal customs. Removing such customs is the only solution.

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The boon and bane of chatbots

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

Man is a social animal and chatting is an integral part of life. Chatting is a basic human function without which people would fall outside the continuum of society. The best and purest form of a chat is a face-to-face one. But, the times are shifting drastically now. The degree of chats with robots/machines is ever increasing especially among the youth. Be it education, health, finance, investments, banking, navigation, etc the quantum of solutions being offered by chat-bots is becoming more significant. For instance, people now depend on chat-bots to find a route to a certain location. The era of calling people to find any location is over. Three years back, the chat-bots were only text-based. Now they are text, voice, image and even video-based. They are being developed into more effective and indispensable bots. Are they good or bad? Are they a necessary evil? What is the boon and bane?

Chat-bots everywhere

Chat-bot is a machine/program that resides in the cloud. It can access all information available in the cloud which then basically forms the source for their responses to any query. For example, the website of education, health, financial, etc., organisations feature chat-bots. In fact, chat-bots is the first encounter that the user will have in opening most websites today. It will start with pleasantries like 'Hi and good morning/afternoon' and then get down to business on education or health or money. In many cases the user need not scan through the website as the chat-bots will do all the navigation and information-seeking. Well-versed technocrats point to the development of the internet. They explain that the evolution of the internet can be traced to the inception of the telegram. The telegram was a simple mode of information-transfer and presently the internet is a different mode altogether. They say that chat-bots will go through the same scale of transformation. Today they are mostly only text/voice but in future they will evolve into something very intelligent (say bionic humans). This means that the chat-bots will only get smarter. They will be more powerful with the ability to offer solutions to problems which the human mind cannot fathom at present.

Boon

Chat-bots give quick responses. They give specific responses as per the filters set by the user such as length, context, content, etc. For complex subject-matters, chat-bots provide the starting point for having some basic understanding as a beginning. The benefits are many for businesses. While selling their products/services, chat-bots can do the necessary discussion with the prospective consumer and even negotiate the price. Some examples - if a consumer wants to buy a printer, chat-bots can discuss with the consumer the moment he/she enters the website of the shop. The discussion will involve the type and make, price and warranty, discount and delivery, etc of the printer. All the while, the entrepreneur need not worry about the purchase/sales negotiation till the deal is final. The entrepreneur can use this quality time to attend to other tasks of the business. For the consumer, it saves time and money for not having the need to go physically to the shop. In health, the patients can schedule appointments with the doctors of their choice as per their convenience. Chat-bots will inform patients about the nature of a hospital and the ailments for which they provide treatment. These are all efficient time/money solutions to everyday human problems.

Bane

Chat-bots are the antonym of original thinking. Today, academic material is easily available through chat-bots. In the past, a visit to the library or even searching through the internet for documents was a must while preparing notes, assign-

ments, etc. Further, the documents are to be compiled, read, compared, selected/not-selected for inclusion in the notes, etc. Now, chat-bots have made this important academic exercise irrelevant. The learner has become so dependent on chat-bots that, in the absence of one the mind does not seem to work. The era of original thinking is declining fast. Even for simple topics the learners are jumping to chat-bots without some minimal effort of original thinking by connecting facts, figures and experiences. For example, take the federal structure of governance in India. Any thinking effort (by combining federal and governance) will conclude that it is about the centre, state and local governments. However, the majority will undertake the easy way out of chat-bots to find the answer. This writer has experimented with a few chat-bots (AI Chat-bot, AI Master, ChatGPT and Google Gemini). It is found that (at least for now) they only scan the surface of the available materials on any topic and deliver very general answers. They don't encourage deep and analytical thinking.

It's a machine after all

A prolonged chat with any chat-bot will give us the false impression and feeling of talking to an actual person. The program is written in such a way that the text responses and the voice modulations will give anyone a misconception of a person at the other end. This is the genius of coding. By understanding word, words, words pattern and sentences the chat-bots generate human-like text/voice responses that connect with the emotions of the user. All said and done, a machine is still just a machine and chat-bots are such and nothing else. Since it is a machine and depending upon how much it can access the cloud in which it resides, the chat-bots can sometimes give incomplete, misleading and even wrong responses. This is the reason why it is advisable that when using any chat-bot one should always go for the paid version. Standard pack is good but the best is always the pro/premium pack. These realities remind us that chat-bots are not better than humans; rather it is the other way around. Chat-bots are programmed by humans and not vice versa.

Humans are irreplaceable

Till date, machines/chat-bots have not been able to understand and replicate human emotions. No matter how real and authentic the discussion with chat-bots feel they will never be able to have a human touch (at least in the foreseeable future). Recent studies/observations have found that after continuous exposure to chat-bots and their quick responses, such users expect the same kind of quick response from their friends while chatting on Whatsapp. In the event of a slow response - anxiety, anger, misunderstandings creep in. Further, if the response from the friends on Whatsapp is not detailed like what is experienced in chat-bots, then this too can cause resentment and conflicts. These are red-flags. A machine can be quick and extensive in its response but it is only humans that can give meaning, context, emotion, understanding and empathy to any content. Chat-bots will narrate extensively on the federal structure of governance in India, but it is only the human mind that can give context and meaning to it in a localized sense (say Meghalaya) as to the existence or non-existence of such a structure.

In the end, just as technological advancement is a reality, chat-bots are also a reality. They are to be used but not in a manner that they subsume human intelligence, original thinking, contextualization and a touch of empathy in everything that is experienced. Chatbots are in truth only a supplement to problem-solving!

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

"No great man lives in vain. The history of the world is but the biography of great men."

— Thomas Carlyle

The Shillong Times

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Priyanka in parliament

WHEN Priyanka Gandhi took oath as Member of Parliament on Thursday, feelings were mixed. Her presence would reinforce the clout of the Nehru Family, known today as the Gandhis. Time alone can say how much her presence in Parliament can be of help to the Congress party. The combined clout of Rahul Gandhi who now represents Rae Bareilly and Priyanka who holds the Wayanad seat should help the Congress sharpen its role as the Opposition.

It is well-known that Sonia Gandhi who led the Congress from the front for over two decades preferred Rahul Gandhi as the future face of the party. However, his good intentions as a politician were tamed by a lack of aggressiveness, which the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi took full advantage of. This is a reason why the saffron establishment, despite its patently communal and religion-oriented ideology, managed to have the upper hand in both parliament and outside. If unity is the Congress party's mantra as always, the BJP divided the nation and its people. Prime Minister Narendra Modi played to the gallery, "acted" as the leader of the poor and disadvantaged sections and helped the BJP win power in successive polls. Yet, the BJP would soon be at the cross-roads. A new leader in Modi's place sooner or later would face the relatively young Rahul and Priyanka. Modi tactfully avoided touching hot subjects. Change was not in his scheme of things. He continued his rule on the same lines as the Congress did and avoided confronting vested interests. The bureaucracy has become more corrupt under his rule, but fact is also that he or his central ministers have not tarnished the image of the Government so far by corrupt practices. Modi seems to have maintained absolute control over them. By contrast, the Congress led UPA governments proved to be epitomes of corruption, evidenced in the series of scams that erupted before 2014. These sealed the fate of the Congress party. In fact, Sonia Gandhi's backseat driving added to such problems. From now on, the new generation of Congress leaders will be directly under the watch of the brother-sister combine.

Priyanka Gandhi has acquired political legitimacy by winning a parliament seat with a huge majority. She may be carrying the baggage of her husband Robert Vadra, who subverted systems and emerged as the biggest land shark around the Delhi region via facilitation from some Congress governments in Haryana, Punjab etc. The Opposition is bound to rake up such issues and target Priyanka Gandhi in the coming days. She would do well to demonstrate a fighting spirit that her paternal grandmother, Indira Gandhi, had shown when faced with adversities. The Nehru dynasty is not like the other, the hand-in-the-honey pot, political establishments. This family shed blood through generations for the nation.

Economics from the common (wo)man's perspective

By Patricia Mukhim

Each time we hear economists invested in the Modi government praise him to the skies for making India the 5th largest economy in the world, my heart shrinks in fear because it appears that the more we speak of a rising Gross Domestic Product (GDP) the higher the inflation rate and the less money we have to spend. Take the case of vegetables which are crucial to our survival. The humble potato is no longer affordable. In Shillong it sells at Rs 60 per kg. Tomatoes cost Rs 80 per kg and we might soon have to give up onions completely. They are now selling between Rs 90-100 per kg. I am not sure how these vegetables are priced in Guwahati or Aizawl or Dimapur/Kohima, not to speak of Imphal (which appears to be existing in a different planet) or for that matter Agartala. In Meghalaya we see truck loads of onions and sugar going daily to Bangladesh via the informal trade. Smuggling makes it sound too gross. No matter what the situation in Bangladesh, trade via the largely porous borders carries on as usual.

The other day I visited the border haat at Balat, East Khasi Hills, which is one of the two border markets between Meghalaya and Bangladesh. The other one is at Kalaichar in West Garo Hills. The Balat border haat looked deserted and the gate that allows entry and exit by BSF personnel after duly checking each person looked as if it has not been opened for ages. Above all there was barbed wire put up around the gate too which means that the gate has not been used. The little building nearby meant for frisking the merchants who go and set up their stalls at the haat looked unused and dilapidated. Somewhere along the fence there was a hole that is big enough for humans to crawl past to India or to Bangladesh depending on which side you want to enter or exit the respective countries.

The other day at a workshop in Women's College Shillong the theme of the discussion was the much touted, Act East Policy and how much we have progressed vis a vis that policy or whether we are stuck in the mud. I am unsure who made us in the North East believe that the Act East Policy is about us. When Myanmar is in a state of flux, how is it possible to think of trade via that country. For states like Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram for whom Bangladesh is the natural trading partner, look-

ing south is an imperative but again with Bangladesh in turmoil what we have is a smuggling economy which does not yield any revenue for the GDP.

I am digressing here because the point I wished to make here is about the futility of using the GDP as a measure of the country's economic growth and progress. Michael Green a former senior official with the British Government's Department for International Development has critiqued the idea of using the GDP to measure a country's economic growth and hence its success. Green says it's not the best way to measure a good society and an equitable one. Green developed the Social Progress Index, which measures things like basic human needs and opportunity. Michael Green says that analysts, the media and big thinkers love to talk about the GDP which simply means the value of all the goods and services produced by a country each year. But does the GDP measure unemployment, the disaffection of those dipping below the poverty line every year and how inflation is affecting the less empowered citizens? It does not. Michael Green says, "With GDP, if your richest 100 people get richer, your GDP rises, but most of your citizens are just as badly off as they were before." Hence Green has developed a new yardstick - the Social Progress Index launched in 2014. The Social Progress Index is a more holistic measure of human needs, satisfaction, happiness, among others. It is not a cold, calculating yardstick like the GDP but looks at three principal dimensions. These are - Basic Human Needs (food, water, shelter, safety); Foundations of Wellbeing (basic education, information, health and a sustainable environment); and Opportunity (do people have rights, freedom of choice, freedom from discrimination, and access to higher education?).

Michael Green and his team worked assiduously to collect data from about

133 countries to come up with a measurement of the world's most socially progressive countries. As can be expected the Scandinavian countries scored the highest with Norway leading the way. Some economists have said that the GDP does not measure important aspects of our lives that are not captured by acts of spending and investing. Even damage to the environment in the process of "development" is not measured. The English banker Josiah Stamp correctly stated that the GDP values only those things important to rich people. Former President, APJ Abdul Kalam was once reported to have said, "What is this GDP business?" and one can't blame him for asking this question. How does

a rising GDP actually help us in any way when our purchasing power is only going down with more and more consumer products and even basic groceries going out of our reach?

Dr Bimal Jalan, former RBI Governor once said, "If you hire a maid and pay her salary the GDP goes up. But if you marry the maid and stop giving her salary, the GDP will go down." However, for want of an alternative model the GDP though imperfect is the least inaccurate measure for a country's economic growth. The major lacunae in the GDP is that goods and services that cannot be valued at market prices are not included. Hence household work which taxes women the most is not accounted as part of the GDP. Even the fruits and vegetables grown by farmers for domestic consumption but don't go to the market are not added to the GDP.

American scholar Eric Zency who uses the principles of ecological economics has come up with a model he called the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) which he says needs to replace the GDP. And looking at the current state of affairs in our own country it is high time we stop blowing the trumpet about our rising GDP which has propelled only a few people to the position of billionaires even while more

and more Indians are dipping below poverty line.

In my state of Meghalaya, education, which is supposed to be the gateway to a better life, is in shambles with more children dropping out of school and tending to sheep and cattle. Their problem is also that the present system of education is far removed from their daily experiences. And poverty has only exacerbated their anxieties so child labour is valued over education. This is the reality of new India!

If the Government of Meghalaya has a programme for bringing children who have dropped out, back to the classroom, the same teaching pedagogy will not work. We need to put education on its head and start asking kids what they actually want to learn instead of forcing a curriculum that's alien to them, down their throats. What's being taught to them is not what they need to know. The homes they return to are not what they read about in their textbooks. I wish every state had the autonomy to craft out its own curriculum based on the economic opportunities in that state with some stress on national politics, history, society and ecology.

One reason why the word "culture" is oft repeated in Khasi society and in every song sung is because culture represents a glorious, imagined past while the future is dismal and for many who live lives of quiet desperation there's really not much to look forward to. We need HOPE and education is supposed to be our hope. But what kind of education? One that meets our aspirations to excel in our innate potentials and brings out the best in every child! That's good economics too because it would stop urban migration and hold back the best brains to develop good farming practices even while leveraging on some of the niche products of Meghalaya.

Yesterday, Dr Vijay Kumar sent me a message showing Meghalaya pineapples selling at AED (United Arab Emirates dirham) 17.95 which is roughly Rs 400 per piece at the Lulu mall in Dubai. This is Meghalaya's way forward and such farming practices should be taught in schools, so people can take up horticulture and agriculture to a different level where it can make good economic sense. That's the only way forward for Meghalaya. We need an ecologically sensitive economic model, not the extractive economy that has plagued Meghalaya for decades!

Onslaught on the Myntdu river

By K L Tariatang

The Shillong Times recently published a news item about the Meghalaya High Court's directive to address the damage caused to the Myntdu River near Jowai, which has been affected by an ongoing road construction in its surrounding catchment areas (ST, Nov 20, 2024). The news was alarming enough to spark my curiosity, prompting me to visit the affected areas recently for a firsthand assessment.

The sight is disheartening. The once-picturesque stretch of green grass and sparse vegetation on the hillocks along the river's upper reach is now transformed into a harsh landscape, marred by exposed cuts on the hillocks with fresh brown soil from the excavation for the road construction spilling down the slopes. Rows of sandbags have been placed to contain the soil on the spills, but they appear fragile, with visible breaches at some points which could allow soil to flow through into the river during the next rainfall. Further down, a significant quantity of excavated soil have accumulated along portions of the riverbanks and have already entered the river at some locations.

The river along this stretch is now almost choked, its width narrowed in many places by cascading earth spills along its course. It's a distressing sight, especially for someone like me who has cherished the Myntdu River for its once-pristine waters, idyllic picnic spots, and excellent angling opportunities. Witnessing the river's current state is both heartbreaking and deeply frustrating, compelling me to share my thoughts on this troubling situation.

Beyond its recreational value, the Myntdu River serves as a crucial water source for the Jowai Water Supply Scheme, irrigating paddy fields in the surrounding valleys, and supporting various other needs. Considering its importance to the people of Jowai, it is imperative therefore to ensure that it is not adversely affected by any indiscriminate activity in its catchments around Jowai. As the careless road construction has critically affected the river, the questions that need to be asked are - why an alternative route - one reportedly surveyed earlier - farther from the river have not been chosen for the Dawki highway instead of the present one which is precariously close to the river. Questions also arise as to why an existing road diverging from the Shillong-Jowai route near Umulung village and already connected to the Jowai-Dawki road not far from Jowai is not instead upgraded into a highway for the same intended purpose. Moreover, with another parallel road already present along the opposite hillock, any flawed maintenance or expansion plans on these roads could further endanger the river's health. The Myntdu River, which nearly encircles Jowai before flowing downstream, has historically been the town's lifeline and is deeply revered by its original inhabitants. Given its significance to the local populace, obtaining environmental clearances and consulting the local community should have been the prerequisites for any major project on the river's catchment around Jowai. Coordination among government departments during planning and construction phases would be essential. It is unclear whether these steps were taken when the project was initiated or during implementation. It is also uncertain whether the relevant district authority issued timely prohibitory orders to mitigate the river's damage once the construction's impact on the river became evident.

On the other hand, if the government has completed the land acquisition process for the road project, concerns persist about whether lands along the slopes below the road in the upper reaches have also been acquired to implement protective measures. Some areas below the new road show signs of demarcation, likely intended for sale as plots to buyers who may intend to build structures on these plots. Structures for habitation

have already started creeping towards the opposite bank of the river, raising concerns that this stretch of the Myntdu could suffer the same fate as Shillong's heavily polluted Umkhrah River which have densely spaced structures for habitation or for commercial purposes on its banks and where legal complexities make it difficult to remove such structures when intended.

The ongoing road construction has increased siltation in the river, adding to sediment that already settled in the river bed earlier because of sediments from unregulated quarrying upstream some years ago. This fresh sediment could affect fish habitats in pools developed by a local fishing association along the river course near Jowai thus undoing the association's successful efforts. The sediment could potentially fill up the Jowai Water Supply Scheme's reservoir as well which reportedly already requires frequent desilting. Further siltation could reduce the reservoir's lifespan, jeopardizing the entire Jowai water supply scheme. The sediments could also impact the irrigation systems, making agriculture less viable. Many Jowai residents have expressed dissatisfaction with the way the road construction proceeded and of its adverse effects on the river. Therefore, this undermines the government's commitment to water resource protection as often proclaimed and it could appear hypocritical for it to invite public participation, at least in Jowai, for such commitments in future.

The intervention of the Meghalaya High Court followed a petition by a local organization which advocates for the river's cleanliness and which is concerned with its deterioration due to road construction. While the Court has issued stringent orders to mitigate the damage, accountability for the harm caused remains unclear. However, post-construction reclamation work on the river may not be fully effective and it would now require well-designed structures at vulnerable points to check further deterioration, followed by regular maintenance and close monitoring. Whether the government will take such steps remains to be seen. Nevertheless, the case brought before the Court and the latter intervention highlights the urgent need for stronger environmental safeguards. But for the Myntdu River around Jowai, it will require vigilance and collective action from all Jowai residents and not just by a few concerned individuals to ensure that the Court's directive is diligently executed and to further make collective efforts to protect the river. However, promoting community awareness and participation in Jowai for this purpose could be challenging as many new settlers in the town are yet to be familiar about the river's significance and who are yet to fully integrate into the community for having a close rapport. Moreover, there appears a growing trend of over-reliance on political leaders, particularly elected representatives to champion common cause in many cases and this has overshadowed collective responsibility. In this case, though the outcome from such an approach might fall short of expectations.

Consequently, it will be an uphill task to bring back this part of the Myntdu river to a near semblance of what it was before. One can only hope that the river will be spared from further damage in the near future. Any additional threats or damaging onslaughts on the river could be catastrophic for the people of Jowai. For now, the river remains integral to the town's present population though diminishingly in recent years. However, its future and its legacy for the coming generations hangs in the balance if it continues to struggle under the weight of human negligence and indiscretion.

(K.L. Tariatang is a former bureaucrat and was an original inhabitant of Jowai. He now lives in Shillong and can be reached at kirtong@gmail.com)

Letters to the Editor

Misinformation conclusions

Editor,
Kindly refer to the report "Outrage over decision to dismantle the 123-year-old St Anthony's building," appearing on page three of your esteemed newspaper of Tuesday, November 5, 2024.

In this regard, as a former General Secretary and subsequent president of the Don Bosco Past Pupils' Association, Shillong, in past years, I wish to state that the report describing the St Anthony High School building "as a 123-year-old building" is not only factually wrong but also without basis as the building is still shy of a century by more than twenty years.

Many will perhaps be interested to know that the construction work on this building started in the aftermath years of World War II, in about 1948 or so, and was completed towards 1951 end. In 1952 St Anthony's High School began functioning from this new building.

rush in where angels fear to tread" !!!

Yours etc.,
Billy P Domes,
Shillong - 6

Violation of food safety norms

Editor,

It is observed that most of the locally produced daily consumable products like bread, biscuits, snacks and even milk, to mention a few, are being sold without abiding with the provisions of the "Food Safety and Standards (Packaging and Labelling) Regulations, 2011" which clearly specifies that in addition to general labelling of pre-packaged foods, every package of food, inter alia, shall carry the information on date of manufacture or packing. Any manufacturer of products which has a short shelf-life of less than three months is mandated that the date, month and year in which the commodity is manufactured or prepared or pre-packed shall be mentioned on the label. The "Food Safety and Standards (Labelling and Display) Regulations, 2020", inter alia, provides that the day, month and year using the DD/MM/YY format for products with a short shelf life of up to 3 months shall

be declared in a particular manner.

It appears that local manufacturers have been given a free hand to sell such products with a short shelf life without following the laid down law. The lack of consumer awareness is palpable given the fact that there has hardly been any resistance on the part of the consumers. It is also bewildering that such situations have persistently been allowed to continue under the watchful eyes of the concerned authorities. The Food Safety Officers have failed to take any action(s) on this front.

Hope this jolts the concerned authorities into taking swift and appropriate action.

Yours etc.,
D L Wankhar,
Via email

PAN upgrade

Editor,
The 10-digit alphanumeric Permanent Account Number (PAN) issued by the Income Tax Department is set to have a slew of upgrades - enhancement of the QR code feature for new and old cards, a completely online application process and a merger of all existing identification numbers to make PAN as the common identifier for businesses. Additionally, a "PAN data vault system" will be created

for all entities using PAN data, for data protection and cybersecurity purposes.

The Union Cabinet approved the PAN 2.0 Project to make PAN the "single source of truth and data consistency". With PAN already linked to Aadhaar, it is expected to become a strong source of identification and information for authorities.

Existing PAN cards will continue to be valid under PAN 2.0, as per the FAQs issued by the Finance Ministry. Existing PAN holders need not mandatorily apply for the new card but could upgrade their PAN free of cost. The number or PAN would remain the same. The allotment or update or correction of PAN will be done free of cost and e-PAN will be sent to the registered email ID. For a physical PAN card, the applicant has to make a request along with a fee of Rs 50 (domestic). For delivery of cards outside India, Rs 15 plus postal charges will be charged, the FAQs said essentially PAN acts as an identifier for the person with the Income Tax department and remains the same once allotted. Further, TAN stands for Tax Deduction and Collection Account Number, a 10-digit alphanumeric number issued by the I-T Department. TAN has to be obtained by people responsible for deducting or collecting tax at source. It is

compulsory to quote TAN in TDS/TCS returns, any TDS/TCS payment challan and TDS/TCS certificates.

The PAN 2.0 Project, with a financial implication of Rs 1,435 crore was approved by the Union Cabinet. The PAN 2.0 Project aims to streamline services and enhance security for taxpayers with a unified, paperless platform. and it is a long-awaited upgrade for a card that has been in use for decades. The number was introduced in 1972 as an optional number but was made mandatory for all Income Tax payers in 1976. Currently, PAN-related services are being offered to people through three different portals - the e-filing portal, UTITSL portal and Protean e-Gov portal. Through the PAN 2.0 project, all PAN and TAN related services will be hosted on a single unified portal of the income tax department. Apart from integration of the platform, the Income Tax department will also switch to completely paperless processes for applying for a PAN card.

Under the new project, a centralised mechanism for resolving the issue of duplicates would minimise the instances of one person holding more than one PAN, which will improve tax administration in the country. While the new PAN card will have a QR code, the Income

Tax department has clarified that the older PAN cards will continue to be valid which is a great relief for people. However, they will have an option to apply for a new card with a QR code now. The QR code feature, which began in 2017-18, helps validate the PAN. This feature will continue with some enhancements. The project also aims to set up a "mandatory PAN data vault system" for all entities using PAN data, including financial institutions, government agencies, and central and state government departments through an online validation service. "The PAN related information is used by many entities such as banks, insurance companies etc. Hence those (entities) who take details of PAN will have to keep PAN data safely, mandatorily through the data vault system." Of the 78 crore PAN cards issued 98 percent belong to individuals.

This is a good step taken by the Government and should be appreciated and if there are difficulties in implementing the same those should be resolved too.

Yours etc.,
Yash Pal Ralhan
Via email

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"It takes a great man to give sound advice tactfully, but a greater to accept it graciously."
— Logan Pearsall Smith

The Shillong Times

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Manipur: BJP's fatal flaw

A state that has been on the boil for 18 months and is ruled by a Chief Minister who leans towards one warring group and labels the other as "narco-terrorists" and illegal migrants but is allowed by an insensitive central government to continue to hold the reins of government, cannot be expected to reach any solution. The Kukis and Meiteis are both suffering. Lives have been lost on both sides of the divide and both communities have been displaced and lost their hearths and homes to arson. People from the hills of Manipur holding jobs in the Imphal valley cannot return to their stations and vice versa. Manipur should have in all fairness and going by the tenets of the Constitutions been brought under President's Rule since at least two militant outfits belonging to the Meitei community namely the Arambai Tengol and Meetai Leepun have been running amok and allowed to loot weapons from the police armoury at the start of the violence on May 3, 2023. How was this even allowed to happen? How could a militant outfit summon the legislators from their community to direct them to hold on to a particular view – which is to reject the idea of a separate administration for the Kuki-Zo inhabited areas in the hills of Manipur. That has been the demand of the Kuki-Zo people since all development, including location of several institutions has been skewed in favour of Imphal which houses the majority Meitei community.

It is the bounden duty of the Central Government, more so when both are from the same ideological framework, to step in and curb internal disturbances that are not controlled within a few days. It is also the duty of the Central Government to prevent killings and bloodshed between people within a state and which the State Government has failed to control. Manipur is a clear example of a Constitutional breakdown yet the BJP-led Government at the Centre refuses to budge. The Prime Minister does not seem to care what happens to a state in the distant periphery which only matters during election season.

As per Article 356 of Indian Constitution, the President can proclaim President's Rule in a state, if he/she is satisfied that a situation has arisen in which the government of a State cannot be carried on in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution. Is this not the case with Manipur? Has governance not broken down completely? President's Rule is meant to be a crisis management strategy to bring down violence and killings. President's Rule empowers the Central government to intervene and take direct control of the State's administration during times of political instability, law and order issues, or other crises that prevent the State government from functioning effectively. Why is this constitutional machinery not invoked? Merely adding boots on the ground, mainly central forces, when the command and control is not in the hands of the central government, is unlikely to end the Manipur crises because the uniformed personnel have no countervailing impact. But does the Modi Government care? Do lives in Manipur really matter?

Letters to the Editor

Time to complement GDP with GPI

Editor,
The special article "Economics from the common (wo) man's perspective" by Patricia Mukhim (ST Nov 29, 2024) made interesting reading and the author has raised many pertinent issues in this article. The Act East Policy was formerly a "Look East Policy" under the UPA government and they kept on looking only. I was handling this subject when I was with the Government of India. The file had become bulky but never gathered dust and when the new government came in 2014 the Look East Policy was rechristened the "Act East Policy" and not merely to look eastwards. The government of the day did act and it is work in progress. But given the situation in Myanmar I only hope that the heavy investment made by the Government of India does not become infructuous given the prevailing situation there. If the Act East Policy is to move forward India needs to take its ties with China seriously. The author of the article has rightly pointed out that in case of Meghalaya informal trade with Bangladesh would go on "no matter what the situation in Bangladesh". Therefore, the need of the hour is to formalise this informal trade and the Government of India should improve its relationship with Bangladesh no matter what

the situation is now in that country, because when trade and commerce come to an end everything else also comes to an end. In this, the worst sufferers would be the people of the North Eastern Region and West Bengal living along the border of Bangladesh or for that matter Myanmar.

Another interesting point raised by the author was the imperfectness of GDP as a measure of progress. She advocated the need to use the Genuine Progress Index. It is a fact that Gross Domestic Product is often criticized for being an imperfect measure of economic well-being. Because GDP does not account for non-market activities such as household labour and volunteer work, which contribute significantly to societal well-being. It includes economic activities that may harm the environment, such as deforestation and pollution, without deducting the costs of environmental damage. GDP measures the total economic output but does not reflect how income is distributed among the population. A high GDP can co-exist with significant income inequality and this is the case with our country today. GDP does not consider factors that affect quality of life, such as health, education and leisure time. GDP focuses on short-term economic outputs and does not account for the sustainability of growth. It can increase due to activities that deplete natural resources, which is not sustainable in the long-run. GDP includes expenditures on activities

that may have negative social impacts, such as healthcare costs due to pollution or accidents, without considering the negative effects.

These limitations highlight the need for more comprehensive measures like the Genuine Progress Index which takes into account social, environmental, economic factors and measures the quality of life to provide a more holistic view of progress.

GPI aims to provide a more comprehensive and holistic view of a nation's progress by including the costs of negative effects related to economic activity, such as pollution, crime and resource depletion. Several countries have adopted or experimented with the GPI as a supplement or alternative to GDP. In the United States various states have implemented GPI to assess economic progress. In Canada some provinces use GPI for a more comprehensive economic analysis. Countries like Germany and the Netherlands have explored GPI. In Australia GPI is used to measure sustainable development. South Korea incorporates GPI in its economic assessments. Japan uses GPI to evaluate economic and social well-being and Brazil has adopted GPI for a more inclusive measure of progress.

However the GPI has had mixed success in the countries that have adopted it. Some states in the US have found GPI useful for policy making, particularly in areas like environmental sustainability and social well-being. However,

it has not replaced GDP as the Primary economic measure. Certain provinces in Canada use GPI to complement GDP, providing a broader view of progress. It has influenced policies related to environmental and social issues. Countries like Germany and the Netherlands have explored GPI, but it remains supplementary to GDP though GPI has helped these countries to highlight the importance of sustainable development.

In Australia the impact of GPI on national policy is limited. It serves more as an additional tool rather than a replacement of GDP. South Korea incorporates GPI in its economic assessment, particularly for environmental and social policies. However, GDP remains the dominant measure. Japan uses the Genuine Progress Index to evaluate economic and social well-being but it has not significantly altered national economic policies. Brazil adopted GPI for a more inclusive measure of progress, focusing on social and environmental factors. Its influence on policy-making is growing but is still secondary to Gross Domestic Product. Overall, while the Genuine Progress Index provides valuable insights and a more holistic view of progress, it has not yet replaced Gross Domestic Product as the primary economic measure in these countries. It is often used alongside Gross Domestic Product to inform more sustainable and inclusive policies.

Is it time to use the Genuine Progress Index in India?

India's economic growth has been impressive, but it has also faced challenges related to environmental degradation, social inequality, and quality of life. The Genuine Progress Index could provide a more comprehensive measure of progress by accounting for these factors. The benefits of adopting GPI in India are because it includes the costs of environmental damage and encourages policies that promote sustainable development when it comes to the environment. By considering social factors like health, education and inequality, GPI can help address disparities and improve overall quality of life which is essential for social well-being.

When we talk of holistic development, GPI provides a broader view of progress, beyond just economic output, aligning with India's goals for inclusive growth. But there are challenges in adopting the Genuine Progress Index in India because it requires comprehensive data on various social and environmental factors, which will be challenging to gather. Shifting from Gross Domestic Product to Genuine Progress Index would require significant changes in policy-making and economic planning. Adopting GPI could help India achieve more balanced and sustainable development. It would provide a clearer picture of the nation's progress and help address the complex challenges it faces.

Yours etc;
VK Lyngdoh,
Via email

Skilling for prime needs of life

Editor,
Having been very much impressed with the article 'Economics from the common (wo)man's perspective' by Patricia Mukhim (ST Nov 29, 2024), I would like to add that we are in fact wide off the mark for the common people are being fed with a learning process that defies any solution of consequential needs of a society steeped in poverty. It needs to be turned around with a new model of inclusive growth.

Meghalaya has immense scope as far as tourism, horticulture, wine-brewing and assorted sustainable agricultural practices are concerned and with the right amount of thrust and pinpointed target, the State's economy could be transformed beyond recognition.

At the same time Meghalaya's rich pristine glory and culture has to be protected and prospective development should be a fusion between the prime needs of life, liberty and skilling, re-skilling, keeping in mind the present technological advancements.

Yours etc.,
Tanuj Goswami
Assam

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From Rules to Constitution

100 years of Presbyterian Church Administration in the Khasi & Jaintia Hills

By Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh

Khasi-Jaintia Presbyterian Synod Mihngi, Khasi-Jaintia Presbyterian Synod Sepngi, Ri-Bhoi Presbyterian Synod and Khasi-Jaintia Presbyterian Synod Pdeng), the plains of Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) and Cachar in Assam, and the Lushai Hills (present day Mizoram).

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in Assam can be understood in its historical context, theological foundations, and the evolution of its governance. The constitutional framework of the church reflects Reformed theological principles, emphasizing the authority of Scripture, the priesthood of all believers, and the importance of governance by elected elders. These principles are foundational to Presbyterian polity.

The motion to improvise Church rules and disciplines was introduced in the Assembly held at Shangpung in 1907. The Assembly resolved to appoint a committee and entrusted with the task to collect together and to revise all rules of Church discipline etc, which could be found in the records of the Presbyteries and Assembly. The revised rules were considered and adopted in the Assembly held in Jowai in 1909. In 1917, at the Assembly held in Mawphlang a further revision was made and it was decided that the Constitution should come up for revision at the end of five years.

Subsequently, the Church administration was undergoing significant changes, and it was felt that the Constitution needed more revision. Thus, in 1922, at the Assembly held in Jowai, it was decided to constitute a committee to revise the Constitution of 1917. The proposals of the committee were discussed at the Shillong Assembly of 1923. In the words of John Hughes Morris, "At the Assembly held in Mairang in 1924, a new Constitution, adapted to the needs of the vastly increased church, was adopted, the fruits of many years' deliberations and discussions in various Presbyteries and Assemblies."

The Ethical Teachings of the Presbyterian Church in Khasi and Jaintia Hills:

Although the Constitution may not enumerate every ethical directive in exhaustive detail, it provides a foundational understanding of the moral framework that the adherents ought to follow. The Presbyterian Church in Khasi and Jaintia Hills has laid strong emphasis on moral teachings and recognized the need to imbibe in its members both ethical and spiritual practices. Thus, the document entitled, Confession of Faith

and Foundational Teachings, for the congregations was formulated. This document continues to serve as a guide for moral and ethical living and spiritual growth.

The Confession of faith and Foundational teachings of the Methodist Presbyterian Church which was adopted in the Assembly held in Aberystwith and Bala in 1823 had been translated and adapted for the adherents in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills in 1927. This Confession of Faith also prescribed certain socio-economic ethics and it is important to highlight here a few of them. The members are taught- (i) in trade and business, to refrain from overcharging beyond fair prices, selling stolen goods or using unfair means. Additionally, it is imperative to avoid exploiting anyone in the course of business transactions (ii) to pay taxes which are legally due (iii) not to take advantage, especially on the poor, by charging them exorbitant interest rates on loans and debts (iv) it is mandatory for those who live by the sea to tend to the needs of those who are in danger at sea. If individuals at sea are facing imminent danger or have experienced shipwrecks, it is the moral duty of the community to assist and help those in need and to protect their lives and property. Any action that contravenes this duty is sinful. This principle is grounded in the book of Exodus 13:9, which states, 'You must not oppress foreigners. You know what it's like to be a foreigner, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.'

The moral and ethical teachings of the Presbyterian Church in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills hold a significant place within the indigenous Hynniewtrep community. However, a critical appraisal of the Confession of Faith and Foundational Teachings, is necessary to ensure their relevance and efficacy in addressing contemporary challenges. The increasing rise of corruption, racial and sexual abuses, and the exploitation of vulnerable sections calls for a re-evaluation of ethical guidelines of the Church. The normalization of corruption poses a serious ethical dilemma, undermining governance and justice in the State. It is crucial for the Church to take a firm stance against such practices and promote values of integrity, accountability, and transparency.

Furthermore, the systemic exploitation of the meek, the poor and minorities should compel the Church to advocate for social justice and equality. The abuse of power, whether in religious, political or so-

cial contexts, is another area that demands attention. The Church's teachings can play a pivotal role in promoting ethical leadership and responsible stewardship.

Democratic Values Versus Gender Issues:

Presbyterianism indeed emphasizes a democratic form of church governance, rooted in the belief that all members have a role to play in the decision-making processes, not just the elected elders/deacons or "tymmen basan" and ordained Pastors. This participatory approach aligns with the Protestant principle of the "priesthood of all believers," which upholds that every woman, man etc, has access to God and a role in the church's mission.

The legacy of the Welsh Methodist Presbyterian Church in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills is indeed rooted in these democratic values. It has allowed lay members to engage in the life of the church and to be actively involved in the Dorbars of Presbyteries, Synods, or Assembly, where important policies and directions for the church are discussed and decided.

However, the role of women is being compartmentalized and their participation in decision making processes is a mere tokenism. In spite of the Hynniewtrep community being matrilineal, the induction of women into an ordained ministry for so long is considered a taboo, it still remains a contentious issue and matter of continuous debate within the Presbyterian set up.

Are women barred by the Constitution from being elected as elders/deacons or "tymmen basan" of the Church? The 1924 Constitution does not contain any specific article/section that explicitly prohibits women from occupying the office of elected elders in the Church or assuming full responsibility in Church administration alongside their male counterparts. Rev. Angel Jones, in his book "Ka History Jong ka Balang" (History of the Church), stated that, "the old Constitution had banned women from becoming elected elders or "tymmen basan", however, after thorough deliberations, the new Constitution was adopted at the Mairang Assembly in 1924, allowing any Presbyterian Church to elect women to the office of elders or "tymmen basan" if they so desire."

The development from simple Rules to a full-fledged Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills is a testament to the evolution of the Church. Today, the Presbyterian Church in Khasi and Jaintia Hills is a well-established institution with a formal Constitution and a democratic system of governance.

The Band, not the Continent

By Maitphang Syiem

Looking at the title of this article, readers might be somewhat mystified. But this about the final countdown which will start on the Nov 30, 2025 at the Me'Gong Festival with their scintillating numbers to be resounded live especially and particularly in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya. Indeed, we are talking about the band called Europe. The name itself synchronises perfectly because they are from Sweden which is in Europe. We can undeniably say that there is not a single person who will not know about the group Europe and their breakthrough song "The Final Countdown" which became a great hit single and the others like "Cherokee", "Walk the Earth", Prisoners of Paradise", "Dreamer" and many more, if one digs into their discography. Having said that they are Swedish, and the fact that we only know their songs does not fully define the purpose of knowing their music. If one were to amusingly ask who that person is from the band Europe, the answer would most probably be "I Don't know."

Going down memory lane when we were in school and college and as true music lovers, we've diligently followed all the bands and learned their histories. Indeed we should dig into the history of famous musicians, musical groups etc. Some musicians have inspired and have changed and helped rebuild many lives. Music indeed has power. Billy Joel the Pianist said "I think music in itself is healing. It's an explosive expression of humanity. It's something we are all touched by. No matter what culture we're from, everyone loves music." Further, quotes by famous lyricist E.Y. Harburg, "Words make you think a thought. Music makes you feel a feeling. A song makes you feel a thought." truly resonates with most of us.

So, keeping this tempo let us inquisitively find out about "Europe," the band. As mentioned earlier the band Europe was a rock band founded in Sweden in the year 1979 in Upplands Väsby, Sweden, with four original founding members namely, frontman Joey Tempest known for his distinctive voice, John Norum known for his melodic solos, powerful guitar riffs, Peter Olsson on Bass and Tony Reno on Drums. In the earlier years the band "Europe" was called "Force", but in 1982 during a Band Competition called Rock-SM, a competing band had a similar name with the word Force "which was "Rising Force", therefore Joey Tempest, suggested a new name "Europe" so they entered the competition and even won it. Ever since the name change, they rocked their way into international fame.

The band had a humble beginning from a small town and struggled their way through sheer persistence and perseverance. We can see that in one of their anthemic songs called, "Walk the Earth," which talks about passion and determination. The lines, "Our conscience weighs on all of our minds/ So we lay our hearts right on the line/ We keep pushing on, holding steady and strong/ Knocking them down just to make our home." The chorus - "And we walk the Earth With our heads held high/ For the life we want Yeah, we've got to fight Yeah/ We walk the Earth Like champions/ With heart and soul Like champions." These lines truly speak of their musical commitment and artistic vision. Reading between the lines one can understand the depth, feelings and thoughts in the song just as E.Y Harburg said in the aforementioned lines.

Diving into the band "Europe" in terms of music style or genre, in the earlier years they were grouped as hard rock. Some commented that they belong to a glam

metal genre of the likes of Motley Crue, Hanoi Rocks, Quiet Riot White Lion and many others. However, in one interview the front man Joey Tempest said they really don't have a specific genre but said their music is a rock form entangled with melodies so we have what we call the Melodic Rock. That is spot on as most of their songs are melodic, powerful rock riffs with overwhelming guitar solos. This is one genre which most of the music lovers particularly those in Meghalaya and many bands in the NE-region also play the Melodic Rock genre.

Their biggest breakthrough was in 1986 when they made their third studio album The Final Countdown which also became the ever-greatest hit Melodic Rock Song which sold over 15 million copies worldwide and their songs were always top of the charts. In 1992, the group members had their ups and downs and eventually they had to concentrate on their individual projects so they went into hiatus but amazingly after eleven years they came back and reunited in 2003 with the exact original members. Just as the words from their song says "So we lay our hearts right on the line/ We keep pushing on, holding steady and strong", they came back even stronger with evolved musicianship and musical skills and in 2004 they came up with the following album Start from the Dark (2004) and subsequently Secret Society (2006), Last Look at Eden (2009), Bag of Bones (2012), War of King (2015), Walk the Earth (2017).

So what do we get from knowing their history and what's the takeaway? The biggest takeaway is that Europe's journey started as a small-town music group to being internationally acclaimed music rock icons. That in itself is a huge inspiration and motivation for all budding musicians and youths of our State. Their resilience, passion, adaptation, reskilling of their musical skills is a great testament, Europe as a band explicitly exhibits enduring commitment to their musical talents. Our state of Meghalaya, is actually a den of musicians of different styles and with a commitment. Many of our musically inclined talented youths can definitely set the stage to stardom. Music has the power to influence and if used in the right way one can achieve many positive things in society. The Pioneer of Neurology Oliver Sacks said "The power of music to integrate and cure is quite fundamental. It is the profoundest non-chemical medication. "A famous Violinist Yehudi Menuhin also said "Music is a therapy. It is a communication far more powerful than words, far more immediate, far more efficient."

The present society has many problems particularly among the youth. There are issues of addiction and other socio-economic challenges. Can there be an alternative way of helping the disoriented, and misled youths through the power of positive music? It is fine to see the Rock Music and Pop Music Giants coming to our State, but we also wish for our youths to become Rock Giants, Pop Giants going places worldwide and rising to stardom. So can we have a Shillong Version of the Berkeley School of Music in Meghalaya so that our youths can be technically educated with various specialisations in music? This is something all of us but especially those in governance need to ponder upon!

Nevertheless, the band Europe's journey is an inspiration which exhibits the power of change through music. To conclude "The earth has music for those who listen." – William Shakespeare

(The writer is a Geospatial Technology expert)