

"Equality and separation cannot exist  
in the same space."

— Jason Mraz

## The Shillong Times

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### Between borders and empathy

THE violence perpetrated by the military junta in Myanmar has sent the Chin people along the Mizoram-Myanmar border scurrying to seek shelter in the Indian side of the border. The problem with boundaries is that they separate kith and kin and turn them into citizens of two sovereign countries. The Chief Minister of Mizoram had written to Prime Minister Modi asking him to offer asylum to refugees pouring in from Myanmar. But Mizoram along with Manipur received instead a missive from New Delhi saying that refugees should be given neither shelter nor food. The missive was later toned down after huge protests by human rights activists in the country. India is in a difficult situation vis-à-vis Myanmar. That country has been offering military help to flush out the North East militant outfits holed up in Myanmar and sometimes the two armies conduct joint operations to achieve their goals. At the moment the cadres of the ULFA (Independent) headed by Paresh Baruah and the NSCN(K) are being hounded by the Tatmadaw. Paresh Baruah meanwhile shuttles between Dehong and Ruili in the Yunnan Province of China adjoining Myanmar. Since the Myanmar army offensive several ULFA cadres have been pushed to surrender or be killed by the Tatmadaw. The NSCN (K) too has suffered similar offensive from the junta although intelligence sources believe this offensive was at the behest of the Government of India which has been talking peace with the NSCN(IM) since 1997. In fact, eight training camps of ULFA(I) the NDFB(S) and Meitei outfits from Manipur which were located in Taga region of Maynmar have been demolished.

In these circumstances it becomes a diplomatic challenge for India to take a hardened stance against the Tatmadaw that is now hell bent on capturing political power at all costs. The problem with Mizoram and Manipur is that the same people live on two sides of the border. All along, Myanmar and India shared a Free Movement Regime (FMR) where people from both sides of the largely riverine border can move up to 16 kilometres into each other's territories. On the Manipur side those living in the hills of Ukhrul regularly host their kin and help them buy food supplies and other articles not easily available in the Kachin Hills, from the Indian side which they carry across to the other side regularly. The same is the case with the Mizoram side of the border. The FMR was suspended in March 2020 on account of the pandemic. Hence border patrolling has been tightened making it near impossible for the Myanmar refugees to take shelter Mizoram or Manipur. That the closure of the border has resulted in increased smuggling of drugs and arms is another matter that the Assam Rifles which guards the borders has to contend with. But this cannot be conflated with the serious violations of human rights by the Tatmadaw thereby forcing many to flee their country. India's stoic silence at this juncture is troubling.

# ILP as Fiction

By Anjum Hasan

What do you think of ILP, I asked a taxi driver the other day, once we were done with the usual conversational suspects – the impossible traffic in Shillong and yet how government employees get easy loans to buy cars, how tourists dropped off after the lockdown and are now slowly returning, while droves of young people are forced to leave the city because there are hundreds of hopefuls for a handful of openings here, and so on – basically what the world in general is coming to. He laughed bashfully. "What to say?" he said, then gave me the spiel. We are a small people, we need protection. We must band together and look out for each other.

I didn't learn anything from our chat but was struck by the civility of it. In Shillong, despite the consensus about the city's decline, we are still able to be, at once, shy and warm, say decorous hellos, thank you's

empire-building helped conceal. The Inner Line is meant to prevent timber and tea companies from pushing further into the hills – encroaching, in this instance, on the mountain valley that belongs to the Apatanis. And yet the colonials themselves don't honour the notional line; they are after exploitation of another kind: the establishing of a military base in this frontier region near Tibet so as to have the upper hand in the area's geo-politics. The two interests eventually coincide; the attack on the Apatanis, when it comes, is in order to "defend British commercial and political interests in the region".

Missionary-turned-anthropologist Verrier Elwin, who was an advisor to the Assam government for the very area Blackburn writes about, and

intervenes. In Shillong, perhaps in all of the north-east, we increasingly look to politics as the arena in which problems that affect us a society will be solved, even as politics becomes ever more vitiated. The hope that laws and regulations will save us does not seem, in our minds, to conflict with a political society in which, as Patricia Mukhim, wrote recently in these pages, "corruption is not just taken for granted but also perpetuated [...]" people valorize corruption by giving those indulging in scams a place of honour in society instead of socially blacklisting them.

To rest all one's faith in politics is to discount everyday life and individual experience, that is: the stuff of literature. Blackburn's

colour spectrum perceived by politics. Simply because of the solitary individualism of his work, the writer may happen to explore areas that no one has explored before [...] to make discoveries that sooner or later turn out to be vital areas of collective awareness," wrote the always prescient novelist Italo Calvino in his collections of essays *The Literature Machine*. To me the key words here are "solitary individualism". For Blackburn to write a compelling novel about the politics between colonials and tribes, he has had to single out characters who can't quite be reduced to those categories, who are recognisable but not typical. Taylor, while surrounded by empire-builders, is private, conflicted and flawed, and we empathise with him. So also Gyati, a loner in a close-knit society who likes to wander by himself in the pine forests. "Other people, especially young men, didn't roam like



and welcomes, make time to sit and chat, sometimes even, traffic permitting, stand and stare. Of course, taxi drivers anywhere in the world make for great interlocutors – I'm always drawn to their street-wise takes. But this young man also had a laidback Shillong cheerfulness, which one misses. One misses it because this distinctiveness of daily life, these everyday interactions, are rarely part of our self-image. ILP consumes us but what about the tones of voice in which we discuss it? The politician's is one style, the agitator's another, the so-called common man's a third. And then there is the writer's. I've just read Stuart Blackburn's 2016 novel *Into the Hidden Valley*, set in 19th century Assam during the early decades of British experiments with the Inner Line. Blackburn captures so well a combination of two things – colonialism's self-justification through high-sounding administrative protocols and the violence that this officious guise of

who lived in Shillong at the end of his life, said, in his 1960 book *A Philosophy for NEFA*, that "the Inner Line Regulation was enacted not with the aim (as is so often thought) of isolating the hill people from the plains, but to bring 'under more stringent control the commercial relations of British subjects with the frontier tribes'." This suggests something of a benevolent outlook but there is nothing kind-hearted about the administrators described in *Into the Hidden Valley*. Yet the novel is not merely an account of aggressive white men and unwitting tribal victims. That would be too simple. Instead we have George Taylor, a sensitive, well-meaning, ambitious although often irresolute young British officer, with a past that makes him vulnerable, and Gyati, an Apatani shaman who too is acutely alert to his world and sometimes finds himself at an angle to it. The two come close to friendship and then what one might call the hand of history

novel won't help us decide whether putting in place an inner line regulation in 2021 would be a good thing or bad. (Though it does illustrate how the law was undermined by those who established it, obviously no effective novel is written to present a solution or make a point.) What it shows us is how the seemingly small stuff – a wrong decision taken in the heat of the conflict or a few words spoken in rapprochement can have an incalculable effect on the world. "Words can change things, the right words" Gyati believes, and yet when his wife is dying, all the "incantatory power" of his chants amounts to nothing. This double bind is the writer's as well – literature, unlike politics, seems to make nothing happen, and yet grasping the relation between language and reality makes one wield a certain power over the world.

"Literature is like an ear that can hear things beyond the understanding of the language of politics; it is like an eye that can see beyond the

that, without apparent purpose and all alone."

Fiction can only address politics by working against its generalising tendencies, thereby revealing those homogenization we take comfort in – tribal and non-tribal, coloniser and colonised, them and us – as, to some extent at least, sophisticated fictions. But there is a deeper sense in which a writer can challenge and enrich politics. In today's world she is obliged to be alive to her possible hidden motives, her biases and blind spots, as well as the fact that she does not control all the possible meanings of her work. What if, asks Calvino, the same happened to politics? "Politics, like literature, must above all know itself and distrust itself." In Meghalaya, we valorise politicians and we trust politics. Perhaps we need to read more novels?

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### Modi gov't's Judo technique pays off in electoral bonds

## Another act of abdication by Supreme Court

By K Raveendran

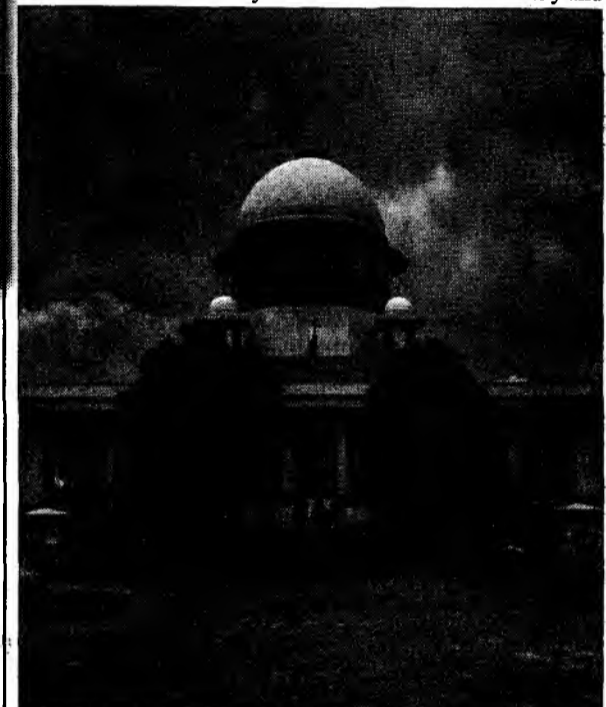
The Modi government has perfected the art of using a safeguard against something to perpetuate exactly the same act or tendency. So, national unity is cited as the reason for attempts to wreck national unity and national interest is taken to mean the interest of the ruling party, especially when there is a conflict between the two.

The most classic case is that of the electoral bonds. Though the idea behind the original legislation was to curtail the use of black money in elections, the law, as it has been finally made, promotes black money and additionally in favour of the ruling party, as if BJP is a permanent feature of power politics for all times to come. Regrettably, the highest court of the land has facilitated this most undesirable tendency by refusing to intervene decisively. It

any urgent attention. The terse order for not taking up the hearing is even more insulting: "The application could not be taken up for hearing".

The court may be justified in refusing to entertain the plea of a few concerned citizens, but most unfortunately, it has dismissed the objections raised by the Election Commission, admittedly the most authentic body that understands elections, irrespective of its perceived soft corner for the ruling party, that the anonymity provided for in the bonds would breed corruption and cuts at the very root of transparency in election funding.

An affidavit filed by the Election Commission even termed introduction of electoral bonds a retrograde step. The commission expressed concern over the non-disclosure of donor identity and



is as though it has become a regular practice for the Supreme Court to look away when inconvenient matters are brought to its attention, especially when it concerns the government.

The Supreme Court last week refused to stay the sale of a fresh set of electoral bonds from 1 April, ahead of assembly elections in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Assam and UT of Puducherry. Accordingly, a fresh round of bonds has been launched and obviously the ruling party will lionise the proceeds from the sale, which has been the case right from the beginning. With an authoritarian government at the Centre, it cannot be otherwise, putting the other parties to great disadvantage in terms of "entitlement".

The Supreme Court has

"The Supreme Court has been dilly-dallying on the issue ever since a number of petitions were filed challenging the electoral bonds scheme far back as in 2017 itself, when the new scheme of things was announced in the Finance Act 2017."

been dilly-dallying on the issue ever since a number of petitions were filed challenging the electoral bonds scheme far back as in 2017 itself, when the new scheme of things was announced in the Finance Act 2017. The petitions had raised several valid questions about the possibility of abuse of the system, but the court refused to effectively intervene, allowing the government to go ahead with the issuance.

Even the latest refusal of stay is apparently on a most flimsy ground: that the "bonds are released at periodical intervals in January, April, July and October of every year; that they had been so released in the years 2018, 2019 and 2020 without any impediment." It has promptly refused to grant the stay and put off detailed hearing of the case as if the issue under consideration is trivial and not meriting

clauses that may allow for shell companies and foreign entities to fund and influence Indian political parties and elections.

The commission argued in favour of transparency in political funding, saying the disclosure of the identity of the funders as well as the recipients of funding was essential for the success of democracy. The counsel for the commission also pointed out that people have the right to know about the antecedents of their representatives and the political party that candidate represents.

There were also other complaints about the bonds: Even the RBI had described the system as a type of "type of weapon or medium for financial scams". This clearly gave credence to the fears of the petitioners that electoral

### Letters to the Editor

#### Detention is cruel to children

Editor,  
I am disturbed by the letter criticising the no-detention order (Shillong Times, Mar 31, 2021). Children have gone through unimaginable stress during the Covid pandemic and this has impacted their psychological, emotional and social well-being. Numerous articles on this topic have already appeared on the websites of the United Nations, World Health Organization and UNICEF. Even children from stable families who were able to keep up a semblance of education during the pandemic have been affected.

In developing countries such as ours, rural and poor children have been deprived even of the meagre schooling they had before. So called elite schools may have managed to have regular online classes but the vast majority of Indian children have lost a year, apart from economic hardships to their families. However, the lockdown has had some benefits. Time spent with family, local community, learning about the multiple facets of the pandemic, and developing resilience are valuable to the development of children. These lessons may not be aligned with the school syllabus but are important life skills.

The no-detention order issued by the Government of Meghalaya is a commendable act of empathy.

Even a well-embedded system needs flexibility to deal with unanticipated crises. To detain children because of a situation beyond their control is nothing but cruelty. One is familiar with the statistics of thousands of student suicides annually because of our draconian system of education. No child is a willful rebel or shirker. Negative behaviours are a reaction to an adult-created environment and are driven by survival instincts.

Lastly, I'm not sure why this newspaper allowed anonymity for the letter writer. Education is an important social issue and one must have the courage of one's convictions to stand up and be counted. This "name withheld" author seems to have no data or evidence, only a misguided opinion that actually harms children.

Yours etc.,  
Prof Glenn C. Khar Kongor  
Via email

**Editor replies:** This newspaper believes in a free and fair dissemination of readers' views so that a debate can ensue on any topic of public importance. Some writers request anonymity and we respect that. The issue is more important here than the person behind the writing.

#### Society in a moral crisis

The news item, "Step-father impregnates minor girl, surrenders" (ST Mar 30, 2021) is very disturbing

for me as a woman and as a mother. To read of rape and violation of young girls be it by strangers or by close relations is shocking. It only goes to state the blatant truth that as a society and as humankind we lack the morals and do not shy away from committing heinous sins. What good is all the progress and development in the 21st century when as human beings we stoop so low! No one can understand the pain nor feel the shame of an act as such as the girl/woman who has been raped. There are numerous causes that lead to such crimes. From the perpetrator of crime himself who has exchanged his conscience for lust, the lack of punishment as per the law only encourages many evil minds to follow suit. How many rape victims have been provided justice? But above all as a society we have failed one another. Once we lack fellow feeling and are overpowered by pride, arrogance and power we have sold our souls to the devil.

Today, what we witness is the triumph of evil over good. Do we want to continue to live this way? Isn't our responsibility to sow the seeds of goodness and righteousness in our children so that they live each day of their lives in piety, a love for one another and above all a reverence to the One above? The onus lies on each one of us as members of the society and the world. Let us come together and impart good teachings by leading through

example. Life is beautiful and so is this world. Can we make this life and the world worthy for what it was created?

Yours etc.,  
Jennifer Dkhar,  
Via email

#### Scandal in MeECL sent a rude shock

Editor,  
The news item published in the Shillong Times under the heading – "Surprise check reveals rampant power theft at Byrnihat" (ST, March 30, 2021) has come as a "rude shock". Nothing is more outrageous than the fact that big companies are allegedly involved in such power pilferage. It is like stealing coins from the bowl of a beggar who has been moaning in pain due to various "sicknesses". No matter who the culprits are, the government must take stern action against them. They deserve exemplary punishment along with heavy monetary penalties. It is not improbable that those unscrupulous industrial units might have pilfered electricity worth Rs 1500 crore thereby reducing the power agency to a pauper over the years/decades.

One can't agree more with what Toki Blah has expressed through his letter – "Condoning corruption" (ST, 31 March, 2021). This case must be thoroughly investigated by CBI with utmost urgency. What is

disgusting is that some of the MeECL officers have been allegedly found to be hand in glove with the industrial companies in facilitating the crime. Such an act of unfaithfulness by the employees towards the MeECL is "unpardonable." Immediate suspension of the officers from service is the first step so that they will not get a chance to tamper with evidence and the like.

The public, and NGOs as well, must come forward to raise their voices against this unprecedented scandal in the state. The CMD, who has already gathered substantial evidence – along with photographs and videos, needs the full support of the public in these difficult hours. It is, after all, the public who has endlessly suffered when the MeECL fell into the pit of debt. Let's find out who all are involved in getting the power agency in Meghalaya into the mess of liability.

Yours etc.,  
Sali Gwalii,  
Shillong

#### On being Khasi and Indian

Editor,  
In response to L Kharwanlang's letter, "Much ado about identity" (ST March 30, 2021) I would like to first thank the writer for pointing out to your readers my mistake. The name of the person I quoted from should be Erno Rubik not Enro Rubik. When Rubik's Cube first hit the market many

years ago, I read in a journal an article about the inventor Erno Rubik and his invention and it was here that I came across this quotation which related to the examples I mentioned in my letter and the ideas which later took shape. Since there was no internet those days to verify the authenticity of the quotation, I took it at face value for its relevance to the ideology we were formulating and for the importance of this quotation to our ideology. It could have been anyone's quote.

Kharwanlang questions my linking of origin to Identity by quoting from "theorist Stuart Hall." I would like to add that the dictionary meaning of "identity crisis" is "the condition of being uncertain of one's origins."

When Kharwanlang writes of himself, "as a tribal myself," I would like to point out that sometimes the word "tribal" is used as a derogatory term to describe some communities as backward and uncivilized. That is why we in the Maitshaphrang do not describe the Khasi community as a tribal community because we strongly believe that we have the talent, the skills and the resources of the state to free ourselves from this scheduled tribe mindset and with the right leadership to be at par if not better at times, with the developed communities of India and the world, to compete and to contribute on an equal footing.

Yours etc.,  
Michael N. Syiem,  
Via email

"It is better to be violent, if there is violence in our hearts, than to put on the cloak of nonviolence to cover impotence."

— Mahatma Gandhi

## The Shillong Times

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### Worry from Mumbai

ON the Covid-19 front, the grim realization is that the worst is not yet over. Maharashtra again presents the worst scenario with some 40,000 new infections reported in a day, and the state government is virtually blinking on the pandemic front. The heavy caseload in Maharashtra, some 60 per cent of the total active cases in the country, is proof that the right steps were not taken there despite a year-long alert across the nation against the pandemic's spread.

Stunningly, the worrisome scenario in Maharashtra, or Mumbai should be seen against the fact that some 60 lakh people in the state have already been vaccinated. Yet, the daily Covid-linked deaths in the state are of the order of nearly 230, the highest figure since October last, followed by Punjab with over 50 cases a day. Pune is running out of ventilators, Covid wards are full in Bengaluru, and similar worries can arise in Mumbai too.

Across the nation too, the vigil against the Covid spread has been heightened. The daily infection count at national level is now of the order of over 70,000 as per Union health ministry figures. Next to Maharashtra, two major concerns are Chhattisgarh and Karnataka, where daily counts are in the range of 4,000 plus. With Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh included, these eight states carry with them over 85 per cent of the nation's total case load. In a way, a matter of relief is that the rest of India is keeping things under some control despite the second wave of the pandemic having been around.

As the scenario is turning critical in some states, the neighbourhoods are also vulnerable to the onslaught and borders could as well be closed. Capital Delhi is worried too in view of the spurt there and the problem being posed from Punjab in particular. Travel restrictions are likely. The Education sector that was trying for recovery is again put to trouble and online classes have been resumed following the fresh school closures in several states. Lockdown is contemplated again by the worst-hit states, which will have another adverse bearing on the national economy.

The Kumbh Mela in Haridwar faces odds in view of the fresh hike in Covid spread. The festival of Holi was already a washout for the second year in succession this time. With vaccination reaching the 45-plus segment from Thursday, things should improve rather than worsen. Maharashtra holds the key towards reigning in the pandemic. Other states should also be on high alert and testing at borders between states is imperative.

### Letters to the Editor

#### Let truth prevail

Editor,  
This refers to the letter published in your esteemed paper (ST March 31, 2021), where L. Kharbithai had praised the CMD, MeECL for the surprise check at Byrnihat Sub Station that supplies electricity to the industries in those areas. This surprise checked was done on January 26, 2021. As we are all aware, prior to this i.e. on the January 15, 2021 the AEE (Vigilance) along with the MTI engineer had caught red handed Shree Sai Prakash Alloy (P) Ltd for connecting a tampering device to reduce energy consumption. As per IE Act, 2003, the AEE (Vigilance) promptly filed an FIR at Byrnihat Police Outpost and also served the compensation bill of Rs 3.48 crores. Surprisingly, the CMD, MeECL waived off 50% of that amount. The questions that need to be asked here are:

If the CMD on his surprise check found that there was electrical theft, then what kept him from filing an FIR at Byrnihat Police outpost as was done by the AEE (Vigilance) earlier?

Why the CMD did not call for an explanation from the concerned field engineers?

Why inform the press

after a lapse of so many days?

L. Kharbithai has also urged the CMD to find out more about the scams for purchase of poles and other equipments. For the knowledge of the writer, MeECL has a fixed rate for all materials and equipments duly approved by the Board of Directors of MeECL. All the estimates are based on this rate only. He/she should also know that the materials lying unused as he alleged are of the Saubhagya Schemes for village electrification where the supply and work is being executed by M/s Satnam Global Infra Ltd, where the prices of these materials are 50 to 100 % more than the approved rate of MeECL. Also this same firm has got the work of another central scheme namely Enetripri Resource Planning (ERP) Project where the rate quoted by M/s Satnam Global are way too high than the market rate. For example, the cost of Work Station PC that comprises a computer table, chair, UPS is Rs.3,36,300 each and that of the Network Laser Jet Printer is Rs.1,19,888 each.

Let the CMD and the State Government call for a CBI enquiry right from the energy theft at Byrnihat Industrial Estate and to the different central schemes where the cost of the equipments are way beyond the estimated amount.

# Of clumsy narratives, oafish wisecracks and political lying

By Patricia Mukhim

Deputy Chief Minister, Prestone Tynsong who is the virtual Chief Minister of Khasi Hills is constantly in the news to bail out his government. In case people wonder why I have only named Khasi Hills, it is because Sniawbhalang Dhar is Chief Minister of Jaintia Hills and Conrad Sangma of Garo Hills. Responsibilities in this government have been divided very astutely although I dare say that Sniawbhalang Dhar exercises his clout across the state because in Meghalaya "Money Talks." No wonder everyone is in the race to get rich quick. And guess what's the route to that cherished goal? You guessed it right! It's politics and more politics. Look at the wealth ranking of some of the MLAs today who started off as indigents some decades ago. Did we ever ask where they accumulated so much wealth and how they can afford to own so many properties in Shillong City and that in the prime addresses of the capital? Forget the Khasi-Jaintia MLAs; even politicians from Garo Hills are making a beeline to own prime space in this overcrowded city.

These skilful practitioners of politics hold on to their seats by parading goodwill and bonhomie with their constituents, most of whom are so poor that even a one-time help of Rs 5000-10,000 during an emergency makes them indebted to the MLA forever. And then we Khasis use the catchphrase, "Uto te um rem shuh." (He will never lose the elections). Now the yardstick for passing such comments is not because the MLA looks after the constituency such as repairing the potholes, ensuring constant water and power supply; street lighting, helping in repair and maintenance of schools and playgrounds within the constituency and ensuring that schemes are implemented in a time bound manner, but, because he/she pays money to impoverished constituents. A vigilant public would demand a blow by blow account of the money spent vide the MLA scheme. Alas! The public of Meghalaya spends more time on social media than on making things happen on the ground.

The politician who until yesterday lived a hand to mouth existence is today a man of expensive tastes. He spends more time building his own personal wealth

than in legislation. The Assembly notably referred to as the 'August House' has only become a debating platform where questions are asked and answers provided with no follow-up thereafter. Knowing that the TV cameras are focused on them, most MLAs act their parts like seasoned dramatists, some even playing weird roles that go beyond their legislative mandates.

If we are to measure the achievements of the MDA Government we will find that it spends more time fire-fighting than actually thinking out people-oriented policies. And while the English language savvy CM can spin yarns about this scheme and that and how it will help the public cause, we never really see in him any glimpse of consistency. He has spoken ad nauseam about river cleaning and even mentioned that some firms from outside would come in to help the state in this onerous task but such statements remain a media sensation for a day. That's it! But the CM gets away because when he addresses the media there's no one to put ask him hard questions on the promises made since 2018. Since we in the media have turned stenographers taking down copious notes or recording speeches in bombastic language, there is no way of cross-questioning the glib talking CM.

Then comes the Deputy CM with his own brand of grandiose claims and unending shenanigans that he used to beat up non-tribals in 1979. The disingenuousness of his statement is breathtaking. On closer look the statement has the stench of tall claims because the Dy CM needed a metaphor for a 'change of heart.' But such claims coming as they do at this juncture when he holds a lofty position are indeed troubling. How do we know in which direction his innate violence is channelled towards? Might it not be that he now uses other discriminatory tactics against people he used to once beat up because he is today in a position to do so? But the fact of the matter is that the more the Dy CM speaks the deeper he puts his foot into his mouth. So much so that memes and videos of him follow every press conference. Prestone Tynsong is a poor replica of BB Lyngdoh who was an

astute statesman and held his own in very tough and challenging circumstances when Shillong was a tinder box of violence. Now we have someone who skirts difficult questions and trivialises everything. But why do we wonder? This is the depth to which politics in this state has plumbed. And we have ourselves to blame for electing people whose only qualifications are to serve their own constituents - the state be damned.

Today we are at a juncture when statements from the Government can no longer be taken at face value. The power cut flip-flop is taxing our patience. Now Power Grid Corporation Ltd (PGCL) will regulate power supply from April 14 because of non-payment of dues. The fire-fighting and the bravado are not working. A long term Power Policy is long overdue. And those groups that are against privatisation had better come up with a fool-proof revenue model on how the MeECL is to be run and where the huge outstandings can be paid from. It's easy to take a Leftist position that you cannot privatise a PSU. People who hold such views should also protest the impending privatisation of Air India and several other loss-making PSUs. Delhi does not have the money to keep pumping into a black hole called the MeECL. And we need power; we really don't care who the power supplier is. Above all, we as citizens cannot support a failed institution that is badly managed, is steeped in corruption and is above all, a big and bulky white elephant that reeks of inefficiency.

It is peculiar to India that a matter that should be decided and settled on the basis of economic viability and business criteria becomes a political issue. Some years ago a senior bureaucrat who headed the MeECL as its Chairman and Managing Director, apparently engaged several contractual employees who could not be retrenched today. This weight is being borne by the MeECL as if it is an employment agency and not a power production and distribution company. The MeECL should have been severed from Government control and should have been run by professionals.

I was checking the profiles

of Chairpersons and Managing Directors of the some power producing companies and all of them have professionals at the helm. The CMD of National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC), Gurdeep Singh, is a Mechanical Engineer with over three decades of experience in the power generation sector. He started his career with NTPC Limited and has worked at various levels both in Indian and Multi-national Companies namely Powergen, CLP, IDFC, CESC and AES. He has worked in different areas of the Power Sector ranging from business development, projects and operations. Prior to joining NTPC, Singh was Managing Director, Gujarat State Electricity Corporation Limited.

VK Singh the CMD NEEPCo since 2019 has a background of over 36 years in Hydro, Gas Based and Solar Power generation starting from feasibility studies to sizing, selection, design & engineering, construction, project management, operation & maintenance. His forte lies in hydro power development chain viz. contracts, commercials and business development apart from in-depth understanding of emerging policy and regulatory issues of the power sector as a whole. He has wide international exposure in the power sector and has been trained/worked at various international facilities of global power equipment giants like GEC Alsthom, ANDRITZ HYDRO and SIEMENS T&D in France and Austria.

This informs us that generalist bureaucrats who had been heading the MeSEB and later the MeECL don't bring with them the qualifications needed to run the Corporation in a businesslike manner and to develop a sustainable business model for it. Also they cannot cross swords with politicians who have used the Board and later the Corporation as their milking cow. Sadly, no one has stopped them in their tracks. Now that the shit has hit the ceiling one hopes that hard decisions will be taken without giving in to all kinds of mushy sentiments from people who have sucked the MeECL dry. And we can do without further lying on this score. Tell us what we need to know but not in instalments. Enough is enough. The Dy CM and the Power Minister both have lost credibility. They should now just shut up and stop the lying.

# Autism: The way forward for inclusion

By Dr Shabina Ahmed

April 2nd marks the celebration of the 14th anniversary of the UN World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD). It was instituted in 2007 to increase global awareness of the prevalence and relevant issues of Autism, to stimulate one to learn more about the problem, thereby upholding and standing for the rights of these children for a right-based existence. WAAD is one of only 4 specifically health related UN Observance days, which serves as a powerful advocacy tool.

Autism as a condition was mentioned way back in 1911 by the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler, and it was thought to be a psychiatric problem but over the years we have come to the understanding that is a social emotional disorder as expressed by Leo Kanner in 1944. Then Hans Asperger, an Austrian pediatrician, found that most of the children are intelligent, differentiating them from schizophrenia. Today we know it as a developmental problem. Their main areas of deficit are in social behavior, communication, cognition and imagination.

Autism may present as a delayed speech in some cases as early as two years of life, but as they get older, they begin to speak but we need to be aware that this is not a cure-level of autism. What we need to look into, is the long-term development consequences of the applicability of speech and thinking. They begin functioning at a time much behind the normal age of their peers.

They have streaks of abilities and interests and have peculiarities of motivation and joint attention that keep them isolated from their peers. Just as we are all different individuals, so is every child with Autism. They have varied presentations and levels in the symptomatology in social communication development. This led to the term Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Amidst this umbrella term lies the children labelled as high-functioning or low-functioning. But the question is: what is the deciding criteria? Is being verbal a high-functioning child? But he may have sensory challenges and may not like to stay in school. Is it low-functioning if the child cannot use spoken language, but may be successful if we nurture him as per his interests and skills? It is now time to ponder that neither of the functioning levels describes the level of ability or function across multiple tasks. There is no optimal criteria to measure autism as a unitary construct.

The children, and adults too, with autism have long faced many inequalities, further exacerbated by the pandemic. This includes discriminatory employment practices, giving rise to under or unemployment of this population. The theme of 'Inclusion in the workplace' thus resonates more. The present trend of management is focused on, that people with autism must change, in order to accommodate to the so called, non-autistic world. This is indeed very stressful and often we need to deal with anxiety, sleep problems, plateauing in their development and becomes withdrawn, which often is recognised as an abnormal behaviour. Research has shown that older persons with autism have expressed that they want subjective wellbeing and adaptive skill assistance rather than neurotypical functioning. If we have a right based approach in keeping with the United Nations convention, it is

time to listen.

The Sustainable Development Goals give us a format, among others, to productive employment for all, including those with disabilities. Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others, in an open inclusive environment. The pandemic has thrown up new ways of working, especially with remote-based technologies, giving boost to an inclusive hiring practice, away from a traditional workplace milieu. The latter is less stressful for them, and also to teaching and stimulating in a naturalistic environment, as evidenced during the pandemic where teaching was home-based and naturalistic. This again is a sustainable methodology.

Autistic persons have a different 'brain wiring' within the normal variation in humans, giving rise to the concept of being 'neurodiverse'. Neurodiversity proponents believe that autism is caused by biological factors, celebrate it as a part of natural human variety (Armstrong 2010). They regard atypical neurological development as a normal human difference and this gives us three ways of responding; do we work to prevent this happening, or work to ameliorate or to celebrate? The question that arises is why we cannot negotiate a place for them amidst the neurotypical? A strength-based focus counteracts the deficit view, as a large group of children have unique positive traits and they are very passionate about their interests and spend a lot of time, energy and imagination, this certainly calls for channelization.

Further, one advantage we have is they are not tied to social expectations, they are methodical in their work, and often seen to be technologically oriented. They have an innate skill in pattern recognition, logical reasoning and picking out irregularities in data. Seeing these qualities some IT companies are now employing them, thus highlighting the importance of harnessing autistic traits in developmentally beneficial ways.

We have sketchy data on the exact extent of autism in India, but none on their employment. Many NGOs, especially EnAble India, has training programs for autistic individuals geared for employment, and though we have many Indian IT companies, it is SAP Labs India that has had an encouraging recruitment of autistic individuals. Globally, a very successful move has been the Danish model of recruitment of high-functioning adults to the IT based Specialisterne Foundation, that has a collaboration with the UN Department of Global Communications and UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Learning about neurodiversity may serve as a turning point towards a more holistic concept of autism, and may represent convergence of social and medical models. Positive framing often helps parents and child interaction to improve.

The 2021 World Autism Awareness Day observance give us all an opportunity to look at the talent pool of autistic persons that we have denied to be part of the labour market.

Dr Shabina Ahmed, MD, FIAP, is the Founder Director and Developmental Pediatrician Assam Autism Foundation & National Awardee of Child Welfare 2014.

incredible natural landmarks should inspire the concerned authorities in our city to make an effort to breathe fresh air into a city which has regressed into a polluted and congested city with each passing day.

Yours etc.,  
Gary Marbanian,  
Via email

#### Road in dire need of repair

Editor,  
The residents of Sankar-Mawroh-Umshing-Mawkyroh are facing insurmountable problems as the road from Mawroh junction (Soul's Kitchen point) to Mawkyroh junction (Nehu-Mawtar road) is in very bad shape and is in urgent need of repair. The road is in such a pathetic condition that there are potholes all along this stretch, even as the road is undergoing earthwork for widening. There was some ray of hope a few months ago when there was earth cutting in full swing. However it is very sad to say that the work for the past few weeks is extremely slow for reasons unknown. The public has to put up with the dust and the nearby buildings are covered in red/brown dust. Through this write up I request the construction firm, whether it is the PWD or a private firm to please speed up the work before the rainy season starts as the road will be difficult to

drive then because of mud and slush. It was reported in a vernacular paper more than one year that 12.50 crores has been sanctioned to re-lay the road from Mawroh to Umjarain from the Central Road Funds. There have been many inspections conducted by the PWD officials and also by the respected MLA, PT Sawkmie. However, the work is moving at a very slow pace. Presently, the road is in bad shape and all I pray through this letter is for the PWD to do some minor repairs to make it pliable till the major reconstruction is done. Residents along this stretch also need to voice their concern for common public welfare.

Yours etc.,  
Reward Rymbai,  
Umshing-Block 2, Mawlai

#### Kudos DC's Office Shillong!

Editor,  
I take this opportunity through your esteemed newspaper to extend my sincere appreciation to Ms Isawanda Laloo, IAS, Deputy Commissioner, East Khasi Hills under whose able leadership we have seen the DC's office, East Khasi Hills becoming more people-friendly and more engaging through virtual platforms. Through personal experiences, I have seen that

the e-communication department of the DC's office has become much more accessible, and the action taken by it has also been very prompt and satisfactory. These days, one does not even need to visit the DC's office for their various works as most have been solved online. Furthermore, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to Ms. Balakantiew Ranee, MCS, Addl. Deputy Commissioner, East Khasi Hills, who has been extremely efficient in dealing with matters of issuing important certificates such as Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste, PRCs, Residence, etc. Under Ms Ranee's charge, we have seen that the time gap for disposal of applications has significantly reduced and errors minimised, unlike past instances where, to be frank, innocent citizens were harassed at every turn for getting their work done by the past dispensations.

Such competent officers give us hope that things will indeed turn out for the better in our State. They act as role models for all civil servants, present and future.

Yours etc,  
Keith Nongsteng  
Via email

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

# Autumn friends



Gayatri Patwardhan who lives in Salt Lake area of Kolkata was at her wits' end when her gas cylinder got over just two weeks after the first lockdown. She did not what to do.

After the horrific Amphan cyclone that ravaged West Bengal in May last year and when the lockdown was still on, Hemant Mukhopadhyay lost touch with his children who live abroad due to internet connection failure. "Living alone and not being able to talk to my grandkids was unbearable for me," says the senior citizen.

Mukhopadhyay was not the only one. With children travelling or settled overseas many of the senior citizens live alone in metros these days and face the same sense of isolation.

With the pandemic there was an additional problem. The seniors are highly dependent on domestic helps to do the chores but now they could not travel to the city from the suburbs where they live due to the lockdown. Insecure about contacting the virus if they stepped out, unable to go out to buy their essentials, "Many of us in our building would share our stuff and eat frugally as going out was a fearful proposition," confesses Bobby Mahato who stays in multi storeyed building in Kolkata's Ultadanga area.

"We haven't seen our children for a long time now as we can't operate Zoom like devices. Today our kids can no longer say that we are just a phone call away," rues 87-year-old Debopriyo Majumdar, whose son is settled in Seattle who also keeps worrying for the elderly father.

While the virus has digitized our lives, most senior citizens cannot handle virtual meets and online platforms without training, and this has led to a kind of digital divide.

But demand generates supply, to repeat an old adage in Economics. To cater to needs of senior citizens in such situations, now have emerged many a service and support start-ups. Suchint Murali, based in Chennai, grouped with her two friends Puja Janan and Gayatri Suresh and decided to provide support to the elderly in 2019. The idea incubated into a company, called Sakhi4life, little knowing that the pandemic was waiting in the wings.

"Before the pandemic, there was

**The number of senior citizens in the country is increasing. Many of them today have to live alone as children live abroad or are on work assignments for long periods. To cater to their daily needs, magnified during the pandemic, start-up companies are coming up to extend a helping hand, finds Anju Munshi**

resistance as they wouldn't want to spend money and would often say that they had good friends and neighbors who would help them should there be any requirement for assistance," recalls Murali. "Now caught off-guard, they realised the importance of caregivers and helpers even though for a charge as suddenly they were deprived of helps. The friends and the neighbours couldn't do anything about it."

Sakhi4life charges a nominal amount and takes care to tackle problems like social isolation, loneliness, grief, as well as buying household stuff, medicines, arranging doctors' visits, vaccinations- factors that generally make seniors feel vulnerable and depressed. Many of them have an anxiety syndrome lest they fall ill or get hospitalised during the pandemic. The virus and fear has robbed them of their coping mechanism too, according to medical experts.

With the pandemic it became very challenging, says Murali. "We had to queue up for two hours at least to buy provisions and then supply these at the doorstep as no elderly person was allowed to go outside."

"The children in out-stations wanted to help their parents and were more than willing to spend on this facility since they couldn't be there themselves. This concern for the welfare of their parents multiplied as they suddenly realised the importance of our services, the lockdown being an eye-opener."

'Cycle Soldiers' was the brainchild of Arvind Kumar, a student of Lakshmi Singhania Academy, batch 2017, Kolkata. He started this service along with his volunteer friends by providing help to senior citizens during the lockdown. Anything that the senior citizens required like medicines, gas cylinders, daily essentials were delivered by these energetic volunteers on wheels.

Says Arvind, "One day, I was sent by my mother to my grandmother's place with some essential supplies on a bicycle. That made me think as to how the older population of the city was coping up in these tough times."

He made a pledge to himself whilst peddling, that he would offer services to the geriatric community of the city.

He did have teething problems with the police enquiring why he was out cycling during the lockdown. "But on explaining to them my aim and objectives, the officer stamped my permit and wished me luck."

Calls from London, Dubai, Doha, USA soon poured in by children seeking assistance for their parents, as they could not visit the city and the flights were grounded.

The cycle soldiers helped the seniors handle bank accounts, enabled them to connect with their children digitally, besides buying provisions and paying their bills online.

Today there are also other organisations like Delhi-based Emoha Eldereare (now branching out to other places) and Dependablez, Kolkata, that provide nursing home care for the seniors with food, medicine and groceries on door step delivery.

Many other organisations have woken up to the need of geriatric assistance beyond these, like, dependable companionship services, assisted trips, payment of bills, assisting elderly with special needs like Parkinson's and Dementia, taking them out on wheelchairs for movies, a walk in the nearby park or to a mall.

At times the counsellors visit them at home to chat and make them do some exercises. "After every visit many elderly persons seem to forget us, so we have to reintroduce ourselves. But it's so fulfilling to see them smile and talk that it gives us immense happiness," says Murali.

It was not only age but also gender that come up with specific issues, says Sugato Das, a social activist. "Elderly women have their own vulnerabilities; they need communication support, especially when it is digitalized and virtual."

Similarly, there are other requirements too for the senior citizens that go unnoticed. They have to arrange house help, cleaners, door cutters, fire saving equipment, oxygen tanks, immediate assistance in case of falls and accidents, electric shocks. These are all emergency measures to assist the elderly.

Someone has to take charge and with time people are realising that a strong support system is needed for people in their autumn years. (TWF)



## A school's tale narrated through architecture

By Archana Sharma

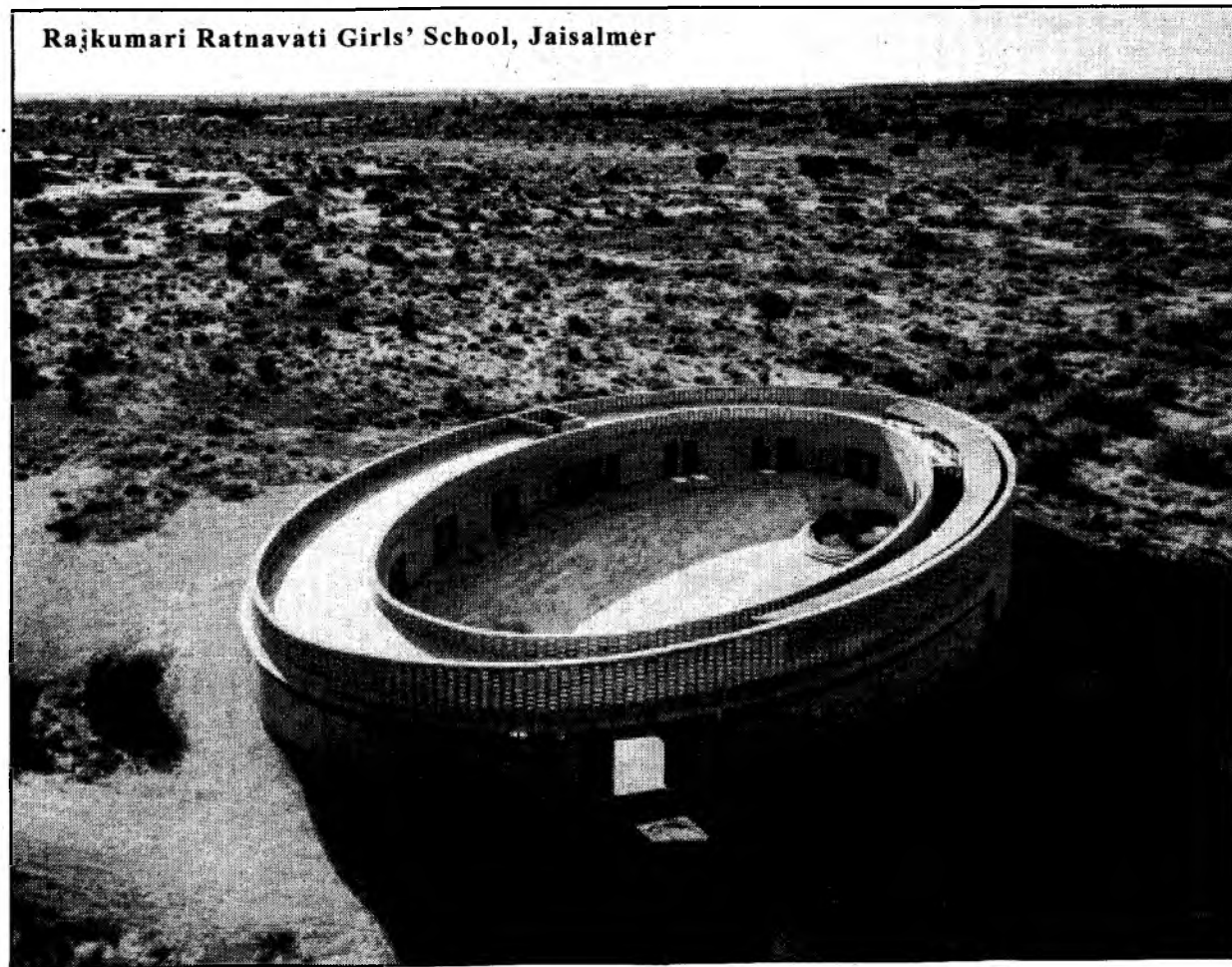
Situated in the centre of the Thar Desert in Rajasthan, a school building made of yellow sandstone is telling the story of sustainability for its architectural marvel as the students can study and play in the protected courtyard here without worrying about the extreme weather outside. This, at a time when temperatures keep soaring and the harsh winds cause sand to blow throughout the day.

The school is built as an oval-shaped structure and blends with the desert landscape with no air conditioners installed inside the building but the beautiful Jali wall at the roofs and solar installations ensure that sustainable principles are followed at length.

Named the Rajkumari Ratnavati Girls' School, the building is designed by Diana Kellogg Architects and is funded by CITTA, an international non-profit founded by Michael Daube, aiming at enticing the local communities to send their girls to school. It will also encourage craftspeople to impart skills such as weaving and printing to the students' mothers and aunts, and make it a marketplace to exhibit and sell their goods.

The school building is situated just a six-minute drive away from Jaisalmer's famous Sam Sand Dunes in Kanoi village and has been constructed with the idea of blending tourism, culture, craftsmanship and other unique aspects of Jaisalmer to open up a concept of economic avenue.

Although the school planned to start its operations in March 2021, it could not start operat-



Rajkumari Ratnavati Girls' School, Jaisalmer

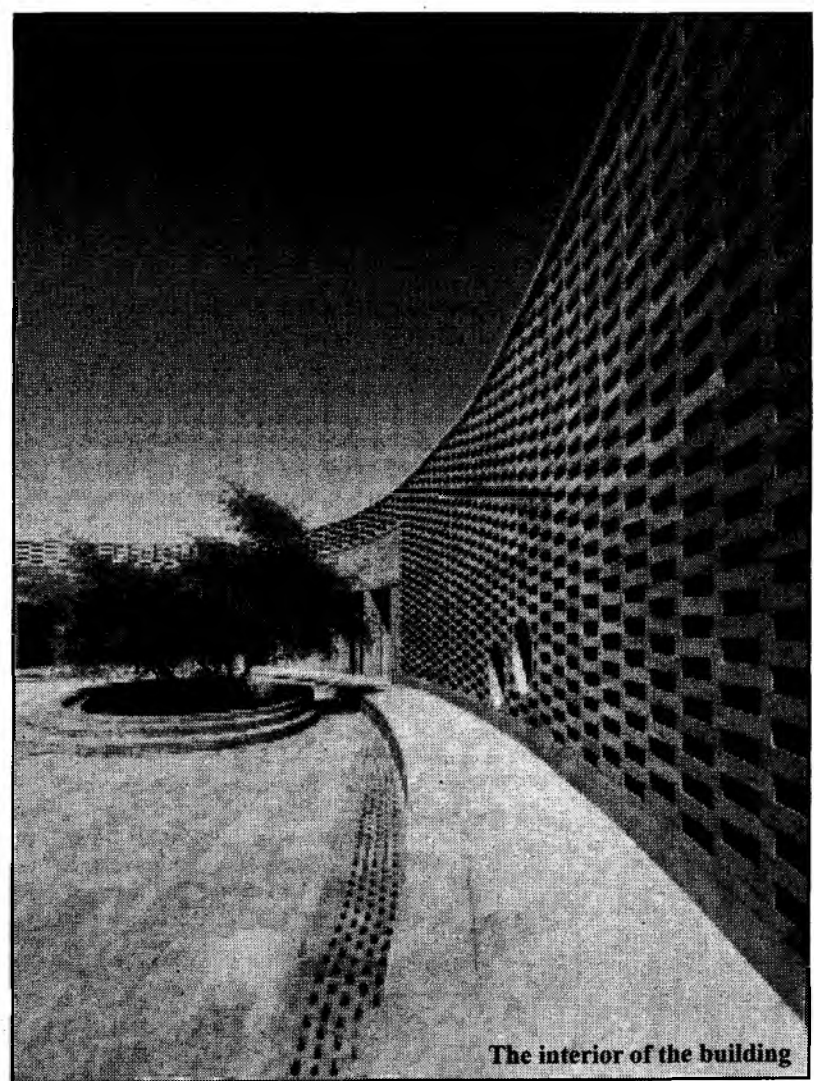
ing due to COVID. However, the design theme of the school has already starting making waves due to the beautiful structure which is quite impressive visually.

"The Rajkumari Ratnavati School will be offered to girls below the poverty line residing in the Thar Desert region of Jaisalmer. The facilities will include classrooms, a library, a computer centre, and a bus facility to trans-

port girls from neighbouring villages. The school will provide education for an estimated 400+ girls from kindergarten through class 10. It will have a midday-meal programme to ensure proper nutrition for the students as well as lessen families' financial burden," says the CITTA website.

CITTA's second goal is to enhance gender parity in the region through the Women's Coopera-

tive. While girls receive education at the girls school, local artisans will teach mothers and other women weaving and embroidery techniques from the Jaisalmer region that are on the verge of being forgotten. The traditional techniques paired with contemporary designers will produce international quality items for the global marketplace, thereby



The interior of the building

diversifying and enhancing the local economy, it adds.

The school building has a Central Hall which will act as the Girls School and the Women's Cooperative, enhancing both programmes forming the completed GYAAN Centre. Strongly following the principles of women empowerment, the GYAAN Centre will invite renowned female artists, designers education advocates to create artwork, host events and present installations.

According to the CITTA portal, "The space will also periodically act as a marketplace to share the women's creations with tourists venturing to the nearby dunes to

experience the sunset."

According to Michael, "The school will help bring together culture, growth opportunities for women, and tourism, all of which will create a 'ripple in the desert.'"

The school has been constructed on land donated by Manvendra Singh Shekhawat, owner of the Suryagarh Palace hotel and a director for CITTA Foundation India. Indian fashion designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee also collaborated with CITTA to create uniforms for the students of this school and also released images showcasing the blue-maroon Ajrakh uniforms. (IANS)

# Rediscovering Mir

By Vishnu Makhijani

Mir Taqi Mir (1723-1810) was not only Urdu's first great poet but also the most prolific one with around 13,500 couplets to his name. He is credited with giving shape and structure to the Urdu language itself, is counted among the five major poets of the language along with Mirza Ghalib, Mir Anees Allama Iqbal and Josh Malihabadi and is often mentioned as 'Khuda-e-Sukhan' (God of Posey or poetry).

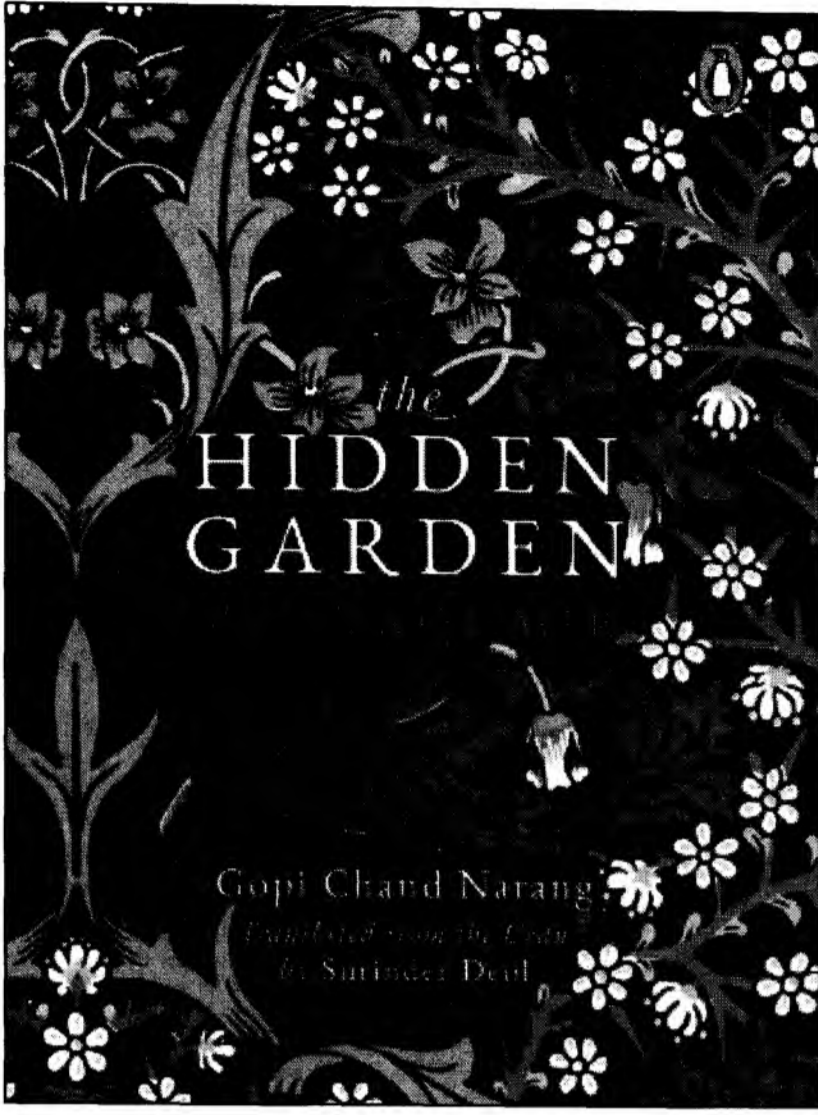
But, he is also grossly misunderstood outside the academic world, to correct which noted Urdu litterateur Gopi Chand Narang has penned the seminal work "The Hidden Garden" ahead of the 300th anniversary two years hence of one of the principal poets of the Delhi School of Urdu ghazals.

It goes back to 1984, when, after working over several months, Narang had delivered a scholarly paper on Mir's poetry at a memorial lecture in Karachi that was ultimately published as a book titled "Usloobiyaat-e Mir" in 1985.

"This text was written in scholarly language for an academic audience, and I'm happy to report that the book is part of advanced studies of Urdu literature in several colleges and universities all over the country. Over time, I felt the need to bring my main research findings about Mir to a wider non-academic audience," the 90-year-old Narang, who writes in both English and Urdu, told IANS in an interview.

"This was considered especially important because we are approaching the 300th birth anniversary of Mir in 2023. That is how 'The Hidden Garden' came into being and that is why it is written in an engaging style that an ordinary reader can use to gain knowledge about Mir's life events and enjoy his riveting verse without being bothered by the analytics that appeal to a more academic audience," Narang, who has the rare honour of being bestowed as the Professor Emeritus by both University of Delhi and Jamia Millia Islamia, explained.

Written in Urdu and translated



by Narang's long-time associate Surinder Deol, the book has been published by Penguin/Viking.

As Narang researched further, he read almost every word written by Mir, taking copious notes and read virtually everything that was written about him.

"My immediate reaction was a shock and a surprise. The shock came from the finding that even some of the more eminent critics failed to have a more balanced appreciation of Mir's poetry. There were two common misgivings. First, Mir's high was really high, but his low was almost like trash. The good part was therefore limited

to only seventy-two nishtars (lan-cets). This meant that there was no balance or no assurance of quality in Mir's verse. Also, if you have read those seventy-two nishtars, there was no need for you to go any further.

"This was a wrong assessment. What was considered low was not well understood by the critics.

"Second, it was mentioned that Mir's poetry was too simple to gain any critical appreciation. This was also wrong because Mir's 'simplicity' has layers of complexity. Mir mostly avoided writing in the Persian style that was prevalent in his time. He preferred the language that people

spoke in Agra, Delhi, and Lucknow. But within that apparent simplicity of language, he inducted the complexity of his thought-forms. Once again, the critics failed to capture this difference," Narang elaborated.

Thus, it is important to understand Mir's life's key events so that the reader becomes familiar with the roots of his pain and scars of his psyche. "He is like a candle that burns and melts continuously. Mir is not only a poet of unrequited love; his voice reveals and recreates echoes of the medieval age's soul-touching transcendental thought of the bhakti tradition and spirituality," Narang explained.

"We know that we cannot fully know about the tragic mass suffering caused by 1857 without going through Ghalib's letters. In the same way, we cannot appreciate the magnitude of horrible pillage, plunder and ruination that happened during the invasions of Nadir Shah (1739) and the repeated plunder of Ahmad Shah Abdali (from 1747 onwards) and also the infighting between Jats, Marhatas, Rohellas and others without going into the soul of Mir's verse and his life," Narang said.

This reveals the parallel between the times Mir lived in and the present day world.

"Mir's story is not just his own story, it is a testament to the miseries suffered by Delhi as a city and by its residents. It is a story of the river of fire he had to wade through to survive in those times: 'Ujre nagar mein jaise jale hai charagh ek' (in a pillaged town engulfed in darkness shines a distant tiny lamp somewhere). Mir is a poet of the fire of love and torment that impacts us slowly. He is a poet of agony and suffering as well as courage and audacity.

"Mir's poetry is relevant in today's troubled world, the world shattered by the Covid-19 and economic uncertainties," Narang said.

What next? What's his next project?

"I am involved in several exciting projects that would probably unfold in the coming months. Please stay tuned," Narang concluded. (IANS)

# Power of books and friendship

The obsession with World War II continues — and from all indications, is not likely to die down anytime soon.

PARIS, 1939: Young, ambitious, and tempestuous, Odile Souchet has it all — Paul, her handsome police officer beau; Margaret, her best friend from England; Remy, her twin brother who she adores; and a dream job at the American Library in Paris, working alongside the library's legendary director, Dorothy Reeder.

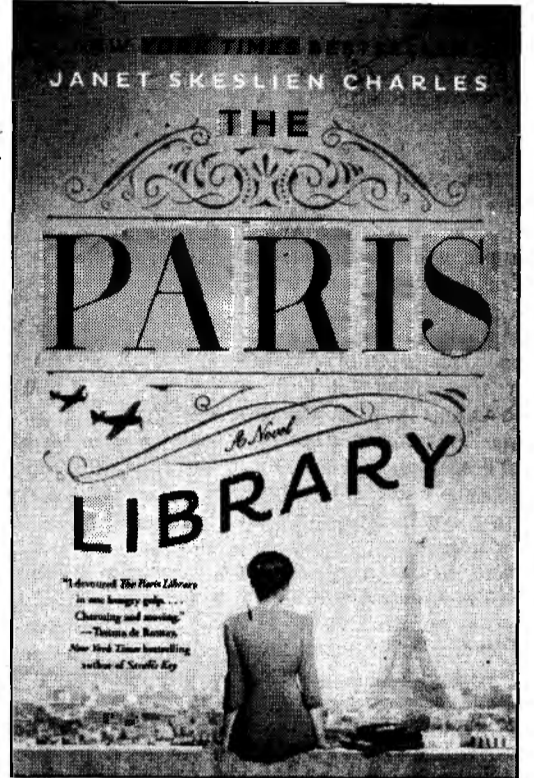
When World War II breaks out, Odile stands to lose everything she holds dear — including her beloved library. After the Nazi army marches into the City of Light and declares a war on words, Odile and her fellow librarians join the Resistance with the best weapons they have: books. Again and again, they risk their lives to help their fellow Jewish readers, but by war's end, Odile tastes the bitter sting of unspeakable betrayal.

MONTANA, 1983: Odile's solitary existence in gossipy small-town Montana is unexpectedly interrupted by her neighbour Lily, a lonely teenager craving adventure. As Lily uncovers more about Odile's mysterious past, they find they share not only a love of language but also the same lethal jealousy. Odile helps Lily navigate the troubled waters of adolescence by always recommending the right book at the right time, never suspecting that Lily will be the one to help her reckon with her own terrible secret.

Based on a true World War II story, Janet Skeslien Charles' "The Paris Library" (Hachette) is an unforgettable novel about the power of books and the bonds

of friendship — and the ordinary heroes who can be found in the most perilous times and the quietest places and the courage it takes to forgive.

Janet Skeslien Charles is the award-winning author of "Moonlight in Odessa", which was published in ten languages. Her shorter work has appeared in reviews such as Slice and Montana Noir. She first became interested in the incredible true story of the librarians who stood up to



the Nazi "Book Protector" Dr. Hermann Fuchs, who had full authority over intellectual activity during the occupation, when she worked as the program's manager at the American Library in Paris. "The Paris Library" will be published in thirty countries. She divides her time between Montana and Paris. Visit her at JSkeslienCharles.com or connect with her on Twitter @SkleslienCharles. (IANS)

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambh

Sunday, APRIL 4, 2021

Moon trine Uranus on your solar return chart and it will give wonderful results for the whole year. You will be promoted in your job. Your business will rise and you will make good profits. You will get many opportunities to rise in your profession. Your financial position will keep getting better. You will also plan a major expansion in your business. Your government related work will get done. You will also come in contact with lot of influential person. You will be busy with business/work related trips which will prove beneficial for you. You will also enjoy a warm and fulfilling relationship with a very charming person. Your elders will bless you. You can also plan to buy a new house/property. Your legal disputes will be resolved with the help of third persons. Auspicious functions will keep taking place.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

It will turn out to be an exciting week. You will enjoy wonderful health. Even your financial position is going to be stable. Good gains in business are indicated. You will explore your professional contacts and make best use of them. You will also fulfill your responsibility properly. Your bosses will be happy with your performance. You will also make plans to go abroad for education/job. You will be happy with good news that you receive from your relatives. You will also enjoy wonderful love life. With success in love, marital life will be pleasant. You will get support of your family members and friends. You will get rid of domestic problems. At this time, business trips will be pleasant. You will have full satisfaction. You will be successful in doing any work. You will receive blessings from your elders.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

You are going to have a very favorable time period. You will make progress in all aspects in your life. You will be meeting influential persons and get their support. Your performance at your workplace will also get appreciated. You will organize your work properly and smoothly. Additional responsibility may be given. Your bosses will also encourage a lot. Financial position is going to be stable and strong. You will also get cooperation in house hold work. You will have wonderful relations with loved ones. Your partner/spouse will keep on supporting you. Unmarried people will fall in love. You will also earn good money. The speed of work will increase. You will make progress in your life due to your intellect. You will also plan to go on a trip with your friends.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

It will turn out to be a very promising week for you. You will be dedicated in your work. And will be able to complete it in time. You will also get appreciation of one and all at your workplace. In your job or business, you will achieve your goals and targets. You will work hard and will have time for your family members too. You will get happiness from spouse/partner. You will be having peaceful atmosphere. The performance of your children in studies will please you. You will keep all your important files properly and start a systematic routine. You will also get promotion in your job. Students will focus on their studies and they will get success also in exams. Meeting with people, enhancing social activities will give you success. Your name and fame will rise.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

It will turn out to be a fantastic week for you. All the ups and downs you were facing in your work will end and you will complete your work smoothly. You will also get support of your bosses and superiors. Your colleagues will also cooperate with you. You will have monetary gains. A new job/business offer will come. You will also make preparations for an auspicious function in your house. You could also have some long business trips to make all of a sudden. It will turn out to be fruitful. According to your ability, you will get the money. Students will get success by doing hard work. In exams/interviews success will be achieved. You could also get attracted to spiritual matters. Everyone will support you fully. You will be happy in all situations.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

There will be lot of positive developments in your favor this week. You will make progress in your job. And will also enjoy mental peace. You will continue to work hard and also acquire practical knowledge. You will be very busy with your official work. You will be able to give time to your family from your busy schedule. You will also get success in an important exam/interview. The results will come in your favor and it will remove your tension. It is a favorable time period for you. An auspicious event is expected in the family. Your economic side will remain strong. You will also meet an influential personality. Your income will rise. There will be an atmosphere of happiness at home and at the workplace also.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

This week is very favorable to have positive results in money related matters. Your work plans will be successful. Your focus towards work will be gained. Peace will be there in the family and there will also be fulfillment of new work. New contacts will be

made. You will get happiness in personal life. Your spouse/partner will give you a lot of comfort and satisfaction. You will also get an opportunity to meet your friends. Land related disputes be resolved. You will also get the affection of your mother. Income will increase. And you will get success in your work due to hard work. Your expenses will also rise. You will work to improve your future. You will be treated with full humility.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

It will be a very enjoyable week for you. The time will be spent wonderfully with your family members. You may surprise your partner with an act much to his/her pleasure and comfort. Your good nature and qualities will come to the fore. You will believe in making others happy through your gestures. You will also be very practical in day to day activities. Some positive events will happen that you had not even imagined about. The obstacles that were there on the path of students will get removed. You will also obtain a victory in every task. There will be a happy atmosphere at home. Your deeds will fetch you respect. You will be miles ahead of people in terms of achievements and thoughts.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

New doors of opportunities are opening up for you this week. The time is very joyful for you. You will get success in whatever you do. Your financial position is going to be stable. Money that was blocked will come to you. Your life partner will walk shoulder to shoulder with you. You will spend some quality time with him/her. Your name and fame will also increase manifold. And you will get appreciation from people for your deeds and acts. Your behavior will be gentle. Your desires will get fulfilled. The mood of students will be good. They will work hard to get success. You will desire to learn something new. You will go for some new research.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

The beginning of the week is going to be fantastic. These are the days for doing something good. Your efforts will be appreciated and you will get rewarded suitably for your efforts. Whatever you do will be done with full loyalty and dedication. There will be give and take in business matters which will prove beneficial for you. You will move forward in the right direction because of your maturity and right thinking. Your relation will blossom into full fledged romance. Your entire attention will be on your house and family. You will feel relaxed. And enjoy time with loved ones.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

The favorable placement of planets is promising gains for you. You will make profit in business/work. You will also love peace and solitude. But it does not mean you will not be in touch with people. You will just relax a bit to feel fresh and rejuvenated. You will enjoy your work. There will be peace and calm in the family. You will also make plans for some new things. There will be material progress. You will also make plans to buy a house/vehicle. You will gain happiness and some of your desire will be fulfilled. At this time, you will get money, respect and happiness. You will walk on the path of spirituality and develop religious inclinations. You will also remain disciplined and teach some values to your family members.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

It is going to be a week very well spent. You will have amazing time with your near and dear ones. You could come very close to someone you know already. You will introspect and analyze yourself. And will bring about a change in your communication and behavior. You will also get employment opportunity. Your eligibility will be revealed to everyone. You will also gain in partnership. You will also establish yourself in your office and officials will be happy with your work. You will do the best of work now. You will be satisfied to know that all your works are going according to your wish. Your bank balance will add on. The loan that you had given will be recovered. There will be an increase in efficiency and dexterity of doing work. Your entire attention will be on your objective. The time will be very peaceful and natural. You will also enjoy wonderful health.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

There will be lot to cheer and enjoy this week. Physical health will be good. You will try and keep your family away from all problems. You will keep a positive approach towards life. And will also finish your work with determination and courage. Your business deals will be successful. Change in plans will work to your advantage. You can also attend some function. Luck will be on your side. You will get a new job-opening. Time will be spent in happiness with your dear ones. And will be full of vigor and energy. Relations with siblings will be pleasant. Your opponents will try to dominate you but will not be able to succeed. You will feel a lot of love towards your dear ones, and relations with neighbors will also improve. The atmosphere at home will be wonderful.

## Career in Poultry Science



By Ranjan K Baruah

The pandemic and lock down has taught us to be more self dependent and one area where business flourished is none other than poultry. Consumption of meats and eggs continued and the sector did not incur loss as there were demands. Whenever we go out for eating out then we realize the importance of poultry in chains like KFCs or any other restaurants. We can easily imagine the scope and opportunities in the field of poultry in the region or in the country.

"Poultry" can be defined as domestic fowls, including chickens, turkeys, geese and ducks, raised for the production of meat or eggs and the word is also used for the flesh of these birds used as food. Poultry farming is the form of animal husbandry which raises domesticated birds such as chickens, ducks, turkeys and geese to produce meat or eggs for food. It has originated from the agricultural era. Poultry — mostly chickens — are farmed in great numbers.

When there is demand there is undoubtedly a career scope in the field. For a successful person in this area is to study in agricultural colleges or universities. To be successful in the poultry business one may not have a formal degree or diploma from universities but it is

always advisable to have academic qualification to excel in the field.

Career opportunities in poultry science are abundant which includes research, education, business, consultant, manager, breeder, advertiser, poultry house designer, production technologist, processing technologist, feeding technologist, value addition technologist, poultry economist, etc. and many more depending upon the aptitude and qualification.

Any aspirant who wants to become a poultry specialist and interested to pursue specialized jobs should complete first B.V.Sc and A.H (Bachelor of Veterinary Science and Animal Husbandry). The minimum qualification is 10+2 with Physics, Chemistry, and Biology (PCB) for completion of the B.V.Sc and AH. After completion of graduation degree, one may opt for a postgraduate programme of M.V.Sc (Master of Veterinary Science) and Ph.D. in poultry related disciplines to become a specialist.

There are many skill training courses which are short term and offered by specialization agencies and institutes in the country. Central and state government extends their support and assistance to individuals or organizations who want to start poultry businesses. Commercial poultry farming in In-

dia has created profitable business openings for the Entrepreneurs. This business can provide a great employment source for potential entrepreneurs.

The Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, Government of India has four Central Poultry Development Organisations (Regional Directorate on Poultry development). The Indian poultry market, consisting of broilers and eggs was worth INR 1,494 Billion in 2017. The market is further projected to reach INR 3,775 Billion by 2023, at a CAGR of 16.5% during 2018-2023.

There are demands or eggs and meats so scopes shall keep in increasing. One must possess basic employability skills or entrepreneurial ideas to be successful in this field. Initially there might be challenge to be in this business but with proper planning and training and exposure any one can do wonder in poultry farming or business. We should know that poultry is one of the fastest growing segments of the agricultural sector in India with an average growth rate of 8 to 10 per cent per annum which shows the future associated with it.

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

*"Faith is not the belief that God will do what you want. It is the belief that God will do what is right."*

— Max Lucado

## The Shillong Times

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### Maoists and killing spree

THE large-scale deaths, 20 or more, of security personnel in a raid in forests of Chhatisgarh formed the second major incident of violence in the state during a phase of 'tactical counter-offensive' planned by the ultras from February 25 to April 20. Five security personnel were killed in a previous offensive on March 25, while some 17 jawans were killed in an attack in Sukma last year. Obviously, there were casualties on the side of the militants too. But this was not unexpected. A top Maoist was among five persons killed in an offensive in Gadchiroli in Maharashtra five days ago. Last week, the NIA raided over 30 locations in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, and a few arrests have been made. Offensives against Maoists are ongoing in Odisha and Bihar, with these seven states forming the contiguous centre-piece of the Maoist/Naxalite movement in the country. Ten years ago, these leftist ultras were active in as many as 300 districts. The killings of VC Shukla and others in 2013 was a major Maoist offensive. In recent years, there was a lull but the scenario seems to have worsened again. Governmental steps to tackle the problem of leftist violence are multipronged. Nearly 120 security camps have been set up in vulnerable areas in Chhatisgarh in the past 20 years and road infra is being developed in interior areas where the problem is acute.

At the same time, the large-scale exploitation of the poor tribals and other disadvantaged sections of the people by vested interests in these states continue unabated. This scenario helps ultras recruit cadre. States like Chhatisgarh are strong with natural resources like mineral wealth. The poor hardly get anything out of the virtual loot of these by many with help from politicians and bureaucrats. Wages remain pitifully low and exploitation is massive. Cosmetic efforts will not help end the Maoist menace. Governments both in states and at the Centre showed little interest other than planning security offensives in setting things right. Big sharks from outside these states land up, set up industrial units and exploit the locals with political support. The entire liquor trade in Chhatisgarh, for instance, was controlled for years by associates of a top gun in Delhi. Native politicians too are largely corrupt and there is little of interest in mitigating the plight of the poor. Elections are manipulated with play of money power. Big talks from the pulpit too will not change the scenario for the better. Nor will the might of the security forces. Tackling Left Wing Extremism (LWE) requires better understanding of why it exists in the first place.

# The state of affairs in the State

By HH Mohrmen

We are into one quarter of year and more than three years of the MDA government rule but the state of affairs in Meghalaya leaves nothing for the people of the state to be proud of. The state of a few government organisations is in a poor shape and the NPP-led government has done itself a disservice by performing very badly particularly in the important areas like Education, Healthcare and Law & Order.

The law and order situation in the state is in abysmal condition and the performance of the Home Department leaves much to be desired. The performance of the police is way below the mark as crime it seems is being perpetrated with impunity. Perhaps it is not out of place to mention that there were two unfortunate crimes against under-aged girls in the East Jaintia hills but the police are yet to find any leads on who is involved in the two heinous crimes. The crimes which shocked the society to its core is when two minor girls were raped and murdered in two different areas in the East Jaintia hills. The school going girls were not only raped but sadly also killed by the criminals. Unfortunately the police are yet to make any arrests and the perpetrator(s) of the crime are still roaming freely. The question the public are asking is why is this happening in the State?

The other crime which the police failed to crack is the assault case in the Golf Links area of Shillong which is an open public space. The case which the police initially described as a drunken brawl unfortunately took an ugly turn when one victim lost his life. Here too, the police have failed in their duty to nab the culprit. Till date the police have not been able to make any arrest or even find any lead in the investigation. In fact it is rather unfortunate that the police in the state capital had to reach out and appeal to the public to help them if they have any information which could lead them to the people involved in the crime. Of course it is not unusual for police to seek public help to solve the crime but this definitely will put the Department in a bad light.

The question that arises is whether criminals are smarter than the police now? Or is it because of the kind of training that is imparted that is not up to the mark hence the police are not able to apprehend the criminals. Because of the poor performance of the police, the other pertinent question that arises is - what kind of message is

the Department sending to the public at large. Will it not show the Department in a poor light? Whatever the reason may be, the situation does not augur well for the reputation of the Police Department in particular and the Home Department in general.

The Police Department can claim in its defence that it is short of manpower which compels it to compromise on the service that it provides to the public, but the question is whether this is really true. How can the Department claim that it does have the required manpower when apart from the police station and outpost, the checkpoints all along the national highway are full of policemen? People who frequent the highway

are to apprehend criminals. The state of affairs not only lowers the respect that the public had on the Police Department, which is not at all good to begin with, but more importantly it will affect the morale of the force.

Then the other problem that is plaguing the state is the MeECL imbroglio. Although much has been written about the Corporation and the Management of the organisation, but the recent development will only help add more fuel to the fire. The surprise visit made by the CMD of the Corporation to the industrial estate located at Byrnihat has only confirmed what the public had suspected for so long. Since the time the MeECL announced its first load shed-

in the area, the question is also about the pending bills of the cement companies in the Narpuh area. How many of the cement plants in the area have defaulted in their payment of electricity bill to the MeECL? If industries at Byrnihat have been able to manipulate their electricity bills, how can the Government assure the public that the same thing had not happened with electricity bills of the cement plants?

It is rather sad that these same industries which have enjoyed all the subsidies offered by the Government in the industrial policy which includes power subsidy are now defaulters in paying their power bills. The other important point to note is that the Byrnihat episode should not eclipse the issue at hand which has been flagged by concerned citizens of the state. The allegations made by the Corporation's workers' union which includes union of engineers with regards to the alleged corruption in the implementation of the centrally sponsored Saubhagya scheme is very serious and needs to be investigated immediately. The Government needs to order police investigation into the alleged misappropriation of public fund by the staffs, or any officers of the Corporation.

Government should also clarify to the public with regards to the allegations against the proposed issue of installing smart meters at the residence of the consumers. The Government should come clear with regards to the two projects which are already cloaked in controversies. The pressure groups and the UDP should continue to pressurise the Government to ensure that the issue comes to a logical conclusion even if it has to be the resignation of the person who heads the Corporation because even if we at the end of the Holy Week the Power Minister unlike Pilate cannot wash his hands over what is happening in the Corporation.

It is sad that the image of these two important constituents of the Government has been damaged by the recent developments. The perception of the public on both the Police Department and MeECL has gone down in recent months. The sad part is not only because the state of affairs in these two agencies has taken a beating but their prospects too are not too bright. The need of the hour for the two Organisations is to embark on a quick image-rebuilding effort to regain public trust once again.

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**The other crime which the police failed to crack is the assault case in the Golf Links area of Shillong which is an open public space. The case which the police initially described as a drunken brawl unfortunately took an ugly turn when one victim lost his life. Here too, the police have failed in their duty to nab the culprit.**

from Guwahati to Silchar or Agartala will confirm the fact that there are plenty of such stations, outposts or checkpoints all along the road with no dearth of police personnel to man these units in all the different locations. Obviously the state government have enough police personnel to man the many police stations, outposts and checkpoints 'along the national highway' but unfortunately they do not have enough personnel to investigate crimes committed against the citizens of the State.

The public now know where or what this Government's priority is and it is of course where the money is. The failure of the Police Department to arrest those involved in the mentioned crimes does not only show the Department in bad light, but it will also open a Pandora's box of problems for the Government. For instance the pressure groups have already threatened to organise protests if the Government fails to arrest the culprits involved in the Golf Links incident. And in such an eventuality the Government will have no one else but itself to blame for the consequences that will follow from the police fail-

ding the question that the public have been asking is how can MeECL go bankrupt when the public have never defaulted on their payment of their respective electricity bills. If the consumer has duly paid their dues then how can MeECL not have money to pay the dues to Power Companies?

The surprise inspection the CMD made only confirms what the public has always suspected that the problem is not with the ordinary consumers but it lies somewhere else. The reason MeECL failed to pay its due to the different agencies is not the failure of the general consumers but the evasion in payment made by the different industries located at Byrnihat. The industries in connivance with some of the staff of the Corporation posted at Byrnihat are responsible for the revenue leak in the area. The staff that are supposed to monitor the power consumption of the industries have instead facilitated the electricity theft which bleeds the Corporation dry.

While it remains to be seen what action will be taken by the Corporation against those who are suspected to facilitate the electricity theft

## Culture of runners and beyond running

By Maitphang Syiem

"Culture of runners" is an uncommon and encouraging catchphrase as it does not only talk about the idea of running as a sport but speaks about building a community to be fit, healthy resilient at large and which also indirectly corresponds to reaping and honoring nature's bountiful gifts which are making it conducive to build such culture. It is even more motivating to hear that such statements are made by people who are engaged in such activities promoting such culture and helping to bring such changes in the mindset of the populace. The captivating part is that anyone young or old can take a step forward participate and cultivate to bring about that culture in simplicity with finesse. Going by the statement of the WHO of health being a "state of complete physical, mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, we clearly see the importance of the three levels in particular. We are deemed healthy if those three are met. To be upfront the said culture would undoubtedly help the populace be it young or old to enhance the health capacity, build resilience and immunity against any kind of unforeseen health hindrances.

If we ponder on the science of running, or perhaps walking, there are a lot of things to take which perhaps we as laymen would not understand but in general it is reflected to be simple like anyone would simply say "well it is just a simple run" nothing much about it. Have we ever thought of the fact how it is even possible for humans to run that many miles? How men and women go running and walked distances to fetch water, to hunt, to tame live-stocks etc? These are just a few examples but there are a lot of things such as recuperating, building immunity, endurance, initiating, adaptation and acclimatization etc. Perhaps experts on the subject can better explain. But isn't it unique for the human system to achieve such unbelievable feats? Just take out a few minutes and think about how blessed we are with such a powerful machine. But as is the case with every machine if the system is not augmented with some activities it is definitely going to go haywire. Our old Khasi connotation which says, "Ka met kaba khih kaba ksar ka dei ka met kaba koit kaba khiah," (a body which is engaged in physical activities is a healthy body) is justifiable on the above-mentioned fact and is in conjunction with what running as a culture can bring, which is the multidimensional change in the populace as a sport, a hobby, a conscience of valuing the natural aesthetic components, building the spirit of support, fellowship and sportsmanship.

With regards to running as an activity, it already existed way back in the early times. There were messengers who would run from place to place to deliver messages. In the ancient days running was a skill highly regarded by the royals as it was considered an asset, so we have a clear idea that it is already a natural trait that all of us already have. An interesting fact about Marathon a well acclaimed sport in the running arena is that it originated in the early times and legend says that Pheidippides a Greek army man who was also the King's messenger ran that many mythic distances from Marathon to Athens to deliver the victorious message to the king and on reaching he delivered the message but died due to exhaustion. This is the origin of the long distance run called the Marathon which was eventually incorporated into the modern sporting event in the Olympics and during the first Olympic held in Greece in 1896, Marathon was in-

roduced to commemorate Pheidippides' run; the same locations was kept which was from Marathon to Athens - a distance of 40 Km or 25 Miles back then.

On a general note we associate a culture with the kind of life, food habits, and many other aspects which perhaps anthropologists can elucidate on, but how is it even pragmatic that running can also be a culture? It is quite uncommon indeed, but the fact is yes "Running" as a culture does exist in communities around the globe and it is associated with the way of life and how people connect with each other, with the landscape, nature or a perhaps a religious affair. In other words it is their unique lifestyle. Surprisingly somewhere in the remotest place of Mexico, the Copper Canyons, there exist a native American tribe called the Tarahumaras the "Running Tribe", or "Runners on Foot" as they say and they are born to run literally. This unique culture runs in the Tarahumaras young and old folks, both men and women. Interestingly their running kit is nothing fancy. It is just a simple indigenous sandal called Huarache and with that they set out for long distances. Legend says that when the Tarahumaras were invited for a Marathon race the local governor sent women to compete and to the inviters' dismay they were surprised at the governor's reply that a 42 km distance is a mere distance for women, so we can understand what kind of a tradition and running culture the running tribe has.

The Tarahumaras don't know what high blood pressure, diabetes, heart diseases, obesity etc is because this does not exist in their dictionary. Therefore, the point to emphasize here is that running or jogging as a lifestyle can really cut down on the major ailments which perhaps may arise out of a predisposed sedentary lifestyle and this learning from the Tarahumaras is a major take-away.

Similarly we have a running culture among the Native American Navajo tribes and they believe that when they run they build a connection between the sky and the earth. Some take it as a ritual of prayers when they run and to some it is a way to be closer with nature and people. Legend says that the native Navajo American tribes run distances to understand the landscape and the environment. It is seen that running as a tradition is a way to appreciate nature. The writer here wishes to emphasize that running as an activity is beyond competition. There is more to what running as a culture can bring such as building a healthy lifestyle. Also running as an activity builds our self esteem, enhances our endurance, increases our perseverance and helps stay focus. From the legends of the indigenous communities of the world it is indeed a great learning how running as an activity can change and touch lives and it is something we need to incorporate.

On the other hand, believe it or not, we in Meghalaya are so blessed because we have the best AQI; the best scenic beauty and terrain which undeniably makes it so conducive to cultivate running as a culture packed with the essence of appreciating nature and leading a healthy lifestyle. On a serious note we can be a hub of runners who can be of the world class level. Perhaps we need to look much deeper on how to help build that culture of runners who not only run to compete but to runs with nature.

(The writer is a Geospatial Expert and an avid runner)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Overhauling MeECL is a must

Editor,  
It is heartening to read the news that the MDA government is all geared up to overhaul MeECL - "Efforts on to reform MeECL, says Deputy CM (ST, April 1, 2021). Well, the situation in which the state is now, "overhauling" the MeECL is a must. Here one clearly sees that even a "little delay" might further push the state into a more complex situation. A series of unforeseen crises might overwhelm the state, preventing the government to execute the various developmental plans and policies. What's more, the ensuing slugfest and blind accusation over the failures might further worsen the condition though MeECL's imbroglio is purely a bad legacy inherited from the previous governments. I think the Power Minister is not wrong in his assertion.  
Of course, hundreds of good works initiated by

any government will not be "noticeable" when we have a wobbly powerhouse. Does an exceptionally well-furnished apartment not look gloomy and dull if it is without electricity? It's the responsibility of each of the citizens/leaders to develop Meghalaya in every aspect. Hence given the present circumstances, instead of indulging in a blame game, we had better put concerted efforts to address the vexed power issue at the earliest possible. When we have a brilliant lamppost overhead, we can list out the developmental programs for the state. So, let's stand together and set a goal to achieve unitedly. I believe, this alone can quickly brighten up the state and cheer up each citizen.

Yours etc.,  
Salil Gwali,  
Shillong

#### Of vested interests & sinister motives

Editor,  
The surprise check carried

out by the CMD, Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited revealing rampant power theft in the industrial areas of Byrnihat is a commendable and laudable act on the part of the CMD who took such a step to check and also put a stop to the corrupt practices going on in the department. But it seems this surprise check did not go down well with the employees of the MeECL, especially the engineers.

On his visit to Rajabagan sub-station, the CMD carried out a surprise inspection following an anonymous tip-off that there was rampant electricity theft going on in the industrial areas around Byrnihat and the involvement of MeECL officers including engineers. This then revealed that indeed there was a massive amount of power theft in these industrial areas. It also clearly shows that the engineers who are supposed to be performing their duties diligently and sincerely are in fact probably the ones responsible for this power theft to have happened in the first

place as technically it is only possible to be carried out by officers and engineers.

However, it seems this surprise visit of the CMD caught the MeECL officials off-guard. This is apropos the news report, "Surprise check reveals rampant power theft at Byrnihat" ST March 30, 2021 mentioning that the MeECL employees had then written an anonymous letter on Monday against the CMD, MeECL for carrying out this surprise inspection. One may wonder why an anonymous letter follows immediately after. The simple answer to this can be, that they were caught with their hands in the cookie jar and as such their vested interests termed this visit as illegal. The act by the CMD to not give prior knowledge of his visit also might not have gone down well with these perpetrators. Had prior notice been given the officials and technicians involved in the power theft would have tried to do something quickly to save their faces and hide their wrongdoings. Following this

inspection, the CMD MeECL has called for an independent inquiry into the power theft case. He has also stated the he is planning to conduct more surprise inspections in the days to come.

The JAC comprising the MeECL Engineers Association (MEA), the Association of Power Engineers (APOE) and the MeECL Accounts Association (MAA) are known for the series of protests and agitations they have been carrying out, especially since last year (2020). They are also the ones who demanded the removal of Ms A. Nikhla who was the then CMD of MeECL and its subsidiaries. It is worth noting here that ironically, the MeECL Engineers' Association are also the same ones who served a 14-day ultimatum to the State Government to remove the Power Minister of his portfolio and demanded the appointment of a senior IAS officer as CMD of the corporation within two weeks. It makes me wonder why they are so eager to get their demands fulfilled? Why are so

many agitations and protests being carried out by them? Why not work towards bringing a change to the MeECL and the Power Department which is plagued and crippled by so many pertinent issues? With this new-found insight, one can only come to the conclusion that the demand to remove the CMD must be because of the fear of being found out. Fear that their vested interests shall come to the fore and they shall not be able to carry out the underhand activities they have been doing for a long time. The anonymous letter that followed could be another proof of the matter. Hence, at this point of time an independent probe is really the need of the hour.

Yours etc.,  
Natasha Pariat  
Shillong - 3

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"Punishment is not for revenge, but to lessen crime and reform the criminal."

— Elizabeth Fry

The Shillong Times

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Crimes against women escalate LAW and order under the MDA Government has touched its nadir. In three months there have been three brutal murders of whom two are school going girls and the third whose half-naked body was found on Sunday being a young mother with an 8-month old infant. While one suspect has been arrested in the recent murder, the killers of the other two remain unknown. Jaintia Hills has become the epicentre of crime against women. For a region that is steeped in criminal activities such as illegal rat-hole mining and transportation of coal for well over six years since the NGT ban on coal mining in April 2014, the rise in crime is not surprising. On and off some FIRs are filed against trucks transporting coal illegally but those cases never result in charge-sheets or conviction. Everything remains a mirage that is soon forgotten. There is no one to hold the Police accountable. The Home Minister takes shelter in excuses and the public are apathetic. Those murdered come from families that have no clout and have to resign to their fates. A one-off protest by school students will hardly make a dent. Clearly Meghalaya has reached a point where criminals have the upper hand. They are not arrested and if arrested are let out on bail for want of evidence. Police investigation continues to remain shoddy.

Take the case of the murderous assault on activists Agnes Kharshing and Amita Sangma in November 2018. One suspect who was arrested is out on bail. He is also a prominent member of the NPP – the political party that leads the present coalition government in the state. The tall claims about Meghalaya being a matrilineal society where women hold a privileged status is a carefully told lie to the outside world. The rising crimes against women tell their own story. In all this it is interesting that the State Commission for Women has been without a Chairperson after the previous one demitted office. If justice and fairness is what is desired then why do women's groups and the plethora of NGOs looking after women's rights not protest when the Government appoints as chairperson someone whose loyalties lie with the Government rather than with the cause of women's empowerment and justice? Earlier a Search and Selection Committee for a Chairperson was proposed by women's rights activists. It is doubtful if that Committee is still functional and if a name of the next Chairperson has been proposed. These delays in appointing persons to important positions of ombudsman over women-related issues suggest that the Government is insincere about its claims of protecting women and children from all forms of injustices. Government cannot be allowed to get away with this.

MeECL impasse
UDP's blatant hypocrisy

By Albert Thyriani

Over two weeks ago the United Democratic Party (UDP), the 'indispensable' ally of the NPP-led Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA) coalition demanded the ouster of James Sangma as Power Minister amidst the MeECL crisis. Initially UDP's seven MLAs, of whom three are ministers presumed that the letter to the Chief Minister signed by Jemino Mawthoh baying for the 'under-fire' minister's blood was thought to be the sole adventure of their party's general secretary. Even the party president who is also the Speaker of the Assembly, Metbah Lyngdoh pleaded ignorance of his party's stance. When it became clear that it was the party bigwigs' decision, the demand for removal of the Chief Minister's brother from the power department has gained momentum. The UDP could well ensure James Sangma lose another significant responsibility after the Power Ministry was rudely 'snatched' away from the same coalition partner. The public should see and direct all fingers at the blatant hypocrisy of the UDP. Following allegations of massive illegality in coal mining and transportation the biggest regional party got its way in banishing the then Home Minister who happened to be the same person, James Sangma. The party was allotted the Ministry of Home in the person of Lakhme Rymbui in addition to him being the Education Minister. Now, James Sangma was relieved of his duty because he was unable to prevent rat hole (illegal) coal mining and transportation of the black diamond by hundreds of trucks. It was expected that the new minister would ensure illegal coal activities would be a thing of the past. However, what happened under Sangma's charge continued to happen also under Rymbui's supervision. Underground coal business has been taking place unabated. The Rymbui incident occurred. Six miners were killed in an illegal mining site in East Jaintia Hills. Trucks allegedly carrying fresh coal continue to ply out of the state even via the state capital's main thoroughfares. The Chief Minister himself admitted to illegal mining activities in the state during Rymbui's current tenure. When the BJP demanded Rymbui's resignation over the Rymbui incident not only did the Home Minister refuse to pay heed but eulogised himself a 'warrior' who embraces responsibilities and

challenges. His party also came to his defence. So here is the patent hypocrisy of the UDP. It blames NPP's James Sangma for his incompetence as Power Minister but it does not accept the failures of their own minister in the crucial Home Department. The UDP is practicing the politics of convenience. Rymbui's reign is a mark of deterioration of law and order. The Ichamati clash took place in which one Khasi Students' Union member was killed. A non-tribal was stabbed shortly after the border imbroglio. The situation in the border segment is still volatile. The Umoid attack occurred in which eight non-tribals were assaulted killing one of them. The latest is the Golf Link assault case in which three youth from Wakhakaji were beaten up, one among whom succumbed to his injuries in NEIGRIHMS. The police is still clueless on the March 21 incident. A Special Investigation Team (SIT) had to be set up to probe the case dubbed as 'difficult'. The inability of the police for a breakthrough has led NGOs and media users to jump to all sorts of conclusions, including a communal angle. A law and order fallout could follow. The KSU has even threatened to take law into its own hands if the police let the citizens down. The responsibilities have rested on the Home Minister's shoulders for the worsening law and order situation in the state. While the UDP is harsh on James Sangma why is it not using the same yardstick for its own minister? The immediate reactions in social media to the Golf Links incident was that the three youth were assaulted by non-tribals. Besides the police position that it was a drunken brawl the communal claims do not add up. Initially there were no wide condemnations from the Shillong based pressure groups. In fact there were few reactions. The reason might have been that the three boys are not from Shillong. They are from a 140 km (5 hours) village known



only in relation to uranium deposit/mining. But the real reason could have been that probably it was known in inner circles that the culprits are not non-tribals. The circumstances seem to support that the perpetrators are locals. One also wonders as to why no rally or protest to condemn the incident has been organised in the state capital. Tomorrow if residents from Jaintia Hills, Ri Bhoi, Garo Hills etc are assaulted and killed in Shillong should protests be held only in Nongpoh, Jowai, Tura etc? What is in the mind of these pressure groups? Our attention goes back to the UDP-NPP's struggle for 'Power', at the heart of which is the MeECL saga. Charles de Gaulle was supposed to have stated, "I have come to the conclusion that politics is too serious a matter to be left to the politicians." The French President who was a World War I and II army officer in the fight against Nazi and who later helped to re-establish democracy in France and rewrite the Constitution can inspire us to say that MeECL is too serious a matter to be left to the petty politicking of the NPP-UDP. The Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited (MeECL) affects the whole state. Its sick condition for a long period of time has resulted in load shedding for many years thereby affecting the general public immensely. The Chief Minister has blamed the previous Congress governments for the present 'white elephant' status of MeECL which is supposed to be one of the biggest assets of the state. The Power Minister has advised his UDP critics to direct their guns to his predecessors. Without vouching for this sort of blame game, for the job of a government is to deliver not to blame past regimes, to be fair to the government, MeECL's large scale disorder is in fact inherited. The UDP has chosen to target the present minister for the sorry state of affairs. Why should we allow the whims and fancies of the

UDP to determine the future of MeECL? Why should Meghalayans watch the UDP playing politics over the state electricity corporation? Without beating around the bush let us ask the UDP if it would be able to resolve the crises in the MeECL if one of their MLAs/ministers is entrusted with the Power Department. Will the load shedding stop? Will MeECL be set right within a time frame? Will MeECL be similar to illegal coal activities? If the UDP think-tank has suggestions to improve MeECL what prevents it from presenting them to the Power Minister or the government? Has the same been done? If not what authority does UDP possess to take a moral high ground? Assembly elections are not far off. UDP wants the electorate to think the failures of the present government are not theirs. As elucidated by other writers in this page coalition government is a sailing ship UDP has been a key sailor in the MDA ship. If the sail is successful all the sailors take the credit. If the sail fails all the sailors take the blame. If UDP feels it can no longer be part of the team of sailors, the best thing is to jump out of the ship, swim to safety or arrange for an alternative ship to successfully sail to the shore. The intentional refusal to sail or sink together is a virtue that is not tenable.

The UDP is a major ally in the MDA government. Without it the government collapses. The NPP knows it. When the BJP was throwing allegations of corruption in the ADCs and the government 'facilitating' illegal coal mining and transportation, the NPP's top brass including Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma and Deputy Chief Minister, Prestone Tynsong could afford to order the saffron party to get out of the coalition. But obviously, the NPP leadership can't give marching orders to the UDP. But does it mean the UDP should take advantage of its strength? Should the 'Drum' party blackmail the hapless MDA government? The 1997 founded party must be intending to tell the people of Meghalaya that it is not involved in the mess in MeECL. The present antics of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills centric political entity must be a ploy to improve its tally (8) in the 2023 elections. We may well see a new Power Minister assuming office but the public should see through the unconcealed hypocrisy of the UDP. Email: albert.thyrianiang74@gmail.com

Decolonised democracy

By Dr Samhita Barooah

Elections have become the T-20 matches these days. Everyone is busy with balancing equations with religious, class, regional, ethnic, traditional lineages. Today our household voting practice started with the staff seeking leave from work to vote for the first time in life. One is 18 and the other 22, rushing home to cast their maiden votes. One friend went to his hometown in the 1st phase of voting. His ailing mother, caregiver wife and young daughters could not vote. Only one vote was registered. Another neighbour went home in Darrang to cast her vote. Voter information is defined by the symbols that they would cast their vote on. Who to vote is a big question for the Assam assembly elections!

People in this state have been voting for personalities more than the symbols that they represent. This is true for many leaders whose personalities have appealed to the voters more than their party affiliations. Assamese community is bothered more about behaviours, attitudes and humility of the leaders running for elections. It doesn't really matter what is there in the manifestos. Whether the land is traded or the industries are privatised or the jobs are shrinking for common people within the commons. It really doesn't matter.

Voting is a matter of the people in power. Power engulfing and power hoarding applies to Assam rather than power sharing. Political power is again a patriarchal passion which is centered around men and



anybody whose identity doesn't threaten men. Men are also struggling to fulfill those patriarchal power driven dreams. Working men are happy with hoist using, gas, bank loans to start something on their own. Now an e-rickshaw driver had recently taken loan from bank and bought his own e-rickshaw to feed his recently migrated family from Sib-sagar district to Guwahati city. He went missing for 2 days along with his brand new e-rickshaw after a week of driving it. He was found in the Guwahati outskirts drugged and without his e-rickshaw and clothes. His case was registered in the local police station but so far he has not found any justice. He was asked to pay bribes at different stages. When he approached media to cover his story, they said currently elections are more important than this kind of stories. So media priorities are also set! While struggling to get back his e-rickshaw he could not go to vote. His wife and children also could not go to vote. Many such migrant daily wage workers in the city could not go for voting. They are contributing towards the urban economy without their voting rights.

Students in university hostels are not motivated to go for voting as they have to go for self-quarantine and Covid testing if they go outside their campuses for anything. Beggars on the street still could not get their voter ID cards to go for voting. Most bedridden and corona affected voters eligible will be restricted from voting unless there are other options. Digital voting through mobile phones will be a new norm soon with the growing demand for mobile technology and physical distancing measures. It is crucial for voters to know the symbol of candidates. If money, free education, scooty, bikes, laptops, food, houses, direct cash transfers, gas connections, Covid 19 vaccines and health security cards are exchanged for votes then such votes may not last long. Democratic election is a matter of diversity of strategies to resolve critical concerns. Today voting is limited to benefit provision rather than electing deserving leadership which need to be visionary rather than being opportunistic. But people are so easily pleased by industries, automobile economy and fast tags that they are in awe of the sugar coated superficiality. Religion is another huge vote gatherer and divider. Politics played around religion is again highly problematic as it's a very personal perspective. But when the particularity of any religious faith determines the educational syllabus, salaries of employees, positions of the 4th estate, job security and satisfaction measures, personal choices of music, food, attire, friendships, relationships and property usage then the political power structures gets repressive. Unless religion and money are separated from politics no election can sustain real democracy. Decolonization of democratic practices is the need of the hour. People are confused with judgments of faith, language, culture, race, caste, tribe, class, physical features, gender, sexuality and many more layers of intersections. The aftermath of cultural hatred, disputes, communal polarity and extreme repulsion of opposing forces needs to be resolved through amity, empathy and acceptance of diversity. The sense of nationalism and sub-nationalism is a motivating factor but one needs to envision such feelings from the decolonized mindset. So far Assamese identity has been seen as an assimilating identity of being accommodating, approachable and inclusive in accepting its diversity. But in the last decade, internal ageism, political competitiveness and leadership crisis in any forum of political assertion has colonized people. This colonization is linked to the class, caste and religious majoritarianism power of the neo conservative patriarchal nationalism of the idea of India. Earlier elections were fought on the grounds of conflicts, peace building, natural disasters, price rise, lack of development gimmicks and job security. This year even the Covid 19 pandemic cannot resolve the problems of hate. Decolonization needs to free people; not enslave them to money, loans, forced relationships, consumerism and the automobile economy with a few sporadic industries here and there. Democracy is a right towards freedom, equality and social justice but every year elections disrobes people from these and stifles them with sanctions and compliance reinforcements to prove their nationality consistently. Decolonised democracy is still a far cry in Assam and elections are yet to bridge that gap. Email: samhita.world@gmail.com

Letters to the Editor

Subversive deals on Govt land

Editor, Two news items in the recent editions of The Shillong Times has drawn my attention. One is the statement made by Minister, Urban Affairs that the contract for the Marriott Hotel in the Shillong Municipal land in Jail Road has been awarded to a new party and the other is a Possession Notice issued by Punjab National Bank informing the public that the said bank has taken over possession of part and parcel of the land and property by the name of Marba Hub at Police Bazar, which was constructed on land belonging to the State Government. The question that arises is what really happened to these two projects which were the flagship PPP projects of the State Government at that time. Against concerns raised from various quarters, the Government of the day had bulldozed all objections and forced the Shillong Municipality and Urban Affairs Department to give away these prime properties of the State Government to private players knowing very well that these would be sold off for good. The Marriott project which is under construction for over a

decade now in a prime land of Shillong Municipality is a complete failure. God only knows whether the lease rent which the private party was supposed to pay the Shillong Municipality during the construction period, has been paid. The question of revenue which was to be shared with the Municipality after completion of the project is a lost cause as the project is still incomplete. In all probability the ownership of the private partner has already changed hands and one can only wonder what penal action has been taken by the State Government on the private party who has defaulted on all accounts and quietly moved out of the project. Further if the ownership of the private partner has changed, whether Government has given approval to the same. Question also arises as to what will finally happen to the portion of the building which was to be handed over to Shillong Municipality to set up their corporate office. These are pertinent questions and it is incumbent on the State Government to let the public know. Now the Minister is now talking of a new contract which is really a mystery. I still remember the matter coming up in the State Assembly sometime during 2010-2011 where the Minister of Urban Affairs

at that time had strongly supported the move to lease out the municipal land to the private party. It turned out to be a complete sell-off and an incalculable loss to the Shillong Municipality. I wonder what the then Minister has to say today. Similarly against the advice from various quarters, Meghalaya Urban Development Authority had gone for a Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) model in the Government land at Police Bazar around 2008-09. Surprisingly, for the default on repayment of loan taken by the private party, the Bank has now taken possession of the Government land and the property standing thereon. The question as to why the Bank should take possession of the land when the loan was availed by the private party. Or did this mortgage of Government land by the private party have the tacit approval of the State Government and whether the same State Government actually stood guarantor? Was such an arrangement legally tenable? Many interesting facts are likely to come up if these matters are dug a little deeper. Now it seems that PPP was a good model to sell off Government land and properties with very few questions asked. Ironically a new sign board for PPP has now come up on the monumental Crowborough Hotel.

Hope this is not another sell-off yet again! Yours etc., D. Surong Shillong-3

Origin of Covid still a mystery

Editor, As the second wave of COVID-19 is surging across the world, the mystery about the origin of the novel coronavirus has not been solved so far. The world seems to be confused by the results of the WHO-China joint study on the origin of the virus. True, scientific investigation takes time. On the other hand, unbiased investigation is impossible when there is lack of cooperation from the side of the country where the virus is suspected to have originated. It has been more than a year since the COVID-19 pandemic hit countries around the world. However, the origin of the virus is still shrouded in mystery. Initially many theorists alleged that the virus was lab-made and purposely released into the world as a bio-weapon. However, this theory was rejected because the virus is genetically related to

coronavirus found in bats. But some experts argue that a research lab studying bat viruses may have spread the virus. The WHO released its report on the origin and spread of the virus. The report states that the virus probably spread from bats to humans via another animal but the report does not clarify if the virus then spread from the lab in Wuhan, China. After the release of the report, WHO chief Ghebreyesus said that the evidence was not enough to support the accidental lab leak theory and that Wuhan lab leak possibility needed to be studied again. He made these comments following the accusations levelled at Beijing by the US and 13 other countries of failing to give proper access to the investigators. The WHO's efforts create the impression that it wants to absolve China of any blame and open up new lines of investigations that lead researchers out of China. Allegations have been levelled at China of trying to hush up earlier instances of Covid infection. It is believed that the virus was circulating in humans months before the first case was reported. However, the WHO rejected these allegations. It must be un-

derstood that the Chinese authorities had tried to silence the doctor who tried to warn about a mystery infection. Some experts are of the view that the virus jumped from bats to humans through imported frozen meat. However, the WHO states that none of the meat from the Hunan market tested positive for the virus. The report also recommends worldwide search in relevant wildlife species to look for the virus since no positive sample has been found so far in Chinese animals. While China cannot be held responsible for the origin of the virus without concrete evidence, its secretive ways cast suspicion on its role on its origin. It is a fact that China wants to shift the focus of investigation away from itself. It seems that instead of giving authentic information about the spread of the virus in its report, the WHO is eager to justify and exonerate China. This has created distrust in both China and the WHO. Yours etc., Venu GS Kollam

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"The best thinking has been done in solitude. The worst has been done in turmoil."  
— Thomas A. Edison

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The 'second coming'

THE worst, it appears, is yet come. That's in relation to the Chinese-induced Covid-19 that has turned life upside down for over a year in India, as also elsewhere. The daily infection count for the nation has crossed the one-lakh-mark, a grim reminder of the depth of the unfinished work even as the vaccination process has already covered large segments of the population.

National capital Delhi has come under night curfew from Tuesday just as the Maharashtra government girded up its loins to face the second surge of the pandemic in Mumbai and elsewhere with similar steps. Doctors say the viral strain in the Second Coming is capable of spreading faster than the first one. While many are managing to overcome the virus attack with simple doses of tablets, several of the infected are faced with serious problems like breathing difficulty, organ malfunctioning and other fatal complications. Worldwide, the US, Brazil and India remain the worst affected.

Notably, big cities like Mumbai, Pune, Bengaluru and Delhi are bearing the brunt while the countryside and small towns are least affected. The scope for physical contacts is more in cities and the social distancing norm is more often than not flouted. Marriage events, where there are close-interactions, and the like are helping in the Covid spread mainly because the set norms are not being followed. By doing so, people are inviting harm to themselves. Proof is Bihar and UP, which are reporting larger numbers of daily infections; and this has a direct bearing on the failure on the part of the police in these states to enforce the social distancing, mask-wearing and hand-washing norms. The animal-like herding together of migrant workers in chawls in Mumbai and Pune, where the government cared little for them, proved to be the undoing for Maharashtra. Life in Mumbai remains largely paralysed for the past over a year and the government is more busy practising new "extortion" techniques as the case of an NCP minister there showed.

The Union health ministry stated on Tuesday that the next four weeks would be crucial in terms of containing the Covid-19 spread and stressed that people's participation – meaning strict adherence to the health protocols – is of vital importance. It also stressed the tools to control the virus spread remained the same – vaccination, social distancing and wearing of masks in public places. The fact that the last 25 days saw a sharp rise in daily infection rate from just 20,000 to one lakh shows the seriousness of the problem at hand.

# Meghalaya power sector: A leaking bucket

By Sumarbin Umdor

Electricity is a blessing of science and an indispensable part of our daily lives. As the economy is reeling under the impact of Covid-19, availability of reliable power supply becomes all the more important for stimulating economic development. Today, when teaching has moved online and work from home is the new normal uninterrupted power supply has become more important and imperative for social development and progress. In such a situation, the recent 11 hours power load shedding and continuing uncertainty over power supply is an unprecedented crisis to have hit the state. While it is clear to all that state governments of the last two decades are responsible for not timely addressing the deterioration in the operational and financial performance of the power sector, the allegations of corruption in power projects such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) funded smart metering project and Saubhagya Scheme, among others, in the midst of the present power crisis has understandably aroused indignation and outrage among the public and even from coalition partners of the present government.

Meghalaya has a hydro power potential of 3000 MegaWatts (MW) while the present state owned hydel power plants generate only about 12 percent of this potential. Meghalaya peak electricity demand at 400 MW has almost doubled in the last 16 years for which the state has been increasing depending on power purchased from central hydro and thermal generating companies. Meghalaya was once power surplus with sale of power by the then unbundled state-owned power utility (MeSEB) in 1997-98 at 234 million units (MU) against purchase of power of 78 MU. The state enjoyed low power tariffs and load shedding was an exceptional event which otherwise was a regular experience in the rest of the country. Since then, the situation has slowly deteriorated with the state having to endure long hours of power cut and load shedding while the power situation in the rest of the country has comparatively improved. So what has happened in these last two decades that led to this unenviable situation?

First, we find that there has been an exponential growth in energy sales to industries, particularly power intensive industries, after the implementation of the special northeast industrial policy in 1997-98. This sales of energy to industries drawing high tension and extra high voltage which was about eight percent of total energy sales

in 1997-98 reached a peak of 50 percent in 2008-09 and today has come down to 35 percent of total energy sales. The slow addition to installed capacity by state owned power generation company (MePGCL) along with the surged in demand from industries and domestic consumers (demand from this segment has been steadily rising due population growth and rural electrification schemes) meant that state has had to rely more and more on costly power from central power utilities particularly during non-rainy seasons and



in rainfall deficient years. In 2017-2018, almost two third of power procurement by the state owned power distribution company (MePDCL) was from the three central power generating stations.

Aggravating this mismatch between demand of power and the ability to meet it from power generation by MePGCL is the high Aggregate Transmission and Commercial (AT&C) losses which at 35 per cent is among

power holding company (MeECL) that industries are involved in electricity theft and the subsequent counter allegation by employees of the Corporation of undue favour shown by the CMD in lowering of penalties slapped on an industrial unit engaged in power theft are probably indicative of one of a long running financial scam causing losses of crores of rupees to the power sector of the state. The power intensive industries numbering only about 130 out of about 4.75 lakh consumers are both a

boon and a bane for the state. This minuscule consumer consumes nearly 35 to 40 percent of power and pays the highest power tariffs among all categories of consumers. However, the unchecked power theft by this segment is equally detrimental to the financial health of the power sector.

While the average AT&C losses is high, the situation in some of the revenue circles such as in Central, East and

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the highest in the country and way above the national average of 22 per cent. The lack of funds to upgrade the existing transmission and distribution networks have delayed avoidable reduction in system losses. Further, high commercial losses caused by human factors such as power theft, errors in meter reading, faulty meters and lack of billing discipline have added to the financial woes of power utilities in the state.

The recent statement by the CMD of state owned

West Garo is alarmingly high and has remained so for a long time. The high commercial losses in these circles are attributed to high incidence of power pilferage, unmetered connection, faulty meters and average billing due to existence of defective meters. This is another area where efforts to improve revenue collection through billing and collection discipline are often met with political interference and consumer resistance. Increase in demand from low tension

consumers due to expansion of urban population and rural electrification schemes has resulted in unfavorable high low tension to low tension ratio which also contributes to high distribution loss and poor quality of power to consumers.

The above mentioned factors have corroded the financial position of MePDCL manifested in the widening gap between average costs of supply and average revenue earned (Rs. 1.17 in 2018-19) indicating that revenue earned from sales of energy is insufficient to meet even the cost of power purchase let alone other operational expenses. This has led to piling of unpaid dues along with penalty and surcharge owed to central power utilities landing the state in a pitiful situation where the assurance for settlement of the outstanding dues given by the state government is not enough to placate the central utilities – a big credibility issue for the state government.

State owned power utilities in Meghalaya are plagued by many operational and financial inefficiencies lingering for many years now and measures to address issues call for augmentation of generation (including from renewable energy), supply side management (ensuring generation, transmission and distribution of energy are conducted efficiently) and demand side management (modify the electricity usage pattern of the customer to bring about efficient use of energy and management of load). However, the situation with the power sector in the state goes beyond technical factors. The issue of corruption in power projects, power theft by industries, lack of political, administrative and community support for stern action against power supply fraud are equally important factors contributing to the present payment and credibility crisis of the power sector. Unless these leakages are plugged, more loans and higher tariffs will fail to rescue our power utilities from the financial quagmire that they are in.

For the government of the day, the situation is no doubt very challenging and the corruption allegations in the department tumbling one after another is a serious dent on the image of the government. However, if the government is able to revive the ailing power sector then it would be a singular achievement that will restore its credibility among the citizens of the state, boost confidence of investors and financial institutions and reap rich dividends in the next election.

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Indian policy has to be pragmatic taking into account China's influence

## Civil resistance growing against army rule in Myanmar

By Barun Das Gupta

The army in Myanmar took over power two months ago, ousting the elected government and throwing its leader behind bars. There has been mass resistance to army rule which shows no signs of abating. The army continues to shoot down civil resisters demanding restoration of democracy. Even children are not being spared. The trigger-happy soldiers kill children without any qualm of conscience. More than five hundred people have been killed. According to a report of Save the Children, an international humanitarian group, as many as 43 children have so far been reported killed. The group described the situation as "a nightmare scenario unfolding."

owned by the Defence Ministry and operates in strategic sectors like ports, telecommunications, etc. Another is Economic Holdings Ltd. It helped the brass hats to line their pockets with money from profitable businesses like cigarettes and petroleum products.

The restoration of democracy put an end to all that. These facts suggest that there was a strong economic motive behind the February 1 coup d'etat. There is very little to hope that the army will lift the national emergency after one year and quietly hand over the administration to the elected representatives of the people. They have captured power and mean to hold on to it as long as they can. The



Unwittingly, the army has brought about a unity of the people against its rule. The young was the first to raise their voice of protest against the murder of democracy. As the army retaliated with unprecedented brutality (during the previous army rule for fifty years there was no civil resistance), more and more sections of the people joined the resistance. Trade Unions were the next to join and then the professional – bankers and bank employees, doctors, nurses, shopkeepers, even the railway workers. The strike by

indiscriminate shooting of civil protesters leaves no room for doubt about it. What should be India's relations with post-coup Myanmar? The first thing is that India should not repeat the mistake it made when the army took over the country in its first coup in 1962. Since then, for several decades, India treated Myanmar as a pariah as it was against the army rule. It helped China to develop its relations with Myanmar in a big way. With China's financial assistance, several projects were undertaken.

*What should be India's relations with post-coup Myanmar? The first thing is that India should not repeat the mistake it made when the army took over the country in its first coup in 1962. Since then, for several decades, India treated Myanmar as a pariah as it was against the army rule.*

Letters to the Editor

### Killing the Umkhras River

Editor,  
Thank you for the photograph published in the front page of your esteemed daily (ST April 6, 2021) which speaks volumes about how our Government is involved in killing of Wah Umkhras. From the photograph, it is evident that long stretches of the river have already been turned into a drain because of soil dumping. What is not clear from the photograph is the RCC work that is going on covering at least four metres of the river bed with large quantities of soil and boulder which have also been dumped beyond the bridge connecting Lower Jail Road with Lawmali. This mindless action of the authorities will surely create havoc affecting the residents of McCabe Road houses opposite the Buddhist temple, entire Polo area, Lower Jail Road and Lawmali.  
Yours etc.,  
L R Das,  
Shillong-1

### Conrad vs the UDP

Editor,  
Apropos the news report "UDP to press CM for James' ouster" (ST dated April 5, 2021), the NPP led MDA government has now got a taste of what it is to be in coalition politics after their senior MLA James Sangma is being targeted twice over by the UDP for his ouster, this time the demand is to strip James Sangma from the Power portfolio. With the 2023 elections on its radar the UDP is trying to project itself as an honest party. As a coalition partner in the MDA government, the party is trying to capitalize on power crisis in Meghalaya. It appears that the UDP strategy is to put pressure on the MDA-led government which could take a few months, and will depend on a variety of factors. But my unsolicited advice to the UDP is to withdraw support to the MDA government!  
Yours etc.,  
Marbianglang Rymbai  
Shillong-2

### Is UDP the MDA's Judas?

Editor,  
The article 'UDP's blatant hypocrisy' by Albert Thyrniang, (ST April 6, 2021), has really hit the bulls-eye. Kudos to Mr Thyrniang for that brilliant article! Mr Thyrniang mentioned the hypocrisy of the UDP as an ally of the MDA Government and I cannot agree more with that. In the past few weeks we have seen the dirt that UDP has been throwing at the NPP its coalition partner and the blatant accusations they have brought up to demand the ouster of the Power Minister. This demand has been gaining momentum with the General Secretary of the UDP going all out all guns blazing.  
It is interesting to note here that a Minister of the UDP who holds the important Home portfolio in the Government, Mr Lahkmen Rymbui has not exactly been on top of things. The Home Department is important because it ensures that law and order prevails in the entire state. His duty is to see that

there is no deterioration of law and order. Unfortunately, the law-and-order situation of our state has gone from bad to worse. Crime against women is on the rise with unfortunate incidents towards women are happening every single day. The instances of the two girls who were sexually assaulted and brutally murdered in Jaintia Hills, and the recent incident on Sunday morning where a half-naked body of another woman was found in Jowai, just makes me question the safety of women in our state. As a woman, I fear for my own safety in the darkness of the night and I wish to run home at the earliest as I do not want to be another victim. This is not just one angle, but other forms of violence is on the rise too with incidents of lynching and murder increasing. The incident at Ichamati, as well as the recent incident at Golf Links and many other cases of murder are awaiting justice, with the perpetrators still out in the open instead of being behind bars. This is all very troubling. The Home Minister had also requested anyone who has any knowl-

edge of the incident at Golf Links to come up and give a statement. But I wonder if anyone did really notice the incident taking place in a forest. People would be in their homes getting on with their daily activities, without being aware of what was happening in that area. Also is it not the duty of the SIT as well as the officers of the department to look into the matter? Why does the Home Minister not take the matter seriously and demand for the investigation to be expedited? A life was lost and the perpetrators are only in the suspect list and not yet behind bars.  
All this just makes me want to question the UDP as to why they not talking about these incidents? Do they not matter to the welfare and growth of our state? UDP being a regional party is awfully quiet in this matter. They were vocal and persistent when it came to the ruckus and mess in the MeECL, demanding for the removal of the Power Minister and the need for reforms to be brought in the MeECL. Why are they not being vocal with other

governance failures too? Are other issues not equally important? Or do they not fit their 'political agenda' to be given due importance. We call ourselves a matrilineal state where a woman is given a high stature, yet crimes against women are on the upswing. Our state claims to be morally sound and God-fearing by nature, but atrocities against people and communities are increasing. The UDP terms itself as a regional party that cares for the welfare of the people and the state but it is a pity to see they are not raising concerns related so much to the welfare of the people especially the womenfolk and matters related to deteriorating law and order situation. It seems this party is more concerned with defending their own from falling off the throne and in keeping their pockets warm.  
Yours etc.,  
Nataasha Pariat  
Shillong – 3

bank employees has had its impact on government daily expenses. The junta-run government has been forced to limit heavily the daily cash withdrawals. About 90 per cent of the country's 7.4 million private sector workers is also on strike.  
The army, accustomed as it was to rule without any resistance, has been taken aback. It was not prepared for such a situation – a country-wide non-violent protest on such a massive scale, undeterred by the leonine violence unleashed by those who have usurped power from the people. More than two months later, the turbulent situation in the country is having its impact on the economy also. According to the World Bank, Myanmar's economy may shrink by 10 per cent this year due to the unsettled conditions.  
The United States which has been against the coup from the beginning has, along with the United Kingdom, has imposed sanctions on firms controlled by the army. During its prolonged rule, the junta also enriched itself by owning profitable industrial enterprises. One such was the Myanmar Economic Corporation, about whose operations very little is known, except that it is

Chinese influence in Myanmar grew as India detested army rule and stopped taking interest in internal developments in Myanmar.  
This mistake should not be repeated now. We have to take Myanmar as a neighbouring country with which we have to deepen our relationship, irrespective of who rules the country. Myanmar is strategically too important a country for India to ignore. Myanmar economic corridor as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This was done in 2018 after signing a 15-Article Memorandum of Understanding. This has enabled China to bypass, whenever necessary, to avoid the Malacca Strait and gain an alternative access to the Indian Ocean. Now there is a proposal to connect China with a railway line to a port in Myanmar in the Bay of Bengal.  
India has to engage with Myanmar and deepen its engagement so that China does not get a walk over and India's strategic interests are well protected. We cannot fashion the world according to our wishes. We have to adapt ourselves to the world as it is, not what we think it should be. (IPA Service)

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**"There is no such uncertainty as a sure thing."**

— Robert Burns

**The Shillong Times**

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**Enlightened judgment**

THE Madras High Court ruled on March 31 last that political parties should be prohibited from making election promises that are capable of adding burden on the public exchequer. The High Court directed the Election Commission of India and other Government authorities to respond to a set of queries ranging from whether the Central Government has taken any steps to bring legislation covering the issue of political manifestos, especially freebies promised in the election manifestos and governing the political parties as per the Judgment of the Supreme Court in the case of S Subramaniam v. State of Tamil Nadu and Others reported in (2013) 9 SCC 659. The High Court also asked the Election Commission in how many elections the Election Commission has vetted the election manifestos of political parties as per the dictum of the Supreme Court and which political parties have submitted their election manifestos for vetting during elections, after 2014 and what actions have been taken against those political parties, which have not followed the Supreme Court dictum to tender the manifestos for vetting? If the apex court takes this seriously and the respective High Courts also follow up on implementation of the 2013 ruling there would be less chances of political parties promising something they are unsure of providing. Politicians should understand that the public exchequer cannot be inordinately burdened by arbitrary decisions of a few irresponsible political parties that believe they can empty the public coffers at their whims.

Another aspect about a manifesto is that the voters forget what was promised soon after the elections. So how can they hold political parties and politicians to account? A manifesto on its own without the public to monitor it is a useless piece of paper. By the time the next election comes voters have already forgotten what was promised five years ago. In a scenario where voters are known to take money for votes a manifesto is not even needed. Very few educated and informed people keep the manifesto of a political party and question their inability to fulfil what was promised. In Meghalaya political parties have promised to resolve the border disputes with Assam right since the 1980s. Now it's 2021 but the problem remains intractable. Other promises include making Baljek airport functional. This has remained only a promise to entice the people of Garo Hills. Before the last bye-election to the Ranikor seat following the resignation of MM Danggo from the Congress and his joining the NPP, promises were made to make Ranikor a sub-division. After Danggo lost the election the NPP no longer makes this an issue and people too seem to have given up the demand. It is good that the Madras High Court has ticked off political parties for their unrealistic manifestos.

# Meghalaya youth policy, 2021: Some observations

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

'The youth are the present and the future of the society'. This is a common youth-oriented statement. It is a futuristic statement and it underlines 'the youth' as critical stakeholders in growth. However, leaving this 'future-orientation' aside; the status of the youth 'today' in relation to the opportunities available for livelihoods is an important indicator of social disharmony. Being a negative indicator, it would be best if this parameter is at its lowest degree. As such, a policy primarily strives to mitigate social disharmony and carry all stakeholders in the path of development.

In this regard, the Meghalaya youth policy, 2021 aims at doing the same. Here, learning from the past is important so as to better understand the present and effectively plan for the future. At the very outset, this is what 'any' policy is supposed to do. The failure to factor this will result in the policy document being only a booklet which is disengaged from the ground realities. In such a backdrop, it is imperative of Meghalaya youth policy, 2021 to be a robust and dynamic document which reflects the ground realities and the needs of the youth thereby paving a strategy for empowerment. In this context, some points are raised which may be of interest to the policy formulators.

To start with, the delivery mechanism of the policy interventions is the key. The focus must be on reaching the target group of 15-29 years as per their interest and motivation. Accordingly, the state government can look into the possible realignment of sports and youth affairs. True, they are related. However, in relation to policy implementation; it may be done so in terms of two different directorates namely, the directorate of sports and the directorate of youth affairs. The implication of this is also that in future they (sports and youth affairs) may be formulated as different policies altogether with a specific target population. This is because everyone in the age bracket of 15-29 years is rightly considered as a youth; but, not every one of them plays sports.

Many of the youth are not inclined towards sports as a serious activity apart from

it being a regular exercise. Their focus is more towards the creative industry (graphics, visual arts, fashion, computer games, coding, etc), arts, drama, songs, dance, films, etc. Moreover, youth affairs are about well-being and empowerment. As such, if sports and youth affairs are just one directorate; the focus would be lost and the target youth unreached. In the process, we are bound to leave out and to lose out on many. Alas, the policy is defeated from its inception. In addition, the policy talks of 'collaborating, partnering and aligning with all the stakeholders working for the youth'. Well, this can

building. It is a case of hitting two birds with one stone. In general, competency is defined as 'the holistic up-bringing of the youth in the domains of knowledge, skills and attitude'. The emphasis on attitude must be given adequate attention. This is because a youth might have the requisite knowledge and skills; but, if the attitude is not there or not right then all the qualifications come to naught. The current policy document seems to be lacking on this front.

As such, the nurturing of an environment which initiates the birth of the right attitude is critical. Owing up to this reality stands as a

***The failure to factor this will result in the policy document being only a booklet which is disengaged from the ground realities. In such a backdrop, it is imperative of Meghalaya youth policy, 2021 to be a robust and dynamic document which reflects the ground realities and the needs of the youth thereby paving a strategy for empowerment. In this context, some points are raised which may be of interest to the policy formulators.***

be better executed if sports and youth affairs are clearly demarcated as different directorates.

In continuation of the above, sports is a pretty straight-forward affair. In fact, the state government has a well structured framework as far as sports promotion is concerned. At the ground level the district sports officers are present to oversee the developments. In addition, many localities and towns have sports clubs which augments well for the youth. However, the bigger issues of youth affairs require more attention as of now. Here, competency building is the key. It is time that the focus should shift from mere education and capacity building. This is because education tends to focus more on knowledge and capacity building on the personality. Well, competency includes both education and capacity

major challenge for the state. There are many youth who do not possess the right attitude towards life. Some might say that this is a problem of upbringing but others say that it is a question of policy. Where does the buck stop?

As we move towards the subject-matter of data and policy, there is a matter of huge concern. For a policy to be relevant and effective, the data upon which it is formulated must be sound and adequate. The data must be representative of the youth of the entire state. The participation of the youth in data surveys is a must. This serves as a 'big data' on their needs and aspirations. Accordingly, a robust policy framework can be outlined which ensures engagement with the ground realities. However, in the case of Meghalaya youth policy, 2021 this is not so.

The policy document outlines that 'the state govern-

ment conducted an online survey to capture the present scenario and perception of the youth and that 500 individuals aged between 15-29 years participated'. Well, just take a minute and ask the question 'only 500 out of 11 lakhs youth'? If anything, this sample size is not representative of the population of youth in Meghalaya. It would have been better if a wider enumeration was carried on (both online and physical interaction) so as to collect comprehensive data on the needs, wants, hopes, aspirations and sentiments of the youth. Well, ok; we can claim that the Meghalayan youth is irresponsible for not being aware about such an online survey. But, is not the primary job of the government to reach out to its people?

As we delve deeper into any policy concerning the youth, the heart of the matter is 'employment'. One might say that employment must be the pivot around which the other guiding principles of the policy are based. This is because the employment factor helps in laying down the basis for a clear policy framework. For this to happen, a wide survey covering a sizeable proportion of the youth is needed. It will take time and money, but it would be time and money well spent. In the process, other important issues facing the youth such as mental health and neurotic concerns, drugs and substance abuse, gender inequality and gender discrimination, etc can also be inquired upon. This will result in a rich database which can then be used for framing policies, etc for their real benefit. In the end, a policy is incomplete without strategies. They are two sides of the same coin. What are the strategies of the state government in relation to the policy? How are they to be implemented? These too are required to be spelt out so as to ensure inclusiveness of all the stakeholders. The Meghalaya youth policy, 2021 is silent on this front apart from mentioning that various other government departments (like Health and Family Welfare, Labour, Planning, etc) will be involved in the process. By the looks of it, there is still lots to be done so as to make the policy a robust and relevant document!

(The Author teaches at NEHU. Email: benjamin21in@yahoo.co.in)

## Ruling regime does not care for autonomy of institutions Many factors responsible for erosion of democracy in India

By Ajit Singh

History has never been easy for the French. 232 years after the fall of Bastille, the French Revolution still stirs passions of both agony & jubilation. This great revolution of 1789 led to the origin of the principle of liberty and the concept of Constitutional law. The struggle for the republic is a reminder for all of us that creative ideas and freedom of expression must be protected at all costs.

In a post-COVID world, strong populist leaders have emerged as victors, using this pandemic to further concentrate power and strengthen a personalised bureaucratic machinery. Democracies like India are not an exception to this phenomenon; although our election process may be intact and transparent (a notion put under a cloud by recent events in Assam and West Bengal), it is only one of several criteria used to determine whether a country is a functioning and liberal democracy.

Recently, it has been widely reported that India's status has been downgraded from 'free' to 'partly free' in the latest Freedom House Report. Instead of introspecting on what went wrong that led to this, the Union Government of India has strongly rebuked the report, labelling it as "misleading, incorrect and misplaced".

However, why must we compare ourselves with a country that has scored just 9 points and was placed in the 'not free' category in the same report, and is infamous for its disregard for its citizens' civil liberties?

Here are some of the primary reasons responsible for the decay of Indian democracy:

Although there is a system of checks and balances available in our Constitution, a clear demarcation is somewhat missing. Taking advantage of the same, the present Union Government has misused its power to control independent institutions like the judiciary, the Comptroller and Auditor General, the Reserve Bank of India, the Central Information Commission, to name a few.

Some lessons can be drawn from the USA, where US President Donald Trump left no stone unturned to sway independent institutions like the Senate, the Federal Courts and the Federal Reserve, but to his dismay, he never got the desired success. Constitutional bodies in India are similarly expected to stand firm and defend democracy from demagogues; sadly, that has not been the case thus far.

People who have critical views regarding the government's policies and its way of functioning are routinely silenced through the use of draconian laws like the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, the Public Safety Act, the National Security Act and section 124A of the Indian Penal Code (better known as the 'sedition law').

While granting bail to climate activist Disha Ravi earlier this year, a Delhi court had remarked that the "offence of sedition cannot be invoked to minister to the wounded vanity of governments".

Effectively gagging the media through the overuse of defamation and sedition laws is one of the main reasons why India has been termed an 'electoral autocracy' in a report published by the V-DEM Institute.

Last month, Prof. Pratap Bhanu Mehta, a frequent and vocal critic of the Union Government, resigned from Ashoka University, purport-

edly due to indirect political pressure. Just two days after his resignation, Arvind Subramanian, a former Chief Economic Advisor to the Union Government and the Professor of Economics at Ashoka, relinquished his position as well. In his letter to Vice-Chancellor, he said that the varsity can no longer provide space for academic expression and freedom.

The last few months have also been witness to film directors being hounded by Hindutva and ultra-nationalist outfits to censor their content. Such incidents of deliberate assault on the imagination and creative freedom of artists are alarming. It also affirms our suspicion of a slowly creeping Orwellian dystopia.

The press is considered the fourth pillar of democracy. Its most important function is to keep a watchful eye on the three other pillars, which are, the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. Sadly, the Indian news media has severely disappointed on this front. Most of its constituents openly fuel online hate, parrot the ruling party, and raise irrelevant issues on national television that has no relevance to public life.

The onus lies with the citizens to demand better quality journalism.

It is high time to boycott en masse sensationalist news coverage that demands neither objectivity nor rationality in order to hit these media companies' bottom-line and signal to them that their hate-mongering will no longer be profitable.

In 1908, India's first Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore wrote, in a letter to a friend, that "[p]atriotism can't be our final spiritual shelter. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live."

In the present scenario, where a political party seems to be winning elections by creating a wave of phony and self-serving nationalism, and promising a hollow dream of becoming a 'vishwaguru' (literally, 'world leader'), people must wake up. They must contrast what is being fed to them by political parties with the reality of their lives.

However, as long as a section of the population keeps fighting for the vision of the Constitution, there is still a ray of light, and the fate of our nation does not seem completely gloomy.

It is hoped that "we, the people of India" will do justice to our nation.

The legendary American comic Charlie Chaplin's take on Hitler's fanaticism in the 1940 political satire 'The Great Dictator' is still relevant today. These words from his final speech in the film still ring true:

"The misery that is now upon us is but the passing of greed — the bitterness of men who fear the way of progress. The hate of men will pass, and dictators die, and the power they took from the people, will return to the people. And so long as men die, liberty will never perish...."

It is a tough time right now for a lot of Indians who have been rendered vulnerable by the collapse of the economy and the job market, combined with rising prices. More than anything else, we need a statesman who listens to the concerns of the population, respects diverse opinions, and fulfills the aspirations of the public, irrespective of their gender, caste, or religious affiliation. (IPA Service)

**Letters to the Editor**

**Death penalty violates human rights**

Editor, Amnesty International says "As long as human justice remains fallible, the risk of executing the innocent can never be eliminated."

The global movement for human justice rightly puts it in words when it comes to capital punishment or death penalty. There are many false rape and murder accusations and the accused sometimes has to suffer for no fault of his/hers. Our Social Welfare Minister, Kyrmen Shylla seemed to be sentimentally anguished when he talked of capital punishment and the general public's support for death penalty is solely based on moral grounds and retribution. Generally, it is believed that only capital punishment will lower the crime rate but according to statistical evidence it confirms that deterrence doesn't work and the fact that it doesn't is because of the lengthy legal procedures in the system. Art. 21 of the Indian Constitution guarantees the right to life to every individual and to legally grant the death penalty to an individual contradicts the fundamental right itself. Capital punishment is no

less a murder, just that it is in legal form and it doesn't rehabilitate the prisoners.

What is needed is proper value education, public awareness, self-defence training and quick and effective judicial procedures to ensure that justice to the victims can be delivered at a quick pace to restore public faith in the rule of law.

Yours etc., Kevin M Shangpliang, Via email

**Environmental destruction**

Editor, Apropos the front page photograph captioned, "Dumping loose soil in Wah Umkhrak," published in your esteemed daily (ST April 06, 2021). Knowing fully well that the area is flood effected for so many years, we fail to understand how the authorities can allow such dumping of soil on the Wah Umkhrak river thereby turning the river into a nullah. As we have seen various steps have been taken to clean up/widen the river for the past few years. This act will not only create havoc but also the very purpose of cleaning/widening will be defeated. We therefore urge the authorities to take immediate steps to stop further dumping of soil and

arrange to remove the soil already dumped.

Yours etc., S.Dey, B.Thapa, P Kharlyngdoh etc Via email

**India sinks on gender gap report**

Editor, India has dropped 28 places to rank 140th among 156 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021 and has become the third worst performer in South Asia. In South Asia, only Pakistan and Afghanistan ranked below India. The report's criteria for assessment covers four areas: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment.

Much of the decline in India has occurred on the political empowerment index. There is a significant decline in the share of women among ministers which has dropped from 23.1% in 2019 to 9.1% in 2021. Apart from this, the share of women in parliament remains stagnant at 14.4%. As for women's economic participation and opportunity, the present state is pitiful. There has been a

decrease in women's labour force participation rate. In addition to this, the share of women in professional and technical roles has declined. Further, the share of women in senior and managerial positions continues to be low. Also, the estimated earned income of women in India is only one-fifth of that of men which positions India among the bottom 10 globally.

Women face discrimination in health and survival as well. India ranks among the bottom 5 countries in this regard. Wide gaps in sex ratio at birth are caused by high incidence of gender-based sex-selective practices. With regard to educational attainment index, one-third of women are illiterate (34.2%) compared to 17.6% of men. In addition, violence against women has risen over the years.

Providing space for girls and women to fulfil their aspirations requires a framework that promotes gender equality at the heart of every design, whether it is policy or programme. It needs to address the complex interplay of factors that operate at different levels. Women's economic independence must be enhanced. They must be helped to enable the realization of sexual and reproductive health

and rights. Life skills education must be provided to women to equip them with knowledge, skills and understanding of their rights. Prevention of violence and violence response system must be improved. These, along with other micro approaches, hold promise of a bright future for women. Empowering women not merely benefits her as an individual but her entire community.

Yours etc., Venu GS, Kollam

**Death penalty for rapists wrong!**

Editor, The Social Welfare minister joins many other citizens in wanting rapists to be hanged to death because of the heinous nature of their crimes. But killing a convict does not deter others from committing the same crime. Then between arresting the rapists and giving them a death penalty is a long tedious procedure. The first thing that is expected when a crime occurs is for the culprit to be arrested. But in the several cases of crimes committed on women in Jaintia Hills and in the state as a whole, arrests

are yet to be made. So far only one person was arrested in the latest case happening in Jowai on Sunday. In the other two cases of this year there aren't even any suspects so far. This is because policing in the state leaves much to be desired. Those who have had experiences of dealing with the police know how unsatisfactory their system is. Is it because of recruitment of wrong individuals without the aptitude for policing? It is well known that in Meghalaya and other states too, recruitment to the police is often dictated by money and political clout and not by merit. If the meritorious had joined the police, things might have been better by now. But why cry over spilt milk? It is our fate here in Meghalaya to suffer from bad policing, bad traffic, bad governance, bad architectural design for houses, bad roads and polluted piped water coming into our homes. Everywhere we look it is dark and dismal. Where do we look for deliverance? Its frustrating to the core.

Yours etc., David Kharpran, Via email

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*"To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle."*

— Timothy D. Snyder

## The Shillong Times

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### Maha bribe and CBI

APPRECIABLY, again, the Supreme Court has turned down a plea by former Maharashtra home minister Anil Deshmukh to thwart a CBI probe into the huge bribe allegation raised against him by former Mumbai Police Commissioner, Param Bir Singh. Deshmukh moved SC after the Mumbai High Court took a serious note of the corruption allegation and asked the CBI to probe the matter. Rejecting Deshmukh's plea to quash the high court order, a bench of the apex court too said the matter is a really serious one.

The more one goes into the case, the more it shocks. The police chief wrote to the state chief minister saying the home minister was asking the cops to collect amounts as high as Rs 100 crore a month from bars, restaurants and the like from the western metropolis. As investigations into the case of an explosives-laden car found near industrialist Mukesh Ambani's home moved forward, it turned out that a senior Mumbai cop was among those involved and he's under arrest. The idea therein too, it appeared prima facie, was an attempt at extortion. The home minister's call to police for "collections" and the car explosives case might be inter-linked.

The point to note is that the home minister might not have acted on his own. His party boss, Sharad Pawar, was bending over backwards to play down the whole incident and even proposed an inquiry by his old chum and retired cop, Julio Rebeiro, so that the things would cool down. But Rebeiro said he would not touch the case with a barge pole. It is against this backdrop that the Mumbai High Court and the apex court have taken a "serious" view of the matter.

Considering the state of affairs in this country today, and keeping in mind the influences that work at various levels, it is likely this case too will not reach anywhere. The minister tendered his resignation and chances are that he would be exonerated and return to the post. People are losing their faith in the system. A home minister asking the police force to extort such a huge amount every month would mean that ultimately the people will have to cough out much more money for the services they avail from the bars and restaurants. Bar owners who pay the bribe will not allow themselves to suffer the loss; they will pass it on to customers.

The spectre of corruption is worsening by the day. Those who run the nation from the front must, first and foremost, hang their heads in shame and not just one minister or political party.

# Wahkaji: Of shattered dreams and abandoned projects

By Patricia Mukhim

Those of us living in Shillong often forget that there are villages just over one hundred odd kilometres away from this urban hub that don't get electricity for months together during the monsoons when storms and winds blow apart the electric poles and there is no one to repair them for months on end. Yes this is the story of most of our villages in Meghalaya, yet such news does not figure in our newspapers because we are all so obsessed with what happens and does not happen in Shillong. I blame myself too as a media person for not doing enough to give agency to people who actually are so disempowered by the tyranny of distance.

The distance between themselves and Shillong and between themselves and those who control their destinies and who hold the key to development—the State Government and its multiple machinery which does not seem to go beyond the district headquarters.

Recently this writer visited Wahkaji village which is 135 Kms from Shillong and takes over five hours to traverse over dirt road once you have crossed Mawkyrwat, the headquarters of South West Khasi Hills. The distance between Mawkyrwat and Wahkaji is 57 Kms but it takes nearly three hours to cover over bumpy roads. Yet people from Wahkaji have to regularly come to Mawkyrwat braving the bad roads for their health needs and to buy essential supplies not available at the local market at Umduhlon. Wahkaji falls under Ranikor constituency in South West Khasi Hills. It was represented by Martin Danggo for four terms but the people of Wahkaji say he has never visited them. This means he is not even aware of the plight of the people in a part of his constituency. Fortunately for the people of Wahkaji, Danggo who won from the Congress Party in the 2018 elections decided to join the NPP four months after he was elected (possibly with the promise of getting some cushy post from the ruling party). Danggo lost

to Pius Marwein of the UDP. And the people have no regrets whatsoever because they say Marwein has visited the village at least eight times since he was elected. He takes keen interest in the development of the area and he is 'at least trying his best' people say. That's a good certificate for any serving MLA.

The reason Wahkaji is deprived of good roads is because pressure groups decided they were not going to allow the two-laned Nongstoin-Wahkaji road to be built as that might facilitate uranium mining by the Uranium Corporation of India Ltd (UCIL). Indeed uranium prospecting, euphemistically termed as "exploratory mining" had been going on for at least two decades. But protests from the villagers and pressure groups have put paid to the UCIL's attempts to mine the ore. But the question that remains unasked is whether any individual or group has the right to halt development? Are the protests against roads or railways based on practical considerations or emotional hiccups? The people of Wahkaji today regret having joined the protest against the two-laned highway which would have better connected them to Nongstoin and Mawkyrwat and speeded up their journey to Shillong, apart from creating livelihood opportunities.

The villagers say that they were told by pressure groups that the highway is actually to facilitate uranium mining which would be disastrous for

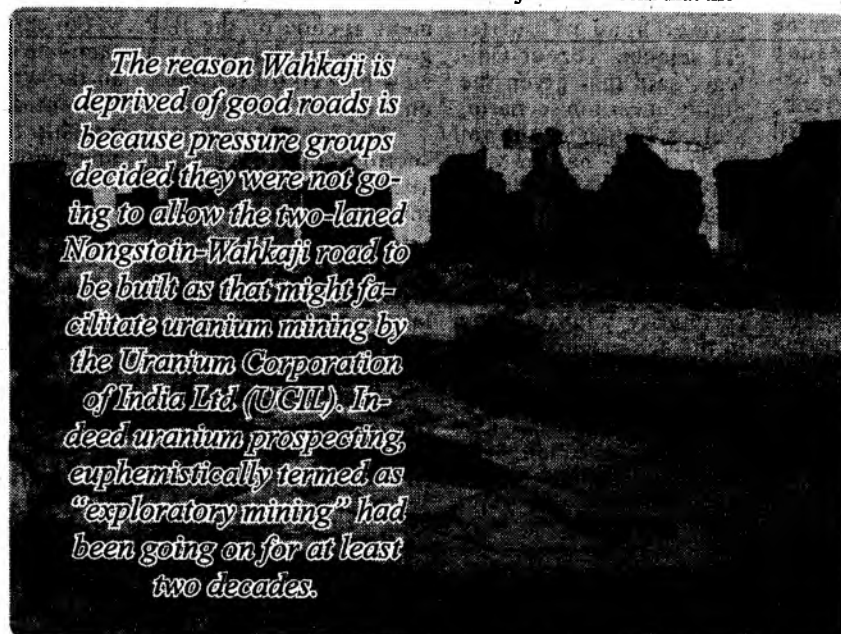
their health and well-being. But could they still not have protested against uranium mining and also demanded good roads? No, they were not given that choice. So who is to be held accountable for holding back Wahkaji with about 150 households and a population of roughly 800 people and several other villages beyond? Who is to be held responsible for the utter lack of facilities and employment opportunities? One can see the bald hills as one passes through the different villages from Mawkyrwat onwards until one touches Wahkaji. It is evident that the

highway.

The questions that remain unanswered are what if someone should need to be evacuated from Wahkaji and adjoining areas due to health reasons? Might the person not die on the way due to the poor road condition? And worse, if it's a pregnant woman who has gone into labour then the plight is unimaginable. The reality is that each time people of Wahkaji need to do a thorough health check up such as getting an ultra sound or CT Scan done, they have to come to Shillong since all those facilities are not available in the district headquarters. It is the private hospitals in Shillong that have all the equipment and the specialist doctors but it also means that they have to pay for every service from their meagre earnings.

The remains of the abandoned road project which includes the office space and residential quarters of the company employees which is half complete has now come apart. The brick work has disintegrated. Much money would have been invested in creating that space now abandoned. Who pays for such abandoned projects? Above all who pays for the years of under-development; the shattered dreams that inflict a heavy cost on people?

Citizens of Meghalaya have long been held to ransom by different pressure groups. While civil society action is necessary in a democracy, at the end of the day the question to be asked is, "Who do the pressure groups represent?" If we have elected representatives then why should pressure groups call the shots? Where do they derive their mandate from to stall a development project? The youth of Wahkaji have no livelihoods. Most of them come to Shillong looking for some kind of labour. Does anyone care to think of their plight? Does the MLA have a plan to develop this desolate piece of land held to ransom by anti-uranium groups? Fight the uranium lobby by all means but no one has the democratic right to stop a road from being built.



The reason Wahkaji is deprived of good roads is because pressure groups decided they were not going to allow the two-laned Nongstoin-Wahkaji road to be built as that might facilitate uranium mining by the Uranium Corporation of India Ltd (UCIL). Indeed uranium prospecting, euphemistically termed as "exploratory mining" had been going on for at least two decades.

poration of India Ltd (UCIL). Indeed uranium prospecting, euphemistically termed as "exploratory mining" had been going on for at least two decades. But protests from the villagers and pressure groups have put paid to the UCIL's attempts to mine the ore. But the question that remains unasked is whether any individual or group has the right to halt development? Are the protests against roads or railways based on practical considerations or emotional hiccups? The people of Wahkaji today regret having joined the protest against the two-laned highway which would have better connected them to Nongstoin and Mawkyrwat and speeded up their journey to Shillong, apart from creating livelihood opportunities.

The villagers say that they were told by pressure groups that the highway is actually to facilitate uranium mining which would be disastrous for

only exports from the village which yield some kind of earning is cutting down trees for charcoal production. Tree felling for timber is also rampant. Stumps of trees stand out as a testimony of the destruction to the environment, but who cares when there are no alternative livelihoods. On the way we come across several pick-ups carrying broomstick to the markets of Shillong. They grunt their way through the dirt road which barely has space for one vehicle to pass.

All around is a desolate barrenness. I asked the people of Wahkaji what they grow in the village. They say nothing grows other than broomstick. In areas beyond Wahkaji which have rivers flowing through in the plains below, people grow potatoes and peas. One also crosses an occasional rice field on the way out of Wahkaji through to Markasa — where one then touches the Nongstoin

are celebrated, but an objective evaluation of the state's functioning throughout its existence paints an extremely grim picture. In terms of numerous developmental and societal indices such as law and order, infrastructure, connectivity, health, education, environmental protection, water supply, electrification, women's safety, and the safety of the minority non-locals, Meghalaya's performance has been abysmal.

On the other hand, the state has managed to "achieve" several dubious distinctions. In a comical display of incompetence and misgovernance, Meghalaya has been unable to rebuild its Assembly building for over 20 years. The state has till date also failed to build a single medical or engineering college for its residents. In 5 decades, Meghalaya has developed no semblance of a self-sustaining economy, and it continues to depend upon New Delhi's grants (doles) for its very survival.

Disturbingly, the situation is worsening daily. Recently there have been frequent power cuts, up to 11 hours a day, as years of corruption and mismanagement in the power sector have finally borne fruit. Crimes against women have seen a sharp spike. Tourism, the only sector which had been showing signs of growth, has been dealt two crippling blows: by the pandemic, and by a sequence of violent ILP agitations. The ILP demand continues to haunt the state, as Meghalaya seeks to be-

## Second wave of Covid has exposed inadequacies in Modi govt's strategy

By Prakash Karat

With the second wave of the Covid-19 infection unfolding, India is facing a calamitous situation. April 4 saw the breaching of the 100,000 mark (one lakh) in daily cases with 103,709 cases recorded. Three days later, on April 7, the count reached the highest so far of 126,260 new cases — the highest daily count in the world. The death rate is also mounting.

To say that the government was unprepared for this surge is an understatement. On the contrary, the Modi government was behaving as if the worst was over in January and confident that the economic recovery was well underway.

Both on the health front and in providing relief to the people during the economic crisis, the Modi government has been grossly negligent. This was reflected in the union budget for 2021-22. The budget had made the fantastic claim of an unprecedented 137 per cent hike in allocations for the health sector when in actual terms the budgetary provision for 2021-22 for the department of health and family welfare shows a 9.6 per cent decrease over the actual expenditure incurred in 2020-21.

The way in which the government has formulated its vaccination policy is also contradictory and confusing. So far two vaccines have been approved for emergency use — AstraZeneca's Covishield and Bharat Biotech's Covaxin. While the latter was controversially approved for use as part of the third phase of trials, the regulatory body has still not cleared the Russian vaccine Sputnik V. It is being used in 35 countries but awaits approval for manufacturing by an Indian company.

The supply of vaccine is already falling short with stocks rapidly depleting in states where the surge is most. This is at a time when people above 45 are being vaccinated from April 1. The failure to plan and execute a scaled-up vaccination programme is glaring.

The government should not only see that Sputnik V is put to use immediately but also procure license for production of vaccines like the Johnson & Johnson product which requires only a single dose. The Novavax vaccine to be produced by the Serum Institute in India as Covovax should be expedited. The central government should also immediately provide money for the centrally-sponsored scheme — Aatmanirbhar Swasthya Bharat Yojana — which is meant to develop capacities in primary, secondary and tertiary health system and other public health facilities. Though the scheme is to incur expenditure of Rs 64,180 crore over six years, no allocation was made for it in the budget. This scheme should be immediately operationalised as strengthening the public distribution system should be the priority.

Contrary to the rosy picture projected by the government of a V-shaped economic recovery, it has become evident that growth is halting and can be stalled. The core sector comprising eight segments marked its steepest contraction in six months. Manufacturing output had hit a seven-month low even before the second wave began. Now with restrictions being imposed due to the surge like night curfews, weekend lockdowns and restrictions on movement, economic activities are going to be further dampened. Even though a full lockdown is being avoided, the rising toll in cases and limited restrictions has already affected retail trade, restaurants and hotels in places like Maharashtra. With jobs being axed in the services sector, reverse migration of labour has begun.

The Modi government was singularly callous in addressing the needs of people in distress during the first wave of the pandemic. The fiscal stimulus package announced amounted to hardly 1.5 per cent of GDP in terms of additional expenditure. Unlike the United States, UK and EU countries where substantial cash subsidies were given to citizens, the Modi government gave negligible cash handouts and refused to support small businesses and petty producers. The spectre of lakhs of migrant workers — men, women and children — walking down the highways without food or shelter symbolised the callousness and inhumanity of the government's response.

The government has to take concrete measures now to meet the impending crisis. The first step is to ensure that every family is provided 35 kg of foodgrains per month, of which 10 kg should be free of cost. Earlier the government had announced provision of 5 kg of rice/wheat and one kg of dal free of cost for 80 crore people who came under the purview of the Food Security Act. However, this was continued till only November 2020.

As of March 1, 2021, India had a huge buffer stock of foodgrains of 9.2 crore tonnes (including un-milled paddy). This is three times more than the mandated buffer. The government should increase the quota of free foodgrains to 10 kg per household per month for at least the next six months.

All the opposition parties had demanded in September 2020, Rs 7,500 cash payment to all families outside the income tax bracket. The government had only given Rs 1,500 in three monthly instalments to women Jan Dhan bank account holders. Given the fact that the pandemic is getting prolonged, the central government should provide a cash subsidy to all families.

With the crisis in employment mounting, the MNREGA scheme should be expanded to ensure at least 200 days work a year with enhanced wages. If that is done, there has to be sufficient allocations for the wages to be paid for the work-days implemented in the states. The government should immediately announce an Urban Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme which can provide some relief to the urban unemployed.

The Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) sector provides employment to eleven crore people. It is this sector which has been severely hit by the pandemic and its fallout. So far, the steps taken have been totally inadequate. The government must ensure, apart from extending the moratorium on loan repayments, waiver of interest on pending loans, subsidy for buying raw materials and other support measures.

All this will involve a much higher level of public expenditure than what has been budgeted for. The government should not rigidly abide by fiscal deficit limits and rely on borrowing for stepping up public expenditure. Further, it should increase taxation on corporates and the super-rich and introduce a wealth tax. This should replace the pernicious reliance on high taxes on petroleum products for garnering revenue.

The central government will do well to aim for the entire country, what the Kerala government has done in two vital spheres. In Kerala, 95 per cent of the people with Covid infection have got free treatment in the public health system. The LDF government has also provided free food kits to 88 lakh families during the entire period of the pandemic. The kit consists of not only cereals but pulses, edible oil and masalas. (IPA Service)

### Letters to the Editor

#### On Power cuts & other issues

Editor,  
Appropos the News item "Power Disconnection from April 16" (ST April 6, 2021) & "8 hour power cut today" (ST April 7, 2021), these continuous power disconnections and load-shedding have totally disrupted life and affected productivity. What with the looming threat of another spell of load-shedding from April 16, it is unfortunate that till date the state has not been able to find a solution to the matter or offer even a token of assurance that a solution is in the offing.

On the brighter side, the increase in revenue collection is heartening. This perhaps, is because of the proactive efforts of the current CMD, most notably, the surprise inspections carried out in Byrnihat. Now there are many industries in Byrnihat and if perhaps, stricter vigil had been maintained by the concerned MeECL engineers overseeing that area, greater revenue would have been collected. The apparent inaction or selective action of the concerned engineers should raise many uncomfortable questions for the MeECL and its engineers.

As per the latest power dues available on the prapti in website of the Ministry of Power, Meghalaya shows the highest outstanding dues of Rs 549 crores amongst the North Eastern states. The corresponding figures for

Tripura, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Sikkim are Rs 131 cr, Rs 98 cr, Rs 21 cr, Rs 2 cr, Rs 90 cr and Rs 93 cr respectively. How did we, among all NE states, manage to accrue such a high outstandings? And that from a 'once-upon-a-time' power surplus state! An erstwhile Board that could at one time grant free or discounted domestic electricity to its employees!

In a local language daily dated April 7, the dues of selected companies in Meghalaya were highlighted and the amount works out to approximately Rs 200 crores. Now is it not pertinent to ask why efforts are not being made to make recoveries of dues from these defaulting companies? Again the same paper, on the same day, published the revised electricity tariff wef from April 2021. I am not against revision of tariff per se, but two questions may perhaps be asked; one, why should we, the regular bill-paying public be made to pay for the failure of others? Secondly, why should we be repeatedly threatened with disconnection for non-payment when the fault appears to lie elsewhere?

I fail to understand how the MeECL engineers can demand the removal of the current CMD. Of course, I am not aware of the internal wranglings that may perhaps be present in the organization. However, I may add, is not a pro-active CMD better than a senior, and maybe senile official, who would be so overburdened with his duties

that he would not have the physical capacity to undertake tours, let alone surprise inspections? The engineers were also in opposition to the previous CMD because of her stringent action against an errant engineer. Why the opposition? Are they trying to protect their own without reason and now attempting to defend those who may have colluded with the Byrnihat industries or maybe, even the Lumshnong cement industries?

In looking into the various aspects for overhauling an organization, especially one with high expenditure outgo, one aspect that has been overlooked, especially in the context of MeECL, is staffing review. All good organizations practice optimal staffing. It is a known fact that one of the many reasons why PSUs flounder and fail is due to over-staffing. Perhaps it is ample time now for MeECL to conduct a staffing review and cut the flab. In addition, perhaps extreme measures such as freezing certain components of salary may be identified. If that happens and the economic pinch is felt, then perhaps the engineers would not be over-zealous about defending their own black sheep. It goes without saying therefore, that the right people in the right place will add value and bring revenue. I do not know if it is the case now, but earlier, MeECL's employees enjoyed pay revision once every five years. The State and Central Governments do this exercise once in every ten years. This practice, if

still prevalent in MeECL, should be stopped and be brought in line with the state government practice. This exercise would perhaps reduce the expenditure burden to a great extent.

Past policies may have resulted in the current financial position or perhaps even current shortcomings, which could include corruption, may have also contributed to the situation. Be that as it may, the task is clear-cut. We have to pay our dues. Measures have to be taken to ameliorate the situation and both long-term and short-term solutions have to be identified and implemented. Strong political will, identification of problems and solutions, united endeavors, determined implementation and above all, demand of accountability from those responsible must be the cornerstone of our efforts. We must keep on putting pressure, keep on demanding action and keep this issue alive in the public domain so that things improve and are finally resolved.

I iterate, therefore, we the public, must not be made to suffer. Or threatened!

Yours etc,  
D. Narry,  
Shillong-8.

#### Nothing to celebrate

Editor,  
Our state, Meghalaya, will complete half a century of statehood in 2022. That should be an occasion where progress and achievement

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

"Even if a unity of faith is not possible,  
a unity of love is."

— Hans Urs von Balthasar

## The Shillong Times

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### Elections, Covid & Coalition Politics

THE rise in numbers of Covid cases across the country and in our own state is a cause of concern but politicians don't seem to care. On Friday 42 new Covid cases were detected in the state. Huge gatherings at election rallies in Garo Hills where neither the VIPs nor the people attending the rallies wore masks could become super spreaders. That political leaders have themselves let their guards down would make it very difficult for the Health Department to enforce Covid protocols one more time. In fact the Prime Minister and Home Minister of the country too have been criss-crossing states to garner votes. It almost looks as if they are immune to Covid. Not one leader exhorted people to remain wary of the second wave of Covid infections for that would have boomeranged on them and the people might have questioned as to why what's good for the political class is not good for them. The next few weeks will reveal just how dangerous the huge election rallies are, when social distancing became a joke and was flouted with impunity. Covid cases and deaths have risen in the past few days. This calls for solid action plans, not a blame game where the Union health Minister is blaming the states; especially the non-BJP ruled states for failing to manage the Covid situation. Is this fair?

Coming to Meghalaya where all is set for the elections to the Garo Hills District Council scheduled for April 12, life is also set to return to normal in the sense that the Chief Minister will get back to his office and the CMO's twitter handle will start buzzing. All these weeks the CM and his team of ministers have been touring Garo Hills like never before. What's interesting is that all the parties in the coalition are going it alone in the Council elections. Health Minister AL Hek is campaigning for the BJP; the UDP bigwigs are campaigning for their own candidates. This makes the MDA coalition an opportunistic convergence of political parties whose ideologies differ and who are there just to form a government until the five-year tenure is done. By 2023 no one knows what the next coalition will look like and which new parties will make up the eclectic group. During the campaign for the GHADC elections each party spoke of its virtues and castigated the others for their faults. The corruption in the outgoing Council and non-payment of staff salaries was the reverberating theme. It would be interesting to see who forms the next Executive Council or if another coalition of disparate forces is in the offing. And when the elections are done and dusted perhaps the Covid protocols will also become more stringent!

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, bitterly fighting for re-election of her government, has claimed during a visit to a temple in the midst of electioneering that she belongs to Shandilya Gotra, one of the eight highest Brahmin gotras, and so a descendant of Shandilya Rishi. This was when the priest asked her gotra for performing puja on her behalf. This reminds us of former Congress President Rahul Gandhi's declaration before last Lok Sabha election that he was a "Janadhari". He visited Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati this time. DMK leaders in Tamil Nadu find it necessary to repeatedly affirm that they are not anti-Hindus.

Political scientists may view this as identity politics that can assume different avatars to suit the occasion. For onlookers, election campaigns are increasingly becoming comic shows and speeches less and less on public issues and more and more on personal and emotional matters. In this trend, use of religion as a tool for propaganda and as a bond that can both integrate and disintegrate people is openly seen today in the four States and one Union Territory going to polls.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the Mata Temple near Dhaka during his visit to Bangladesh to participate in the Golden Jubilee celebration of freedom of that country also invited criticism as having a political motive of appeasing Matua community of Hindus living in North 24 Parganas in West Bengal. Modi also said, "This is a pilgrimage of the bond between the people of India and Bangladesh... People from India visit Orakundi each year and we will take measures to facilitate the pilgrimage". To Mamata Banerjee, it appeared to be a case of "vote marketing" and it is reported in the press that she raised a query in her characteristic style why PM's passport and visa should not be cancelled.

In election season, there is need to befriend all castes and communities while one can choose one's favourites off-election season. People, particularly those politically active, recall that the same West Bengal Chief Minister disallowed the traditional

### Religion in elections

# Appeasement of Hindu majority

By Dr S. Saraswathi

practice of taking out a procession for immersion of Durga idol after Durga Puja to allow undisturbed Muharram procedures. Such contradictory positions assumed by political parties are very common. Consistency is the last virtue in election-related activities.

In Puducherry, the BJP promised to remove government control over all donations given to places of worship, to build a temple complex at the famous Sani Bhagwan Temple at Tirunallar, to renovate historical temples, and conduct annual cultural and spiritual festivals. It promised to remove all encroachments on temple lands, and set up special funds for renovation of temples. All these were offered to make the region a "spiritual



hub".

The DMK repeatedly asserts that it is not opposed to any religious faith and would uphold religious harmony and protect the honour of all religions. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister E Palaniswami belonging to the AIADMK says that Muslims and Christians should not trust the DMK and minorities should not have fear when the AIADMK is in power. He has also promised to renovate 7,000 temples in the State.

DMK is taking special efforts to erase the image it has earned as an anti-Hindu party by its origin and history. Rationalist leaders of the party questioned many traditional beliefs and practices still followed at home, in temples and in the society as part of religious rituals which helped to perpetuate social inequalities. They also changed some of them. Priestless, ritual-less self-respect marriages were validated by the DMK government. Under Karunanidhi, the party had held

anti-superstition and anti-caste conferences. It permitted temple mantra in Tamil along with Sanskrit. Reforms intended for eradicating caste inequality and superstition, created an impression about the DMK as anti-Hindu and pro-minority religions.

More recently, Setusamudram Project opposed by many on the belief that Ram Setu was the bridge constructed by Lord Ram to cross the ocean to go to Lanka and therefore a sacred structure that should not be demolished was steadfastly supported by the DMK -- a stand that vitally hurt Hindu religious sentiments. Its extraordinary enthusiasm in the project overlooking even its economic viability seemed to display a strong anti-Hindu posture.

supports minority religious groups and privately follows the religion of the majority.

West Bengal presents a classic case of religious polarisation in the present election. In the Indian elections, religious affinity is used so far to appeal for votes, to select candidates, and for mobilisation of bloc votes by promises and offers. It was usually applied to garner support of minority groups which are inclined to form groups. This politics has gone too far and has now created need for "majority appeasement" to balance the disturbed scales.

Mamata Banerjee accused the BJP of trying to divide the minority votes and playing communal politics. "It is my responsibility to ensure your security and well-being of your society", she told the minority groups. She was not averse to reciting Islamic verses in government events, but protested against Jai Shri Ram slogan and walked out of the birth anniversary function arranged for Netaji where PM was also present. The epithet "Mother of Minority Appeasement" used for her by a BJP leader, whether fitted her or not, indicated that elections still have use for religious divisions and appeasement politics.

In Kerala, Modi took up the case of protecting Indian culture. Citing the incidents at Sabarimala Temple for allowing entry of women in all age-groups as intrusion of activists in the culture of the land, he resented portraying Kerala culture as "regressive" and the attempts made to "destabilise place of worship". He started his speech by chanting "Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa" and paid tributes to several temples in the region. With large population of Muslim and Christian minorities, Kerala has a composite culture.

It is clear that in the present election series, the most noteworthy and surprising feature, because of its rather sudden emergence is the politics of Hindu majority appeasement. The well-established minority religious pampering is today facing a parallel growth of majority appeasement. When the BJP does it, it is part of its ideology of protecting and preserving Hindu religion; when others do it, it is their secular outlook!—*JNFA*

(The writer is former Director, ICSSR, New Delhi)

### Centre-States Pow Wow

# Mars vaccination drive

By Insaf

An unsavoury slugfest between the Centre and Opposition ruled states over Covid vaccination is the last thing that the country needs to be embroiled in. Unacceptable! Allegations of vaccine shortage by Maharashtra, Delhi, Chhattisgarh, and Punjab have not gone down well with New Delhi. "Vaccine supplies are being monitored on a real-time basis, and State governments are being apprised regularly about it," has reacted Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan. He claimed the charges were "utterly baseless", particularly in Maharashtra and 'nothing but an attempt to divert attention from its repeated failures to control the spread of pandemic.' The State had said that it had 13 lakh doses of Covaxin and these would last just 3 days. Vardhan also hit out at Delhi's request for opening up vaccination to everyone

above 18 years of age saying goal posts are being changed to camouflage their poor performance in the vaccination drive. A pointer was vaccination of health care workers. Maharashtra has done only 86%, Delhi 72% and Punjab 64 per cent with the first dose. In comparison 10 States/UTs have done over 90%.

Vardhan also hit out at Chhattisgarh saying that comments of its leaders on efficacy of the Covaxin vaccine was a deliberate move to 'spread misinformation and panic' and that it would be better if the State government 'focuses its energies on ramping up their health infrastructure rather than on petty politicking.' Though he chose to single out Chhattisgarh on this front, reports say that there are at least 14 States, including BJP-ruled Goa and Himachal Pradesh, which have refrained from using a single dose of Covaxin in their vaccination drive. No words or reprimand for them? It must win confidence of all in this battle against Covid. It's not enough to warn that the situation is getting worse, with the country recording 13.1 million cases, and next four weeks being 'very very critical', and expressing 'maximum concern' over rival governments. It must remember the adage a stitch in time saves nine. Politics in the times of Covid is certainly not touché.

between different political parties. True to her style, she shot back with: "Why is that no complaint has been filed against Narendra Modi, who talks about Hindu and Muslim (vote banks) every day? How many complaints have been lodged against those who had uttered the word 'mini Pakistan' during the Nandigram campaigns." Worse, she told the EC that it could issue 10 show-cause notices, but her reply would be the same, "I will always speak against any division of Hindu and Muslim votes." Predictably, all eyes are on Nirvachan Sadan how it tames the Bengal tigress, with five phases of elections due.

**Setback for MVA**  
There's no respite for the Maha Vikas Aghadi government in the high profile corruption case against its former Home Minister Anil Deshmukh. It's far from over as it had

claimed last week. On Thursday last, the Supreme Court dismissed its petition and one filed by Deshmukh challenging Bombay High Court order for a 'preliminary inquiry' by CBI into allegations levelled by former Mumbai police commissioner Param Bir Singh. The two-judge bench said: 'nature of allegations, the personas involved and seriousness of allegations do require an independent agency to enquire into the matter. It is a matter of public confidence given the factual scenario... what has been directed is only a preliminary enquiry albeit by an independent agency.' Deshmukh's counsel had argued the HC order would 'affect federal structure' as the State had already withdrawn general consent to CBI to probe cases in its territory. But the apex court was firm: 'the two personas involved... were closely working together till they fell apart, both holding a particular position. Then should the CBI not investigate?... This is not your enemy who has made these allegations, but almost your right-hand man'. It also ruled out a case of 'political rivalry' as alleged by MVA government saying the Centre uses the CBI, not independent, just to settle scores. With that issue settled, all eyes shall now be on CBI's preliminary enquiry. A fortnight turns out to be along harrowing wait indeed.

**Tripura wakes up**  
Tripura seems to have finally woken up that it's not immune to the corona virus and the government is getting its act together. Now, so late? Guess, the realisation dawned only after none other Chief Minister Biplab Kumar Deb tested positive for Covid-19. There's a flurry of activity and government has now issued restrictions to control the spread of virus specially in its offices. The list includes: a maximum of 20 persons can attend official meetings; they should sit at least one metre apart; must follow protocols such as wearing of masks, carrying hand sanitizers and visitors would now be allowed entry with prior permission only. It now sees the need to order that wearing of masks or face shields are mandatory at offices and public places and anyone found not wearing a mask will be fined. Insaf recalls its visit to Agartala in early February and to its horror found that Covid protocols were hardly in place. An oft heard response was 'there's no Covid here!' The north-east being 'different' came into play. Even in Guwahati, the response was similar. In comparison to other States, Tripura has just '70 people under treatment for Covid' and the positivity rate is a mere 5.19%, as per the State Covid control room. Be that as it may, it must enforce the guidelines it has woken up to and not miss the woods for the trees. *INFIA*

### Round The States

### Letters to the Editor

#### Animosities of the CCORMAU A Product of Fear?

Editor,  
On Wednesday, 7th April 2021, the President of the Coordination Committee of Registered MeECL (Employees) Associations and Unions (CCORMAU), P. K. Chullet demanded a CBI enquiry into the alleged irregularities in the Corporation. To quote his words "The employees of MeECL are troubled with the irregularities at the MeECL for power theft and other scams." He also demanded that appropriate action should be initiated against any engineers of the MeECL indulging in malpractices.

The CCORMAU said in a meeting that was held recently they had thoroughly deliberated on the recent events connected with the irregularities and scams in MeECL that have been highlighted in the media which also includes power theft and the CMD's surprise inspection at Byrnihat area. Is it however possible that rampant power theft in Byrnihat is going on without the knowledge and connivance of members of the CCORMAU? As we all know that technically none of this is possible without the involvement of engineers. If we go by Arju Dkhar and P. K. Chullet's justification,

the CMD should have informed the officers and the industries involved in power theft before carrying out the inspection so that they could have prepared themselves. But if this was done, then I am sure, power theft would not have been discovered in the first place because they would have done whatever they could have to cover up for this malpractice and misconduct which has come to light.

It is also interesting to note Arju Dkhar's dramatic offer to tender his resignation and let go of his terminal benefits. This is startling as nobody in their right minds, especially a government employee would so willingly give up their terminal benefits which will support them in the future after their retirement. So, does this mean he has earned enough from the irregularities and misdeeds unleashed on the public all these years to the extent that he does not need any retirement benefits? One can only wonder.

I am positive the citizens of Meghalaya are smart enough to judge the people working at MeECL. It is time now for the citizens to also raise their voices against these people as well for we all know that certain functions within the Corporation will not operate without their involvement. These malefactors have looted the state for years and enjoyed stealing from the common public

by increasing the electricity bills which is a regular affair every now and then.

The deep nexus between the contractors, engineers and the MeECL officials are well known and well established with the Corporation. As a common citizen, I appeal to the Chief Minister to conduct a thorough CBI probe with regards to the matter.

Yours etc.,  
Jordan Diongdoh  
Shillong - 2

#### When good deeds become a hindrance to perpetrators

Editor,  
The Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited (MeECL) has been under a lot of criticism for the poor state of affairs in supplying power to the State. One could initially point fingers and solely put the blame on the current MDA government but looking back at the tenures of the previous regimes, there is not much difference in the functioning of the Department.

This could be due to the fact that the MeECL has huge debts to pay off which has accumulated over the decades. The loans that the Department has taken over the years is really amusing! Looking

at the previous regime, the total amount of loan taken rocketed to a whopping ₹ 1629 Cr which is approximately ₹ 203 Cr per year as compared to the last three years amounting to ₹ 166 Cr (approx. ₹ 55 Cr per year) only. This in return is creating a serious problem in running the Department smoothly.

As mentioned by the Power Minister in the recently concluded Budget Session with respect to the One Time Settlement (OTS) Scheme, it aims to pave the way for consumers to pay off their outstanding dues such as to increase the billing efficiency in the State. The initiative led by the CMD offers waiver of 100 per cent of Delayed Payment Charges (DPC) or 30 per cent of the total outstanding dues, whichever is more beneficial to the consumers.

With the recent news in the media stating that various industries in Byrnihat have been continuously using electricity illegally, this OTS Scheme would in one way prove to be beneficial in bringing these illegal activities to rest. When we say there is a large proportion of consumers not paying their bills, it is somewhat still logical since the amount accumulated for the consumers would not be at par compared to the bills that the industries owe to the MeECL. The Government should strictly follow up on the issue and try

its best to revive the dried-up Corporation and bring it to its track.

The CCORMAU has recently argued and questioned the reforms initiated by the Power Department and MeECL authorities. However, they have failed to explain why they are against the One Time Settlement Scheme (OTS) which will waive off Delayed Payment Charges (DPC) for domestic and industrial consumers to recover outstanding dues. The Association was against giving special tariff to Byrnihat Industrial Association (BIA) but at the same time they conveniently forget to mention that the tariff is not set by the Power Department and MeECL but it is done so by the Meghalaya State Electricity Regulatory Commission (MSERC). Quoting the Power Minister in the last concluded assembly "The tariff is revised every year and there are petitions laid down by consumers and as such the consumers can petition the MSERC for revision of tariffs"

It is high time that the irregularities in the MeECL come to a stop. As a concerned citizen I also feel it is time for the people and the Government to work together as responsible citizens and revive the mess that the Department is currently undergoing. Our State cannot always dwell in the same period the MeECL has been going through over the years.

It is time for the Department to do away with its lousy work ethics and start anew by putting in place a contemporary system to sort out the wrongdoings within the Department and bring about the much needed change.

Yours etc.,  
Abigail Szymielich,  
Shillong-1

#### State in doldrums

Editor,  
When one goes through certain traumas and difficulties in life, there is a saying in English which provides hope to the one undergoing the suffering and that saying is, 'Have hope, there is always a light at the end of the tunnel'. In Meghalaya's case, I am afraid, this old saying might not apply as, what with the rampant corruption in most spheres of government and with the power situation being what it is, the light at the end of the tunnel will probably soon have to be switched off. God help us.

Yours etc.,  
D.M. Pariat,  
Shillong - 3

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# 'E-fuelling' New Feminism

Today, communication through digital tools has expanded the horizon across the world at a dizzying speed. Academic Meena Pillai explores how the growth of digital communications empowers activists to work for women's rights, reports SPAN writer Michael Gallant

What happens when people fighting for women's rights unite not just through meetings and marches, but web conferences, chat rooms and other digital platforms? According to Meena Pillai, Fulbright-Nehru Fellow, the answer could be a powerful movement like nothing seen before.

Pillai works at the University of Kerala, where she serves as a professor for the Institute of English, director of the Centre for Cultural Studies, and director of the School of English and Foreign Language.

Her research and teaching look at how the growth of digital communications empowers activists to work for women's rights at local, regional and even international levels.

"This is the rise of a new feminism," she says, "where the digital world has opened up the possibility for ordinary women to narrate their stories too. This will lead to a bigger ensemble of voices," she says.

Pillai describes digitally-empowered feminist movements of the future as building without the need for leaders, but with the potent ability to challenge institutions and structures that oppress women.

"I see my research as capturing this brilliant historical juncture," she says, "where women around the world are awakening to the possibilities of new sisterhoods of resistance."

Pillai has spent three decades studying and teaching topics related to language, culture, communications and gender. She first

won her first Fulbright-Nehru fellowship two decades ago to study at Ohio State University in the mid-1990s. She completed her second fellowship, in which she was named a Fulbright-Nehru Academic and Professional Excellence Award Scholar, in 2020.

For the second fellowship, Pillai travelled to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) as a visiting professor. She taught a course titled "New Geographies of Women's Digital Dissent," that focused on some of her core interests: combining multiple academic disciplines, examining women's rights as described in movies and mass media, and looking at how culture and gender intersect in everyday life. For Pillai, the experience was wonderful—and the students with whom she interacted as vital and fascinating as the subject matter itself.

"Teaching an eclectic group of students, including African Americans, was one of the most rewarding experiences ever," she says.

"For every aspect of feminist mobilisation and dissent we discussed, whether from India, Tunisia, or related to #MeToo in America, there were always different opinions."

She describes the diversity of voices as rich and powerful, though navigating cultural differences proved challenging at times. "When I told my students of the menstrual taboos in India, I could see that they were visibly shaken," she says.

When she heard about the difficulties women faced in the United

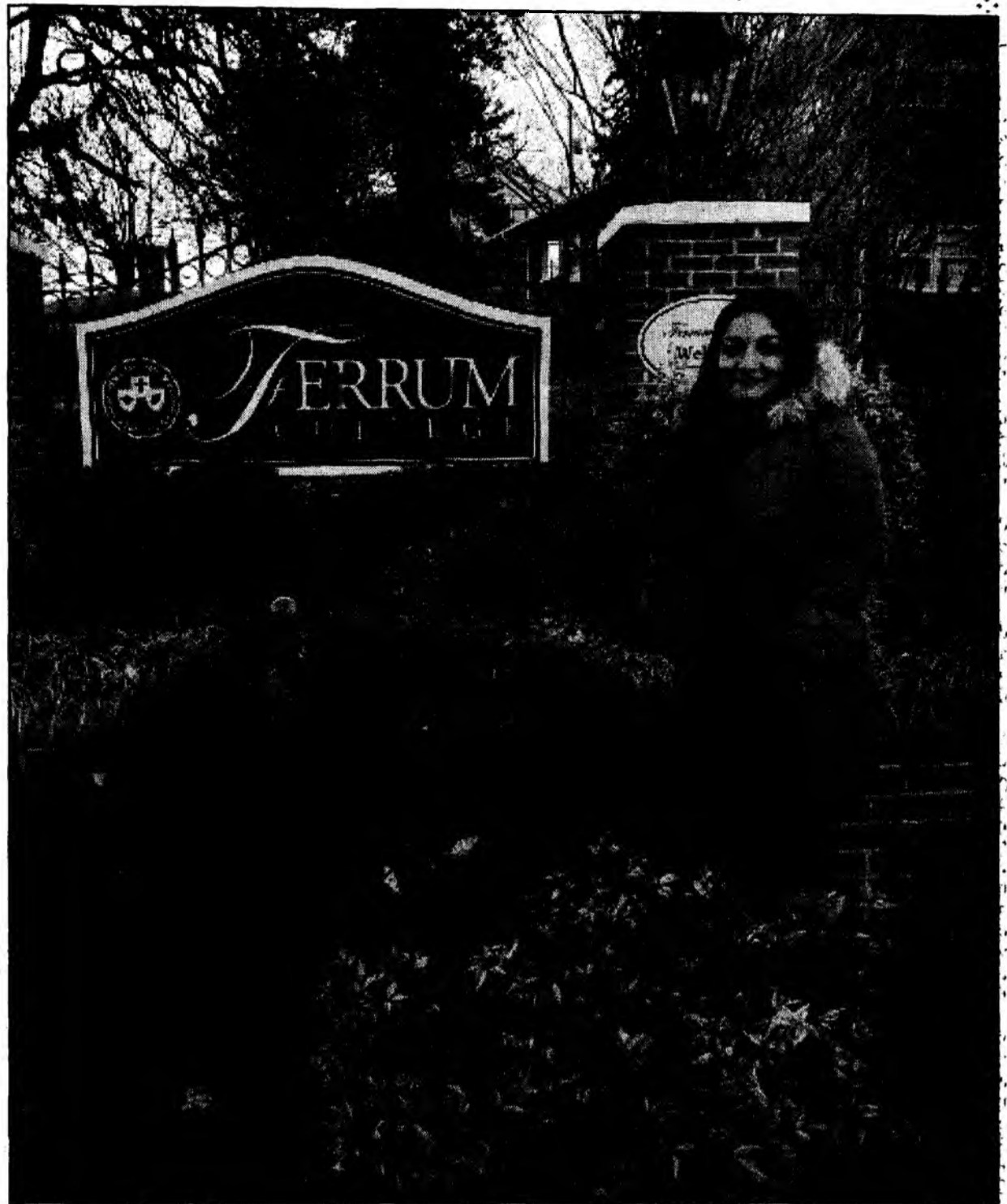
States trying to deal with oppression and sexism, she felt shocked as well. "So, we unlearned and then learned together," she says.

The bonds Pillai forged in the United States were strong. Though her work at UCLA is now complete, she remains in touch with many of her American students and faculty colleagues, and she considers them "lifetime bonds across time and space." She credits her lectures and conversations within the United States as helping to inspire her current book-in-progress, *New Feminisms*.

"Today, I am carrying little bits of all that I saw, taught, learned and loved during this unique journey of a lifetime," she says, "hopefully having left a little of me behind, in the numerous academic and affectionate ties I made."

For those interested in following Pillai's example via Fulbright-Nehru fellowships of their own, Pillai's advice is simple: "Go for it! It will change you, change your world. It will push the limits of your horizons and enable you to sprout new wings. It is a window to new worlds, new possibilities, new people. In a networked world, it will open new pathways of research collaboration and human interaction."

Pillai describes her fellowship as a transformative experience. "It changed the way I perceived the world," she says, "and changed the manner in which I had imagined and fashioned myself and my academic work. It helped me forge deep bonds for life." (SPAN-TWF)



## Legendary musician Dave Grohl's saga to come alive in *The Storyteller*

Dave Grohl has been one of the most beloved and respected figures on the international music scene since his recorded debut with the alternative rock band Nirvana on 1991s generation-defining *Nevermind*.

Grohl had taken centre-stage with his incumbent rock band Foo Fighters' 1995 self-titled debut, the first of 10 albums in a massive 12-Grammy-winning streak, most recently including the No 1 charting *Medicine at Midnight*.

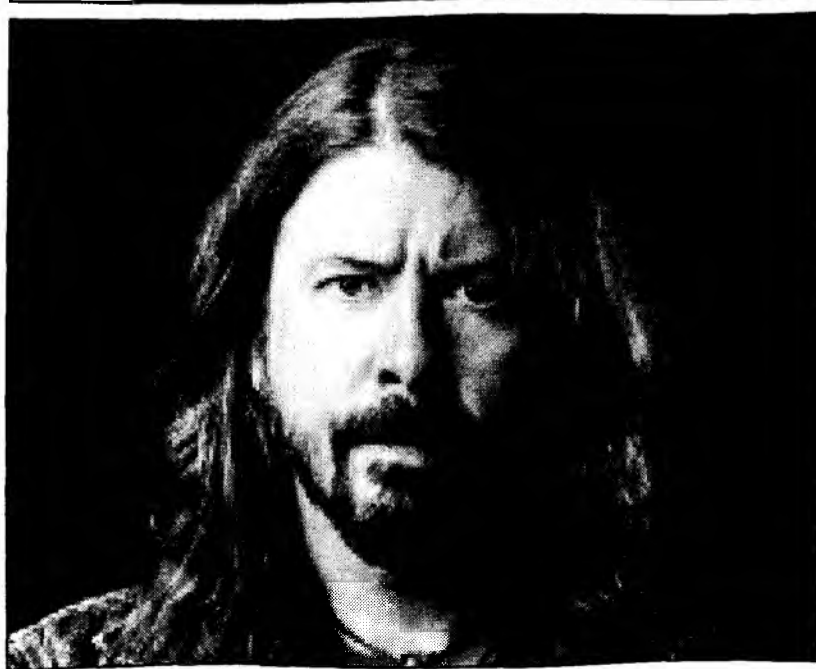
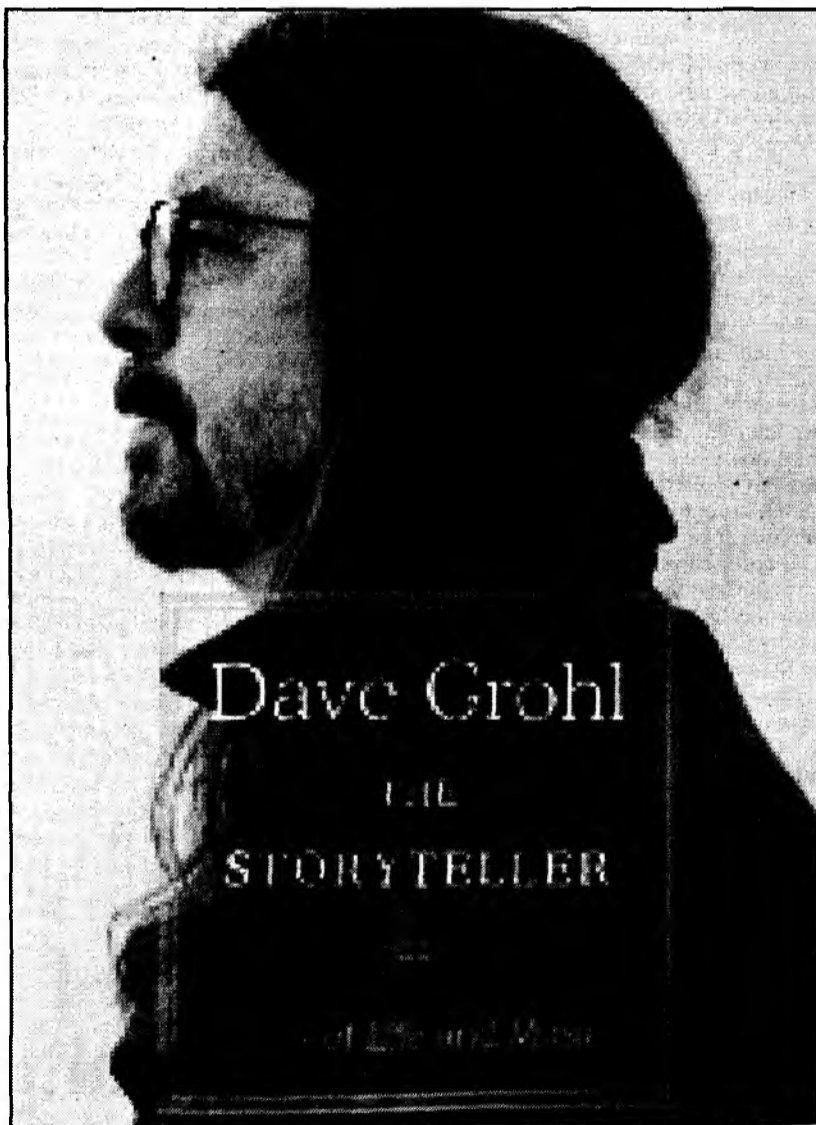
He has travelled the planet doing the thing he loves most — playing rock n roll marathons for tens of thousands of ecstatic Foo Fighter fans, but when the pandemic necessitated going into lockdown, Grohl took stock of how he might use this moment of pause.

Channeling his creativity into writing and using his remarkable skill for storytelling, in May 2020 he wrote a moving reflection for *The Atlantic* on missing the thrill of live music during the Covid era that went viral.

Then, ending a longstanding self-imposed exile from social media, Grohl's new Instagram account @davestruerstories was born. This new platform became a way for Dave to share his extraordinary (and funny) stories with fans and fellow music nuts and now, Grohl is set to build upon that momentum with his first book, *The Storyteller* (Simon & Schuster).

It's as much a celebration of music as it is about the moments that have moulded him into the man he is today. From hilarious childhood mishaps, touching family moments, leaving home to see the world at eighteen, to spectacular stories about Nirvana, Foo Fighters, David Bowie, Joan Jett, Iggy Pop, Paul McCartney, playing drums for Tom Petty on Saturday Night Live, performing at the White House, and even swing dancing with AC/DC, with all love, laughs, loss and embarrassments along the way. It's a fascinating look at a life lived loud.

"There is a common thread that runs throughout everything that I do: storytelling. Whether in song, documentary film or on the page, I have always felt compelled to share moments from my life. This inclination is a huge part of what excites me creatively but also as



a human being," Grohl said.

In March 2020 realising that his day job with the Foo Fighters was going to go on hold, he started an Instagram account (@davestruerstories) and decided to focus all of his creative energy on writing some of his stories down, something he loves doing but never really had the time for.

"I soon found that the reward I felt every time I posted a story was the same as the feeling I get when playing a song to an audience, so I kept on writing. The response from readers was as soul-filling as any applause in an arena. So, I took stock of all the experiences I've had in my life — incredible, difficult, funny and emotional — and decided it was time to finally put them into words.

"From my early days growing up in the suburbs of Washington, DC, to hitting the road at the age of 18, and all the music that followed, I can now share these adventures with the world, as seen and heard from behind the microphone. Turn it up," Grohl added.

Grohl has also directed the eight-part HBO docuseries *Foo Fighters: Sonic Highways*, which premiered in October 2014 and went on to win two of the four Emmys for which it was nominated (outstanding sound mixing for non-fiction programming and outstanding sound editing for non-fiction programming).

Described by Grohl as a love letter to the history of American music, each episode chronicles the creation of one song on *Sonic Highways* album, each written and recorded in a different American musical landmark — Austin, Chicago, Los Angeles, Nashville, New Orleans, New York, Seattle and Washington, D.C.

"I don't think I have ever seen such universal excitement in a company during an auction, with so many of my colleagues sharing their very personal memories of Dave and his music as we put our bid together. But, in the end, what really sets this book apart is the sheer brilliance of the writing: this is a rock memoir that will set the standard for a generation to come, as he truly is THE storyteller," Deputy Publishing Director, Non-Fiction Ian Marshall, who negotiated the deal to publish the book, said. (IANS)

## The six-yard wonder

Saree-inspired paintings on view at a Delhi exhibition



By Siddhi Jain

Paintings by Dipali Deshpande, an artist seized by her love for the nine-yard wonder and Indian women's clothing and textiles, will be on view at the All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society (AIFACS), Delhi, from April 16-22.

The solo art exhibition titled 'Resham' by Deshpande will feature unique paintings on draperies, textiles, and handlooms.

During her childhood in a small town in western Maharashtra, the artist spent time at her family's textile showroom with her grandparents and observed fabric folds and their free flow. The feel of different types of fabrics has always fascinated her, she says, adding that she has deep adoration for the luxury and richness of silk.

Deshpande says, "I see so much beauty in Indian culture and aesthetic of women's fashion here — the style of their hair, drapes, jewellery — all of those portray traditional India. Moreover, I love and am inspired by silk and handloom fabric, these are the trea-

tures of India that I feel need to be preserved, which is something I do through my art."

Her works show that along with a special taste of various types of fabric or textile materials, the artist also has researched on the invention of the timeless nine-yard wonder and its evolution from Indus Valley civilization to today's modern trendy drapes, and how expensive stones and gold threads made their way to exclusive saris.

Traditional oil painting techniques with modern materials create a strong base for her works.

A strong observer, Deshpande includes intricacies on texture, colour, embroidery motifs, and accessories in her work. She has been trained in old masters' traditional oil painting techniques, and strongly believes and respects traditional methods of paintings.

"To catch that 100 per cent material feel is important. For example, while viewing a painting, silk should give you that rich, silky, smooth, and luxurious feel while jute should give you that rough feeling (texture)," she says. (IANSLife)

# The Gopichand Factor flatters to deceive

By Vishnu Makhijani

**H**ero or hurdle? That's the question one is left wondering after reading *The Gopichand Factor* (Westland) given author Abhijeet Kulkarni's praising sky high only the second Indian to win the All-England badminton title but also grudgingly admitting how he has been an impediment to the game while being the Chief National Coach for the past 14 years while simultaneously running his private training academy — leading to repeated charges of a huge conflict of interest.

"Only time will tell whether India can become a world badminton superpower like China, Japan and Korea in the near future. But the first two decades of this century have definitely transformed the country's most popular recreational sport into an aspirational career option.

"And the credit for that definitely goes to Gopichand and his band of racket-wielding champions," Kulkarni writes in the Introduction.

At the same time, "the mistrust between Gopichand and the BAI (Badminton Association of India) has currently reached a level where neither of them is willing to take a single step towards resolution, and that is threatening to derail the whole process. Things are unlikely to move in the right direction till one of the two budges," Kulkarni writes in the concluding chapter titled "Challenges And The Way Forward" of the 206-page book.

It's true that Gopichand has won a host of awards, including the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna and the Padma Bhushan and that his academy has produced several badminton players including Saina Nehwal, P.V. Sindhu, Sai Praneeth, Parupalli Kashyap, Srikanth Kidambi, Arundhati Pantawane, Gurusai Datt and Arun Vishnu.

But it also true that with Rio Olympics silver medalist PV Sindhu deciding to opt out of Gopichand academy and train

with Korean coach Park Tae Sang at the Gachibowli Indoor Stadium, the World Champion has followed in the footsteps of London Olympic bronze medallist Saina Nehwal, who too had walked out of the Gopichand academy a few years ago to train under U. Vimal Kumar in Bengaluru. Saina has since returned back to the city to train under Gopichand.

It has been on the cards that Sindhu would not train under Gopichand ever since she left for London to train



there before re- turning in February. Although she has been saying all is well with Gopichand, there is no denying the fact there is not much of a good rapport between the coach and the player.

Then, as is asked of any sport, where's the second line after the current crop of players are past their prime?

This has been beautifully catered for by the National Cricket Academy and the MRF Pace Foundation in the case of cricket because there is a clear separation between the trainers and the team selectors — but not in the case of badminton, where both roles are combined in Gopichand.

Where is the second line of players, *IANS* asked Kulkarni in an interview.

"This is a question that I have raised many times in the past in

my writing as well as my conversations with the authorities. In the last two decades, even I could have named half a dozen players capable of making the second line if groomed properly. But that did not happen," Kulkarni replied.

"We have had the likes of Siril Varma and Aditya Joshi becoming Junior World Number 1 but then they suffered injuries and are now struggling to find their footing again. While we understandably put in major amount of money and attention on our senior stars, there was a need to look after the juniors as well and that did not happen.

"For me, this is a typical flaw of our Indian system across sports. We are so happy that things are going smoothly in the present that we don't really give a proper thought to the time when things won't be going this good in the future. And it is difficult to pin the blame on either Gopichand or the BAI for this. I feel both could have worked together to create a better system to groom these juniors," Kulkarni maintained.

Thus, the major obstacle seems to be the continuing tussle between Gopichand and the BAI.

"It's quite a tricky question to answer. Things definitely began on a wrong note between the new BAI office bearers and Gopichand when they came up with the new constitutional amendment, which he felt was specifically targeted at him. Since then there have been attempts to sort out the differences on various occasions and some progress has been made.

"If you see the statements that Gopichand has given over the last one year, he is trying to make a case that as chief national coach he should have the freedom to implement a certain system regarding coaching and tournaments his way and then be held accountable for the Indian team's performances.

"The BAI obviously wants to spread the net wide, provide a level playing field to all those participating across the country, when it comes to selection of

coaches, players and even scheduling domestic tournaments. I think both are right in their own ways. The real need of the hour is to find a middle path that will continue to help India produce

While senior camps are going on at the Gopichand academy, junior camps are now being held only before major tournaments and at separate venues. This means that the juniors rarely get to spar

Kulkarni hedged on this, merely repeating that Gopichand had been demanding he be given the freedom to decide on coaching schedules and tournaments.

But then, this is an issue that cannot be easily wished away. Even the Bombay High Court had taken note of the conflict of interest issue.

"It appears there is a possibility of conflict of interest in Respondent No 1 (Gopichand) running his own private academy and as head of the selection panel... Those who attend his private camp may be selected. He may be a good coach but it affects fairness of selection," a Division Bench headed by Chief Justice Mohit Shah had said in December 2012 on a petition by Prajakta Sawant who contended she was not selected for the national coaching camp because she sought a change in the doubles and mixed doubles partners.

However, nothing further was heard on this matter.

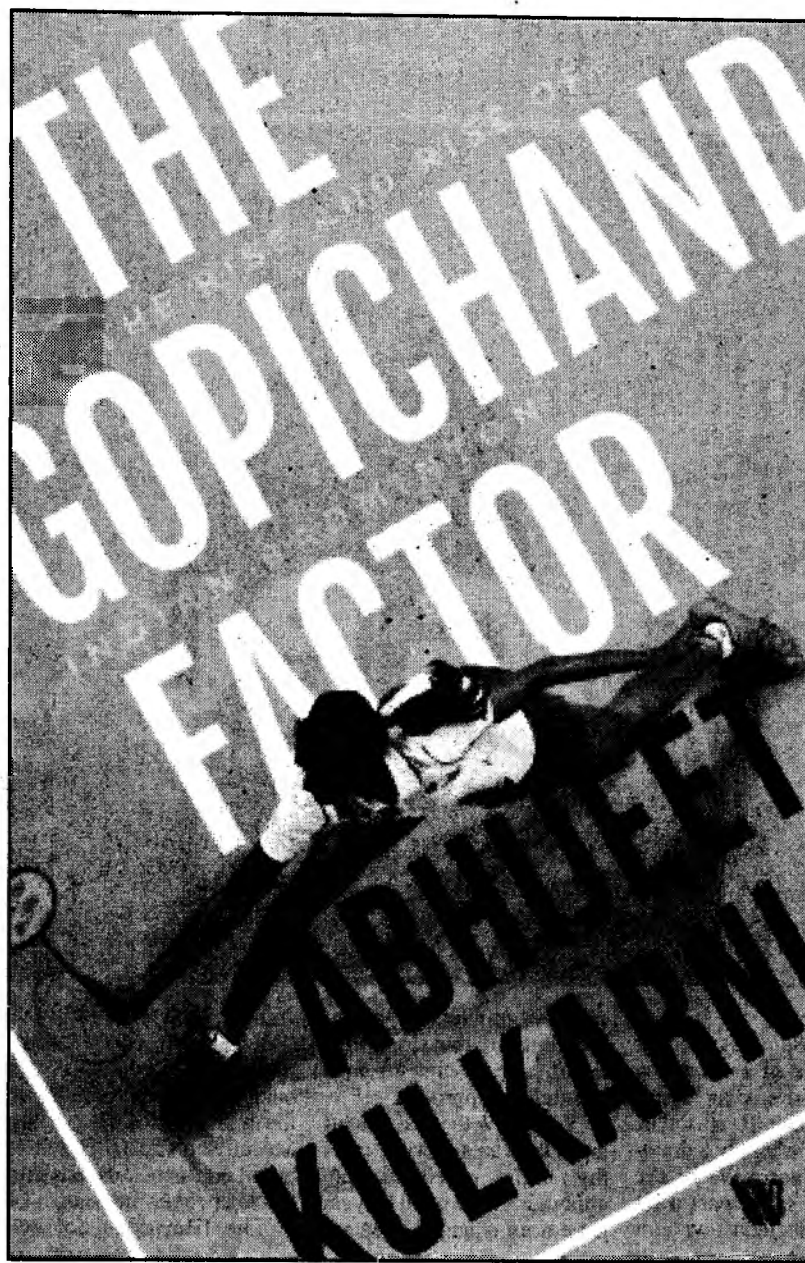
Q: What then, is the way out? More so as you say, India has miles to go before catching up with badminton powerhouses like China, Japan and South Korea that have a select bunch of players participating at every level... with a dedicated support staff travelling with them.

"I think the only answer is that the overall system has to be bigger than any individual, be it a coach or a player. Everyone has to play their roles to the perfection.

"That is one thing most Asian countries have in place. Everyone has their own system of grooming and nurturing talent and I think it's time BAI also puts together a pan-India system to support the elite national camps if we want to continue this progress on the world badminton stage," Kulkarni replied.

In all fairness then, it would be left to the reader to make an informed judgement on the question that was initially asked: Hero or Hurdle?

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many more champion players," Kulkarni maintained.

But then, the lack of a proper coaching system and a vision for developing the next generation players is likely to haunt Indian badminton in the coming years.

with their seniors unless they are part of the Gopichand academy or have access to quality training partners like at the PPBA (Prakash Padokone Badminton Academy) or some select centres in Bengaluru.

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, APRIL 11, 2021

Moon sextile Saturn on your solar return chart and it will give very good results. Your family will respect you very much. Your siblings will support you fully. They will obey your orders. You will get success in business/profession. You will be successful in matters of love and romance. New job offers will keep coming. Your financial part is going to be strong. You will also develop contacts with persons living far from you. You will make effort to make money. You will also extend a hand of friendship towards a friend in need. You will bring new practices in your business. There are possibilities of buying a new house or property. You will remain in the pink of your health and there is nothing to worry. Elders will keep blessing you.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

The work that was held up for some time will get done. You will feel relieved finally. People will start understanding you and your talent will finally get noticed. You can get a job promotion too. Your financial resources will open up and you will feel more secure. You will make use of your talent and earn money with your own efforts. Negative thoughts that were going in your mind will finally get removed. This will set you apart from others. The relationship between husband and wife will be very cordial. Both will understand each other's feelings. You will also extend a helping hand towards someone in need. Those in politics or media will see their influence get stronger. You will make contact with new people. And will give maximum time to your family.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

You will be getting the support of people in all spheres of life. You will also get the blessings and life lessons from your elders. A decision taken by you after a lot of thought will bring very good results. Your area of influence will widen. You will earn money with your own efforts. You will have success in love affairs. Things are changing for you. You will enjoy happy moments. You will also receive good news from somewhere. The tension that was there between brothers and relatives will come to an end with the help of someone's mediation. Your enemies and foes will be active, but will not be able to harm you. You can expect better results in business. Your graph of respect and prestige will move upwards in society.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

The works that were held up will get done. Your tasks will get completed. You will expedite impossible tasks with your wisdom. You will also spend money liberally. Work conditions will improve. You may get help from such corners of which you had never even imagined. Success will come up to your door. Your financial condition will be quite strong. Your colleagues will also cooperate with you. You will spend wonderful time with your partners/spouse. The door of success and fame are opened for you. You will develop a healthy balance between the busy schedule at work and family life. Journey will be successful. You will be able to achieve all you desired due to your hard work and tall. You will invest wisely in financial matters.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

The week will begin on a bright note. All your held up works will be completed. You will get an important post. Victory is written all over. There is yoga of promotion in your job. Your officials will be supportive. You will begin a new work. Days will bring joy and wealth. You will get success in every work. People associated with media and technical field will reap lot of benefits. You will also get benefit from your inheritance. You will also focus on your work. There are chances of you going on trips. You will spend your time having fun with your friends and close people. Politics will attract you. You will achieve success in your business. You will also see some positive changes in yourself. Decisions taken after deep thought will help you earn money.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

The week promises to bring positive results for you. Meeting with influential persons will open the doors of destiny for you. You will manage to get the support of your officers and subordinates. Many plans will occur to you and you will make an outline of those plans. Meeting with loved ones will lighten your mood. You will be guest somewhere. Your relations with family members will strengthen. You will also plan for a major function. You will ask your children to do something special. Till you get success, you will not let go. You will also get success in competitive exams. You will also develop your own self. You will have the desire to learn something new, you will feel that your performance has become better than before.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

It is going to be a week full of achievements. There will be success in all your works. Those who are planning to start a new business venture will be able to do so. New job opportunities too are coming your way. There will be success in all your works.

Those who are studying will be interested to go for higher studies or research. New resources of income will open up. There will be favorable conditions for business and job. Plans for something new will be made. There will be a lot of progress in business. You will also meet your spiritual preceptor and that will make you feel a blessed life. There are chances of their being a change in your thoughts. You will also take the blessings of your parents. And there will be joy and cheer in family relations. Works will be done without any hitch.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

It is going to be a wonderful week. Money that was lent to someone will come back. Your financial condition will be strong and stable. Contact will be established with a person living far away. It will prove beneficial for you. Your relations with influential person will deepen. You will also keep everyone happy and satisfied in your job. Your bosses will encourage you and you will implement new ideas. You will have good gains in your business. The time is good for enhancing your knowledge. The passage of time is also very favorable for you. Government related work will get done. You will also remain busy in religious work. Relations with friends and relatives will be fruitful. You will buy new clothes, jewelry and other things.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

As you begin to take control over lot of things in life, you will feel lot of positive change in yourself. Your talent will come to the fore and people will take notice of you. You will prove your worth too. You will also take some steps that will prove to be just right and people will have respect for your capabilities. Your job prospects too will improve. Works that had been planned will be completed. Family life will be blissful. But you will be lost in your own world. You will feel a new energy. Your boss and family elders will be helpful to you. You will be happy and feel delighted. You will also take advice of your faithful friends.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

There are indications and 'Yogas' of receiving unexpected gains and windfalls for you this week. You will reap rich dividends from some investments you had made in the past. Your financial position is going to improve drastically. Your spirits will be high and you will remain cheerful. You will find yourself financially strong and in a better position during this time. Your creative potentials will come out before everyone. This is a highly favorable time for writing, editing and other creative works. Take business related decisions only after giving a lot of thought. Your plans and projects will get implemented.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

Your enthusiasm, zest and zeal will help you in achieving what you dream your work will get done. You will get attention and appreciation from people. Friends will be ready to help you. Your area of influence will widen. Through hard work and gift you will achieve everything that you had desired for. Your positive thinking and attitude will take you ahead in life. You will get success in social welfare works. You will be greatly inclined towards religious activities. Company of close friends will be helpful in your progress. Cooperation, support and blessings of the elder will help you a lot. You will get a new job offer.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

It is going to be a wonderful week. Positive changes bought about in business and occupation will yield positive results. Time movement is favorable with respect to career and job. Special thing to be noted is that during this time you will give your full time to family and friends. You will minutely examine and decide on various aspects related to life. Your mind will be focused on studies. New political contacts will be made at this time. Your bag will remain full when it comes in accomplishments. You will feel closed to your loved ones. You will decide on objective for yourself and start working towards it. A very enjoyable time period.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

It is going to be an amazing week for you. You will have a passion to perform tough task. Money will come to you. You will deal with your emotions and sensitivity properly during this time. You will also keep trying a balance between your family and married life. You will get full support of your subordinates. An important decision of yours will prove to be correct. You will also meet an influential politician or senior officer. You will also get into a fight with someone at your workplace. It will not be of any worth. Avoid complicating things. There are strong chances of getting a reward from long term plans. You will hear a good news related to your friend or relative. Your self-confidence will increase by leaps and bounds.

## Career as Pharmaceutical Sales Representatives



Ranjan K Baruah

**W**e have published many articles related to management and sales and marketing. One of the areas of sales and marketing where many young people get engaged after their graduation or post graduation is in the field of medical sales which is commonly or popularly known as 'MR' or Medical Representatives. Though we use the term MR as our easy understanding, it may be called as different names in different countries but the task is more or less the same in all the countries. There might be some specific differences but in simple terms we may call it sales related to medicine or other health equipment.

Pharmaceutical sales representatives (MR) are salespeople employed by pharmaceutical companies to persuade doctors to prescribe their drugs to patients. Drug companies everywhere spend billions annually sending representatives to doctors to provide product information, answer questions on product use, and deliver product samples. Companies maintain this provides an educational service by keeping doctors updated on the latest changes in medical science.

A medical representative's job is to promote and sell their company's

products, whether that's pharmaceutical drugs or medical equipment. Customers can include doctors, nurses and pharmacists. The medical representative will increase product awareness, answer queries, provide advice and introduce new products. Key responsibilities of any MR includes organising appointments and meetings with community- and hospital-based healthcare staff, identifying and establishing new business negotiating contracts, demonstrating or presenting products to healthcare staff including doctors, nurses and pharmacists, meeting both the business and scientific needs of healthcare professionals, maintaining detailed records, attending and organising trade exhibitions, conferences and meetings, etc.

Graduates from any stream may become medical sales representatives but students from science backgrounds get more advantage as they understand many scientific terms easily. One of the important skills is effective communication and the person must be willing to travel to different parts. If someone is working with any company in the North East then s/he must travel to different parts of the region. Travelling is an important part for the people who want to join this field.

As there are many medicine companies, there are more possibilities

in this field for individuals who are good in sales and marketing. There are some short term training programmes but individuals who are confident and who can travel and meet doctors and other health professionals and make good presentations about products can excel in this field. Initially individuals start as sales representatives but with their experiences and knowledge later they can become managers and other professionals which are having more salaries than sales representatives. Initially there are challenges and pressure in this field but for committed people things become easy for them as they could manage and do well through sales and marketing.

I have seen many individuals from the North Eastern region who have done well in this field and there are more possibilities and the health profession is booming up. There are more doctors and varieties of drugs which mean there is demand for sales representatives who can get engaged in this field. Aspirants may undergo various training before joining in this field. Initially this field is challenging but it's rewarding too.

(The author is a career mentor and skill trainer and can be reached at [bkranjan@gmail.com](mailto:bkranjan@gmail.com) or 8473943734 for any career related queries)

*"Opinion is usually something which people have when they lack comprehensive information."*

— Idries Shah

The Shillong Times

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## Some hope amid despair

INDIA is now swinging between hope and hopelessness. As the Covid-19 scenario remains grim, the nation is observing a Tika Utsav, an intensified vaccination programme for four days from Sunday. This is based on discussions PM Modi had with state chief ministers. The Covid-linked daily death toll is nearly 1,000 a day. At the same time, India is hogging some positive limelight for the way its pharma firms are meeting domestic requirements and also extending a helping hand to several nations in terms of supply of anti-Covid vaccines and special drugs for treatment of the infected people. This is the silver lining for India in an otherwise cloud-filled horizon. While Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has a point in asking the government to halt vaccine export, India would do well to adopt a balanced approach. A good image that India's pharmaceutical industry has created in these trying times will have a lasting impact and help further raise the nation's status as a pharma giant. While it's easy to earn a bad name, it's difficult to build a good image.

India, as per latest data from the Union Health Ministry, has over 11 lakh active Covid cases. Over 1,50,000 fresh cases are reported a day in a progressive rise. Capital Delhi is recording over 10,000 cases a day. India will have five more Covid-19 vaccines, over and above two vaccine brands that it has produced and distributed locally as also exported – Covaxin and Covishield. One of the five locally developed is an intranasal vaccine. The government is not rushing through requests for Emergency Use Authorization, rightly so, by stressing that safety and efficacy are important. Russia's Sputnik V is closer to the grant of EUA here. The vaccines developed by China, as its state authorities admitted, were less effective compared to what India has rolled out.

While India has administered the vaccine so far to some 10 crore people of the upper-age brackets, China has given jabs to 16 crore people and the US 18 crore. Considering the population bulge, both India and China are somewhat on par while the US has covered more in terms of percentage of population. India has temporarily banned export of Remdesivir, an anti-viral drug used in Covid-infected patients with serious health complications. Some seven Indian pharmaceutical firms are producing this drug in collaboration with a US firm, of the order of nearly 40 lakh units a month. This is another credit for our pharma firms. They have turned adversity to advantage for themselves and for the nation too.

# Paradigm Shift in Natural Resource Management in the State

By HH Mohrmen

In the fifty years of the state's existence the initiation of the Basin platform in the government's function is a very important intervention. The institution of what is now called the Meghalaya Basin Management Agency is perhaps one of the game-changing interventions ever made by the government. In its efforts to serve the people of the State Basin Agency apart from achieving its target, has also accomplished two more targets. It helps create convergence amongst government departments and has become a platform for landing of funds from national and international, governmental and even non-governmental agencies.

**Inter-departmental convergence**

Earlier departments in the State Government worked in silos with no scope for the different department to converge. For example though the work undertaken by the Irrigation and the Agriculture departments are linked and the objective is to serve the farmers of the state, but there were no meeting points between the two. Similarly Soil Conservation, Forest and even Agriculture departments do not touch-base despite the fact that the work they execute are interlinked. Unfortunately there were times when departments were not even on talking terms with each other. The coming of Basin Agencies in the picture changed the scenario and with the DC as the Chairperson of the District Basin Development Units at the helm of power, convergence amongst the different departments started happening.

**Natural Resources Management in the state**

Forest is the major part of the natural resources in the State and of the total area under forest cover only about 4 percent of the forests in Meghalaya are under the State Forest Department. The remaining 96 percent of forests is under the purview of the different Autonomous District Councils in the state. As per the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and also the prevailing land tenure system in the state much of the land in the different regions of the State are either owned by the different clans, the community namely the dorbar shnong, the raid and the elek, and a considerable part of the forest is now under individual ownership.

**Natural Resources Management challenges faced by the ADCs**

The Autonomous District Councils are already armed with the different Laws with regard to NRM, like for instance the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous

District (Management & Control of Forest) Act, 1958, the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District (Management & Control of Forest) Rules 1960 and the United Khasi Jaintia Hills District Fisheries Act. But the important question is how effective these laws are in the management of natural resources in the state. The first challenge is the fact that the existing laws recognise only trees and revenues from the trees as natural resources while in the

sources management (NRM). There is need to empower and involve the ADCs in natural resource management and the participation of the ADCs is vital if the state is to effectively manage its natural resource.

**CLLMP in a nutshell**

The Community-led Landscape Management Project (CLLMP) is a project of the Government of Meghalaya which is supported by the World Bank. As the name suggests the project aims at

**Forest is the major part of the natural resources in the State and of the total area under forest cover only about 4 percent of the forests in Meghalaya are under the State Forest Department.**

context of the current system of management of natural resources, not only forests but water which includes rivers, lakes and ponds are also considered as natural resources. In fact in the modern context, forest includes the entire ecosystem in and around it.

The other point to be noted is that the laws also have provisions for registration of forests with the respective District Councils. But the pertinent question is how many forests have been registered with the different ADCs? The point is that in spite of the presence of the existing laws, conversion of forest land to non-forest land, community forests to private forests and conversion of Pata Hali to Land Holding Certificates happen every day. This opens a floodgate of opportunities for encroachment into agricultural land, and subsequently the construction of human settlement on the banks of the river. As per the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, the management and control of rivers are also under the purview of the ADCs. Hence the ADCs have a very important role to play in protecting the rivers.

Earlier a baseline study conducted by Community-Led Landscape Management Project (CLLMP) has also found that penal mechanisms under the present ADC laws are ineffective. The staff of the Forest Department of the ADCs and even the chief forest officers (CFO) of the District Council, literally have no powers to punish violators and forest offenders. Hence in the present scenario there is an urgent need to review the existing District Council laws regarding natural re-

strengthening community-led participation in natural resource management and it is implemented in 400 highly degraded villages in the state. CLLMP has conducted a baseline study which was completed in 2020.

**The way forward**

NRM which will ultimately influence climate change and global warming is not only a local issue but a state, national and global issue. It is an issue that needs to be dealt with very carefully at all levels and more importantly it should start at the grassroots level. To manage the region's natural resources, local participation is mandatory and it is a matter that needs to be looked into very deeply at the district or even at the village level.

Effective management of natural resource can only happen if the agencies at the grassroots level are involved and actively participate in the different activities. It is based on the fact that agencies at the grassroots level are integral to natural resources management that CLLMP in collaboration with the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council Jowai organised a consultative meeting with the community heads which include the Daloi, the President of the Synjuk ki Wahchong from the various parts of both East and West Jaintia Hills District and civil society leaders.

The objective of the consultative meeting is to develop forest management guidelines for the ADCs, to develop forest management for villages in Meghalaya, legal and institution aspects of forestry and natural resource management plan for the villages of Meghalaya

and integrate in the scope of CLLMP.

**JHADC and its approach to NRM**

It is also heartening to see the active participation of the JHADC in the meeting in which Lasky Rymbai the Deputy CEM was present in the entire meeting. The Deputy CEM even took part in the group discussion with the Daloi and the Wahchong coming from different parts of the twin districts. In his opening remarks the Deputy CEM of the Executive Committee said that they accept with humility the onerous responsibility to work with CLLMP to conserve biodiversity and manage natural resources in the district.

In the fact the present Executive Committee of the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council needs to be congratulated for one of its recent achievements. It can be said that the current EC is very progressive because it is the only ADC in the entire North East which has adopted its own Forest Policy known as Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council Forest Policy 2020. After the policy was adopted the need of the hour was to come up with legal framework to put the policy into operation.

Although the goal is to initiate collaboration with the different ADCs and consultative meetings were already held with both the Khasi Hills and Garo Hills Autonomous District Councils, Jaintia ADC is natural candidate for pilot testing the collaboration for the very fact that they are much ahead than the other ADCs in the north east region of the country. JHADC must be a natural candidate for piloting the NRM strategy because it already has its own forest policy.

**Optimistic Approach**

To take the task ahead, CLLMP has already constituted Village Natural Resource Management Committees (VNRCs) in the four hundred villages with the objective of helping to improve natural resources management in these 400 hundred villages. This is a positive approach of the NRM which is also pragmatic and forward looking. The approach is also looking at providing alternative livelihoods to the affected members of the villages. CLLMP natural resource management approach is looking at convergence not only with State Government departments but with the ADCs too. This is perhaps the first time ever such a convergence is happening. The involvement of the ADCs is a step forward in attempting to make NRM effective in the state of Meghalaya.

Email: [hhmohrmen67@gmail.com](mailto:hhmohrmen67@gmail.com)

Costly lessons from demonetisation, lockdown and COVID strategy

## PM's learning by trial and error spells disaster for nation

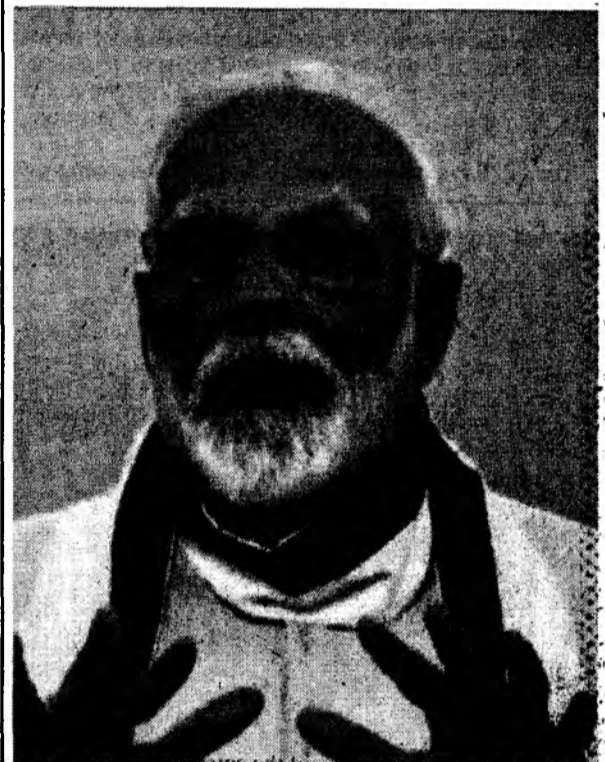
By K Raveendran

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has declared that a second lockdown is no solution to the second wave of Covid infection, which is threatening to spread with a vengeance, because the economy cannot handle such an eventuality. So far so good!

If such good sense had dawned on the prime minister over one year ago, when the infection broke out for the first time, India today would have been a different place altogether and the lives of people and the economy would have been in a much better position. Not that the country could have managed without a lockdown, which

cent of the affected patients would require hospitalisation. This has prompted the experts to warn that such an eventuality could cause our health system to collapse. Already, several states, including the national capital, are reporting problems with the availability of hospital beds.

When Modi first announced the 'people's curfew' as the precursor to the full-fledged national lockdown, we only had negligible number of infections, which could have provided the opportunity to approach the issue more realistically and plan for more efficient and humane solution to the



was very much a part of the global effort to contain the pandemic. But it could have been planned more scientifically, especially in terms of the timing, which would have provided for an adjustment period to prepare for the national closure.

But then, science has never been a favourite with Narendra Modi. Also, he has been adept at assigning some of the key functions of the brain to the gut, which works sometimes depending on one's luck, but mostly ends up in disasters. So, when Modi's gut feelings go wrong, it is unmitigated disaster for the country, because he is the prime minister.

It is true that Modi is a keen learner. But the trouble is that he learns by trial and error. He embarked upon the ill-fated demonetisation in the earnest hope that it will help deliver the intended

problem at hand. Instead, the panic button was pressed straightaway, giving people and the economy no time to make adjustments.

The result was that it led to one of the biggest human tragedies that the country has seen in recent memory. Hundreds of thousands of migrant workers were seen desperately trying to return to their villages, which were in no position to cope with such an exodus. Harrowing tales of young and old, men and women, accompanied by children, battling hunger and fatigue, and covering long distances on foot had shocked the collective conscience of the nation, except the government and the authorities, who kept looking away until a reluctant Supreme Court intervened and ordered decisive steps to help the victims. The reverse migration

**It is true that Modi is a keen learner. But the trouble is that he learns by trial and error. He embarked upon the ill-fated demonetisation in the earnest hope that it will help deliver the intended results.**

results. In the first place, he did not think it fit to consult those who were in the know of things. Even when there were consultations, he disregarded all opinions that did not approve of such a draconian move. In the end, it took thousands of lives and destruction of the national economy for him to learn that demonetisation was no way to fight black money. Having realised the folly, he never uttered a sentence about it because he had learnt his lesson.

In the same manner, the prime minister has now realised that a second lockdown is no option to fight the renewed wave of Covid infection, by all indications much more dangerous than the first. The daily case load is nearing 1.5 lakh, and the chances are that this will only go up in the coming days. According to estimates, the country will require 5,000-10,000 beds every day for critical care and the corresponding oxygen supply, (assuming 5-10 per-

also meant that nearly all businesses, small and big, had to stop working because there was nobody to perform the tasks or turn the wheels of production. The worst part is that no studies have been undertaken to measure the impact of reverse migration. This, in turn, meant that there was no meaningful intervention by the government to address the problems of either the migrants who suddenly lost all their means of livelihood or the millions of informal businesses that lost their rationale for existence.

The second wave of infection is occurring even as the national economy is struggling to get on even keel after the biggest disruption in the post-independence phase. Apart from the implications for the national health system, the new spike in infection could jeopardise even the slight recovery that has been becoming visible in recent weeks and months. (IPA Service)

### Letters to the Editor

## UDP's riposte to allegation of hypocrisy

Editor,

The article captioned "UDP's blatant hypocrisy" by Albert Thyrniang (ST April 6, 2021) is a pointer to the fact that the author is already having a pre-conceived mindset against the UDP without understanding the background of the issue raised by the party. No one can deny the fact that the people in the state have been put to a lot of inconvenience due to load shedding and power cut experienced in the past few weeks and which probably may continue in the days to come. The UDP raised this issue out of concern and especially when NEEPCO and later on the Power Grid threatened to regulate the power supply to the state. Besides, reports in the media about the scams and corruption in the Power sector and the continued agitation on the part of the employees of MeECL is an indication that all is not well with the functioning of the Power sector. Obviously, the UDP had to point fingers to those at the

helm of affairs who are supposed to be the driving force to bring about corrective measures in the functioning of the MeECL. We are aware about the complexities relating to the Power sector and because of this, may I remind the author that we did not seek the removal of James Sangma from the Cabinet but merely to suggest for change of portfolio to pave the way for the anomalies to be rectified. This is a normal practice done in a democratic setup.

I would like to remind the author that during the previous government led by the Congress, the UDP had also taken a very strong stand way back in 2014 by organizing a sit-in demonstration near the secretariat to protest against the power failure in the state and consequent to this a fact finding team was constituted comprising of the opposition parties to find out what ails the Power sector. The FFT visited Leshka, Umtrew, different stages of Umiam and after soliciting views and opinions from experts the report was finally submitted to the then CM and Power Minister suggesting the way forward. So the allegations by the author, that the UDP is trying to gain political mile-

age is unfounded. In fact, we want to give suggestions to the Government with regards to the Power Sector. What is required now is an independent inquiry to unearth the truth on the various allegations so that appropriate steps can be taken to ensure the smooth functioning of this very important sector. We were a power surplus state during the 70s and 80s and during 2014-2016 efforts were made by the management to improve the efficiency in terms of administration and Finance. Hats off to the then CMD and Director of Finance who tried to bring stability and ease the burden of the MeECL. The problems again reappeared. It is a fact that we have inherited this problem from past governments but the blame culture is not going to help the state.

In fact, as leaders, we need to take up the challenges and for this, what is required is to put a team with managerial and financial skills to ease the burden of MeECL. Therefore, to blame the UDP of hypocrisy is uncalled for and I would like to request the author to please understand the seriousness and gravity of the issue at hand. If raising the issue is inappropriate for

the UDP, then let the people decide.

Yours etc.,  
Dr Jemino Mawthoh  
General Secretary,  
United Democratic Party  
(UDP)

## India-Russia troubled ties

Editor,

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit to India enabled us to take stock of the positives in the ties between the two countries and the issues on which the two countries disagree. India and Russia have always maintained strong relations though many factors have caused fluctuations in the relations over the years.

Neither Russia nor India can be blamed for the strained relations between the two countries. The last three decades have witnessed a lot of changes in the world. China has emerged as the number two global power. Russia-US ties have deteriorated. Russia and China are under pressure because of the West. Consequently, both have formed a stronger strategic partnership. Further, Russia-Pakistan ties have strengthened in recent years. Similarly, India-US

ties have strengthened and the US has become India's partner in many ways.

India and Russia need to review their close ties through these changes and adapt their policies in accordance with them. Sergey Lavrov held detailed discussions with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar on a range of bilateral and regional issues and also on preparations for Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to India later this year. There has been longstanding partnership between the two countries in nuclear, space and defence sectors.

Sergey Lavrov's visit to Islamabad after his visit to India is a cause for concern for India. Moscow has expanded its relationship with Pakistan in recent years. It maintains good relations with China as well though the relations are contentious. The fact that Russia supplies over 6% of Pakistan's conventional weaponry has adversely affected India-Russia relations. Both countries have convergent views on the peace process in Afghanistan, the place of importance given to Taliban in power-sharing. On Afghanistan, India's perspectives do not match that of

Russia's.

Notwithstanding the cordial relations between Russia and Pakistan, the ties between India and Russia have had a broad range. True, many factors have affected the stability of the relations between the two. The present status of the relations between the two countries in the changed circumstances can only be understood after Putin's visit to India. It remains to be seen if India will go ahead with the purchase of S-400 anti-missile defence system from Russia in the face of severe US restrictions on this.

Against this backdrop, India needs to devise plans for strengthening India-Russia ties. Even though India-Russia ties have had their ups and downs, both countries cannot afford to sever the ties. Strengthening of the ties will help moderate Russia's tilt towards Pakistan and China.

Yours etc.,  
Venu GS Kollam,  
Kollam

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“Creativity is the power to connect the seemingly unconnected.”

— William Plomer

The Shillong Times

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People power defies money power THAT A sitting MDC of the GHADC and a former Deputy CEM was roughed up in Chokpot for attempting to buy votes, gives hope that not all voters succumb to money power. The ex-Deputy CEM Augustine Marak was roughed up by the very people that voted him to the ADC five years ago. The public wrath might also be due to the fact that the MDC did not deliver on his promises and is only seen during election time. While getting physical is not exactly the way to get even with non-performing legislators and councilors and the best way is to ensure their defeat, what is also true is that people can take lies and deception from their representatives only up to a point. When pushed to the brink after being left defenceless and being repeatedly let down by their MLAs and MDCs people reach the tipping point and are in a position to hopefully bring about a change for the better. The next councilor from Silkegre constituency, (if the present one is not re-elected) would hopefully be more responsive and be a better representative for the people of this backward area of Garo Hills.

People of Meghalaya are notorious for electing non-performing MLAs/MDCs who only rabble-rouse and show their faces to their constituents during elections. They rest in the belief that throwing money a week before the elections is enough to ensure their victory. And that is what has brought people with no understanding of the role of a legislator and whose only objective is to expand their businesses, into the August House. Word is now going around that the next election to the state assembly is going to be fought only by a few families with money power. The constituencies from which these elite and affluent tribal families will be fighting from – at least from the Khasi and Jaintia Hills are already decided. There is no word yet as to how 2023 is going to pan out in the Garo Hills and whether it will be just the Sangma versus Sangma battle as it was last time around. To elect individuals that promote a dynastic form of politics is to defeat the very purpose of democracy. In fact, our votes are only going to strengthen the family empires of the respective contenders. Is that what the people of Meghalaya want? Or do they still aspire to good governance and the rule of law which has been hugely compromised in this state? The people of Chokpot have created a precedent by rejecting money power and deciding to throw out a contender who believes he can buy people like sheep and cattle. This should serve as an example to other voters too when the State heads for the Assembly elections in 2023.

Wahkaji: Could the media do more in being a mirror and a voice?

By Albert Thyrianiang

It was a pleasant surprise to see “Wahkaji: Of shattered dreams and abandoned projects,” in the main column on April 9, penned by the editor of this daily. That the writer undertook a 135 Km ride from Shillong for over five hours’ on dirt road particularly the 57 Kms hazardous stretch from Mawkyrwat to Wahkaji that consumes three hours, deserves kudos. The first hand testimony of ‘months of no electricity, of the people coping with bad roads, of political neglect, of obstructive pressure groups who thoughtlessly blocked the construction of the two-laned Nongstoin-Wahkaji road, of them taking villagers for a ride, of rampant deforestation, of barren land and of youths having to migrate to Shillong for want of opportunities,’ merits compliments. I wish the media does more in being a mirror of the society and a voice for the voiceless.

The writer raises her hands up agreeing that newspapers pay little attention to rural Meghalaya. Wahkaji is a rare exception though its story is the same in most villages in the state. Recently hundreds marched in a maiden protest rally against lack of civic amenities and government apathy in the Indo-Bangladesh Border of East Jaintia Hills. Pictures of the worn out roads in Jaintia Hills also made their way into the print and social media courtesy the complaint by a Sumo drivers’ association. Unfortunately, the Wahkajis, the Hurois, the Lejris, the Hingarias and Lahaleis don’t figure regularly in newspapers. The focus is largely on the ‘Scotland of the East’.

The media is a mirror of the society (reality). The media reflects the reality. We know that a mirror does not lie. What is in reality is reflected in the mirror. Now, is the media reflecting reality of the society? Does the stuff we read and see in the media a reflection of the reality? Do the pages in newspapers and the electronic space replicate the actual reality? Do we see the whole of Meghalaya in various media outlets? Are media persons aware of this unique role? Are they trained and empowered to fulfil this unmatched duty? Are media owners and editors convinced of this irreplaceable responsibility?

Reporting facts is just one aspect of journalism. In-depth discussion and critical analysis are also vital facets of the profession. Perhaps this has not come of age in Meghalaya. It has been noticed that politicians get away

with loose statements. When the Deputy Chief Minister, Prestone Tynsong refused to take responsibility for the Rymbai tragedy last January begging it occurred far away from the main road, no one asked, “Why not?” Similarly when the Health Minister retorted that if ‘something happens in Shillong Civil hospital or in his department’ he is not responsible, the multi-time minister got away with it.

An unhealthy situation also prevails in that few are critical of pressure groups in Meghalaya. Their unmandated role is seldom questioned. Their ‘holding people to ransom’ is hardly challenged. Their ‘larger than life’ involvement has practically no dissent. Their negative roles to the point of stalling development are taken as heroism. Their emotional activism is not detected. Their double standard is not spotted. Reportedly the protest in Khliehriat was supported by the Khasi Students Union (KSU) but the same organisation spear-headed the movement to halt the two-laned Nongstoin-Wahkaji road. The FKGP welcomed railway up to Mendipathar but opposes the same to Byrnihat. It is time intellectuals and thinkers begin to be critical of these groups. It is time the public stop romanticising the ‘seng bhalangs’. They are not always facilitators. They often operate at the level of emotion and even xenophobia. Wahkaji is a sad victim. We have a grim picture of backwardness there. The government and the protesting pressure groups are responsible.

In Garo Hills the groups who oppose participation of non-tribals in GHADC elections have made their voices heard through rallies and public meetings. But should they be permitted to declare a bandh on polling day? Should they disrupt the constitutional process? If they do their action is unconstitutional and constitutes a criminal offense. Should they not be hunted down? All law abiding citizen should come out in unison to condemn this unlawful and undemocratic behaviour. When don’t these pressure groups engage with GHADC/government at other times to alter the practice that has been in currency since 1952? Why create ruckus only during election?

The Deputy CM wishes us to believe that the MDA government’s priority for the last three years has been rural

Meghalaya. Inaugurations of a few stretches of roads are not accomplishments. Which government is unable to do so? Tynsong’s eulogy is easily refuted. Wahkaji is one. Huroi, Lejri, Hingaria, Lahaleis are others. The vast peripheries of East Jaintia Hills, South West Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, East Garo Hills, North Garo Hills, South Garo Hills, even Khasi Hills and West Garo Hills are akin to Wahkaji. Then where is the priority for villages? Where is the priority when the NHAI sanctioned a two-laned road and you rejected the offer? My next ‘state visit’ will be to travel to interiors to take snaps of bad roads, dilapidated school buildings, health care centres and government offices and post them on social media to debunk the claim.

Politicians will exaggerate their statements to artificially amplify their achievements. It is for us citizens to be alert. When the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi in April 2018 aired that all villages in India are electrified a lot of people believed him. My response was to post photographs and videos of villages on social media platforms that I visited that had/still have no electricity connection. If in my vicinity there are 4/5 villages without electricity then in the whole of India there will be thousands. If we add villages where there is no electricity for months during monsoon the number will be staggering. We in Umswai area, a cluster of more than ten villages in West Karbi Anglong are first hand sufferers of the ‘monsoon no show electricity’. The solar panels on rooftops or courtyards to light households and help children study stand evidence to the lengthy electricity failure. So the Prime Minister’s proclamation missed the truth by miles.

About a year ago I was shown a paper by a local politician claiming a network of roads that have been sanctioned and that work would commence soon. With no sign till date I WhatsApped to him pictures and videos of a long neglected road that is not traversable once monsoon sets in. If all those who listened and read the assertion of our Deputy CM post photos of kachha, worn out roads and roads with potholes in villages he would run for cover for sure. Politicians would think twice before making things up.

Those of us who have visited Kerala might have

noticed one thing. All the roads are in excellent condition. There is no difference between cities/towns and villages. We also know that no non-performing public representative is re-elected. Politicians have to show their work or else they are out. For 40 years, the Southern state has never re-elected a ruling government. Pinarayi Vijayan’s LDF’s could be the first. No representative takes his constituents for granted. Even the best effort of the popular CM might fail. In Meghalaya we do not demand performance. We are lured by cash. What made Martin Dango win for sixteen years consecutively without visiting villages? How did he repeatedly return as MLA when Wahkaji and many other villages in the constituency are in such pathetic condition?

The campaign for the elections to the Garo Hills District Autonomous Council (GHADC) was dominated by claims and counter claims (of development or lack of it) between the Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma and former Chief Minister, Mukul Sangma. But is GHADC entrusted with building roads, water supplies, hospitals, school and colleges? Are these not the mandate of the state government? Then why over-stress on infrastructural development in GHADC elections? Is not GHADC a legislative body with respect to land, forest, inheritance, customs and traditions? We should instead ask, what did the last Executive Committee and MDCs do or did not do during their tenure in relation to the above to be re-elected or rejected? Why is the plan to clean up the mess in the GHADC?

Recently former NEHU lecturer, Prof LS Gassah stated that many members of the ADCs are ignorant of the Sixth Schedule. Going by the rhetoric in the GHADC election battles it looks like the state’s top politicians are unaware of the Sixth Schedule. Aspirants think their functions are similar to that of MLAs and the Executive Committee is equal to the state cabinet - all catering to ‘development’. This is why ADCs are redundant and irrelevant!

‘Wahkaji’ is a compelling call for the media to honour its responsibility of being a mirror of the society, a voice for the voiceless and a tool to educate the masses. The rest of us can grow to be critical so as not to be fooled by utterances and actions that are coloured.

albert.thyrianiang74@gmail.com

Political economy of Covid-19 vaccine shortages in India Expanding the production base involving states, is crucial

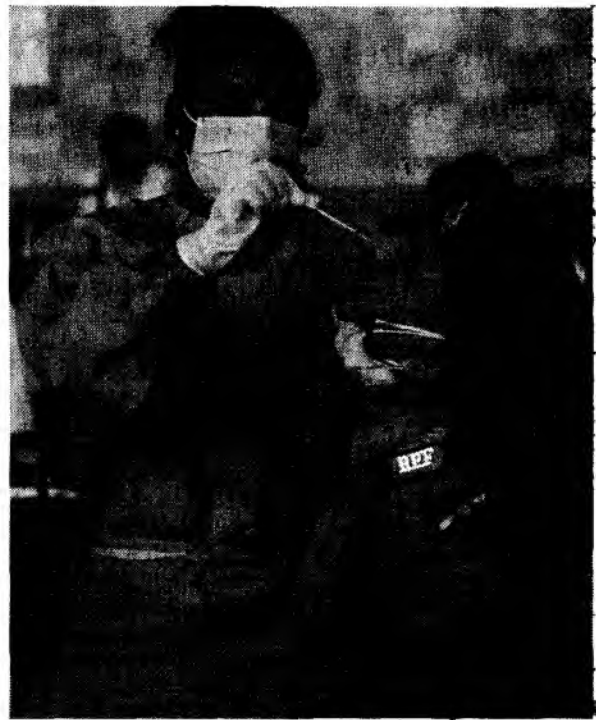
By Ravi Duggal

As India enters the third phase of its ambitious COVID-19 vaccination drive, many state governments are reporting vaccine shortages and are having to close down some of their vaccination centres, with supplies available for only 2 or 3 days. Most of these states are non-Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) ruled ones, but some BJP-ruled states like Uttar Pradesh are also reporting impending shortages.

What is causing these shortages? One factor is that of our total vaccine production till March, we had exported twice the number of vaccine doses that we had domestically used, as per data furnished in the Rajya Sabha.

As the vaccination momentum grows and demand increases, especially as we find ourselves well and truly in the grip of a second nation-wide COVID wave, with single-day new cases across the country crossing a high of over 1.4 lakh as well over 700 new fatalities daily, the vaccine supply chain has got impacted. This is both because stocks are depleted, and our vaccine production capacity is struggling to keep up with the required daily vaccine dose delivery.

Since India began its vaccination drive about three months ago, over 70 million of our population has received the first dose of the vaccine. Of these, only 10 million have received the second dose. Nearly 9.5



Other is the very low level of production in contrast to the huge population of the country and its demand.

Some state governments are claiming that the Union Government is biased in favour of BJP-ruled states, with such states getting vaccines out of turn with either their proportion of population or their COVID prevalence rate.

Data shows a mismatch between COVID-19 prevalence and vaccine supply in most states.

To verify these claims, let us crunch the relevant data. The graph below maps the COVID prevalence rate

crore doses have been used in the country, and about 6.5 crore doses have been exported to other countries, including by way of donations, as per the Union Health Minister.

In all this time, why has India not ramped up its production capacity by at least 8 to 10 times, given its status of ‘the pharmacy of the world’? Why do we continue to rely only on two producers: Serum Institute and Bharat Biotech, and wait for them to make investments to increase their respective capacity?

The Union Government could easily have invoked

We see that the gap between vaccine coverage and the prevalence rate is highly variable across states instead of being flat or proportionate. This indicates that vaccine supplies are not based on either the population size or prevalence of COVID cases in states.

of all states along with their respective vaccine coverage rate (states are organised in descending order of their vaccine coverage).

We see that the gap between vaccine coverage and the prevalence rate is highly variable across states instead of being flat or proportionate. This indicates that vaccine supplies are not based on either the population size or prevalence of COVID cases in states.

The larger the gap between the two indicators in the graph, the greater would be the supply of vaccines for that state. Hence, states like Maharashtra and Delhi, with some of the highest COVID prevalence, have some of the lowest such gaps, indicative of a low level of supply of vaccines.

The Union Government must evolve a scientific formula to disburse vaccines since it has monopoly control over vaccine purchase and supply. Such a formula could use the population size and prevalence of cases weighted equally to determine the volume of vaccines that a state should be getting; this would reflect reasonable equity.

compulsory licensing to allow other pharma companies who have vaccine production capacity to produce these vaccines alongside others as and when they are authorised for use in the country.

The use of compulsory licensing would dramatically change the political economy of the COVID vaccine. With a substantial increase in volumes, the price would also get reduced, and India could then supply the vaccine in larger numbers to other countries.

With further spikes in this second wave, allowing compulsory licensing and expanding the production base is something the government must consider on a priority basis. Once the production is ramped up, purchase and distribution can be decentralised so that states can have control over their supplies and can also commit state budgetary resources towards funding vaccinations. That is the only feasible way we can move swiftly towards eliminating shortages, and closer to universal access to the vaccines.

(IPA Service) Courtesy: The Leaflet

Letters to the Editor

Dubious practices in private hospitals

Editor, From what we know about the Health Ministry’s instructions for vaccination drive in India, there is hardly any restriction on who can take the COVID-19 vaccine, except for the age factor. Health conditions, as such, do not matter, and it is more important that people with co-morbidities take the vaccine.

However, a few private hospitals are deviating from this protocol. They are checking blood pressure, and are advising those who land up in the hospitals for COVID-19 vaccination, to consult hospital doctors, for a fee, for clearance for the vaccination. This is extremely unfortunate.

In Government facilities, including PHCs, no such restrictions are observed and people are getting vaccinated for free, and without any prior testing.

The Government should publicly make the position clear so that people seamlessly take the vaccine, and make themselves safer from

COVID-19.

Yours etc., D Bhutia, Guwahati – 24

The shoe is on the other foot now!

Editor,

For quite a while now the fire and brimstones have fallen on MeECL and its entire establishment. Now with the news of scams exploding under the very nose of the so-called leaders named in the report there is no justification for Mr Shullet the President of the Coordination Committee of Registered MeECL (Employees) Associations and Unions (CCORMAU), MeECL Engineers’ Association and the Chairman of the MeECL Joint Action Committee, to claim innocence after being involved in manipulating the award of contracts to firms owned by his wife and relatives. If he demands a CBI inquiry on MeECL, I think that it should be the other way round. We the people ought to demand a CBI inquiry on him. The recurring losses faced by MeECL and power thefts would not have occurred without the involvement of

those in authority manning crucial stations and sections in the establishment of MeECL. Now who the CBI should investigate is a matter that we the people should demand in order to set things right in the MeECL.

Yours etc., Dominic Stadlin Wankhar Shillong:3

Height of hypocrisy

Editor, Why is media attention on the Power Department for the last few months? We’ve seen allegations levelled against the Power Minister and the CMD of MeECL for quite some time. The MEA, the CCORMAU as well as the UDP has continuously pressurised the Government to relieve Mr James Sangma and Arun Kumar Kembhavi from their assigned posts alleging that they are behind all the mess in the MeECL.

At first, the move initiated by these parties seemed valid and logical but as time passed we could see fresh reports that things are not as simple as made out to be. In fact things took a U-turn after the CMD made a surprise inspection at Byrnihat, where he alleged that some of the engineers from Me-

CL were involved in various illegalities occurring in some of the industries.

However, the CCORMAU led by its President Pradip Kumar Chullet and Vice President Arju Dkhar along with other officials came up with a press conference stating their arguments and opinions on several issues related to the Power Department and have sought an independent probe into the alleged ‘irregularities’ in MeECL. The Union has also threatened to agitate if the Government fails to address their concerns and demands within April 26.

Now what’s interesting is that right after the statement given by the Union, fresh cases against the MeECL union leader Pradip Kumar Chullet surfaced, accusing him of corrupt practices and financial irregularities in the Corporation. Sources have revealed that Chullet, who served as a senior electrical inspector from 2011-2018, had awarded multi-crore contracts to one I.S. Enterprise, a firm run by his wife Aynla Imsu. It is said that Chullet had allegedly awarded tenders without assessing the technical experience of I.S. Enterprise and had deliberately removed mandatory requirements of

expertise for quotations and proposals to accommodate the firm.

Let us dig further into the alleged corrupt practices that the leader was involved in. Media sources reveal that Chullet has split large quotations into 106 small quotations below ₹ 50,000 to avoid floating of tenders in the public domain so that they could be directly awarded to the firm. Payments to the firm were also cleared without taking any bank guarantee from it. The sources said Chullet accepted quotations for 8-watt LED lamps at ₹ 850 per unit which is ₹ 600 more than the market price. For a basic two-minute promotional video, the firm was also paid ₹ 50,000 without any assessment of its technical capabilities. According to the documents found, it also shows that he had purchased a 60-watt LED streetlight for ₹ 28,700 while the market price of such a bulb is not more than ₹ 1,800. Now that’s a huge amount of deviation because a profit of ₹ 26,900 is being made for such a small item such as a bulb.

What’s more alarming is that back in 2018, a complaint was filed against Chullet for nepotism, con-

flict of interest and abuse of power with a copy marked to the CBI. Now, these are some serious allegations laid before the same person who days before, called for an independent enquiry into the irregularities of the MeECL.

So why are the Associations against the reforms that the Power Minister and the CMD have brought forward? Is it because before the reforms, corruption was rampant and there were no checks and balances? Was manipulating bills so easy in the past decades? If so, then it is obvious why all the drama in the MeECL is happening in the past few months. Is it right to point fingers at someone else if the same person is involved in such corrupt practices? Were they creating all the dramas to save their own backs? This is hypocrisy at its height! And the leaders involved in such corrupt practices should be brought to book!

Yours etc., Abigail Syiemlieh, Shillong - 1

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

"Liberty is the right of every man to be honest, to think and to speak without hypocrisy."

— Jose Marti

## The Shillong Times

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### Polarisation in Bengal

THE West Bengal assembly election process has turned out to be a shame on India's vaunted democratic system; and not just for the firing by security forces that killed five persons in Cooch Behar. The whole polity there is today deeply divided.

On the one hand, sand seems to be slipping from under the feet of feisty chief minister Mamata Banerjee. Her own election from Nandigram seems to be doubtful, considering the rival is locally entrenched Suwendu Adhikari, the former minister who fell apart in protest over the CM's styles of functioning. The CM's obsession to bring forward her nephew, grooming him as her heir apparent, is evident from the present campaign of the TMC too. Abhishek Banerjee, like his aunt, is drawing sizeable crowds. Rallies of PM Modi and Amit Shah are also largely attended, giving out the hint that the relative strengths of the TMC and BJP are perhaps evenly balanced.

How this has happened is curious to note. The chief minister and her party openly asked Muslims to side with them. The BJP simply waited for such an eventuality to do what it is best at: polarizing the Hindu votes in its favour. For the first time in West Bengal politics, religion as also caste came to the fore of the campaign arena. This is a pity considering the secular credentials of the state. At the same time, the involvement of a new party in the assembly polls – The Indian Secular Front – is important. A Muslim cleric who heads the party is influential in the community. It is allying with the Congress and the CPI-M. Yet, a look at the campaign scene would make it clear that this alliance has fewer followers this time.

Rahul Gandhi is descending on the campaign scene from April 14, which is unlikely to make any impact due to the deep polarization there. He and Priyanka Gandhi concentrated on the Kerala and Assam campaigns so far, as these are the two states the Congress has some hope in this round of polls.

It remains to be investigated whether there was high-handedness on the part of the security forces in Cooch Behar. The deaths could have added to the trend of religious polarization in the state. Reports are that the security forces roughed up a local youth, leading to an offensive from the locals and then came the retaliatory firing. Religious polarization as also dynasty instincts hurt the fair progress of democracy. Elections should be fought on the basis of issues, like the positive and negative sides of the TMC rule in West Bengal.

# Politics of the bizarre

By Rajdeep Sardesai

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.' Charles Dickens in Tale of Two Cities.

The author may have been reflecting on Britain in the mid nineteenth century but 21st century India seems trapped in its own Dickensian moment. If 2020 was the year of doom and gloom, 2021 seems to be the year when hope alternates with depression. Early year optimism that the worst was over is now rapidly descending into deepening concerns over a 'second' Corona wave. Covid 19 cases have climbed back up to more than one lakh a day but if you are covering the state elections you wouldn't really know of a pandemic. The masks are off as thousands gather to poll rallies. The sadhus and devotees are in celebratory mood at the Hardwar Maha Kumbh while cricket's annual mela, the Indian Premier League, is set to kick off in Mumbai. Ordinary citizens are being coerced into observing Covid 19 protocols and the dreaded word 'lockdown' is back to torment you unless you are a VIP neta, a religious guru or a cricket star living in a bio-bubble. Not more than 50 people can be invited to a marriage but thousands can assemble for a political rally or religious jamboree. Crazy but true.

The madness doesn't end there. Maharashtra is the worst affected Covid 19 state by far, accounting for nearly half the cases in the country. As it struggles to handle the case rise, a three party coalition government in Mumbai seems to be on a monthly ventilator. Its 'Big Boss', NCP leader Sharad Pawar has been admitted to hospital for a surgery barely days after reports surfaced of a clandestine dinner meeting between him and union home minister Amit Shah. This, against the backdrop of charges of extortion made by a former Mumbai police commissioner against the state home minister who has finally stepped down. We don't know what's cooking on the political high table but surely this is the time for a unified fight against Covid and not for conspiracy theories.

You would think that the lessons of 2020 and the need to get the economy back on track would be the all-consuming endeavor of our political leadership. Well, not quite. An important budget session of parliament has been cut short because netas have to hit the campaign road. Most union ministers aren't in their offices but instead have been assigned specific districts in Bengal to handle. Such is the obsessive desire of the BJP to win an election in Bengal that the central government is playing second fiddle to the party's ambitions: its almost as if governance and crucial

policy decisions can wait till Kolkata is conquered. Even a diplomatic outreach to Bangladesh has become an occasion for the prime minister to campaign for the Bengal elections by visiting a Matua community temple on voting day.

In TV studios, we are told by government officials that a V shaped recovery is on its way. Business leaders continue to talk up the economy. On the ground, as one travels from Kerala to Assam, the one unifying factor is the visible economic distress, especially amongst those working in the vast unorganized sector. As Rajiv Bajaj, one of the few outspoken industrialists puts

it, "We seem concerned with BSE and NSE but who will be concerned with MSMEs?" In difficult Covid times, fuel prices are up, jobs have been lost and incomes have shrunk across working class groups. Every political party is promising to put more

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the rhetoric of 'love jihad' and Sabarimala, of Hindu traditions, Muslim appeasement and Church assertion threatens decades of relative harmony. In Bengal, religious polarization has been taken to such a fever pitch that chief minister Mamata Banerjee was compelled to reveal her 'gotra' and recite the Chandi Path. The one state relatively free of the religion card is Tamil Nadu but that's perhaps because Muslims are not significant enough here to make a difference at election time. If the BJP is determinedly pursuing its 'opposition-mukt' Bharat agenda, then the opposition too isn't helping its own cause. The Congress

take weeks to recover from a fractured foot but elections have miraculous healing abilities. Was the injury 'doctored' to attract sympathy? Only Didi knows.

And in the midst of the spiraling poll madness around us, we have the Election Commission under the scanner. Supposedly a neutral umpire but increasingly looking like a twelfth man for the ruling party at the Centre, ready to show a red card to the opposition but hesitant to blow the whistle when the BJP plays foul. Even when it does act against a BJP strongman like Himanta Biswa Sarma, the penalty is quickly withdrawn. Level playing field? Well, not really. By the way, farmers in several parts of north India are still agitating and demanding that the farm laws be withdrawn.

Their agitation has been on for more than four months now. Surprisingly, we don't hear of rising Covid cases amongst the farm community even as those in Mumbai's high rises bear the brunt. Is the kisaan more immune to the virus than the sharp-suited Indian? Maybe, maybe not: in the India of 2021 'kuchbhi ho saktahai!' (anything can happen)

Post-script: The politics of the bizarre is also heavily laced with hypocrisy. For example, BJP leaders at the Centre advocate a nationwide beef ban. In Kerala, the local BJP leadership says people are free to eat what they wish. Maybe, the Hyderabad MP Asaduddin Owaisi was right after all: the cow for some is 'Mummy' in UP, yummy in Kerala! Yeh hai 'new' India!

(The writer is senior journalist and author. Mail: rajdeepsardesai52@gmail.com)

Yes, from that force which has developed the expertise of distorting and rewriting Indian history with elan; Rana Pratap defeating Akbar in Haldighati being one of such "priceless" gem!

That the father of Bengal Renaissance—Raja Rammohan Roy should be termed a much-hated chamcha of the British is an insult to Bengal and its people!

Bollywood starlet Payal Rohatgi is the author of all the above statements. She asserted that Sati was the "woman's choice." That Mughal invaders or Muslims are "rapists" out to "dishonour" Hindu women; that the British were necessarily "destructive" determined to edge out the "great traditions" of "Bharat" with Raja Rammohan Roy being a "co-conspirator" robbing the "divine rights" of the Hindu widows to voluntarily sacrifice their lives upon the pyre of their deceased husbands!

Now this ideology harbouring such a medieval, dark, rabid, regressive, horrible misogynistic mindset is working all-out to politically conquer the enlightened progressive region of Bengal bearing the humanitarian legacy of Raja Rammohan

lacking a full-time party president is desperately looking to Rahul Gandhi to deliver votes and win it a state or two. Gandhi has even shown us his deep sea diving and aikido skills in this election but we still don't know if he really wants to take up a 24 x 7 responsibility as party chief. His sister, Priyanka too has joined the campaign this time but her future role is also uncertain. The Congress is a party in pause mode, hoping for resurrection more by luck than planning.

In Bengal, Mamata Banerjee's persona is the core issue, the self-proclaimed 'Bengal Tigress' taking on the 'outsiders' from Gujarat. She has been aggressively campaigning on a wheel-chair after claiming to have fractured her foot in an 'attack'. Most sportspersons would

take weeks to recover from a fractured foot but elections have miraculous healing abilities. Was the injury 'doctored' to attract sympathy? Only Didi knows.

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Roy! What a tragedy that these very people are working overtime to take control of Bengal and to decide the future of its women!

No wonder why Unnao-Hathras-Budaun form the signature state of affairs of Uttar Pradesh with scenes of BJP leaders marching on Jammu streets with tricolour in hand to defend the accused of spine-chilling Kathua gangrape-murder case and anti-Romeo squads being promised by Yogi Adityanath to "save the women of Bengal"! One only hopes the women of Bengal would rise to the occasion and vote sanely by resisting the "unique" "Bengal-only" utopia of "free education and travel in public transport"! This sudden love and respect for women and great figures of Bengal, is just to win elections at all costs. That's the BJP's agenda – promises and more promises.

Yours etc.,  
Kajal Chatterjee,  
Kolkata

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Both BJP leaders are violating the model code during campaign in Bengal poll

## New CEC must show the guts to discipline Modi and Shah

By Sushil Kutty

India has got a new Chief Election Commissioner. Sushil Chandra moved to the top post April 13, a Tuesday and notably 'new year' in the Hindu calendar. What's striking is that in photographs, he looks like a 1960s Bollywood movie actor. One of those oily characters who come up with slick performances. The question is what kind of CEC will Sushil Chandra be? The point is, in the last nearly one decade, not one CEC has toed the people's line, so to speak.

There have been only tame and game (tamed and gamed!) chief election commissioners eliciting the thought 'what a waste of talent/authority?' Sushil Chandra will serve till May 14, 2022. He is 63, and was appointed Election Commissioner in February 2019, just before the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. In the ensuing months from now on till he gives way to another tamed CEC, he will oversee polls in five states - Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Goa, Uttarakhand and Manipur.

But that's for later. Right now he's got to see the finish of the West Bengal assembly elections, which

fronted for being sickeningly partial to the Bharatiya Janata Party, and for being extremely harsh to Mamata Banerjee – one set of rules for the TMC; and another, more benign, set for the BJP. Like it is said, Prime Minister Modi can holler anything from the rooftop and the EC would be deaf and dumb. But Mamata Banerjee says something a little out of line, and it's heard loud and clear. The EC hauls her up and bans her like she's a loud-speaker on a minaret!

Question: What does CEC Sushil Chandra think of the 24-hour ban handed out to Mamata Banerjee by the outgoing CEC? Equally, if not more, important what does he think of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's transgressions of the MCC? Early April, Modi had without batting an eyelid said that if the BJP comes to power in West Bengal, the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi will be passed in the very first cabinet meeting, adding that farmers of West Bengal will not only start getting the benefits of the scheme, but also the "backlog of Rs 18,000."

Isn't or wasn't that a clear violation of the Model Code of Conduct? Wasn't it the job of the CEC and Election Commission to immediately point it out to an ignorant Prime Minister that he had violated the code and should be rightly told in no uncertain terms that he's banned from campaigning for so and so hours, beginning right now? Ah, nobody in the Election Commission had the cat's guts to shake up Mr. Modi. And that included Mr. Sushil Chandra, the one with a slick hairdo!

Sushil Chandra had over-seen the CBDT's 'Operation Clean Money' launched in 2017 to curb illegal wealth and black money. It's clear as daylight that he didn't succeed in the endeavour, black money and illegal wealth continue to be the hallmark as we all know. But, here's another chance to redeem. Will CEC Sushil Chandra accept the challenge, and read out the riot act to Prime Minister Narendra Modi & Co., during the remaining weeks of the West Bengal elections as far as the MCC is concerned?

Point is, if Mamata Banerjee bucked the model code when she asked Muslims not to "waste" their votes, Modi by keeping on mentioning Mamata's transgressions has been cleverly signaling to the majority community not to waste their votes! Even otherwise, Modi and BJP have with the use of 'Jai Shri Ram' and other Hindu-slogans trying to attract a relevant section of the electorate. The Election Commission has steadfastly ignored Modi's transgressions and from all indications nothing's gonna change with Sushil Chandra at the helm.

Those sort of miracles do not happen with Modi and Amit Shah at the helm. Doesn't matter how defiant Mamata Banerjee is and will be; whether she rejects the EC's elections or not, nothing will matter. Polarizing references like "mini-Pakistan" from Hindutva tongues have been adopted by the Election Commission as legit lexicon. If outgoing CEC Sunil Arora could not make a difference, incoming CEC Sushil Chandra seems no different. Both are birds of the same feather! (IPA Service)

Chandra arrives at the helm even as the election body is being hotly con-



has four more phases to go. And then the results for five states – Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Assam and West Bengal – assembly elections will be announced on May 2 this year. Needless to say, Sushil Chandra has been in the thick of things in his role as election commissioner, and he need not be reminded of how the Election Commission has been working ever since elections to these five states got underway.

'Pathetic' and 'servile' are two words that come to mind. Nobody has to tell Sushil Chandra of the statements being issued by political figures during these last few weeks, most of them BJP leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. Of course, there is the shrill voice of Trinamool Congress supremo Mamata Banerjee, butting in with her own assertions. But there's a difference. While PM Modi gets away with murder, so to speak, Mamata is the one who gets hung to the rafters for allegedly having busted the Model Code of Conduct!

As if 'MCC' is the Marylebone Cricket Club for the BJP, and Modi; and the Election Commission's Model Code of Conduct for the TMC, and Mamata Banerjee. The Prime Minister and his minions, such as Nitin Gadkari for one and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath for another, can buck any and every model code provision, but not Banerjee. There are so many of the pronouncements that Modi has been making and there's not a whimper from the Election Commission.

Will Sushil Chandra be different from his predecessor? Most observers of the "scene" will laugh at the suggestion that Chandra will show spine. If he had one, he would have revealed it long ago, ever since he's been in the Election Commission. But in his defence, he wasn't CEC to throw his weight around, do a Seshan! Then again, before he became one of the trio in the EC, he was chairman of the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT), and CBDT doesn't usually breed lions!

Chandra arrives at the helm even as the election body is being hotly con-

### Letters to the Editor

#### On UDP's blatant hypocrisy

Editor,

Apropos Albert Thyrniang's article captioned "On UDP's blatant hypocrisy," (ST April 4, 2021) followed by Dr. Jemino Mawthoh's reaction on April 12, 2021, I am compelled to express my utter shock that the writer Albert Thyrniang, has chosen to dump us all in the UDP as blatant hypocrites, no one, not even our worst political foes had ever said so. I know one Rev. Albert Thyrniang and I don't believe he is the one who lambasted us as criminals, with malicious intent, using abusive and slanderous terms, normally done only by those who work for some hard-core opponents.

Whoever the writer may be, I welcome his observations, since it is normal for us to face criticism, condemnations in democracy in a manner politicians do and we do within the scope and limitations, understanding that there can be no permanent friends and foes in politics. We know how to restrain

ourselves within the parliamentary parameters. Albert is duty bound to prove the hypocrisy tag he used against us. I am flabbergasted that I am a hypocrite too and let me tell Albert, I know no hypocrite in our Party nor in other parties in our State as well.

The writer touched on many controversial issues within the wide political spectrum, like the rat hole coal mining, current MeECL imbroglio, law and order and other issues and abused the UDP that the party black-mails the hapless MDA government, etc. Worst political controversies have been there in the past and will be there in future too, depending on the wisdom or otherwise of the political dispensations that be.

There were worst issues like the MLAs being disqualified in 1990-91, warranting President's Rule in the State, the teachers' scam 2013, the coal mining, ILP, crimes and other law and order issues and what not. Such issues are everywhere in the country today. The writer even claimed, that UDP play politics over the electricity corporation MeECL, when we actually try to contain

the many failures and shady deals that came up in public and he dared whether UDP can resolve the crisis if the Power portfolio is given to the Party. I accept his bet that we will not shy away from any responsibility and we will definitely be in a position to contain the damage and restore normalcy.

Our leaders have managed even to get the state carved out Assam, the NEHU and we managed to retain NEIGRIHMS within the State and we have done many wonders so that we are what we are today. I blow no trumpet, I have done my part too and if wanted, I can go public. Slanderous accusations even against any hapless individual are not only malicious but outrageously unlawful and contemptuous and can attract judicial contempt proceedings.

We hypocrite politicians in UDP, welcome Albert to go on criticizing, accuse or condemn the way he wants, but we would like to sincerely advise him to toe within the parameters of the law and not to enter into the areas where even Angels fear to tread. As for his call to the public to be careful of the UDP in 2023, we welcome even if he comes out openly

to go against us. We believe in our honesty and will do our part.

Yours etc.,  
B M Lanong,  
Via email

#### Between ignorance and impudence

Editor,

Now the BJP is terming Raja Ram Mohan Roy who worked to ban Sati as the chamcha of the British and Sati is being termed as, "not regressive." The narrative touted out today is that Sati tradition was not "compulsory", but merely introduced to "prevent the prostitution of the Hindu wives at the hands of Mughal invaders!"

So now we are made to believe that Sati was a great "progressive practice", it is the "glory" of Hindus; rather the "Jewel in the Crown" in the lives of Hindu widows, which that chamcha of the British dared to defame and by "conspiring" with the British had ensured it's ban! No prize for guessing where these "brilliant" thoughts have emanated from. They are from the great, proud, nationalist Hindu ideology.

"The only vice that cannot be forgiven is hypocrisy. The repentance of a hypocrite is itself hypocrisy."

— William Hazlitt

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 237 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, APRIL 15, 2021

Bank holiday imbroglio

APRIL 12 was a gazetted holiday for employees of the Government of Meghalaya as it was a festival of Shad Suk Mynsiem observed by the followers of the indigenous faith – Niam Khasi, Niamtre. This is one of the major festivals in the State. It would be prudent to believe that there would be adherents of the Niam Khasi, Niamtre among the bank employees, no matter how big or small their numbers. For all other festivals the Banks under the Negotiable Instruments (NI) Act declares 'Restricted holidays.' In 2021 under the NI Act there are 29 Restricted holidays. A Restricted holiday is one that is optional and left to the discretion of the employee whether to take leave on that particular day. Bank employees and others governed by the NI Act can avail two Restricted holidays with prior permission of their organisation. On April 12, pressure groups visited some banks and told them to down their shutters on account of Shad Suk Mynsiem. This is not the first time that Banks in Meghalaya were asked to close their shutters due to intervention by pressure groups. Such arbitrary behaviour by sundry pressure groups is unwarranted and should be resolved amicably.

Apprehending such a situation, the All India Bank Officers Confederation (AIBOC) wrote to the Government of Meghalaya as early as in April 7, requesting them to declare a holiday on April 12. The Government wrote back on April 9, regretting the request for reasons best known to them. The AIBOC is an all-India organisation and should have taken up the matter with the Reserve Bank of India putting forward the necessary reasoning which in this case is culturally nuanced.

Section 25 of the NI Act empowers State Governments to declare a holiday under the Act as there is a difference of importance to a particular festival in a particular state. The State Government of Meghalaya was well within its rights to declare Shad Suk Mynsiem as a holiday or even a restricted holiday.

There can be arguments that Bank employees enjoy far too many holidays in this country than is good for the trading community especially since the economy is just getting back on the rails. In 2021 Banks have declared 16 Gazetted holidays which means full closure of banks. Add to that 52 Sundays and 26 other days being second and fourth Saturdays. So banks have a total of 123 holidays out of 365 days a year. In other words there are only 242 working days a year. This is not what other developed countries can boast of. But that's because their priorities are different. Neither religion or festivities or emotions decide policies in such countries.

Letters to the Editor

Of banks and bank holidays

Editor, This has a reference to two news items appearing in the Shillong Times on 13.04.2021 and 14.04.2021 with regard to Banks in Shillong and adjoining areas remaining open on 12.04.2021 on the occasion of Shad Suk Mynsiem. The news items seems to have generated more than necessary confusion, misrepresentation, murkiness and mystery to the issue, which I attempt to debunk as below for the benefit of all who are peeved at Banks not "complying with the request made by the state government".

Firstly, banks are not private institutions and do not have the luxury of declaring their own holidays. Bank holidays are necessarily declared by the respective state governments annually in a holiday list prepared by them. Bank holidays are mandatorily to be separately declared under the Negotiable Instruments Act of 1881 for which state/central government is the sole empowered authority, not the banks/bankers/employee unions themselves. Shad Suk Mynsiem this year was not declared as a holiday by the

government of Meghalaya under the NI Act.

In anticipation of local pressure groups ultimately requesting Banks to shut down suddenly on that day (from past experience) the All India Bank Officers Confederation (AIBOC Meghalaya State Unit) had pragmatically written to the government of Meghalaya as early as April 07, 2021 to declare a holiday under the NI Act on the day of Shad Suk Mynsiem, which however was declined, rather "regretted" vide their letter to AIBOC dated April 09, 2021, leaving no locus standi for Banks to close on their own. Further, in a bizarre display of knee jerk reaction and myopic vision, on April 12, 2021, police personnel were visiting bank branches and requesting them to close down in anticipation of an awkward situation. As anticipated, on April 12 last Bank branches had to down shutters, either in deference to the request of the police or by the pressure groups. Had the Government concurred with the pragmatic request of AIBOC in the first place, such a situation could have been averted.

The news item appearing in The Shillong Times on April 13, 2021 provided the proverbial last nail by stating that it was the Gov-

In a story titled 'Her Yellow Revolution' published by the Shillong Times on 9th March 2019, Sahana Ghosh tells the story of Kong Trinity Saioo's endeavour in promoting the cultivation and boosting the popularity of the indigenous, high curcumin content (7.9% as against 2% of other varieties) Lakadong turmeric. The high curcumin content claims to help in protecting the liver from oxidative stress, kill off fungus more effectively than other spices, lowers blood cholesterol levels, protects body from diabetes and against cognitive/memory defects. For her efforts, Kong Trinity was felicitated by the Ministry of Agriculture. Recognising the commercial potential of Lakadong turmeric, the Government of Meghalaya launched the 'Lakadong Mission' in 2018 with the aim of producing 50,000 metric tonnes per annum of the variety for the next five years, i.e., 2018-2023.

In 2020, the Ministry of Food Processing Industries under the Centrally Sponsored Pradhan Mantri Formalisation of Micro Processing Enterprises Scheme launched the One District One Product (ODOP) scheme to be implemented for a period of five years, i.e., 2020-2021 to 2024-2025 with an outlay of Rs 10,000 crores. Lakadong turmeric from East and West Jaintia Hills is one of the products selected for support under this scheme for Meghalaya along with others like Soihong, Pineapple, Banana, Jackfruit, Ginger and Cashew nut products from the other districts of the State. The importance of the Lakadong turmeric has therefore seen a tremendous upsurge in the last few years.

On January 2021, Invest India, the National Investment Promotion and Facilitation Agency of India had a meeting with NESFAS (North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society) and its partner SURE (Society for Urban and Rural Empowerment) to discuss the problems that growers of Lakadong turmeric face, and the constraints in the value chain. One of the Lakadong farmers, Hamsnawpher Suchiang from Mulum also participated in the discussion. Then on 1st April 2021 NESFAS and SURE were again invited to the 'ODOP-Lakadong Turmeric Flag Off Ceremony'. Kong Trinity Saioo also attended the meeting. The discussions during the consultations raised a few concerns regarding the whole exercise especially the

Implications on Agrobiodiversity

Lakadong turmeric & one district one product (ODOP) Scheme

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

idea of the selecting a single crop from a particular district and its impact on the local agrobiodiversity.

Lakadong turmeric is just one of the many food plants grown by the farmers in the Jaintia Hills region of Meghalaya. Mynso in West Jaintia Hills is one of the villages which grows this particular variety. The participatory mapping exercise done in Mynso, West Jaintia under the Rural Electrification Corporation (REC) supported project 'No One Shall be Left Behind Initiative: Biodiversity for Food, Nutrition and Energy Security, Meghalaya and Nagaland,' revealed an agrobiodiversity of 220 food plants. Among the starchy staples which provided the main source of carbohydrates, were 19 rice varieties and multiple varieties of maize, taro and sweet potatoes. Other fruits category had the highest number of food plants reaching almost 50 food plants (including those harvested from the forest). Lakadong is part of the condiments food group category which also includes varieties of ginger, chilli, coriander, mint and garlic (total of 13 food plants). A similar richness in agrobiodiversity will undoubtedly occur in the other villages where Lakadong is cultivated. What happens to this diversity when only one among the multitude is being selected for rigorous development and promotion?

Lakadong is not unique in getting a great deal of publicity for its health benefits and focus for commercial exploitation. Another famous case is that of Quinoa (Chenopodium quinoa), a small grain staple of the Chenopodiaceae family which has been a cultivation for at least the last 5000 years in the Andean Highlands of South America. In the book 'Diversifying Food and Diets' Michael Hermann has a chapter, 'Success and pitfalls of linking nutritionally promising Andean crops to market.' He traces the remarkable rise of Quinoa and other Andean crops like Maca (Lepidium meyenii) and Yacon (Smalanthus sonchifolius) and the consequences on the local economy and ecology.

A natural consequence of the growing popularity of the three crops was the increase in the area under cultivation. For a crop like Maca this was very significant. Prior to the late 1980's, there were fears that the crop would become extinct. However, increased returns saw an increase in

the area under cultivation by a factor of almost 60, i.e., from only 15 ha to some 3000 ha. However this had its own negative consequences which became more apparent with Quinoa. The rush to grow Quinoa resulted in reduced soil fertility brought about by reduced fallow periods and expansion into steep and erosion-prone land to compensate for reduced area productivity. It led to what is called 'soil mining'. This was facilitated by a growing trend of absentee landlords who relied on hired labour with little regard for community action to maintain sustainability practises. Price escalation because of high export demand also meant that local producers are more interested in trading (especially for export) than consuming. This also had the knock-on effect of discouraging local consumption as well since local consumers were unable to afford the crop. This, according to the author, has implications on nutritional diversity and cultural identity.

The focus on a single commodity, in this case the Lakadong variety, is understandable because of the substantial resources that would need to be allocated if more are selected and the logistical complications involved. At the same time, the risk that good market returns could spark a process of mono-cropping which will lead to a decline of the existing agrobiodiversity and bring about negative ecological consequences also exists. After the 'Lakadong Mission' was announced, new villages have taken to cultivation of this variety. It hence becomes very important that the lessons learned from Quinoa, Maca and Yacon are given serious consideration.

One way to avoid the negative implications of an increased importance given to Lakadong turmeric is to link its cultivation with the existing agrobiodiversity and build on it to ensure that the increase in the former does not lead to a loss in the latter. Here, the concept of Keystone species becomes quite useful. A Keystone species is a plant or animal that plays a unique or crucial role in the way an ecosystem functions. In India tiger, elephants, rhinos and bears are key critical Keystone species. Programs targeting their conservation like 'Project Tiger', in fact, have the advantage of protecting other species (flora and fauna) that inhabit the

same ecosystem. The same can be done with Lakadong turmeric and the other crops identified under the ODOP scheme.

Also one way in which sustainability and profit are reconciled is by making it a rule that the targeted crop (in this case Lakadong turmeric) will be sourced only from farmers who are genuine (not absentee) and who grow crops other than one being sourced. This has the benefit of helping small and marginal farmers that need the most support and rewarding them for their role in agrobiodiversity conservation. The reward however is indirect which might not appeal to some who might also complain of being made unwilling conservators. In such a case there will be those who will try to find a way around it. Another way is to promote Lakadong turmeric as a product which apart from having tremendous nutritional benefits also plays an important role in agrobiodiversity conservation which again has important climate change implications (A good book to understand the role of agrobiodiversity in climate change adaptation is the 2013 'Community Biodiversity Management: Promoting resilience and conservation of plant genetic resources' by Walter Simon de Boef and colleagues). The existing rich agrobiodiversity allows for that case to be made. The premium earned from the sale of the commodity can be deposited into an Agrobiodiversity Conservation Fund for paying the farmers or villages who grow the variety but also to maintain agrobiodiversity. Other ways to link environmental sustainability and profit exist and must be explored.

The 'ODOP-Lakadong Turmeric Flag Off Ceremony' was brought to a close by the flagging of the truck carrying a consignment of Lakadong turmeric to Kerala. If the Scheme succeeds there is no doubt that the participating farmers' will experience an improvement in their incomes. However it is equally important to ensure that the returns are sustainable, not only in economic but also ecological terms (ecological degradation in fact will affect future profits as well). Failure to do so will be akin to "killing the goose that lays the golden eggs".

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Ecological reflection

Matriliney, matriarchy and earth-care

By Barnes Mawrie

It might sound rather strange and unusual to speak of the connection between the two. However, if we go deeper into it, this might not sound so strange after all. Matriliney is a socio-cultural system where the role of the progenitress (mother) is dominant. In this system the lineage is traced through the mother and not the father. Matriliney on the other hand is a system where the woman is head of the family and she assumes control of all household affairs. In most matriarchal communities matriliney is also practiced as part of it. However, in some communities like the Khasis and the Garos, matriliney and patriarchy are simultaneously practiced.

It is undeniable that there is a close resemblance between a human mother and Mother Nature. Both are endowed with the ability of reproduction and nurturing. The fact that Nature is ascribed a feminine gender in all cultures, proves the presence of motherly traits in

towards Earth care. Women are naturally endowed with motherly traits and they are highly sensitive to the needs and sufferings of others. Therefore women are naturally and psychologically more connected to Nature and they understand her better than men do. It is because of the emphasis on the feminine dimension of the community that tribal communities in general demonstrate exceptional respect and care for Mother Nature. They look at Nature as a true mother who provides them with materials for their shelter and food for their sustenance. In matrilineal and matriarchal societies this aspect of motherhood is more prominent and thus the link with Nature is much closer.

History has shown that much of ecological destruction has taken place in western societies where patriarchy is the system. We are aware that deforestation and exploitation of nature for natural resources has



her. This is the reason, why matrilineal and matriarchal societies are naturally more closely connected to nature than patriarchal societies. This brings me to the argument that matrilineal and matriarchal societies are better inclined towards Earth care than others. When we go back to the early years of our Khasi society, we see a sort of elemental relationship that used to exist between the community and their natural environment. The ancient Khasis had tremendous respect and love for Mother Nature. In fact they addressed her with titles like "Meirilung Meirisang," "Mei Ramew," "Mei Mariang," etc, all indicating the motherhood of Nature. This was the reason why nature was never exploited by our ancestors. It was said that when people required trees or other materials from the forests for constructing their

been going on for centuries in western countries. The well known Sahara Desert was once upon a time a rich forest land but due to the wanton felling of trees by the Romans and others, it has turned into a vast desert. A patriarchal system where man rules, is characterized by an attitude of domination. This in turn leads to greed, ambition and destruction. The conflict between patriarchy and matriarchy is beautifully depicted in the blockbuster Avatar of James Cameron where the muscle men of western materialistic society come into confrontation with the tribal community known as the Na'vi. The former group is bent on destroying Mother Nature while the latter is determined to protect her. Looking at the current situation where we are threatened by global warming and climate change because of man's cruelty to

After all, solving environmental problems is more about changing attitudes than formulating policies. Unless our attitudes of greed, ambition and cruel domination are changed, there will be no respite for Mother Nature.

houses, they would seek first the permission of the guardian spirits and then they would take only as much as they needed and nothing more. When they would go fishing they would fish only for their sustenance and not for commercial purposes and no destructive means were used like lime, dynamites or other chemicals as people do today. Even in the practice of agriculture, our ancestors exhibited tremendous respect and concern for Mother Nature. They would cultivate in one place and then moved on to another location and would return to the same plot after a few years thereby allowing the land to heal itself. It was essentially an organic farming using the natural manure provided by Mother Nature herself. No wonder, our ancestors were healthy and lived long because they ate organic food free from chemicals and poisons. Psychologically, we can explain why tribal societies where women are extremely respected and play dominant roles, are more inclined

Nature, it makes us realize that the attitude of domination and exploitation so characteristic of patriarchy, needs to be tempered by a motherly attitude of care and preservation. Matrilineal societies like the Khasis or Garos and a few matriarchal societies in different parts of the world are in a better position to teach the world about the necessity of respecting and caring for our Mother Nature and the importance of connecting ourselves to her. After all, solving environmental problems is more about changing attitudes than formulating policies. Unless our attitudes of greed, ambition and cruel domination are changed, there will be no respite for Mother Nature. In my opinion, even patriarchal societies need to allow the feminine and motherly dimension to emerge so as to give way to noble sentiments of love, compassion, care and concern which are so essential in our relationship with Mother Nature. Email: barnesmawrie@gmail.com

newspaper and other media ahead of time. The news could have been carried and no needless tension would have been created. The pressure groups would then have had to contend with the Government instead of the Banks.

Hypocrisy the only Policy!!

Editor, While some seems to not know, many of us know that "We are all Hypocrites". We all behave differently that what we truly are! In any situation and position we always make the best of both worlds.

Look at our professionals, where the MeECL engineers make the best example, they will keep their mouth shut while the ship is sinking because of their own doings. But, when someone dares to interfere with their misadventure, they are ready to climb on every rooftop and electric pole to shout their ignorance and their allegiance to the entity and the public to whom they have taken an oath to serve, and is vehemently ensuring that the best and only the best is delivered!

Look at our NGO's and how concerned they are for

the borders, for the land, for the identity and for everything that concerns the Jaidbynrivew. These are the group (s) of people who know when to open their mouths and when to come to the streets, for reasons best known to them (or their masters, as the case maybe). But in almost every agenda, the public are supposed to listen and agree to their ideas and beliefs, whereas we are made to believe that they only voice the concerns and fears of the public. On the contrary in most cases, they are the ones who bring fear to the masses and are the major reason why many of the daily wage earners are concerned about whether or not there will be disruption to their livelihoods tomorrow! Look at the Church! It is the best hunting ground for hypocrites! And mind it, I mention the church because I belong to one, but surely all mosques, temples and other so called place of worships have their own share of hypocrites and scoundrels! These are the spaces where people speak against corruption and injustice, and also the same places where corruption and injustice finds the most comforting shelter!

And why should we even mention the political parties? The same party which veh-

mentally opposed implementation of a certain law while in power, is now continuously talking about its implementation because it's itching for power. That's the height of hypocrisy. And when the same party whose member in the cabinet seems to have equally failed in a particular portfolio whom his predecessor was judiciously asked to be removed by them, are very much comfortable in their silence and complacency, is that not hypocrisy? As for our lawmakers and upholders of the law, the public knows it all!

Recent news will testify on all of the above arguments, but again, look at all of us, the writer included. We are all silent and feign ignorance, but don't forget that we are the one who breed all of the above! We certainly belong to at least one of the above, and if we don't know when to speak we are no less than any one of them. But again, we are a society who secretly believes that "Hypocrisy is the only, if not the best Policy"!!

Yours etc., Wanshan B Khardewsaw Shillong 2

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

"Somewhere in the world there is an epigram for every dilemma."  
— Hendrik Willem Van Loon

## The Shillong Times

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### Afghanistan, India

AFGHANISTAN, after long years of occupation, war and militant mayhem, is far from being normal. Taliban factions remain lethal with Pakistani support on the one side and machinations from multiple interests on the other. Despite the long years of direct involvement by the US in a peacekeeping form and to "protect" democracy there, there is neither peace nor an effective form of people's rules there.

In this context, the announcement made by US President Joe Biden a day ago that all American and NATO troops will be pulled out from Afghanistan by September 11 is both significant and a matter of serious concern to Afghanistan's well-wishers like India. In the event, chances are that the field will be "wide open" to both home-grown militants and also those who were nurtured from Pakistan and the West Asia region, who are active in the landlocked kingdom. For good or for bad, several nations are happily getting involved in the affairs of Afghanistan. The Russian occupation at the fag end of the last century was only a start for fresh incursions and involvements there from external interests. The US sent in Osama bin Laden to fight the Russians out of Afghanistan. Eventually, Laden started the Al Qaeda in the Afghan soil to target the US. Pakistan has all along been playing its games in Afghanistan, also to counter the Indian influence there. The Hamid Karzai era, which saw the start of the democracy initiative in Afghanistan in the first decade of this Century with US and Indian support, was a relatively better period for Afghanistan. With Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah coming into the scene in later years, India lost a part of its influence on Afghanistan and Pakistan began taking the upper hand for a while. For various reasons, Pakistan's role has been reduced by Ghani himself in recent years.

However, Joe Biden's offer is that Afghanistan should now be cared for jointly by Pakistan, Russia, China, India and Turkey, in that order. China is making serious bids with Pakistani support to largely involve itself in Afghanistan. This sends out danger signals to India in more ways than one. Russia is no more a close friend of India. Neither is Turkey as some recent scenarios make clear. Chances are that India will get increasingly isolated from Afghanistan, where this country has gone out of its way to build friendship. Joe Biden's aim is to extricate the US from a long-drawn military engagement. But, its implications are serious and scary for this geopolitical region.

# What do we do with Education

By Patricia Mukhim

It is said that education is the escalator to opportunity but what happens when that escalator is broken. Covid has brought all of us to a state where we are groping for answers. The last thing that anyone should do is to play politics with Covid. This is the time for the government to open up its horizons and look for suggestions, not from the usual suspects and acolytes that get invited to every meeting, but by scouring the horizon to get people with experience and pragmatism to share their views.

We have just come to a point where possibilities of a second lockdown stare us in the face as Covid cases have escalated. Just imagine looking at another year of repetition, isolation and stress. The shock of a year ago is now threatening to repeat itself. And it's not a happy thought; not especially for parents for whom 2020 has been a cancel year for their children's education. The pandemic threatens to take us back to those times when younger relatives would stay away for fear of being asymptomatic carriers. Social distancing as we all know has a very debilitating effect on everyone but especially the elderly and if this is repeated, I wonder how we can cope with the situation. In fact a year-plus of social distancing has changed our personalities forever.

We are, if I may venture to say, hopefully less selfish and more caring than we used to be. Research shows that most people become calmer, more accepting, more self-confident and socially sensitive as they mature. One hopes this is correct. But as members of a larger human family, we have nagging doubts about how the younger members in our families are coping. What are they not telling us about how they feel? And what are they actually going through? Adolescence is that time in life when the hormones are hyperactive; it's also a period of heavy socializing. Adolescence is a testing ground for how many peer groups one can belong to. If an adolescent is not socializing; is an introvert, adults believe there's something wrong and we try to draw the person out. But Covid puts everything on pause mode. We would be aware of young adults who in 2020 had a hellish time being forced into solitude at

the very moment when their identities are most vividly forming.

Covid has made parents feel less stressful if the adolescents don't get too many calls or don't agonize too much about having to stay at home and missing out on the fun and games. In that sense families living in gated residential complexes are better able to cope because their kids have enough spaces in community playgrounds to meet their friends, since the effects of isolation can be

Aren't they all second guessing? To see on the TV screen pictures of dead bodies waiting to be burnt is exasperating and conveys a message that the government has given up and will take no responsibility for the growing number of deaths, infections and the breakdown of the health system. How does it feel to be living in these times?

You realise the futility of investing your votes on politicians for they are found most wanting when a calamity like Covid strikes. You



worse than the disease itself. The whole of 2020 has been an accumulation of, "what could have been but never was," — the joys we missed in not being able to celebrate birthdays and attend marriage ceremonies; but more so the funerals of close relatives and friends and the family gatherings that we took for granted. Thankfully there are as yet no trackers for moments of ups and downs; laughter and tears in 2020.

We humans need so much more to nourish ourselves with than the food we fill our bellies with. We have found us without emotional nutrition hence emotionally drained and that manifested itself in bouts of loneliness. Am not sure yet if any research has been conducted on how people coped with and fared during those lockdowns beginning March 2020. Personally I know I have spent more time looking at the computer screen or scanning for news of hope for a cure or a vaccine. Now that the vaccine is here, we are told that even those who have had it are still prone to Covid, some suffering severe forms of the virus. Do we even understand this virus better today? Do any doctors know for sure what they are talking about?

also realise that every issue is politicised instead of being solved. Then everything gets lost into the manhole of ugly politics while the public is left gasping for answers.

I have yet to see a pragmatic think tank created by the MDA government to handle crises such as the ones posed by Covid. There is an 85-member body created to celebrate 50 years of Meghalaya — a state that is going nowhere. But there is no serious brainstorming on how to tackle education; the forthcoming exams; how many students have dropped out since last year and what their fates would be and whether there are any recovery mechanisms or whether it is prudent to take hasty decisions on shutting down schools when the online classes are a dismal failure.

The youth are our biggest assets. If we cannot spare the time, the energy and other resources to take a hard look at education and if we are to leave everything to the government then believe me we are a lost cause. Those who have given their lives to the cause of education because they believe in it and its potential to change the destinies of youth and not because of

the profits it takes in, should actually put their heads together and give a blueprint for action to the government. Let there be no ego tussle between government and well-meaning educationists. That's the last thing we need!

In the United States a research conducted says over three million children got no education in 2020. Nicholas Kristof in his article, 'School Closures Have Failed America's Children' in the New York Times says he didn't see the wisdom of opening bars while shutting down schools. It's instructive to know that even in states like Oregon in the US low-income children often don't have internet to attend Zoom classes and some homes have neither internet nor cell-phone service. "The evidence on remote learning suggests that despite the best efforts of teachers it doesn't work for a large share of kids," said Emily Oster, a Brown University economist who has studied the issue. She says America has sadly deprioritized children in a way that will do long-term damage.

Talking about the risks of opening schools, Kristof says there's enough data in the US and abroad comparing areas that reopened schools versus those that kept them closed. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention found that in-person learning in schools has not been associated with substantial community transmission. Adding to this, the British Medical Journal in an editorial said, "Closing schools is not evidence-based and harms children."

A Tulane University study also found that in most of the United States, school openings do not increase coronavirus hospitalization. And teachers don't seem at greater risk than people in other occupations.

It would be prudent therefore to take a call on school/college closure after due diligence and much thought on the issue rather than out of panic reaction because one or two kids tested Covid positive. Let's remember that even Pandora's box was opened at tipping point. Let's hope that intellectual sanity defeats political short-term agenda. And last but not least, let's remember what Joseph Nye said, "Education is that soft power we can gift our young people to take on the world."

# What ails MCCL

By C.F. Lyngdoh

In the last few months, serious questions were raised by the State Government about how to revive the operations of MCCL in order to bring the organisation back into a healthy and profitable unit for the economic benefit of the areas surrounding the cement plant and for the state in general. The options before the government as it appeared from the newspapers are three in number:-

i. That the state government would continue to run the unit

ii. To enter into a joint venture with a reliable cement manufacturing company and

iii. To privatise MCCL completely.

But what actually caused MCCL, a reputed unit of the state started in 1966 to turn into a sick unit at the turn of the century? The answer is 'Human failure' at all levels right from the top management, down to the lowest categories of employees. It is in the written records of MCCL that way back in 1974 (after

the old wet processing technology like cement plants everywhere till the new dry processing technology was introduced in the last three decades of the 20th century gradually replacing the old wet processing in India as well, mainly to save fuel consumption, the vital factor for profitability. The manpower of MCCL has a long experience in running a wet processing plant but did not have the experience to run a dry cement plant; that is why the performance of MCCL went down horribly in recent years.

At the initial stage of MCCL (in 1966) the MCCL management under (L) PH Trivedi (IAS) and (L) MD Raptap IAS engaged ACC (Associated Cement Company) as consultants. Subsequently, most of the key technical posts were filled up with personnel experienced in ACC Cement plants and nobody complained about their appointment because the local people understood the necessity thereof. Gradually the local engineers,



Meghalaya attained Statehood) even the Minister of Industry (L) S.D.D. Nichols Roy and eminent Directors like SL Khosla IAS, R. Natarajan IAS, (L) Herbert Suchiang IA & AS among other bureaucrats took time to visit Mawmluh Sohra — as members of the Board of Directors every month to attend the monthly coordination committees of MCCL in connection with the completion and commissioning of the expansion project of the cement plant. Earlier to this, eminent politicians like (L) Maham Singh took time off as the then MLA of Sohra to hold meetings with the MCCL and the Laitryngew technicians and up to the lowest categories of workers picked up the skills and obtained adequate experience and were able to take over the posts as they fell vacant. MCCL then also sent several of its personnel including Assistant Engineers, Chemists etc. for training in the ACC plants expecting them to become fit enough to take over charge when the time came.

Even with no assurance from any of the stakeholders, the MCCL management can run the plant. There is a cement plant in Changsari, Assam which runs on limestone from Mawlong, Shella and other areas and it is quite profitable. So, the MCCL plant can also function effectively and profitably by taking supplies of raw material from sources like Mawlong, Shella etc. The true picture of MCCL clearly indicates that the first option i.e., for the State Government to manage exclusively with the existing manpower, would be futile even by appointing a few experienced personnel from outside.

The third option — to privatise the entire management and operations at the works would create several problems which will hamper the smooth working of MCCL. However, the second option — to have a joint venture with some reliable cement companies appears to be unavoidable for the revival of MCCL operations and performance. The people want to see positive and quick action and not to have to wait till the monsoon sets in, which will hamper all sincere efforts to re-commission the units which have been lying idle since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. What decision shall be taken by the State Government is what the public want to see.

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### Letters to the Editor

## Closing of Schools and Colleges a last resort

Editor,  
It will come as no surprise to you that teachers, parents and students are half hoping for schools to be closed now that rumours are rife about the increase in numbers of COVID 19 cases everywhere. It would be a matter of great convenience for these three groups of hopefuls who see the closure of schools as a sure means to their ends — of course, the health and safety of all being the most obvious one. But there is also a growing suspicion that students would want schools to close for a more ulterior motive — so that exams could continue to be held online and that they could continue to make use of the innovation of copying and pasting their answers to stardom.

1. on the other hand, find this matter rather ironic. For instance, it is perfectly alright for people to visit crowded places like Police Bazaar, Golf links, Iewduh the parks and parties with their kids where they stand a higher risk of being exposed to the virus but schools have suddenly become epicentres of the pandemic and a rescue mission must now be undertaken to get everybody out of these places. Members of the

public have all but thrown caution to the winds. They are now least bothered by the virus. Many believe it to be either a conspiracy to manipulate the masses into some sort of submission or a gimmick to divert people's attention from some rather interesting development. Otherwise, how else can election rallies, protests, feasts and what not be held even amid such a 'pandemic' where a whiff of the air pregnant with the virus can cause people to suffer traumatic health issues? Look at the number of people walking around with a hint of a mask on their faces. And those who do have one on it appear not to know how to wear it or have such weak lower jaws that they must use their masks to hold them in place.

Why does the government not do anything about such blatant violators of the COVID 19 SOPs, you ask me? Well, if they were to take any action in this regard, they would have to start with themselves first, that is why. It is the same story — from the centre to the states. The less said about this the better, at least for my health.

But let us seriously consider the impact of closing schools and colleges and conducting classes and exams online. It is an open secret that at no level is real learning taking place through such a system. Not just because there are many inherent flaws in the system

but especially because students who sit for online exams do not need to study for the exams. We all know very well what happens in this case where students Google for answers and write them down on A4 sheets and then upload the scanned images of these 'well-written' answers to the exam portal much to the surprise and delight of their teachers who notice the quantum jump of their students from average learners during the offline normal non-pandemic situation to excellent scientist material during this online new normal period. There is nothing to be happy about in this regard. Such a practice is creating a dangerous trend that will result in students with superficial knowledge and zero skills. God forbid, we get treated by doctors and nurses who have completed their studies through such a system. If they can find the heart when in search of the liver, it will be salvation enough for many. At least they have still managed to find something in the human body.

Let us therefore not be too hasty in closing schools and colleges without finding alternatives that could work to conduct classes and exams safely for all. There must be a system that could work. Look at how certain educational systems in Asia have done it. They conducted their exams in wide-open football fields where school distancing norms could be

observed without any dearth of space. A system of conducting classes on alternate days or using odd/even roll numbers or varying timings could be tried before declaring an indefinite holiday and consigning our children to a token form of education.

And what about the fact that when schools and colleges close, parents are still required to pay the fees even though their children are denied many of the facilities that they ought to get as part of their admission. And the very teachers who are in favour of closing schools are also the ones, perhaps, who need salaries. However, if they are not, then they are to inform the management so parents can celebrate the fact that their children will be blessed with free education for a year, at least.

I would urge upon all concerned to avoid being alarmists and to take a more practical and far-sighted approach to the matter at hand before jumping to any sort of conclusions that could jeopardise our collective future.

Yours etc.,  
P. Majaw,  
Shillong — 1

## Inhuman attitude of BSNL

Editor,  
Through your esteemed

daily I would like to draw urgent attention to the utter negligence and apathy of the BSNL authorities in the state. It is about the damaged iron cover of the BSNL cable duct manhole near Jhalupara, GS Road. As the upper lid is worn out and pressed down many major accidents have already happened.

Every passing vehicle is forced to take the "curved path" to dodge this manhole. Many new vehicles coming from Guwahati are likely to fall into this manhole damaging the lower parts of the vehicle. It is reported that many bikers have hit the spot and tumbled down leading to severe injuries. Had this spot been demarcated with a small signboard and red flags, such accidents would have been easily avoided. This should have been done by the traffic police department.

Well, now we must dig out what makes the BSNL leave such a dangerous manhole unrepaired for several months. The PWD and the Deputy Commissioner must bring this to the notice of the BSNL without further delay. One feels the telecom service provider must be penalized heavily for this sheer negligence and callousness over public safety. It is totally inhuman to leave the manholes unrepaired. Compromising public safety is a serious offence.

Yours etc.,  
Sail Gwali,  
Shillong

## Hands-off policy needed

Editor,  
Why are the military and para-military personnel always stirring up the hornet's nest in Meghalaya? I stayed in Assam for almost two years and I've never seen or heard the military personnel creating any commotion or unnecessary trouble for the local people. In Arunachal Pradesh, the military personnel are the people's knights in shining armour. In both states there is mutual respect and understanding between the army personnel and the local people. In Meghalaya on the other hand, the military and para military personnel continue to be a thorn in the flesh of the local people from time to time. Why this differential behaviour? We want the military personnel in our state but we also want them to treat the local people with respect.

Yours etc.,  
Gary Marbaniang,  
Via email

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"The greatest threat to freedom is the absence of criticism."

--- Wole Soyinka

## The Shillong Times

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### GHADC results, lessons

THE people of Garo Hills have voted wisely for the next set of councilors to the Autonomous District Council. It was a vote for change. New faces have been elected and old ones thrown out. Many sitting MDCs including the former CEM and Chairman were voted out. The best way to get rid of corruption and poor governance is to dislodge the corrupt and vote in younger councilors in the hope that they will bring in much needed change. As voters it is easy to become cynical considering how politicians have repeatedly let down their voters but cynicism bears no fruit. In a democracy the citizenry has to engage more proactively in creating awareness among the masses and influencing them to vote for a larger purpose and not because the candidate pays a one-time fee for voting for him/her. This has virtually debased the tenets of democracy as was envisaged by the Indian Constitution.

The long term impacts of people taking money to vote a particular candidate are visible in Meghalaya today. Pot-holed roads and bridges that take long years to complete have become the lot of those who have elected candidates that relied on money power to win their seats. That any candidate could even consider voters to be purchasable items shows that he/she has scant regard for democracy and the sanctity of the voting process.

The BJP, a national party has made inroads into the Council winning two seats – one the prestigious Tura seat from where the present Chief Minister was elected in 2018 and another from Dalu. The BJP had put up 21 candidates which is akin to casting a net into the sea and expecting to rake in whatever is possible. That they were able to put up 21 candidates is some achievement considering that one of the oldest regional parties - the UDP could put up candidates only in 15 constituencies without winning a single seat. Whether the GHADC polls are an indication of things to come is difficult to predict but the Chief Minister has been put on notice and cannot take things for granted. Tura might no longer be his pocket-borough and if Bernard Marak performs well as a Councillor he could well carry the trophy in 2023. Politics after all is the classic game of thrones – of seating and unseating personalities. What will be of interest is who will lead the GHADC this time and in which direction.

## Crash plan for increasing indigenous production the need of the hour

# Ill planned vaccination programme stumbles amidst shortages

By Dr. Somu

The second wave of COVID-19 pandemic situations across the country is becoming alarming. With nearly 1.52 lakh new cases being reported daily (as on April 10) and the death toll mounting, the health situation takes a turn for the worse. Amidst the deadly chaos, various states report vaccine shortages and people being sent home from the vaccination centres. With a spike in infections people have started thronging vaccination centres as the demand has suddenly soared.

The two vaccine producers, Serum Institute (Pune) and Bharat Biotech (Hyderabad) are struggling to meet the demand. This clearly shows the failure of the government in planning properly. Ironically Centre seems to be in total denial about vaccine shortages in the country, and is blaming the states for mis-managing available stocks. Realizing the severity of fast spreading pandemic and mounting death toll during the last one week, the government has finally approved the SPUTNIK V COVID vaccine from Russia to supplement the doses and fight shortages. It should have been approved in January when Russian government was ready to negotiate at much lower prices.

Sequencing of SARS COVID-2 virus samples collected from patients revealed that presently four new strains are in circulation among the population- South African (B.1.351), Brazilian (P.1), UK and double mutated (E4 84Q and L452R) Indian mutation. Spike Genes on the surface of the SARs COVID viral surface change their behaviour and increasingly become aggressive while attacking the human body cells.

According to Dr. Rakesh Mishra, Director, Hyderabad based CCMB says nearly 20 percent of patients in Maharashtra are infected by double mutated Indian strain. Just in a week's time number of cases have doubled and by April 15, they are to reach as high as 1.8 Lakh cases. However the second wave of pandemic is caused by the last year's same COVID 2 strain only. Dr Rahul Pandit, member, Task Force, Maharashtra attributes rapid rise to Indian double mutants (up to nearly 60 percent) is alarming in the second wave of infection mainly the result

of negligence and flaunting recommended COVID discipline in public places.

The fact is the total production capacity of the manufacturers of Covishield and Covaxin, is nearly 24 lakh vaccines a day. The current demand is 37 lakh vaccines a day. Daily shortage is already huge touching 15 to 20 lakh vaccines a day, government failed to anticipate higher vaccination demand with starting the 45-plus age group. This will become more acute in the weeks to come as production capacity increase will take time. To break the infection chain at least 70 percent of the population must be vaccinated. Till the second week of April only eight and half crore population is vaccinated during the last two months. At this slow pace it might take nearly one and half years to reach the set goal to vaccinate and reach herd immunity. This may turn the coming days precarious with subsequent waves of pandemic emerging occasionally with the appearance of new mutant strains. In the face of these critical times, the government appears to be complacent and in a denial mode refuting serious vaccine shortages.

Instead of acting fast to speed up production of doses, Union ministers have started blaming the non- BJP ruled state governments for mismanagement of stocks. Even the health ministry refuses to share information on the rollout process of COVID-19 vaccines.

In the recent virtual online meeting, chief ministers of some states complained about a serious shortage of vaccines in several districts across the nation and they are forced to close vaccination centres temporarily. Ironically ignoring the looming shortages, prime minister blamed the states for mismanagement of vaccine stocks and urged the public to strictly adhere to COVID discipline. He even tried to give it a joyous colour calling it "festival of vaccinations" rather than focusing on how fast the production of vaccines by the Serum Institute of India and Bharat Biotech can be scaled up from present levels to meet the existing gap between supply and demand in districts.

There is a huge gap between the words our ruling

party leaders, especially the Prime Minister and Amit Shah, preach to people and what they practice. Despite the loud talk of Covid behavioural discipline, both prime minister and home minister addressed more than 35 election rallies during the ongoing state elections, with neither wearing masks, nor maintaining physical distance. Added to this neither election commission nor home ministry took note of prolonged election campaign, especially spanning six weeks of eight phased polling in West Bengal nor the Kumbh mela, cricket matches, opening up of bars and cinema halls despite the Covid threat looming large. Instead, the prime minister became so complacent that he never acknowledged the fast rising death rate. With decline of cases in January this year and boasting India's victory over COVID as a great accomplishment, he kept stressing on it to the entire world. Ultimately people got the message and started emulating the political leaders. Thus, the negligent attitude became public and the neglect of Covid cautions resulted in an alarming second wave of infection.

2021-22 budget made tall claims of unprecedented 137 percent hike in allocations for the health sector when in actual terms the budgetary provision for 2021-22 for the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare shows a 9.6 percent decrease over the actual expenditure incurred in 2020-21. Seeing the resurgence of second wave of infection in Spain, Germany, France and U.K our government should have invested on strengthening health care infrastructure. Ironically not a single rupee was allocated in the Union budget for increasing hospital beds, ICU wards equipped with ventilators and oxygen supply, improvement of facilities in rural primary health centres. In the words of a renowned child specialist, the biggest lessons to learn from the pandemic raging in India is to create a robust healthcare system. Bold healthcare reforms have to be introduced as cosmetic changes will not help. There has to be a sustained campaign to deliver healthcare to rural India, he observed.

As the recent data shows a vast majority of infected patients are in the age group of 18 to 45. Incidentally this age group belongs to the earning sections, toiling to live and sustain the dependents. They constitute nearly 75 percent of the population in India. Being young they do not exhibit symptoms and act as active vectors to spread the infection. So as to break the chain and attain herd immunity, the present vaccination drive must be extended immediately to the younger working masses.

The present government is very slow in anticipating the need for capacity expansion to deal with a second surge of infections, which would require a much higher level of vaccination. The problem turned acute as a group of bureaucrats at the PMO have been put in charge of decision-making on production and distribution capacity across the country. It is also a fact that all the Union ministers (honourable health minister rarely speaks while all other ministers interfere) for the last four months have been actively engaged in electioneering in different states.

Presently, Serum Institute shoulders nearly 90 percent of the vaccine supply and the rest by Bharat Biotech. There is an urgent need to speed up production of both the vaccine products. The producers should be provided with special grants and other tax benefits to expand production capacity for increased supply of doses. Government should immediately negotiate and import other vaccines from Russia (Sputnik), Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson.

Time is running out, keep aside boasting about vaccine nationalism, vaccine diplomacy. Nothing is more important than averting a huge humanitarian disaster and saving the lives of fellow Indians. The Serum Institute has the capacity to produce 60 million doses a month and its promoter, Adar Poonawala, has been seeking bridge finance from the government to enhance capacity to produce 100 million doses to meet the growing demand. At present, the Serum Institute cannot meet even its current export commitment of over 60 million doses.

Prime minister should immediately invite a meeting of all political parties, scientists, doctors and discuss ways to come out of the Pandemic crisis. (IPA Service)

## Holy Dip vs Namaz

# Different rules on faith!

By Insaf

It's an appalling dichotomy. On the one hand, there is a sea of humanity at the ghats of the Ganga in Haridwar, Uttarakhand, at the Maha Kumbh Mela and on the other a total of only 50 persons are allowed to offer prayers five times a day at Delhi's Nizamuddin Markaz mosque with social distancing norms! The latter though should be seen as a saving grace for if the Centre had its way, no gathering should have been permitted 'as religious congregations stand prohibited by the Delhi Disaster Management Authority in the Capital'. The Centre's affidavit in the Delhi High Court dealing with Waqf Board's petition for allowing Namaz, did get the judge to frown who said: "there is no clear stand has been taken whether any religious or festival-related gatherings or congregations are permitted at other religious places like temples, churches, mosques." Precisely, so why the discrimination? The Uttarakhand government has made the Kumbh mela an exception, when Covid cases across the country are rising. Over 14 lakh devotees so far turned up at the ghats and it takes solace that there is a foothold in the numbers – way behind the 1.6 crore registered in 2010 Kumbh. It's a matter of faith which is bigger than anything else', is its reasoning, which should apply to the month of Ramadan too.

What takes the cake is when Uttarakhand Chief Minister Tirath Singh Rawat seeks to silence critics saying don't compare the Kumbh Mela with the Nizamuddin Markaz "which was held in a closed space and attended even by foreigners." The Kumbh is being held in the open on the sprawling ghats of the Ganga, with SOPs in place, which of course is hogwash. A pertinent question would be then why are States scrambling and imposing curfew? People can congregate out in the open. Here too does the justification that 'people's health is a priority but matters of faith cannot be totally ignored', hold good? There is a need for debate: is the Hindu faith different from that of the Muslims? In the Delhi High Court, when Solicitor General of India stated 'all religious gatherings have been banned', the counsel for Waqf Board countered saying he could submit photographs of Karol Bagh Hanuman Mandir to show a long queue and absence of social distancing. In fact, photograph of the Kumbh would more than suffice. The regret that Centre's rules are applicable for only Muslims, is not off the mark. Will New Delhi make amends? People would like to believe Mera Bharat Mahaan!

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) would do well to think of the adage, 'once bitten twice shy.' More so, following a terse lesson on usage of UAPA by a two-judge bench of Guwahati High Court on Wednesday last. Upholding the bail order of a special NIA court to activist Akhil Gogoi in October last year, the court ruled: while even provocative speech may come under UAPA ambit, it's only punishable if it's done with the intention of a "terrorist act" aimed at disturbing the country's "unity, integrity, security and sovereignty" and in this case there was no ground to hold him "prima facie guilty of committing a terrorist act." The case dates back to December 2019, after NIA hurriedly took over the case from Chabua police station, accusing him of leading a crowd of 600-odd people during anti-CAA protests, which caused 'economic blockade', 'pelting of stones' and murder of a 'police personnel on duty.'

The materials along with the chargesheet, noted the court, are 'basically statements of witnesses recorded under section 161 of Cr.P.C.', which "obviously do not have any evidential value." While Gogoi, who floated a new party Rajgor Dal, and contested from jail for the Sibsagar seat in these Assembly polls could heave a sigh of relief, his ordeal with NIA isn't over, as the Central agency has him booked in another UAPA case. Will it give in now?

**Gujarat's Tainted Reality**  
Three cheers to the Gujarat High Court. It has blown the lid off Rupani government's false claims on steps being taken to contain the covid spread. On Monday last, a division bench of Chief Justice Nath took many by surprise, pleasantly.

It heard a PIL, taken up suo moto saying the volume of reports in leading newspapers/news channels 'are flooded with harrowing tales, unfortunate and unimaginable difficulties, unmanageable conditions of their infrastructure, the shortfall and deficit of not only testing, availability of beds, ICU, but also supply of Oxygen and the basic medicines like Ramdesivir, etc, and these can't be ignored.' Observing "People now think they are at God's mercy," the AG was ticked off with: "situation is quite different than what you are claiming. You are saying that everything is alright. But, the reality is contrary to that." Specifics were reeled out: it now takes almost five days for a person to get RT-PCR test result; you didn't upscale testing facilities when you had time, there is no shortage of Ramdesivir, everything is available with you. We want results, not reasons." A hard rap indeed. Not only is there a 'trust deficit among people', but Rupani would do well not to rely on the propaganda machinery, which did wonders for Modi as Chief Minister. And remember Lincoln's famous quote: You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time.

**EC Didi's Whipping Boy**  
The Election Commission may well end up as TMC's favourite whipping boy, if it is upstaged on its turf. It's a no holds barred for Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and team. By now Nirvachan Sadan may have got used to off-heard charge of 'unconstitutional' decisions but being nicknamed 'Extremely Compromised' by Derek O'Brien in a tweet soon after Didi was barred from campaigning for 24 hours should make it see red, given that it has barred BJP chief too from campaigning for same period. Adding insult to injury, firebrand colleague Mahua Moitra tweeted on Thursday last: It's certainly criminal negligence bordering on manslaughter on part of @ECISVEEP to mandate 8 phase election in WB in middle of worst pandemic. Unbelievable that we are being put through this. Infections, deaths rising everyday," after Didi requested the EC to consider holding remaining 3 phases of polls in one go, "to protect people from exposure to Covid." While the reason could be doubted given the BJP is giving the TMC a run for its money, the EC is in no mood to concede and said 'There's no such plan.' It has also signalled it won't hesitate in banning events like rallies in case guidelines aren't followed. Luckily for it, Calcutta High Court too has stepped in and directed all guidelines as laid down by EC and CEO are strictly implemented in 'letter and spirit and if necessary, with police aid.' Who will have the last laugh?

**Round The States**  
taken up suo moto saying the volume of reports in leading newspapers/news channels 'are flooded with harrowing tales, unfortunate and unimaginable difficulties, unmanageable conditions of their infrastructure, the shortfall and deficit of not only testing, availability of beds, ICU, but also supply of Oxygen and the basic medicines like Ramdesivir, etc, and these can't be ignored.' Observing "People now think they are at God's mercy," the AG was ticked off with: "situation is quite different than what you are claiming. You are saying that everything is alright. But, the reality is contrary to that." Specifics were reeled out: it now takes almost five days for a person to get RT-PCR test result; you didn't upscale testing facilities when you had time, there is no shortage of Ramdesivir, everything is available with you. We want results, not reasons." A hard rap indeed. Not only is there a 'trust deficit among people', but Rupani would do well not to rely on the propaganda machinery, which did wonders for Modi as Chief Minister. And remember Lincoln's famous quote: You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time.

### Letters to the Editor

#### GHADC: Lessons learnt for UDP?

Editor,  
After a high-intensity showdown at the GHADC elections, the UDP came out with empty hands despite being complacent enough to announce that they would claim stake alongside the NPP. Many learned commentators view this election as an indicator of the 2023 state elections of Meghalaya. That being said, things look quite grim for the UDP at the outset.

With stalwarts like Bindo Lanong taking the backseat after strong years in politics, the current leadership has not gone beyond radical regionalism and empty rhetoric to fulfil their publicity needs. Jemino Mawthoh has been shown the door on two occasions, in 2018 and 2019, and despite that continues to hammer on irrelevant issues for the public, leave apart his unfounded confidence on his political presence. Paul Lyngdoh stays deeply buried in the KHADC, peeping out in the media once in a while to make controversial statements.

If the UDP wants to avoid a GHADC like scenario for the 2023 Assembly elections, it needs to come down to community engagement and understanding the needs of people. Making comments from armchairs atop ivory towers, and holding a misguided empathy, does no good in the politics of today. In the current scenario the

party can at best remain a coalition party, if not with reduced seats.

What the party needs at this point is to rethink strategies and make their prime focus of regionalism more substantive. The region has issues no doubt, but the party must deploy constructive narratives to talk about solution-oriented political goals. Using money power can go only a certain distance to capture a section of voters. But informed voters will always make decisions based on their assessment of impact, and hollow rhetoric is surely not amongst them.

Yours etc.,  
Patrick Kurbah  
Via email

#### Veiled threat by UDP unwarranted

Editor,  
The letter to the editor written by senior UDP member BM Lanong (ST April 15, 2021) reeks of a petty and intolerant mindset that threatens legal action against anyone who 'dares' to criticise the Party. If the UDP is so hyper-sensitive to criticism then it should quit politics and become an arm-twisting pressure group. The public has every right to criticise every political party. That is a democratic right guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. BM Lanong believes that since he is a lawyer, he also knows the law better than ordinary citizens. Sorry but we can all read and understand the

Constitution from which the laws of this country flow. Of course the UDP is hypocritical when it demanded that the MDA Government of which it is a part to take away the Home Department from James Sangma of the NPP and give it to their MLA, Lakhmen Rymbui. Has anything changed in the Home Department? Have the number of coal trucks not increased even though coal is still illegally mined and transported? In fact truck owners allege that the amount they pay today to get clearance for their coal trucks to move is higher.

Now the UDP want James Sangma to be removed from the Power Department just because of the electricity regulations. Wasn't UDP part of the earlier Congress Governments too that allowed the MeECL to sink into the morass of corruption and incompetence? Have they ever said anything against the Power Minister, Mukul Sangma? So why only now? Is that not blatant hypocrisy? Why feel ashamed when you are being called hypocrites? It will be interesting to see if BM Lanong takes Albert Thyrniang to Court for speaking his mind. Instead of appreciating Thyrniang for having the courage to call a spade a spade Lanong is trying to intimidate him. This is not acceptable. All of us who believe in freedom of speech and expression should stand with Albert Thyrniang for he speaks for all of us.

Yours etc.,  
D Langstiech,  
Shillong -3

#### Kudos to CMD, MeECL.

Editor,  
MeECL is really fortunate to have the young and dynamic CMD Sri AK Kembhavi. Such proactive Chairperson shall be able to work against odds to bring accountability that is conspicuously missing in all the tribal dominated states in NE. The Shillong Times has done a great job in keeping an upright person floating; otherwise the pressure groups would, as usual, be successful in drowning him by painting him as a corrupt and inept officer in the eyes of the public.

However, while explaining the apparent irregularities, like SMART Energy meter procurement, I expected transparency by resorting to technical & commercial grounds in justifying the purchase, rather than citing the example of militancy infested Manipur where cut-money is required. I am curious to know as to who will ultimately bear the huge expenditure in installing SMART energy meters that will surely eliminate pilferage of energy, thus bringing down the tariff of electricity substantially, to the advantage of genuine consumers.

I also expect that expenditures on purchase of materials and award of contracts are incurred with due diligence, based on necessity and techno-economic viability for achieving the

set targets. After all, there is no room for lavish expenditure.

Yours etc.,  
Nikhil Roy,  
Guwahati -1.

#### MeECL and the cycle of denial

Editor,  
The public has now become very much aware of the seemingly bottomless pit of scams that have recently come to the fore at MeECL. Corruption, it is now clearer than ever, will destroy this state. This lack of electrical power supply is surely not a new thing and for sure the origins lie with earlier governments as well, that is clear. Mukul and his INC cannot go acting like angels suffering from amnesia. This problem did not simply come out of nowhere but took years and years of abuse and corruption. The end result is that we have finally reached a stage where we have been left totally and completely in the cold dark. But we hope that this lack of electricity highlights our lack of Political Power as well. It seems to have piled up a lot of feathers within the organization and is as gripping as any crime thriller! We sincerely hope that we can hear more and more of the graft and theft that has been committed and that sooner or later we can actually charge-sheet some of these crooks as well.

James Sangma, must step down as Power Minister and

there must be an independent external inquiry into the Corporation and the Power department in general. A decent man would acknowledge his mistakes and resign. James Sangma cannot simply blame everything on the Congress mismanagement of the past! Does he honestly consider the recent Saubhagya Scheme scam a minor matter? This has happened right under his very nose. Any denial of responsibility is equivalent to hubris and we must as a community strive to see the eventual downfall that comes with such arrogance! James Sangma might be content to blame the demons of the past but the inexplicable and unjustifiable cost escalations in favour of firms, Satnam Global Infra and Onyon Enterprises, happened under his watch. This paper and others have reported this in numerous editions. This pricey misadventure has cost the state crores in unnecessary expenditure during its most difficult time, right during a pandemic. Our people are struggling even to make a meagre income while this unkind government plays a cruel joke on them by spending crores pointlessly! Channel this money into healthcare, into schools and into job creation. Stop wasting money and stop wasting everyone's time, MDA!

Yours etc.,  
Aver Pariat,  
Spokesperson, New Dawn,  
Via email

# Vectrax: Let us Beat the Mosquito Menace

Malaria remains a major health hazard in the developing world even today. Dengue has also seen multiple fatalities in many countries, including India. So Vectrax, a U.S.-India Science and Technology Endowment Fund-supported product, promising a cost-effective and sustainable solution to the problem is good news. Paromita Pain reports

Advances in science are often about challenging dominant paradigms. Agenor Mafra-Neto knows this well.

He is the chief executive officer of the California-based ISCA, an agricultural biotech company that brings new, effective and inexpensive solutions to global agriculture.

His research has led to the creation of Vectrax, an eco-friendly and sustainable solution to fight the hazard of disease-bearing mosquitoes in both urban and rural settings.

"In the early 2000s, my brother and sister, who lived in large cities in Brazil, caught dengue," says Mafra-Neto.

"How could they catch dengue in the middle of a city?"

That got me thinking about how difficult it is to control the breeding of mosquitoes in urban areas.

"Mosquitoes are vectors that may carry and transmit several harmful diseases to humans and animals through their bites.

Mafra-Neto, who holds doctoral and postdoctoral degrees in entomology/chemical ecology, started looking into the field of mosquito control and realised that there was "very little innovative thinking" when it came to chemical ecology.

"At that time, there was a dogma stating that female mosquitoes feed only on blood and males feed only on sweet excretions from plants," he says.

## Attract and kill

Intrigued, Mafra-Neto took a fresh look at what attracted mosquitoes in the first place.

"We saw that adult mosquitoes, both male and female, use plant nectar as fuel for their various activities," he says.

"We started working on scents and different compounds that mimic odours of plants providing these nectar meals to mosquitoes."

This research led Mafra-Neto's team to create Vectrax, a patented odour-based solution that mimics the scents of plants mosquitoes feed upon, attracts



and effectively eliminates the pests.

Recently, the project received funding from the U.S.-India Science and Technology Endowment Fund (USISTEF).

The fund supports research and development to generate public good, through the commercialisation of technology developed as part of sustained partnerships between U.S. and Indian researchers and entrepreneurs.

In association with the Telangana-based ATGC Biotech, Mafra-Neto was able to test the efficacy of Vectrax in Hyderabad.

Mafra-Neto was introduced to Markandeya Gorantla, chairman and managing director of ATGC Biotech,

through his colleagues from Cornell University.

"The pheromones [chemicals that affect insect behaviour] are expensive to manufacture," says Gorantla.

"ATGC Biotech specialises in this area, and we have the capacity to cost-effectively manufacture such chemical compositions. So, the collaboration was very useful."

## Eco-conscious and sustainable

While developing the product, the team was very careful to ensure that using chemicals to modify the behaviour of insects did not affect other beneficial insects like bees.

"We wanted a product that could be sprayed as an 'attract-and-kill' application, rather than only as an attractant for traps and other devices," says Mafra-Neto.

Conventional pest control techniques usually use harsh chemicals that need to be sprayed on every inch of an area to ensure there are enough toxic surfaces for the mosquitoes to land on and die.

But this spraying is often uneven, leading to areas with unequal doses of toxic chemicals, which allows mosquito populations to build up resistance to pesticides.

However, Vectrax works differently.

"We create numerous point sources or hotspots in the area where Vectrax is applied, and this attracts mosquitoes to the point source where they encounter the right dose of pesticide that, then, kills them," explains Gorantla.

"This means using significantly less insecticide per treated area.

Thus, the impact on the environment is very low." He adds that the effect lasts over several months.

## Tried and tested

Vectrax has already been field-tested for several years in Africa and South America.

"Vectrax can be a game changer for developing nations fighting diseases such as malaria and dengue," says Mafra-Neto. It can be safely used in both urban and agricultural areas.

As Gorantla emphasises, urban pest management is an important concern in India. Vectrax was used in the Golconda Fort area, which was successful in reducing about 70 percent of the mosquito numbers.

"India has very strict regulations concerning the use of insecticides, so we were allowed to use Vectrax in a limited area.

But if we were allowed to treat the whole area of the fort, we could have reduced the mosquito menace even further," says Gorantla.

With the aid of the USISTEF grant, ISCA will now be able to extensively test the product in Indian conditions.

This, in turn, will help it meet regulatory specifications and register the product in India.

ISCA's plans involve working toward bringing more products like Vectrax to the market, scaling up manufacturing and improving distribution. (SPAN/TWF)

# From a Daughter to Mother: Here's Translating a Memoir

The English rendering of "Amader Shantiniketan", a charming memoir by the late Hindi writer Shivani, translated by her daughter Ira Pande, will be released under Penguin Random House India's Vintage imprint next month.

This timeless memoir was

ness of its inmates, many of whom went on to become iconic Indians.

Shivani's recall of her time there takes the reader into a magical space that remains as inspirational as it was to her when she went there all the way from Kumaon a lifetime ago.

translated into English now, at a time when that Bengal and that life has almost vanished.

Today, when I see the legacy of Tagore being fought over, I think this world needs to be remembered, and this school needs to be preserved in our memories," she added.

Elizabeth Kuruvilla, Executive Editor, Ebury Publishing & Vintage, Penguin Random House India, said: "Shivani is a masterful storyteller, and in 'Amader Shantiniketan', she transports you to the carefree world of the childhood she spent at Shantiniketan.

Witty and filled with warmth and laughter, this is a rare, intimate view of life in Tagore's experimental school, which shaped the most creative minds of the age.

These are stories that need to be read by adults and children alike, of a school that allowed its students to not just dream but also, importantly, to day-dream."

Milee Ashwarya, Publisher, Ebury Publishing and Vintage, said "Amader Shantiniketan" takes the reader "on a trip to her formative years spent in Shantiniketan that had a huge influence on her life and her work.

This remarkable memoir with its vivid portrayal opens the window to a unique world, and the people who inhabited it giving us an insight into the influences and inspirations behind one of the foremost Hindi writers of twentieth century. I am delighted that Ira Pande has translated this gem, and

brought it alive for many more readers".

ther, Pandit Hariram Pande, a close associate of Pandit Madan

her gurus at the Ashram and looked upon Bengal as her second home. Her literary output, which spans some 40 works, bears the deep imprint of both Kumaon and Bengal.

Best known for her short stories and novels and newspaper columns, Shivani also wrote several travelogues and a three-part autobiography before she passed away. Most of her novels were serialized in the popular magazines of the time and created a vast readership that was the envy of her contemporaries.

She was awarded the Padma Shri in 1979.

Starting as a lecturer in Panjab University, Ira Pande later switched to editing and publishing, working with several prominent English-language publishing houses. Her last editorial stint was as chief editor of the India International Centre's Publication Division.

In 2005, she wrote a memoir of her mother titled "Diddi: My Mother's Voice", documenting the life and times of her mother.

Other translations followed, along with several edited volumes at the IIC.

She is now mainly a translator of Hindi writing and is working on a few projects.

In 2011, she was awarded the Sahitya Akademi prize for her translation of Manohar Shyam Joshi's "T'ta Professor", which also won the Crossword Translation prize in 2010.

She writes a regular column for the Tribune, published from Chandigarh. (IANS)



written by Shivani nearly 50 years ago from her perspective as a child and young girl studying in Shantiniketan, the school set up by Rabindranath Tagore. It is a loving homage to a grand institution and its legendary gurus.

Along with the moving tributes she wrote when some of her beloved contemporaries passed away, the memoir is a sort of diptych that captures the spirit of the Ashram and the liveli-

"Amader Shantiniketan" said Ira Pande, "has always been the favourite of my mother's works. Apart from recording an important part of the fashioning of the Bengal renaissance, the book is written from the perspective of a child.

It captures the innocence and the pristine, pastoral world that Tagore created, and brings alive people in a way that only a child can portray them".

"This book was born to be



Gaura Pant 'Shivani' (1923 - 2003) was among the foremost Hindi writers of her time.

Born in Rajkot, her childhood was spent in various places as her father moved from one princely state to another.

As a young child, she was tutored by her scholar grandfa-

Mohan Malviya and one of the founding faculty members of the Banaras Hindu University.

At the age of 12, she was sent along with her two siblings to Shantiniketan, where she spent nine magical years.

Throughout her life, Shivani lived by the teachings of

# Subodh Gupta: Making Art out of the Personal

By Sukant Deepak

**F**rom brass utensils to stainless steel tiffins. From cow dung to buckets - in the world of one of India's best known contemporary artists, Subodh Gupta, the universal derives from the personal even as the past and future emerges as a time of both hope and conflict.

Known for employing localised metaphors in some of his best known works - steel tiffin boxes, thalis and bicycles, to reflect upon the transformation of the Indian social landscape, an exhibition of Gupta's latest paintings, along with those of Jitesh Kallat, titled 'Confabulations: New Painting' was recently held at Nature Morte in the capital.

Talking about his four new paintings, all entitled 'Lonely City', that started with found photographs of the fires in the Amazon rainforest in 2020, a dramatic departure from his earlier paintings, the artist points that the pandemic, and lockdown that followed taught us a great deal about ourselves and how we live in this world.

"Several things are changing on the planet - climate, behaviour of species - and yet we humans are always in a mad rush to acquire and accumulate.

In many ways this pandemic has indeed been a 'portal' from one way of existing into another, and that's how I like to think about the movement within my own work too.

"When I started making work with stainless steel, it was very much about the economic change India was going through at the time and the disappearing use of steel among a plastic favouring the new middle class.

So change and how we respond to it has always been a



key theme in my work.

As an artist, I may practice something for a long period of time, but I also don't want to get stuck in it.

My language is constantly evolving just the way the world around me is, and that's what I respond to, he tells IANS.

Adding that the period of lockdown was immensely productive for him, he elaborates, "It was a period when as a human race we needed to pause and look deep within ourselves.

Artists have always been solo creatures and love to work in isolation. The world went quiet."

Point to the fact that works

by both Jitesh Kallat and him were exhibited together -- with their much different styles and processes, and Gupta says Kallat is a contemporary and gifted painter.

"Also, the show was curated by Peter Nagy, who is a painter himself, so both of us were in good hands.

We have two different languages of course, but that's a good thing otherwise what is the point of having a show together?" says the artist who has shown at some of the most important biennales across the world.

Currently working on five-six projects simultaneously - paint-

ing, sculpture and installation, he says: "I work across mediums, and like that flexibility."

One of the most expensive contemporary Indian artists, whose work 'Banyan Tree', a life-size sculpture made from stainless steel, is permanently displayed at the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, Gurugram-based Gupta insists that he never thinks about who is at top and who is not.

"As an artist, my job is to make and be stimulated by new ideas. I know to do only one thing in my life and that is art.

It excites me and gives meaning to my life so that is why I

keep doing it."

In contemporary social and political times, when artists are often asked about the politics of their art, Gupta makes it clear that he does not make "political art".

"But my art always poses a global question - of food, how we eat, what rituals surround it, what ideas and objects sit at tables across the world. In some ways these questions are the same across cultures."

For me, to ask these questions is a way to build awareness about how we live on this planet," says the artist.

For someone who brought the world on the same table by cooking at Art Basel as part of his performance piece, he smiles.

"I've always said that if I wasn't an artist, I would be a chef. Maybe they are not different after all. I love cooking and it's as simple as that."

"I'm constantly trying new recipes and reading about those who take an interest in the topic. In fact the title of my Art Basel performance is from Charles Malamoud's book."

I was very taken by how he talks about the philosophy of Indian food and wanted to translate that into a performance.

Perhaps my only regret was not being able to feed the average person through that.

I hope to one day make it a public art project that is not specific to an art crowd," says the artist who was born in Khagaul in Bihar.

As the conversation veers towards the current state of art schools in India, Gupta, a pass-out from College of Art and Craft in Patna says he is terribly saddened by the fact that nothing has changed in the past 30 years.

"The younger generation has a lot of potential, but in India, we see a serious lack of governmental support to art institutions. Some private players have sought to fill this gap, such as the Shiv Nadar school of Art, but we need to see many more of them.

Perhaps even one that is initiated by artists themselves. I still remember that I was not given even a single class of art history in my six years of art school.

Therefore, I am a great believer in self-learning actually."

The artist, who did theatre for around five years feels that it has been instrumental in shaping him and he would even say that those years were his real art school.

"I used to act, do set design, make posters, and even sell tickets -- so it was really a versatile education.

"It gave me the love for putting on a show. That's where I picked up this idea of staging something for an audience."

When you take that to visual art, you are your own most intimate audience."

Even today, the way I stage my installations, they are big because they are loud, almost screaming - Look at me!

So retaining that performative aspect of my training has been critical in the way I make art now," says Gupta who is married to major contemporary artist, Bharti Kher.

Through the decades that he has been making art, Gupta says that there is a language that has developed over time.

"Some things get simpler and yet others get tougher. The idea is to keep looking for that same thing over and over again, the very thin line between what is art and not." (IANS)

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, APRIL 18, 2021

Moon settles Venus on your solar return chart and it is going to give wonderful results. The number of your contacts is going to expand and you will be getting opportunities to rise in your business/job. Your financial position will be good and you will also achieve your aim and objective on time. You will also have an inclination to do something new at every moment. You will also be able to get your work done and will remain in the spot light. Additional sources of income will be explored. There will be an inflow of money. You will also win support and confidence of your peers and superiors. Students will perform well and get admission in courses/institutes of their choice.

**Aries: (March 21 - April 20)**  
There will be improvement in your financial condition. And your business will improve. You will also undertake business related trips and get a chance to meet lot of new people. You will be happy and at ease. Your carefree attitude will win you new admirers. Jupiter orbit in your horoscope will keep your health in the best condition. You will also enjoy a wonderful love life and your relations with partner/spouse is going to be great. You will understand his/her feelings and try to fulfill them. You will also get promoted in your job. The doors of fate are opened for you and you will rise in your field of work. The time is good; take advantage of it.

**Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)**  
It is going to be a very favorable week for financial and love matters. You will be in best position to take advantage of a very favorable time period. You will do the best of work now. And also get the desired success. You will be satisfied to know that all your works are going according to your wish. Your financial position is going to be strong and stable. Your bank balance will add on. You will also take tours due to your job/business purpose. You will also enjoy perfect understanding and bonding with your mate. He/she will be a source of inspiration and will keep on guiding you. You could also get involved in a new romantic relationship. Some problem will be resolved with the help of a friend. Officials will be happy with your work. This will increase your influence and prestige.

**Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)**  
Your influence and prestige will grow. You will also recollect some good memories. Your prestige is society will increase. And your deeds will bring lot of fame and name. You will have kindness and pity for the sick and needy. It is a very good time for financial gains. Some new guests will arrive at your home and you will keep you busy. Love birds will have an amazing time. You will touch new heights of achievements in your business. Students will work hard and get desired results. You need to introspect and analyze yourself. It is time to become a bit vocal and express your feelings. You need to bring about a change in your communication and behavior. It will help you in meeting challenges of life well.

**Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)**  
It is going to be a favorable week. Your physical health is going to be very good. You will make good gains in your business. Your progress in job/work is going to be praise worthy. There are going to be no major financial worries. You will try and keep your family away from all problems. You will also get blessings of your elders. You will also keep a positive approach towards life. Your government related work will get done. You will be able to get your work done by running here and there business deals will be successful. You will also attend a family function. There is possibility of works related to land, building etc. being completed.

**Leo: (July 23 - August 23)**  
Your well executed plans will bring in lot of money. You will have sudden gains. Your efforts will also bear fruits. You will meet people with the same thinking. You will also pay attention to sports and entertainment. You will work hard and make progress in business/job. At home, the atmosphere will be in your favor and your family members will look towards you for guidance. You will also enhance your knowledge. Some happy moments will come in your life. You will be able to take everybody with you. Housewives and working women will pay attention to their families. You will top in some interview. There will be some enthusiastic activity in family life. You will be full of vigor and energy. Pending matters will gather momentum. Relations with siblings will be perfect. Your opponents will try to dominate but not get success.

**Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)**  
Things are looking up again for you this week. A dispute that was going on for long will get resolved with the help of a third person. It will bring you lot of relief. Possibility of some journey with your family is there. You will be appreciated for your contribution in

your society and work place. Your opponents will be active, but will not be able to face you. You will also fulfill your family responsibility well. The time is in your favor. You will also recover your money that you gave to a third person as loan. Time will be spent on daily chores. But you will be more enthusiastic. You will be able to make a separate identity for yourself on the basis of your talents. Officials will be influential by your style of working.

**Libra: (September 23 - October 23)**  
You will have a desire to excel in your job/work. You will be successful in your efforts. You will also be able to make new contacts which will prove very profitable for you. A chance meeting with an influential person will open the doors of destiny for you. You will also plan a major expansion of your business. New transactions will provide strength to your business. You might need the recommendation of someone to achieve your goals. You will also meet your family members with a lot of enthusiasm. Your opponents will keep an eye on you. You will get success in matters related to heart. Your dreams will come true.

**Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)**  
The beginning of the week will start with money inflow. Your financial position will get better. You will also establish a good working relationship with your bosses. Your investments will fetch you good gains. Couples will have cordial relations. They will help each other. Initially you will have to make a lot of sacrifices in your career. There will be struggles too but later on you will get success. Everyone will take advice from you. You will also have a feeling of dedication. Your spouse will have good bonding with you. You will be absorbed in yourself and be able to establish a coordination amongst things.

**Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)**  
It is a wonderful week. Your relations with closed ones will improve. You will also enjoy good food in a restaurant. You will also purchase a new property. It is time to leave some of your old ideas and bring new energy and thinking in your personality. You can also get interested in religious work. The time will be well spent in the company of your spouse/mate. There will be stability in money related matters. You will make good gains in business. Legal matters will be resolved with the mediation of someone. The middle of the week will be peaceful. Some new thoughts may come to you. You will also complete your work with sincerity.

**Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)**  
An exciting week is in store for you ahead. Due to influence of Mars on your zodiac, you will show a lot of zeal and zest in your work. Your enthusiasm will be unmatched and you will do amazing things in your work. Your plans will be successful. You will also get money from multiple sources. You will get great speed or response in your work. At this time someone else may try to take credit for your work but you will not allow it to happen. Emotionally you will be strong. Hurdles will get removed and you will get success in studies. Dedication and commitment towards your goals will take you far.

**Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)**  
This week is a success granting week. You will make a very good start and keep getting success. Your efforts will be praise worthy. This will make you feel delighted. Your work planning will take you towards success. The time will fetch you great rewards. There will be an increase in your work potential. There is scope for promotion in job. You will also go for some investment and saving too. You will have a loving attitude towards your family members. Even your spouse will support you a lot. Meeting with an important personality will be rewarding for you. You will finish work related to higher education and research and also children related work.

**Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)**  
It is an extraordinary week for you. All your planned works will get completed. You will also make good gains in business. Government related work will get done. You could also get a promotion in your job. You will be busy in the fun events. The obstacles in the way to your success will get removed. You will also be lost in various plans and ideas. But you will be getting the opportunities to rise. You will also gain profits in your profession. You will also behave politely at your workplace. Lovebirds will have a wonderful time. Those who are single will get good marriage proposals. You will also meet a top personality. It will open the doors of progress for you. You will be lost in your world and thinking. But this is an ideal time to make the perfect move. We have to grab the opportunity when it matters most. Your children will make you feel happy with their performance.

# Career option with Customers

Ranjana K Baruah

**W**e are still worried about COVID 19 and the pandemic. The cases have increased in many parts of the country.

Exams are either postponed or cancelled by a few boards and we are uncertain about other exams.

Students are still worried and it is a serious concern. In spite of all that, we have to move ahead and keep planning for our career options. Log down may be strict or partial but we have to take precaution and protect ourselves and others from the pandemic.

Let us talk about an option which will continue even if there is lock down.

For any business the most important word is customer or client. Whatever business we do, we need to have good customers to make more profit and increase the business.

To become successful in business or in any commercial activities we need to have people who can manage customers and at the same time increase customers.

One of the career options related to this field is customer relationship management.

Customer relationship management (CRM) is a model for managing a company's interactions with current and future customers.

It involves using technology to organize, automate, and synchronize sales, marketing, customer service, and technical support.

It entails all aspects of interaction that a company has with its customer, whether it is sales or service-related. Apart from working with existing customers it also deals with future potential customers.

CRM is most commonly used to describe a business-customer relationship; CRM systems are used in the same way to manage business contacts, clients, contract wins and sales leads.

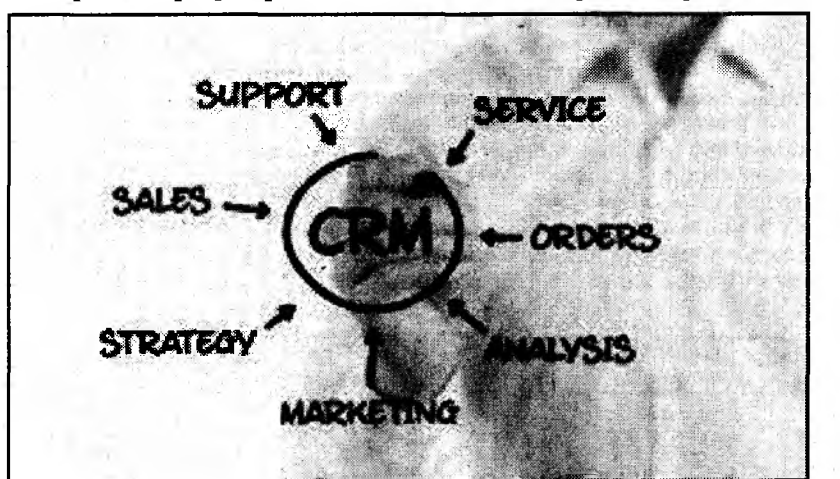
Many organizations now use CRM software, a technology that

makes the customer - company interaction swift and graceful.

The key elements to a successful Customer Relationship Management plan are people, process and

communication skills if they want to choose this profession.

Apart from good communication skills, a positive attitude and effective interpersonal qualities are



technology. Customer Relationship Managers are very much essential in an organization to manage relationships with customers systematically, efficiently and profitably.

These people may be technical who can manage the system and at the same time sales professionals who can deal with the people directly.

CRM involves many designations and avenues like project engineer, consultants, technical consultant, functional consultant, manager, project leaders, sales professional, solutions developers etc.

The responsibility of these professionals varies according to their position.

Graduates in any discipline can make a career in customer relationship management.

Though there is no specific course for this but graduates with computer background or knowledge of computers are always preferable.

There are courses like MBA in CRM. Some institutes offer Certificate, Advance Certificate, Diploma and PG Diploma programs in CRM through their regular and distance learning programs. Like other professions, aspirants must have good

must for success in this area. They must have leadership qualities and also good personalities as they need to meet and face different kinds of customers or other clients.

We should not confuse the term with customer care executives or customer care directly.

There are links to all these but all are different and have different roles and responsibilities.

There are growing demands in this field as business is enhancing everywhere.

Big companies and corporations are looking for trained and qualified people for CRM.

Even during lock down we saw few businesses could make profit though most had challenges.

Customers are important for any company or even anyone who is into business. New startups also need good relationships with customers to excel in the field.

Though the scope is not tremendous in North East at present but in future there would be demand for the same.

(Ranjana K Baruah is a career mentor and skill trainer and can be reached at 8473943734 or bkranjana@gmail.com for any further queries)

"Don't waste your time with explanations: people only hear what they want to hear."

— Paulo Coelho

## The Shillong Times

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### Congress still fighting fit

THE recently concluded GHADC elections have disappointed those in the ruling conglomerate – the NPP, UDP, BJP who believed they were going to sweep the polls. The people of Garo Hills chose to vote for individuals instead of Party. They elected those they felt deserved their trust. True that money power could not be completely defeated but it had to a certain extent when the people of Chokpot roughed up the former MDC who was also the former Deputy CEM of the outgoing Council for trying to bribe them with cash. The outgoing Council led by the NPP had indulged in blatant misdemeanours by allotting contracts to people close to the Party. These misdemeanours were brought to light by an RTI done by the BJP which is to the tune of Rs 100 crore. Projects that were allocated funds are all hanging fire even while the money has been disbursed. Employees of the GHADC numbering over 1700, were not paid salaries for over three years which is unprecedented. This saga of corruption has been widely discussed by the media and the BJP had made this the crux of their campaign in the run-up to the GHADC polls. Although the BJP and the UDP are both coalition partners in the present Government, they all fought on separate planks in the Council polls and hammered at each other. No pains were spared by the BJP to publicly speak about the scams in the Council and the need to clean up the ugly mess. No wonder the NPP distanced itself from the two elected BJP MDCs while forming the Executive Council on Saturday. The BJP thought that its support would be needed because the NPP would not have enough MDCs on its own. As it turns out the NPP got 11 seats and made up for the shortage by aligning with the 3 Independent and one GNC MDC.

What's interesting about the GHADC election is that it could be a foretaste of the 2023 state assembly elections. Going by this calculation, the Congress has emerged as the single largest Party winning 12 out of 29 seats in the Council. What's also of interest is the public statement by a senior minister of the present MDA Government that the Congress cannot be written off and that former Chief Minister and Congress leader, Dr Mukul Sangma is still in the reckoning in the Garo Hills. The Congress is no stranger to the UDP. The two parties are past allies and have a working relationship. In the 2018 assembly election, Congress had won 20 seats which are now reduced to 16 on account of resignation of one MLA and death of three others for which bye-elections to two seats are pending. In politics there are no permanent friends or enemies. And going by the public disillusionment on the performance of the NPP-led MDA Government there is likelihood that there will be a vote for change in 2023. The UDP in its wisdom is keeping all options open.

# The river is people's identity

By HH Mohrmen

There are two things that one must understand to be able to appreciate the reason behind the recent protest against the plan to construct a dam on the Wah Umngot. One must first understand the ancient and profound connection that the community has with the rivers and the ecosystem. And the second is of the resurgence of this connection that people have with the rivers in the two major towns of the Khasi Jaintia hills. Reader of the Shillong Times who follow the news in Khasi Jaintia region, would notice that there are people both in Shillong and Jowai who try to revive or protect the rivers in their respective areas.

The move to revive wah Umkhrah as it is the case in Shillong and the movement to protect the river Myntdu in Jowai is the sign of the resurgence of this ancient relation that the locals have with the ecosystem and the river in particular. Hence one will miss the most important point if one does not see the protest against the dam over the Wah Umngot in the light of these developments.

There are those who question why Umngot is important. A careful analysis would reveal that Wah Umngot is one of those rare rivers where one sees no human settlements on its banks except at the end of the river before it flows to the plains of Bangladesh. From the place of its origin on the foothills of the Shillong peak till it reaches Shongpang, the nearest village will be many kilometres away from the river. In other civilizations first human settlements were always found on the banks of the rivers, but in the case of Umngot it is not so. The reason people avoid settling on its bank is perhaps out of respect for the river.

Maybe Umngot is like a maiden who is shy of humans and lives her own life and flows through the rough terrain to serve the people. This perhaps is the reason why the River remains clean and crystal clear till it reaches Dawki. Throughout the length and breadth of the River, it created beautiful canyons on both sides. Even the tributaries of the rivers which flow to Umngot from every direction are clean and clear which helps maintain the crystal clear condition of

the river. This is perhaps why the famous Wah Umngot is unique in its own right and is special to the people.

Indigenous people around the world have their own understanding of nature and that which surrounds them. One of their very unique understanding is that plants and even rivers are sentient beings. They are not just beings but animate beings which they treat like their relatives. They have hundreds of stories about these rivers in which they personify as humans. Even in the way they speak to or about the beings around them, they give them the same respect that they give to fellow human beings. For example unlike in English where the pronoun used when referring to beings other than human is 'it', in Khasi Pnar language, the same pronoun is used for both humans and other animate beings.

One can see the respect that the culture gives to other beings when they use the pronoun 'u' or he/him for male and 'ka' or her/she for female even for other animate beings. They do not consider them as lifeless so the pronoun 'it' is not used when referring to other sentient beings. Not only is the sentient world treated equally but even rivers, hills, mountains and rocks too are referred to as living beings in the Khasi Pnar milieu. Myntdu and Kupli rivers were also worshipped as deities by the people.

What better example can best illustrate the profound connection that people have with their rivers than the song composed by Shemphanghun Mukhim from Mawdulop village who is also a member of farmers on the banks of the River Umngot (ka kynhun nongrep harud wah Umngot). The song which was first used in the protest against the recent proposed public hearing at Singkhinai, has become like a protest song of the people who live near Wah Umngot. The song also resonates both the ancient and the present bond that people have with the river.

It is a pity that the song is in Khasi, but then language is another important medium through which one can con-

nect with nature. This writer will attempt to translate the same to English so that all the readers of the Shillong Times will be able to appreciate the profound relationship that people have with the river. The song is a classic case of Shemphanghun's connection with the River or rather how the river speaks to his heart.

Ko wah Umngot wah kaba kyntang/Ko wah ba don la ki khandatng/Ko wah basngur ba ithiang/Kum pha ngan shem pat shaei?/U khaw u kba shilynter jong pha/Ki shnung baduk pha ai bam pha bsa/Ko wah Umngot naduh mynhyndai/Harud jong pha don ki mawlynnai. Rice grows along the river which feeds the poor villages. Umngot, since time immemorial on your banks there are precious stones.

Like Umngot; Kupli also has its story and when the Kupli Hydroelectric project was made, a large part of the river on the Jaintia side was also submerged but the pertinent question to the government is how has the state benefitted from the Kupli project? The other question has to do with the cost of construction. The cost of the Myntdu Lechka hydel project had escalated three times the original cost. Obviously when one loses one's respect for the river one also loses respect for other values system like 'kamai ia ka hok'.

In the indigenous culture all the rivers have stories and if we lose these stories then part of people's identity too will go. Similarly people who live on both sides of the river have stories and if the river is dammed then all these stories will vanish away. The Government claimed that the dam will not affect the land and its people, but has it taken these important points into consideration? With regards to the villages downstream of the river where tourist spots have emerged, the question that begs the answer is – what about the USP of all the tourist spots in the area. The truth is the crystal clear condition of the water is the only USP of all the tourist spots downstream of the dam. Hence any construction upstream will cause turbidity of the water and it will no longer be crystal clear.

If the Khasi Pnar really wants to protect their identity, maintaining the deep relation that they have with nature is also their identity. If one loses this bond then one is no longer an indigenous Khasi Pnar because protecting the river and the entire ecosystem is also protecting one's identity.

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from our ancestors. We will not allow the wealth that God has bestowed on us to be taken away from us. We will fight even if we are poor and illiterate. We will not let people take away our rights from us.

U khaw u kba shilynter jong pha/Ki shnung baduk pha ai bam pha bsa/Ko wah Umngot naduh mynhyndai/Harud jong pha don ki mawlynnai. Rice grows along the river which feeds the poor villages. Umngot, since time immemorial on your banks there are precious stones.

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India is currently carrying the status of largest per day infections

## Narendra Modi's model COVID management now coming out in true colours

By Sushil Kutty

In Lucknow, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath could, if he wants, smell the stench of death. For the last several days, the city's crematoriums have been inundated with Covid corpses. So much so, with people taking a morbid interest in the goings on at the city's largest crematorium, the authorities had to put up an "opaque" fence all around it! Out of sight out of mind?

Hardly. Governments, both central and those of the states, seem to have lost the plot to the coronavirus, fumbling along in bumbling disarray. And it doesn't matter which party is in power where. If Gujarat's Chief Minister Vijay Rupani and Maharashtra's Uddhav Thackeray have no clue, Prime Minister Narendra Modi looks no less lost. Surprisingly unaware of responsibility! Stumbling from one misstep to the next. Lost in a labyrinth of their own making.

In its second coming, Covid-19 is treating India like it treated Italy and Brazil (and Spain) with the first wave. And it's not just in

mation grounds are crowded with the Covid-dead, the standstill caravan of ambulances outside hospitals tell another story – of acute shortage of hospital beds; prompting people to cynically retort, "But, then, when did we vote for hospitals, we voted for Ram Mandir, didn't we?" Like they say, the sting is in the tail: Only now it's dawning on the electorate that their priorities were wrong.

That said, it took countless dead to bring home the basic truth. Social media is awash with posts and comments, tweets and Instagram stories, of people who have woken up to the realization that temple domes and masjid minarets do not count if there isn't Remdesivir, the ventilator and the oxygen. That in today's Covid world, death is cheap!

Entire families are getting infected and nobody knows for sure whether it's the old who are succumbing more, or are the young too collapsing lifeless in big numbers? All you get to hear and see (on TV and newspapers) are cold lifeless statistics. And,



Lucknow, crematorium grounds across India are witness to unseemly hurry thwarted by pile-ups of Covid dead. The dead are being burned well past dusk, right up to and beyond the midnight hour. Similarly, burial grounds can't locate space to bury the Covid-dead. Besides, consigning the dead now costs a packet, at crematorium as well as at the 'kabristan'.

Chances are if you are rich, if you're "connected", with "jugaad" written into your pedigree, you would be able to survive Covid-19, nary a worry. For instance, Bollywood actors, who post their Covid-19 statuses on Twitter and Instagram, move into the best of hospitals without a hitch. Not the common man, even the middle-class twitterati. Only the lucky few among these lesser mortals are able to find a hospital bed and oxygen to beat the coronavirus.

The other day a "national award winning cyclist" died after two private hospitals in Pune refused to admit him, and the third, a government installation, admitted him only to allegedly "neglect" him. This guy got his features plastered all over the media because his was a known face, but the common guy, the Aam Aadmi, will pass away, vanish into a black-hole the other side of the Invisible Line, no questions asked!

And, now with the Government putting the brakes on the over-the-counter availability of Remdesivir, there's a roaring black market in the drug all across the country. In Karmal, Haryana, a vial of Remdesivir @MRP 250 is selling at Rs 15,000-Rs18000 in the black market. That said, the shortage of ventilators is the biggest killer in the realm. Nobody's sure whether Remdesivir is effective or not, but hundreds are suffocating for want of ventilators in hospitals. In Ahmedabad, where cre-

then, you're told of Covid-appropriate behaviour while Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah and politicians of all hues address Covid-inappropriate public rallies without a care in the world.

The question: Do politicians only care for elections, to win them at any cost? Unlike SARS, Covid-19 is not going away anytime soon. The severity of the second wave is proof that the novel coronavirus has quietly adapted to earth conditions and is mutating to spread across geographies. A 'mahamandaleshwar' of a Jabalpur temple who took a dip at the Khumb in Haridwar died of Covid-19 the other day and it's reported that he had taken both doses of the Covid-19 vaccine before he took the 'shahisnaan'.

The point is, everything about the novel coronavirus, including the vaccines, is sort of fluid at this point in time. If the Government of the day does not understand this, then we as a nation might as well do a Padmavati! Just for reminders, India reported its highest number of Covid cases for the eighth time in nine days on April 17. This, when China reported record economic growth as it rebounded from the pandemic slump. Should Narendra Modi take some Covid lessons from Xi Jinping?

Maybe yes. India's total Covid cases had raced to 14,074,564 and Covid deaths to 174,308. Nobody lives forever, but to die from Covid is such a waste. A novel coronavirus comes out of "nowhere" and takes away lives by the hundreds of thousands! For millions of Indians who sat through the first Covid wave, the second Covid wave is unnerving. And, for all we know, there's a massive vaccine crisis in the making even as helpless and hopeless people despair. Lives can be saved, but who's listening? (IPA Service)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Damming Our Future

Editor,  
Umngot River, the cleanest and the most beautiful river in India is being converted to a Dam. To the Government these dams are a symbol of mega achievement but to the people who are displaced, these monsters mean emptiness of existence. The construction of this dam is not only against the people but also against the advice of ecologists, geologists and activists. Being a major tourist attraction, it is a major source of livelihood for the locals and it is also used to irrigate agricultural land in the villages upstream. The plan of the Government is to build a hydro-electric dam by the MeECL (Meghalaya Energy Cooperation Limited) in one of the most important rivers. Yes it'll generate more electricity but there is no telling that the project will succeed. Building a dam increases the possibility of floods in the area, ruining the agricultural land and the people who depend on it.

Above all, this project would affect the biodiversity and ecosystems of the forest nearby and the local fisheries will lose habitat. Being a major tourist spot and a source of irrigation, building a dam would make the lives of the locals harder, the effect would be felt far away in Dawki where the risk of the dam drying up during the winters would cost a great problem to their livelihoods. We should not allow the Government to turn India's

cleanest river to a catastrophe. So far the locals have been protesting successfully despite the pandemic, risking their lives. But the Government seems to be paying no heed. Let's not forget that the Government is for and by the people. And we as the people will continue to fight against this dreadful decision and together we will stop it.

Yours etc;  
Lyzander.E.Sohkhet,  
Via email

#### Rejoinder from AIBOC

Editor  
Apropos to the editorial 'Bank holiday imbroglio' (ST April 15, 2021), I would like to clarify, certain points and bust some myths regarding Banks and Bank Holidays.

Point No. 1: The Government of Meghalaya publishes a Holiday List every year. It comes in two parts Annexure I & II. Under Annexure I, in 2021, (No. GAA.88/2020/48 dated 09.12.2021) apart from 23 General Holidays, there are 3 (maximum) Local Holidays which the Deputy Commissioner can declare within their respective jurisdictions, except for East Khasi Hills where the GAD (A) department will declare the Local Holidays. Shad Suk Mysiem is one of the holidays listed in the Holiday List qualifying for declaration of Local Holiday. Again, as part of Annexure I, there is a provision of Special Holiday in 6 districts of Meghalaya for Rev. Thomas Jones Day on June 22, 2021. Then comes the list of 10

Restricted Holidays in addition to the above referred holidays under Annexure I, out of which employees can avail any 2. This would effectively mean that the State Government gets 23 General Holidays + 2 Local Holidays + 1 Special Holiday + 2 Restricted Holidays, totaling to 28, and adding 52 Saturdays and 52 Sundays, it would stand at 132 days, i.e., 233 working days for the State Government. (63.83% of a year). This is just for the sake of comparison, without any prejudice to the employees.

Point No. 2: Bank Holidays are declared separately by the GAD (A) department under Annexure II, under the NI act 1881. It may be kept in mind that being a separate Annexure altogether, Bank Holidays have no bearing on the provisions of Annexure I, especially regarding Special Holidays and Restricted Holidays. In fact, the very statement in the above referred Editorial that "For all other festivals the Banks under the Negotiable Instrument (NI) Act declares Restricted Holidays" is a myth, because (a) Banks cannot declare their own holidays and (b) the very concept of Restricted Holidays does not apply to Banks. As a logical corollary of this fact, the other statement in the Editorial that "Bank employees and others governed by the NI Act can avail two Restricted Holidays with the prior permission of their organization" is also factually incorrect. The "organisation" referred to in the Editorial, has no power to declare a holiday, not to speak about "prior permission".

Point No. 3: The Reserve Bank of India is a regulator of Banks and Banking and has no authority to declare any holidays, not even its own. Hence the suggestion to AIBOC to approach the RBI is well taken but bereft of practicality, hence untenable.

Point No. 4: In Meghalaya, in 2021, Annexure II of the above referred No. GAA.88/2020/48 dated December 9, 2021 there are 22 Holidays declared separately under the NI Act. These 22, plus 24 second and fourth Saturdays and 52 Sundays would mean 98 days of holidays for Banks and not the mythical 123 holidays as per the editorial. Out of the 22 holidays declared in Annexure II, 5 are forfeited as they are falling either on a fourth Saturday or a Sunday, further reducing actual holiday count to 93. Effectively Banks are working 73.15% of the year. It would perhaps also not be out of place to mention here that during the height of the lockdown in 2020 when pretty much everything else was closed/worked on skeletal/roster basis, Bank employees across all cadres were in the frontline, not shutting down for even a single day, in service to the public despite being at risk of contracting the virus: The average ATM availability percentage of SBI in and around Shillong from April 2020 to September 2020 (major lockdown period) was 95.38%, one among the highest in India. This was possible due to Bank employees working 24x7x365. Moreover, a visit to any Bank branch will re-

veal that there are no fixed or regulated working hours and Bank employees can be seen at their desks even at 8.00 pm on any given day. Exigencies of service also make it necessary for many Bankers to ignore holidays and go to work on a fairly regular basis.

Point No. 5: Again, just for the sake of comparison and without any prejudice, Central Government employees are privy to 123 holidays (17 General Holidays+2 Restricted Holidays +52 Saturdays and 52 Sundays). The Capital Markets all over India remain closed on all Saturdays and Sundays in addition to all major festivals. In the United States, they have 10 general holidays plus 104 Saturday/Sundays, in Germany 15 plus 104 Saturday/Sundays, and in Italy, 24 General Holidays plus 104 Saturday/Sundays. In France, Offices have a 35-hour working week only.

Yours etc.,  
Davis Lyngdoh  
Organising Secretary  
AIBOC  
Meghalaya State Unit

#### Freedom of political expression

Editor,  
The letter to the editor 'UDP Riposte to allegation of hypocrisy', by Jemino Mawtho is expected. Albert Thymiang's editorial 'UDP's blatant hypocrisy' had hit the bull's eye and it has hurt the UDP. From a neutral point

I would agree on most of the points raised by Mr Albert. The UDP is part of the coalition and should have taken collective responsibility rather than indulging in pointing fingers. The mess in the power sector in our state is deep-rooted and it will not take only a fortnight to solve it. Even if the UDP General Secretary is in charge of the Power sector he will not be able to solve the woes in a limited time. Interestingly the UDP MLAs did not have any problem with the Power minister but it is their ex-MLAs that are vocal against him. Even the UDP President seems to be in a state of confusion. In politics you have to take advantage of the hot issues; you have to make your presence felt especially when you have lost the election otherwise you become irrelevant. There is nothing wrong in indulging in political opportunism and there is no law in India that forbids it, but the general public are smart enough, and the just concluded GHADC elections is a perfect example of the smartness of the electorate. Criticism is part and parcel of democracy and politicians should also learn to accept criticism. Threatening the public that criticize your party as BM Lanong has done is a clear sign of weak leadership and is totally unacceptable and unpardonable in a democracy like ours. Are we living in a state where freedom of political expression is under siege?

Yours etc  
Manuel Carey Lymba  
Shillong 08.

"When all else is lost, the future still remains."

--- Christian Nestell Bovee

The Shillong Times

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Covid resurgence scary

WITH capital Delhi brought under a weekend-curfew for two days, the nation is stressed again and back to square one - almost. The cases of Covid infections are rising at an alarming rate, with Mumbai and Delhi being among the worst cases and over 10 states experiencing a scary rise in the infection rate over the past one week.

Problems are at multiple levels. On one side, there is a shortage of vaccines in various states. The largely Covid-hit states have raised an alarm over this and sought more stocks from the Centre on an urgent basis.

The finding by a global research team that Covid-19 can spread via air too, as is reported in The Lancet medical journal, turns upside down the earlier concepts as to how the virus spreads.

To the two UDP stalwarts

By Albert Thyrniang

"not to enter into the areas where even angels fear to tread" is an intimidation. Effectively the message is to all writers, "Be careful what you write. If you are critical and attract our ire you may be taken to task."

Besides personal remarks, Lanong also displayed a stereotype mentality. He favours setting rules that certain people should not overstep their 'boundaries'. This is probably why, even in this millennia the male domains are out of bounds for women.

Unspecified 'they' have advised me, "Being you, you may not be involved in politics... Write only on development." Well, I comment on development, corruption, law and order, violence, democracy, education, backwardness, etc. all of which are inseparably linked to politics.

Those who are 'concerned' that individuals like me are 'involved' in politics can refer to my articulation "Calling the Church out" of February 9 this year in this paper for which inspiration was drawn from the cover story of the national 'Christian Weekly, the India Currents.

Bishops, papal Encyclicals, Apostolic exhortations, the famed Second Vatican Council and the documents of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI). In his much acclaimed Encyclical Fratelli Tutti Pope Francis declares, "The Church cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the building of a better world, and she cannot fail to contribute to the betterment of society."

The contents of the periodical are a critical analysis of political developments with an anti-Hindutva ideology slant. Occasionally this writer makes his way into the pages of the prestigious Weekly. Contributors are mainly persons like me. The lesson is, getting involved in electoral politics is out. Political comment is in.

Contrary to Lanong's charge, I did not lambast anyone as a criminal nor used abusive and slanderous language nor called anyone a 'hypocrite'. If Lanong himself admits, "We hypocrite politicians in UDP" others can't dispute.

While one of the UDP's leading office bearers accuses this scribe of prejudice against his party, the other takes us on memory lane to the education scam, to the era of worse law and order scenario, etc. Well, if the former lawmakers have been following my 'bulletins', criticism is not limited to the UDP alone.

A couple of young UDP's fans reached out to me stating that the party has viewed the 'Khasi-Jaintia centric party' remark positively. Though unsuccessfully, in the last GHADC elections, the party made efforts to make inroads in Garo Hills.

Finally, Mawthoh puts the UDP's 'inappropriate' James stand in the people's court. It goes without saying. We only make submissions. The onus is on the readers. They are intelligent. They make conclusions. All the same, hope the electorate is more enthusiastic about the UDP these days compared to 2018.

The 'indigenous' party secured a big zero from the GHADC in 15 contested constituencies. For its long neglect of Garo Hills it could only painfully watch the Congress and the NPP's neck and neck battle and the ground breaking two seat victory of the BJP.

With its secular credentials punctured, CAB/CAA background, ILP puzzle, indifferent handling of the Home Ministry, MeECL 'continuum', the 'negative impact of demanding for removal of James Sangma as Power Minister and its general credibility taking a beating from the fore of the beleaguered 'big regional brother' might be static if not regressive.

The statement attributed to the Shillong MP reads, "Today, the general secretary of UDP says that James Sangma should be removed, tomorrow Rymbui will say he (James) has done well, there is conflict of interest among the legislators and party workers."

People will give their verdict on self-revealing actions. Email: albert.thyrniang74@gmail.com

The disease that kills us

By Jagdish Rattanani

There is no escaping the death and destruction of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic that is upon us in a second disastrous wave. Experts tell us we will hit a peak soon. The numbers will then begin to climb down. Nature would have found a way to bring some calm - we did precious little, and can only pray that there will be no third wave.

Even if we may excuse the poor response during the first hit last March, there can be no excuse for doing worse the second time around. Consider that we can claim to fight at the borders but die in the tens of thousands within our borders. The nation has been described in recent days by senior functionaries of the government variously as a space superpower, knowledge superpower, economic superpower, manufacturing superpower, even a vaccine superpower. We can get people to come together to beat empty vessels and light lamps and lakhs march out with a leap of faith to the kumbh mela but we can't arrange hospital beds when a pandemic we know is around and flares up.

Examples of how badly we fought this war come from all directions. It is

day. The announcement is significant because it tells us that belief, faith and ritual are not contradictory to the scientific approach. Yet, the former has been put to work and exploited at the cost of the latter.

An Associate Professor at the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences, Rishikesh, has been funded by the Department of Science and Technology to run a pilot to study the "effect of gayatri mantra and pranayama in terms of inflammatory markers in hospitalised Covid-19 patients." The official record states: "...Scientists are racing against time for a miracle cure/vaccine to fight this pandemic which has gripped the world. In this scenario, role of pranayama and gayatri mantra chanting which has been used in other diseases and has shown promising effects become vital." Millions of Indians who chant the Gayatri mantra, Hindus and non-Hindus alike, will understand that this is not the best way to respond to the pandemic.

On the other hand, the Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genomics Consortium (named 'INSACOG') comprising 10 labs identified to study variants of the virus in India,



launched in December 2020 had received no funds till at least as late as March-end. This was critical activity because variants are thought to have delivered the new wave. Yet, the nation has been too slow to launch this kind of sustained, planned and coordinated activity to sequence the virus genome. On 24 March, the health ministry reported that "though VOC (variants of concern) and a new double mutant variant have been found in India, these have not been detected in numbers sufficient to either establish or direct relationship or explain the rapid increase in cases in some States."

That begs the question: What has caused the current spike? Where is the epidemiological insight? As of 16 April, only 13,614 Whole Genome Sequenced samples were processed at the 10 designated INSACOG lab. Sequencing was targeted for 5% of total positives beginning December 2020; what was sequenced cumulatively as of mid-April is barely 5% of daily rise in infections!

Meanwhile, there is a daily release on vaccination numbers that look large in absolute terms but offer the true picture of the task at hand when we see that barely 1.2% of India is fully vaccinated, according to data from the University of Oxford. This compares to 25% fully vaccinated in the US, 14% in the UK and 3.8% in Brazil, which India overtook this month to have the second largest number of infections in the world, after the US.

It is true that COVID-19 is a terrible disease that is killing us but the disease that allows this disease to thrive and spread with impunity is the disease that we have had for long - a longing to live by a mythical story of a much-tooled greatness of yesterday to bring on an air of celebration today before we go crashing down tomorrow. (1009 words)

(The writer is a journalist and faculty member at SPJIMR. Views are personal) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

Letters to the Editor

Use of arms uncalled for

Editor, I can't help recollecting whatever I had witnessed in the fateful incident on Mawshbit road which passes through the GTC area on the evening of April 12, 2021. I was with my three year old son and my sister on my way to an important family matter, when a few minutes later I had to engage in a verbal duel with few army personnel dressed in their civvies. I was amidst the local taxi drivers and youth of Mawshbit who were protesting against the unpleasantness caused by the traffic barricades on both sides of the road at that particular stretch which had been put up that very same day. I chose to stay on the spot because of two reasons: I was irritated by the harsh manner in which a few army men were handling the situation and I was concerned for the safety of the youth protesting on the spot. Although I knew I couldn't do much but was simply present there to help ease the tension.

how many more times are we going to face such situations in the future. From angry shouts of few army men, to exchanging of verbal fights, to power being cut off twice, to brutal assault of our unarmed youths in which four or five of them were injured and one of them luckily escaped injury from the khukri but was left with its mark on his hip. What shocked me most is the act of cowardice on the part of the army personnel in using rifles and khukri to randomly thrash and injure the unarmed people gathered at the spot where I was standing.

With due respect to the army officials representing the GTC in the meeting at the Deputy Commissioner's Office on April 13 who preferred to settle the matter amicably and claimed that the people of Mawshbit are their neighbours and friends, may I point out that whatever had been done did not demonstrate that friendship and neighbourliness.

Hence I would like to ask whether it is appropriate that war weapons like rifles and khukri be used against unarmed civilians who were simply protesting

for a cause, above all for something that was causing discomfort to the people of the village. Should they have been treated with zero tolerance?

It was a relief to hear that in the joint inspection meeting held on April 17, 2021 between the District Administration, East Khasi Hills, Headman & Members of Dorbar Shnong Mawshbit, the local MDC and Army officials of 58 GTC, resolutions on short term issues had been made. Issues like checking/harassment of the public at the gate and use of traffic barricades is to be discontinued, rumble strips (speed breakers) positioned on both sides of the gate are to be removed and the gate is to remain wide open. Also the initiative to form an empowered committee to solve the problem permanently is a positive step.

While appreciating the concern shown by the District Administration, I also express my gratitude to the Headman and Dorbar Shnong, Mawshbit, our local MDC for treating the matter seriously and also the leaders and members of the different social organizations, the KSU, HYC, FKJGP

who whole-heartedly stood with us in fighting our cause.

Lastly, the fact remains that the road has been under the utilization of the Shnong of Mawshbit for almost two hundred years now. Based on this ground, I wholeheartedly urge the concerned authorities to see that this problem is solved permanently i.e. by 'the removal of the gate' such that the freedom and peace of mind of the peace loving people of Mawshbit is restored.

Yours etc., Diana M Syiemlieh, Shillong-793007

Mass gatherings the biggest mistake

Editor, Even a child knows that he should not play with fire. But amidst the raging heat of the pandemic, the government certainly played with fire. More than anything, it has hastened to lift the restrictions on "mass social gatherings". With the benefit of hindsight, one believes, it is one of the "biggest mistakes" for which we might have to pay

dearly in the future. Are our tomorrows not staggering in the darkness of uncertainty? The innumerable election campaigns held recently and mass gatherings expose the height of our hypocrisy.

If we seriously analyze the exponential rise in COVID cases in the last two weeks in the country, we come to the conclusion that it has its roots in mass social gatherings. What is heart-rending is that the second avatar of the Wuhan virus has come with a sharper sting. What will be the consequences if another round of "lockdown" is imposed as in the last year? In fact, it is a very serious thing. How will the poor people, such as vendors, hawkers, daily wagers, drivers, rickshaw-owners, tea-sellers, barbers, carpenters etc survive? Hence imposing the lockdown again will be like forcing people already impoverished by poverty to die without food. So, before the situation turns from bad to worse, social gatherings of all kinds must be strictly prohibited. If we don't postpone our merry-making and festive celebrations, the virus might hasten our "end" on this planet.

Yours etc., Salil Gawai, Shillong

Bring anti-defection law in ADCs

Editor, Now that the dust has settled down after the GHADC elections results have been declared and we all know who is going to govern the GHADC, I believe the coalition governing the Council needs to bring in the Anti-Defection law immediately. Party hopping MDCs have actually crippled the smooth functioning of the Council and it's just not only the GHADC, but the other two District Councils too suffer from this ill. I believe all MDCs must come together to scuttle any future defectors from benefiting from such a detrimental exercise to the governance of the Council. The Anti-Defection law will bring an end to the Judases who scheme and plot for a bigger share of the loaves and fishes. This test will prove how serious are the political parties in addressing corruption too.

Yours etc., Tyrone D'Brass Tura

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

"Something good comes out of every crisis."  
— Dave Pelzer

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 243 SHILLONG, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 21, 2021

### Courts and governance

INDIA'S foundations of governance have been well laid out by India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru and other leaders of the Independence movement after India won a hard fought freedom from British Rule in 1947. India declared itself a Republic in 1950, with a well-drafted Constitution to guide it in managing the affairs of the nation. Over the years, the well-established systems saw to it that the nation's affairs are carried out in an orderly manner where the three pillars executed their responsibilities equitably.

With time the systems went through pressures and pulls and suffered as a result of a progressive drift, but the positives remain. It is important that the different pillars of the democratic establishment, namely the Executive, the Legislature, the Judiciary and the Media as a public response system carry out their jobs in a fair and transparent manner and not encroach into one another's realms. If such intrusions are allowed they result in chaos. The thought arises in the context of a Supreme Court order on Tuesday, setting aside the order of the Allahabad High Court which directed the state government to impose lockdown in five Covid-affected districts of Uttar Pradesh. The apex court, in its wisdom, opted to give the freedom to the state to decide on this matter. Notably, the Hyderabad High Court too has forced the Telangana government into a similar action by way of holding out a threat that if it did not impose controls, the high court would itself have to issue the order.

Elected governments are mandated to run the affairs of the nation and states. The Executive has its limitations, but the elected leadership is well-aware of the ground realities and it is expected to act with a sense of responsibility in matters like handling the Covid situation. It is easy to criticize, but difficult to perform. A recommendation from the court should be welcome, but it will be well-appreciated that the judiciary avoids wielding the stick or taking upon itself the responsibility of running the affairs of the nation. If any such attempt is made, it would seriously affect the existing governance system as a whole. The Supreme Court clearly understands this as is evident from the setting aside of the HC order by Chief Justice Sharad Arvind Bobde himself. Discretion is the better part of valour. There have been several instances of late when it was felt that courts intruded into affairs of governance and caused embarrassment to the elected governments. Courts can act on the basis of the established laws of the land, and carry out their mandate within the parameters set by the Constitution. Governance is an executive function and not the domain of courts.

"The cost of discipline is always less than the price of regret. So self discipline is the biggest investment for success in life" (Late President APJ Abdul Kalam)

Amidst the many defects of our Indian society, I would consider a culture of indiscipline as a major one. When it comes to both personal as well as collective discipline, we Indians fare miserably. In more than umpteenth times we have shown to the world that we are an undisciplined nation. The present situation of the Covid 19 pandemic has more than enough confirmed this character of our nation. The current exponential spread of the second wave of this pandemic, as experts agree, is due to the laxity of our people in observing Covid 19 protocols. How disheartening it is to see indiscipline right from the top to the lowest rung of society. Our own Prime Minister and Home Minister and many other political leaders openly flout the Covid 19 protocols of wearing face masks and social distancing. They organize massive rallies in West Bengal, Assam, Tamilnadu and Kerala where thousands of people crowd

on each other with no masks and social distancing. If our top leaders do not show the example of being disciplined persons, how do they expect ordinary citizens to behave otherwise? Often when we compare ourselves with other nations even with our Asian neighbours like the Chinese, the Koreans or the Vietnamese, we find ourselves far behind in matters of discipline. The manner in which the netas and the crowds openly flout the Covid 19 protocols has only aggravated the pandemic situation and today we have become the second most affected pandemic country.

When we talk of indiscipline, we can witness such an attitude not only in relation to this pandemic, but it is evident in other walks of life too. I remember how one day when I was on a flight from

# A culture of indiscipline

By Barnes Mawrie

London to New Delhi, there were many Indians in that particular British Airways flight. When we were just one hour before touching down at Delhi Airport, to my shame as an Indian, my fellow citizens got up from their seats and started talking loud and then they began to use their mobile phones. The air hostesses tried to appeal to them to settle down and to switch off their phones, but her appeals fell on deaf ears. It was a very bad experience I had of the so called "Indian indiscipline." Again if we talk about cleanliness in our country, the main cause for our unclean and polluted environment, is lack of personal and collective dis-

without any sensitivity for the vehicles behind them. At other times, they suddenly halt the vehicles the moment they see a passenger knowing full well that such an act could cause an accident for the vehicle behind.

When it comes to religious practices in India, religiosity seems to get the better of precaution and civic sensibility. The manner in which the Hindu devotees flocked to the Kumbh mela in recent days with scant concern for Covid 19 protocols, will only worsen the situation. Considering the fact that many devotees come from various rural areas of the country, they could be potential super spreaders of the pandemic. In such religious functions personal and collective discipline seem to be altogether absent. Religions should learn to listen to sciences and we should not let our religiosity end up as blind faith.

Discipline of citizens is a sine qua non condition for the prosperity and progress of a nation. Discipline begins at home where parents have the responsibility of fostering in their children disciplined behaviour and lifestyle. Things like not littering



Guarunam migrants board interstate buses for their native places, amid a COVID-induced lockdown imposed by the Government of Assam on interstate buses in Guarunam (Tuesday, April 20, 2021).

cipline. How often we have seen our citizens throwing empty water bottles or food packages on the roadsides. How many times we have

is being perpetrated first of all by VIPs or the so called ML 01 vehicles. All of us must have witnessed how these arrogant vehicles flout traf-

*"Often when we compare ourselves with other nations even with our Asian neighbours like the Chinese, the Koreans or the Vietnamese, we find ourselves far behind in matters of discipline."*

witnessed irresponsible persons dumping their garbage on public drains and rivers. Our Wah Umkhras is a clear testimony of this attitude. The efforts of many good citizens who are trying to clean this river, are going down the drains as long as people continue to use the river as a dumping place. I am proud of the people of Mawlynnong

defy the rules? Only time will tell.

On the same note, the greatest concern at hand is the Umiam bridge that connects Guwahati to Shillong. The bridge is over 50 years old but is also the most heavily used one (24X7). Can this present Government turn a deaf ear and a blind eye towards this bridge? Can the Government abandon its lackadaisical attitude towards the Umiam bridge and take initiatives to at least identify ways and means to address this grave concern immediately? Even today heavily loaded vehicles are plying on this bridge posing a threat to the lives of all. The bridge needs serious care, no matter what vehicles may ply on it because it is overworked. How much longer will it hold on before it gives way? Imagine the impact on the dam and the lives of people. Can the government still overlook the seriousness of the matter or will it get down to work and prevent any devastating incident anytime soon?

### Umiam bridge in danger!

Editor,  
It is frightening to read the news item regarding the Bailey Bridge at Dwar Ksuid where the planks have come part barely a month after its inauguration by the Deputy Chief Minister, Prestone Tynsong. Aren't these signs of ineffectiveness, inefficiency and duplicity? I am no engineer to understand the technical know-how of why the bridge is showing cracks just a month after its inauguration but I am certain that this is not a good sign. The Deputy CM clarified that the damage on the bridge was "not due to the poor quality of the construction" but "the plying of overloaded trucks." Well whatever the reason may be the point is that somewhere something is not right. Be it at the level of those involved in the construction work or those involved in checking the permissible weight limit. Repair work is done but the fear remains that anything untoward and unfortunate could happen in the near future. Will those in charge take utmost precaution against malpractices or will they remain hands in glove with those who

news. I do believe we expect better from administrators of educational institutions who have the burden of educating and creating responsible citizens.

Yours etc.,  
Patrick Kurbah  
Via email

### US created mess in Afghanistan

Editor,  
The report captioned, "Announcing Afghan pull-out, Biden asks India to do more for Kabul" (ST April 15, 2021) is a pointer to the fact that the United States by pulling out without a clear victory has opened itself to

criticism that a withdrawal represents a de facto admission of failure for American military strategy and with its failed policies and shoot-first-ask-questions-later attitude. Foreign involvement in Afghanistan has been a major source of that country's instability though the Afghan political class and warlords have also played a significant role in the destruction of their homeland. However the "forever war" cannot continue and the sooner foreign forces leave Afghanistan and Afghans themselves take responsibility for their country, the better. The invasion of Afghanistan stemmed from a shoot-first-ask-questions-later attitude, one especially prevalent among neo-cons but shared by a significant cross-section of the respectable foreign policy establishment. Indeed, rather than the "good war" moniker the Afghanistan conflict has been cloaked with since its inception, it was ironically the "not good enough war." A bigger bang was needed to show the US meant business. Such a cavalier approach to the use of deadly force permeates American behaviour among citizens, between citizens and the police as well as between the military and other states raising questions about US society beyond the ambit of foreign policy.

Yours etc.,  
Advocate M Haque,  
Shillong-6

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

## Global producers vet to ease output curb High oil price may hit Indian economy hard

By Nantoo Banerjee

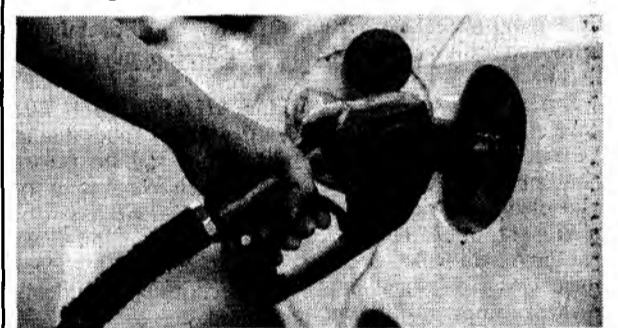
After the new wave of coronaviruses in comes the oil shock to India's fragile economy. Going by government estimates, India's GDP had shrunk by eight percent in 2020-21 as against a four percent growth in the previous fiscal. While the current year's economic growth picture remains unclear at this point of time, rising global crude oil prices and falling Indian rupee (INR) are posing a concern. Crude oil prices are rising in anticipation of an economic recovery in big markets such as the US, China, India, Japan, South Korea, the Netherlands, Germany and Spain. China is the world's largest oil importer, followed by the US and India.

The three countries together account for nearly 45 percent of the overall crude oil import. The US Energy Information Administration (EIA) had earlier indicated an average of \$49/b for Brent in 2021. This is around 14 percent higher than the average for the fourth quarter of 2020. EIA expects that while inventories will remain high, it is anticipated that they will decline because of the rising global oil demand and lower than expected increase in OPEC+ oil supply. EIA forecasts Brent prices to average \$47/b in the first quarter of 2021 and will rise to an average of \$50/b by the fourth quarter. Unfortunately, the global oil market seems to be behaving differently.

Oil futures are much higher. They are now range-bound near \$60 a barrel, a level around which they have gyrated for almost four weeks. The oil market is trying to shake off near-term demand concerns regarding the resurgence of the virus

economic recovery process, this year. Nearly, 86 per cent of India's annual crude oil requirement are met through imports. In 2019-20, India imported as much as 270 million tonnes of oil, recording a four percent increase over the previous year's level. The import cost was US\$102.3 billion. India's import of LNG spiked 17 percent to 33,680 Million Standard Cubic Meter (MMSCM). India imports around 1.5 billion barrels of crude oil each year.

The rising crude oil prices would raise India's overall expenditure and lead to higher fiscal deficit. The lower crude oil prices were a major contributing factor in the reduction of India's fiscal deficits between 2014 and 2016. Earlier this month, the Indian currency fell 1.5 percent to Rs. 74.55 against the US\$, witnessing the biggest one-day drop since August 2019. On April 15, it dropped further to over Rs. 75 for a dollar. This is igniting overall price inflation as the costs of both production and transportation are going up. All oil transactions are paid in US dollars. Most oil-exporting countries peg their currencies to US dollar. As a result, a 25 percent rise in the dollar offsets a 25 percent drop in oil prices. The global economic uncertainty, is keeping the US dollar strong.



The EIA oil price forecast 2025-50, done early in the coronavirus pandemic last year, says by 2030, world demand is seen driving Brent prices to \$89/b. By 2040, prices are projected to be \$132/b. By then, cheap oil sources may be exhausted, making it more expensive to extract oil. By 2050, oil

as well as the easing in the global deflation trade. However, the Indian economy is beset with fast rising Covid-19 infections, spike in inflation, falling factory production and shrinking value of INR. Rising crude oil prices are bound to hit further India's economic growth prospects, this year. Only last month, oil briefly rallied toward \$70 a barrel after OPEC+ chose not to relax supply curbs even as the global economy pulls out of its pandemic-driven slump. It confounded widespread expectations that the group would loosen the taps.

Suddenly, major international banks are hurrying up to upgrade their crude price forecasts. Saudi Arabia said that it would maintain its one million barrel-a-day voluntary production cut. Now, reported shelling of Saudi Arabian Aramco's oil facilities by Yemeni Houthis at Jubail and Jeddah comes as a further shock, threatening to disturb a reasonable oil price stability during the rest of the year. Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthis claimed it had fired 17 drones and two ballistic missiles at targets in Saudi Arabia, though there was no immediate confirmation from Saudi officials. The slow rate of Covid vaccinations in Europe and India and anticipation of additional supply of oil from Iran in the coming months partly capped price gains.

High global crude oil prices coupled with India's punishing domestic system of levies on petro products by both the centre and states are bound to impact the

### Letters to the Editor

#### UDP, GHADC Elections and MeECL

Editor,  
It was interesting to read the letters that appeared in this paper last week pertaining to UDP's performance in the just concluded GHADC elections and the MeECL fiasco. Without joining issues with the comments, I wish to put forth my views on the failure of the UDP to score even a single seat in Garo Hills. One reason is because UDP lacks a strong base and leadership in Garo Hills. Barring BG Momin, the UDP had no credible face even during the initial period of its formation in Garo Hills. It faces a resource crunch and even today the party is poorly organised in Garo Hills with no financial resources to back up its organisational activities. Again, the UDP in Garo Hills woke up late for the MDC elections. Moreover, it lacks trustworthy political heavyweights, capable party manpower and strategies to attract voters from among the masses.

Now, if the political truth is to be told, the only face of the regional party in Garo Hills was only that of Capt. Williamson A. Sangma when the APHLC was in power. After that the politics of Garo Hills was led by the Congress, NCP and NPP which are national parties led by Capt. W.A Sangma, Purno Sangma, Salseng Marak, Dr Mukul Sangma and Conrad Sangma. Today, the two political forces in Garo Hills

are the NPP led by Conrad Sangma and Congress led by Dr. Mukul Sangma. Without shying away from facts this may apply to the UDP in Garo Hills in the LA elections of 2023 if the entire UDP leadership does not throw its weight behind the Party to ensure that it does not return empty handed in the 2023 hustings.

On the allegations of UDP hypocrisy, I am not inclined to brand the party as unblemished. However, I feel that the UDP has the right to criticise the functioning of the Power Minister and the CMD of MeECL and also to ask for their removal because, as I see it, there are enough justified reasons. Further, I understand that the goings-on under MeECL and the Power Sector as a whole, which is a major and vital sector of the state, is exceedingly messy and requires independent inquiry by the CBI or any other trustworthy agency to find out the irregularities and to fix responsibility for the monumental mess. Again, this government-owned PSU has never been without blemish and indebtedness. Instead, it may even remain indebted for good. But this hopeless scenario can be overturned if we have a passionate work culture and honest, knowledgeable, capable, wise, dynamic, and committed Power Minister, CMD, and Members of the Board of Directors working in tandem with the passionate and dedicated work culture among the team of engineers.

Yours etc.,  
Philip Marwein,  
Shillong

#### Schools violating Govt guidelines

Editor,  
After seeing a hike in the number of COVID cases, the Government on Monday took a decision to shut down schools for 14 days to try and break the cycle of infection. However, some schools in the vicinity of Rynjah, Umpling and Nongthymai have already told their teachers to disregard the government notification and attend school. The reason cited is that teachers have to take online classes. Such schools have even threatened to cut salaries if teachers violate their instructions. These schools must not take the Government notification lightly. Teachers have suffered last year due to the pandemic, and the last thing they require now is an uncooperative administration. But the question now is whether the school administration will take responsibility and accept penal provisions if their results in more positive cases?

I am aware of the schools in question but I am refraining from naming them in the hope that they understand the gravity of the situation. However, the concerned schools should understand that they will come under the Government's scanner if they do not refrain from violating guidelines.

COVID-19 is not a joke at this juncture and any sensible person will understand this if they are following the

"A man who dares to waste one hour of time has not discovered the value of life."  
— Charles Darwin

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 244 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, APRIL 22, 2021

### Meghalaya's leadership crisis

WHETHER it is the country or the states, politicians seems to have lost the plot. Political parties in Meghalaya organised umpteen political rallies in the Garo Hills where thousands gathered without masks; forget social distancing. It was only after the elections were over that the political establishment suddenly woke up to the health emergency facing the state when Covid returned with a vengeance. For over two months, it was evident that the mutant strain of Covid 19 had entered the country and caution was called for at that point. But since politicians had to garner votes, all protocols were dispensed with. The number of active cases in Meghalaya is on the rise and about to touch the one thousand mark even as testing had dropped. It is logical to believe that if testing is ramped up then the number of Covid positive candidates would be much higher than shown.

The Director of Health Services has candidly stated that Meghalaya would not be able to handle 100 critical Covid cases at the same time since the healthcare system is not geared up for that kind of onrush. It is doubtful if NEIGRIHMS has the wherewithal to take on the task of managing Covid patients, mostly from Meghalaya since the Institute is admittedly facing funds crunch and manpower shortage. In recent times NEIGRIHMS has been treated quite shabbily by the Union Health Ministry and with Chief Ministers of the North Eastern states adopting a hands-off attitude this Institution will hit many roadblocks. Meghalaya Health Minister, AL Hek has urged NEIGRIHMS to make do with available resources but considering that Hek is on the Board of this Institution, is it not his duty to advocate for it in Delhi? After all, the system in India privileges some states over others depending on political affiliations.

And then we have ambiguities within the MDA Government. While the Health Minister admits that crowding at election rallies which draw huge crowds that are neither masked nor maintaining social distancing are what has resulted in the Covid spike, the Deputy Chief Minister of the state makes light of things and denies that such rallies have become super spreaders. Diversity of views are expected from people holding ideologically different positions but a lack of consensus within the MDA government on an issue as serious as Covid could hasten the crisis. A crisis demands that leaders are proactive and not merely reacting to situations. In a crisis, leaders do a scenario building exercise of the possibilities that can occur so that several plans are kept ready for implementation. Do we have that leadership in Meghalaya? At the moment the leadership vacuum is both visible and palpable.

## Indian citizens lost trust in the State over the years, but not in PM Narendra Modi can he privilege India over the BJP? Time to depoliticise Indian police. It can be Modi's Sudarshan Chakra

By Lt Gen Prakash Menon

The tragic loss of 22 policemen in a Naxalite ambush in the jungles of Chhattisgarh on 4 April invoked memories of earlier such incidents with the worst being the loss of 76 lives in Dantewada in 2010. As part of an old pattern, political and institutional homilies followed promises of revenge. One can be fairly certain that the matter will be officially investigated, and a politically patronised cover-up carried out, with only the lower-level officials facing the brunt. Life will continue as before, till another incident comes along, and the cycle will be repeated ad nauseam. The police leadership will continue to promise solutions to politicians as long as their numbers are increased, and going by the recent raising of CRPF battalions, financial constraints do not seem to come in the way of pumping up numbers. If only somebody educated India's politicians that the qualitative inadequacies in the CRPF cannot be made good by numbers.

The bigger picture and the truth is that for a long period of time, nearly 4,000 square kilometres of territory in south Bihar was in control of the Naxals. In a recent interview, the IG Police, Bastar, said that it has now been shrunk, but an area of 1,000 square kilometres is still with the Naxals. The executive is fully aware of it. Parliament and the media have chosen to remain silent.

Running in parallel is l'affaire Param Bir Singh, the former DGP of Maharashtra, who after being sacked went to court complaining against former state home minister Anil Deshmukh. From what is publicly known so far, the role of the toxic underbelly, which is an admixture of corruption, criminality and political chicanery involving the nexus of political executive-bureaucracy, seems all too evident. As details keep emerging, it seems that the political-police nexus was all-pervasive. It stinks.

No doubt, both these incidents have completely different contexts. One is about the avoidable loss of lives in a situation of armed uprising in the tribal belt of central India. The other is about corruption and possible murder by the law keepers themselves under the tutelage of their superiors. Both these incidents may seem unconnected, but even a casual look reveals that the dramatis personae

remain unchanged, except they appear in different forms and contexts. Both incidents relate to politicisation and control by the executive of the police, and in both, the executive and the police lack accountability.

**Lapses over and over**  
In the Chhattisgarh CRPF ambush case, the politicians have been deluding themselves and the general public that a closed-fist approach should be the main prong of their strategy. It completely ignores the fact that the tribal people are among the oldest residents of India that is Bharat. Many of their socio-economic grievances

are genuine and their basic human rights have been violated time and again. And that is how they came under Naxal influence. Political incompetency has combined with gross operational stupidity of the police leadership to use large groups that can never retain the element of surprise, which is the key to success. No wonder the CRPF, supposedly the hunter, is often the hunted.

**The country cannot find its potential if the character of elected leaders is moving steadily towards criminalised probity, the police deliver justice and the judiciary is ineffective.**

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The political leadership at the Centre and the states must take responsibility for failing to implement reforms against politicisation and criminalisation of police, deepening parliamentary oversight of the executive, loosening political control by the executive, and the lack of accountability to the people. This is despite continued lapses and many studies and reports calling for reforms. The contents of the E.N. Rammohan report that examined the Dantewada incident in 2010 has never been publicly revealed.

The current Mumbai DGP case reveals the politicians' nexus with pliant police leadership to operate above the law. The N.N. Vohra Report of 1993 and many reports after have all flagged the linkages between the underworld, politicians and the bureaucracy. But any approach for rectification must deal with the criminal justice system of which the police is only

be accountable to the people. Besides, it is necessary to have a police force which is professionally controlled and is politically neutral, non-authoritarian, people friendly and professionally efficient."

To be fair, all politicians and police leadership cannot be tarred with the same brush. However, the number of politicians with criminal backgrounds have been on the rise, and calls for electoral reforms to improve the quality of political leadership have been studiously ignored by all parties. In addition, there is a complete lack of political will to enforce police reforms despite the Supreme Court judgment more than 15 years ago. Political leaders have increasingly chosen to rule by laws of their own preference instead of by the rule of law. With so many broken parts of the criminal justice system, some states have clearly empowered the police to deliver 'justice' through illegal killings. Both at the Centre and the states, neutralising political opponents through abuse of power vested in intelligence and investigative agencies - that became a widespread practice with Indira Gandhi - has in its recent manifestations become equally, if not more, malevolent.

**Time for Modi to step up**  
In contemporary times, a large part of India's citizenry

under the impact of Covid-19, seems to be under duress and is expecting the State to protect it, politically, economically and socially. They have lost trust in the State over the years. But they have not lost trust in Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The pertinent issue is that trust in Modi is directly experienced as an emotion. However, the distrust of the State and its organs is like a bad odour that refuses to go away. This is not to say that certain sections of the citizenry are not culpable. They do not often fulfil responsibilities of citizenship. They may have learnt to survive by paying their way out of trouble. But with the example the State has normally been setting, the loss of trust of citizens in the Indian State does not augur well for India's future. The country cannot find its potential if the character of elected leaders is moving steadily towards criminalised probity, the police deliver justice and the judiciary is ineffective. No amount of defence preparations against external enemies can protect the Indian State from this type of threat it may pose to itself. The threat is insidious. But the silver lining is that India's main hope can be Narendra Modi.

But only if Modi, the immensely popular leader, can privilege the Indian State over the Bharatiya Janata Party. It would require risking short-term for long-term gain, without any reassurance of how this will pan out for his own political survival. It requires a leap of faith. But lots of people now have blind faith in what Narendra Modi says. This can be his Sudarshana Chakra, a weapon he idolizes. Whatever he does, massive public support is assured. If he announces a major process to reform India's foundational systems like the electoral and the criminal justice system, then the Indian State has a good chance to redeem itself. It might well turn out to be his lasting legacy.

Lt Gen Prakash Menon is Director, Strategic Studies Programme, Takshashila Institution, Bangalore and former Military Adviser, National Security Council Secretariat. Views are personal.

(This article has been republished with permission from ThePrint. The original article appeared here <https://theprint.in/opinion/time-to-depoliticise-indian-police-it-can-be-modis-sudarshan-chakra/642317/>)

PM and BJP state leaders have the duty to help CM overcome the crisis

## Uddhav Thackeray tackling grim COVID situation in Maharashtra

By Sushil Kutty

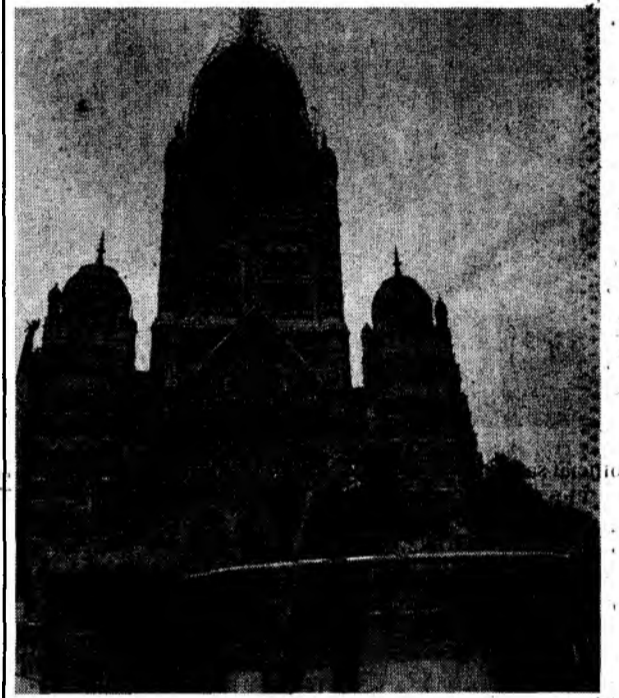
Finally, Prime Minister Narendra Modi took to the airwaves and addressed the pathetic and sad state of Covid-India. Some say he was goaded by Wayanad Congress MP Rahul Gandhi who nudged him with the statement "I'm no longer going to address election rallies", and ex-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who wrote to the Prime Minister and asked Modi to look at the whole Covid thing with a fresh pair of eyes instead of electoral-dust-blanked blinkers.

The most generous reading of Modi's transformation of "Prime Minister Narendra Modi has finally come to his senses." Till then millions of Indians were wondering and speculating if India had a Prime Minister! Electoral politics had been playing havoc with Covid-appropriate-behaviour and Narendra Modi was leading from the front, donning the Pied Piper's hat, leading mesmerized folks up the garden path while Covid numbers went from good, to bad and then ugly!

pandemic turning out to be a tsunami?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi should have known that migrant workers everywhere had been piling into Railway Minister Piyush Goyal's trains all the days he and Amit Shah were helping Bengal and "outsiders in Bengal and Assam" spread the coronavirus at election rallies in West Bengal, Assam and places elsewhere. He should have known that India's Covid numbers had been breaking records every single day. If Modi did not know, the PMO needs a shake-up.

Modi should also know that Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray is under pressure like Arvind Kejriwal and Vijay Rupani and Baghel and Chauhan. Like every other state, Maharashtra was also caught unprepared by the severity of the Covid-19 second wave. There's a shortage of everything, from oxygen to ventilators to hospital beds to essential drugs like Remdesivir, which the BJP allegedly wants to wholesale



April 20, 10 minutes short of 9 pm, Modi shucked his God-given apathy and addressed Covid-nation Hindustan. Turned out Modi was waiting for Ram Navami to come. And Kumbh Mela to lose steam. Could he would have waited for even May 2, the every-vote-for-Modi (EVM) day. At least that's what people are speculating. That is, those who aren't dying from Covid-19, or suffocating from Covid-induced lack of oxygen.

People who Modi now wants to follow Covid-appropriate behaviour, when he himself was giving the impression of flouting every Covid-appropriate behavioural rule in the Coronavirus Survival Book. And, now, he has set up the Centre against the states, by asking the states to consider "complete lockdown" only as a last resort. This when every other state except Uttar Pradesh was contemplating some form and degree of lockdown to fight the deadly second wave.

Maharashtra, in particular, was talking of a complete and total lockdown. Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray called a meeting of his ministers April 20 and they in turn left the final decision to him. In the meantime came Modi's speech. Quite unlike in 2020, when he had rung in a nationwide lockdown with a banging of cooking utensils, this time around he wants no immediate and total lockdown.

Apparently, Modi does not want migrant workers to lose jobs and be forced to take the long and winding road home, like in 2020. But, didn't he know that half the migrant workers had already left distant lands for distant homes while he was busy addressing Mamata's castaways in West Bengal, unmindful of the free-run given to Covid-19? Did he not know that people were in panic mode with the second wave of the

and retail in Maharashtra. Apparently, ex-Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis, the Leader of Opposition in the current Maha Assembly, can't wait to wrest back the Chief Minister's chair from Uddhav Thackeray, even if it would take a killer-pandemic and tens of thousands of vials of drug Remdesivir to do it. Fadnis and the state unit of the BJP have allegedly been trying to "buck" the system to run Maharashtra's healthcare affairs much to the Maha Vikas Aghadi Government's displeasure.

All this when people have turned lachadaisical to Covid-appropriate behaviour, are shucking facemasks and shortening social distance. The IPL, the election rallies far and near, the Kumbh Mela and the Prime Minister and Home Minister's election rallies and road shows giving Covid-19 a free run in election-states. The BJP has a sizeable vote-bank and at least 20% of it thinks Modi is God, so says a survey, that everything Modi does is divine!

Fact of the matter is, it's not just the Prime Minister who had to be brought to his senses, a lot of what many BJP leaders are saying and doing just doesn't make any sense. Covid-19 is like rabies to them, some of whom don't even know that they have gone nuts these days of the coronavirus. For example, Uttarakhand Chief Minister Tirath Singh Rawat who compared the Kumbh Mela with the Markaz and said that there's no need to worry, throw a tantrum, because the Kumbh was spread over 11 ghats while Markaz was just one hall choc-a-bloc! Then, there's Alok Sharma, ex-mayor of Bhopal, who posed for a picture with half a dozen brand new hearse carrying the Covid-dead in Bhopal - for him it was photo-op! (IPA Service)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Different Covid protocols for politicians?

Editor,  
After a year of anxiety and apprehension of the first wave of Covid-19, a second wave is staring at us and a lockdown appears imminent. With the spike in cases across the country, hospitals are overwhelmed with Covid-19 patients and staff are stretched thin. Many states have raised an alarm over shortage of beds and oxygen supplies. Schools are being shut down and night curfew is being imposed in different states. The economy is already in shambles and another imposition of a blanket lockdown means the livelihoods of people will be destroyed. A micro lockdown is the way forward, keeping in mind that cases do not rise exponentially.

In February this year, India's election authorities announced key elections in five states where 186 million people were eligible to vote for 824 seats. Campaigning had begun in full swing and a month later things began to unravel. India was in the grip of a devastating second wave of the virus and cities were facing fresh lockdowns. Just

when we thought our fight against the virus was over, it came back and hit us even harder. By mid-April, the country was averaging more than 100,000 cases a day. Despite the surge in cases, politicians continue to hold mass rallies across the country for state elections. Covid-19 norms are being flouted by thousands of people, thus, keeping everyone at risk.

Are Covid-19 guidelines just for citizens and not political leaders? Why are elections being prioritised when they could have been deferred? It is heart wrenching to see images of dead bodies piling up at crematoriums and people losing their loved ones circulating on social media. For many families, it's an endless wait before they even get a bed at a hospital or find a place for burial.

Meanwhile, the government at the Centre has been facing flak from the Opposition for not sensing the danger despite repeated warnings by experts. However, BJP leaders countered by stating that the elections cannot be blamed for the COVID spike. While politicians are involved in a spat for brownie points, it is always the citizens that eventually suffer.

Yours etc.,  
Steven Marbaniang,  
Via email

#### Lockdown and our PM

Editor,  
Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, on Tuesday April 20 evening while addressing the nation, appealed to the State Governments to use lockdowns as a last resort, so that economic activities can continue. This is in sharp contrast to his own action to impose sudden and strict nation-wide lockdown on March 25, 2020, with a notice of just FOUR hours. This brought immense hardship on the people of the country.

Tuesday's appeal by the Prime Minister is a tacit admission of the grave mistake and hara-kiri created on the nation, over a year back. Recently, mass election rallies were allowed to go on, and many of these were addressed by the PM himself. Moreover, a super-spreader, but avoidable, event like the Kumbh Mela was allowed to take place.

The Union Government continues to make mistakes after mistakes to ensure that pandemic spreads rapidly, and bring hardships to the people of the country. The country and its people deserve better.

Yours etc.,  
D Bhutia  
Guwahati - 24

#### Why the frequent power cuts?

Editor,  
Recently the MeECL announced that they will take strict action by cutting off electricity to those houses/ establishments that have not paid their dues for a very long time and that the step indeed is a necessary evil. The power situation in Meghalaya is very serious and defaulters need to be fined, punished and if necessary even taken to court because electricity isn't something that's free or cheap to produce. However, if there are defaulters in payment of dues there are also those who have been regularly paying their bills without any delay. They deserve uninterrupted power supply. But it seems like the Corporation has failed in that aspect. With over 10-15 power cuts daily lasting from a few minutes to several hours, even on a sunny day the consumers are losing patience.

Whether these power cuts are necessary or due to poor management is not known but MeECL has to ensure that those paying their bills regularly are assured of uninterrupted power otherwise the Corporation has to refund us the money we invest in other sources of light such as inverters, candles, torches,

lamps etc.

We are in a contract with MeECL. If they are providing us electricity then we are also paying them money for that. By not providing us with uninterrupted power they are breaching that contract. But it is equally true that defaulters who don't pay their electricity bills regularly have also broken the contract and they should be punished for that.

Yours etc.,  
Reakor Shisha  
Kharkrang  
Upper Shillong.

#### Will we see reforms in GHADC?

Editor,  
Despite the chaos and protest from every corner of Garo Hills by some NGOs, the GHADC election has finally come to a close with the Congress Party emerging as the single largest party. The main reason for the protests and rallies was because political parties gave tickets to non-Garo to contest the GHADC election. This protest was felt throughout Meghalaya and nearly all the NGOs took part in protesting against those political leaders who gave party tickets to non-Garos in GHADC election especially against Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma as he is the national president

of the NPP and also the Chief Minister. He had all the powers to decide whether or not to give tickets to non-Garos. If this party had refrained from setting up non-Garo candidates then other parties would have followed suit. After the result of GHADC election, all the NGOs and people of all Garo Hills cheered for those candidates who won the election especially for Bernard Marak and Nikman Marak as they are well known for their leadership among the youth and because they supported the NGOs during their protest.

But we are shocked to see that Nikman Marak has joined the alliance led by the NPP - the Party he was dead against before the polls. We are doubtful if a leader like him who had strongly opposed the corruption in GHADC under the NPP could serve the people. Now questions arise as to what made him join the NPP alliance. Is it Money or Power? How can Garos believe the NPP yet again after the previous EC led by it had not paid the GHADC employees' salaries for 33 months?

Nevertheless, we Garos are keeping our eyes open to witness once again whether the present EC will be capable of reforming the GHADC in the coming five years.

Yours etc.,  
Joshua Marak,  
Via email

*"It's fine to celebrate success but it is more important to heed the lessons of failure."*

--- Bill Gates

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 245 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, APRIL 23, 2021

Time to act fast

A sense of desperation grips capital Delhi and several other cities where the spread of Covid pandemic is at worrisome levels and hospitals have run out of beds, ventilators and oxygen supplies. There is also the problem of vaccine shortage but this is partly understandable. A second wave of Covid was only to be expected, but the central government was apparently not so sure about it to have taken adequate precautionary steps. Oxygen is so vital in treating the infected Covid patients facing respiratory problems. This is no time to nitpick but to act fast, affirmatively and decisively.

What's understandable is that though India is a major vaccine producer, it is not possible to vaccinate one and all so soon. Three months ago the first vaccine dose was administered with around 13 crore doses being used — meaning one-tenth of the population was inoculated by one jab or the maximum of two on each of these persons, mostly of the upper age limit. In phases, the age limit was brought down to those above age 45 and further down to those above 18 from May 1. The need now is to overcome the shortages, arrest the spread and restore a modicum of hope. Strict implementation of the control protocols is a matter of first priority. India held back the Covid assault for several months after its eruption in March last, keeping things mostly under control even as the situation turned irretrievable in Mumbai and acute in Capital Delhi. The iterations of lockdowns did seriously hurt the national economy and now only localized lockdowns are advised depending on the acuteness of the problem. This was what should have been done in the initial phase last year too.

Of utmost priority is to save lives. Now, this principally means maximizing the oxygen production and supply even through the three extreme modes like "beg, borrow or steal" as the Delhi high court has advised the Centre. The nation has the capacity to produce adequate quantities of oxygen. It must enlarge the scope. The supply to overseas clients has doubled in recent months, though this is in part the oxygen used for industrial purposes — as different from the oxygen for medical purposes. Oxygen Express trains are reaching the supply to states in the fastest mode and Prime Minister Modi has come up with a three-point plan to overcome the crisis. This should work. India having crossed the daily infection rate at the three-lakh mark is facing the grim prospect of outwitting the US and becoming the worst Covid-hit nation. This is time to act fast.

# Covid19 to Covid2.0: Did we learn anything?

By Patricia Mukhim

Just as we were all hobbling back to what we thought would be a 'normal' life albeit with masks on (at least most of us had not abandoned our masks despite the fall in Covid numbers), back comes the virus with a more virulent strain. Sitting at home one hears the sound of the ambulance more frequently these days. Watching the news deflates whatever hopes one has accumulated through meditation and prayer. Yet one needs to connect to the world to know if hope is near at hand. Alas! Every day brings heartbreaking news. So many colleagues from the journalistic fraternity have succumbed to the virus while on their line of duty. Perhaps the vaccination regime started a bit late and as cynical humans we tended to listen to conspiracy theories that confirm our biases and delayed the vaccination further. Science tells us that while we may test positive after the vaccination the ferocity of the virus is tamed down. Call it a placebo effect or whatever but I believe that famous "mind over matter" philosophy/psychology. The mind has a powerful influence over the body.

An article in Forbes magazine titled 'Mind Over Matter' the writer Alice G. Walton quotes from an interesting study by Stanford University to suggest that this may actually work when it comes to health. The study finds that just thinking you're prone to a given outcome may trump both nature and nurture. In fact, the study reinforces that simply believing a physical reality about yourself can actually nudge the body in that direction. In their study the researchers focused on two critical areas, namely endurance during exercise and satiety during eating. For the endurance part, they did genetic testing on the participants to see whether they carried variants of a gene that make a person more or less prone to tiring easily. They also had people run on a treadmill to measure their endurance. Then, they randomly split the participants into two groups, telling one they had the gene variant that made them tire easily and the other the gene variant that's linked to endurance. Actually

they had randomly divided the participants into these two groups, so some were being given accurate results and others the exact opposite. When the participants ran on a treadmill again, their endurance changed measurably. Participants who were told they had poor endurance genes couldn't run as long. They stopped 22 seconds sooner and had poorer lung capacity, and their bodies didn't rid themselves of carbon dioxide as effectively. Those who were told they had better endurance ran a bit longer, regardless of what genes they actually carried. The result of the eating exercise was almost the same. Hence Alia Crum the lead author of the research whose lab has been studying how mind affects the physical body for some time, says that the mindset that you put people in when you deliver genetic risk information is not irrelevant. "The mindset of being genetically at risk or protected can alter how we feel, what we do and as this study shows, how our bodies respond," Alia Crum says that for those who may not want to go through genetic testing, the study is a good reminder of the folk wisdom advice, "mind over matter." She says the very fact that we believe something to be true (in this case that we have good genes) can help us run the extra mile.



So during these stressful times it might help to tell ourselves that we are capable of overcoming many of the health worries that we have accepted as our lot. While we can continue to be on medication and other health regimen, just a walk; it is also a quiet, contemplative time that does good to our souls. I know of many that took to this routine during the last one year. Let's not give up these good habits when the world returns to its frenzy, post the Covid fear. There are several personal lessons we have learnt. Many shared how they learnt empathy and caring for more than just oneself and one's immediate family or neighbours but that the empathy extended even to those in greater need of our caring concern. Friends I spoke to say they fussed less over their appearances and women friends said they didn't think jewelry or make-up was important and that they felt liberated by this feeling that they didn't need to invest in these extraneous things when surviving the pandemic was all we were thinking of. And now before we know it and are prepared afresh to deal with this bigger threat, there is need to remain calm even as we do our best to follow Covid protocols ourselves and also influence oth-

ers to do the same. Wearing a mask is a huge behavioral change which is always difficult to achieve but achieve we must if we have to come out on top of the second wave. The DHS has bluntly told us that if a hundred people were to suddenly need critical care the system would collapse. He is warning us to take all precautions and not to be careless with our behaviour because that is what even the educated and well-to-do are guilty of sometimes. Remember the Greenwood resort marriage celebrations?

Not all is bad about the pandemic. Last year taught us that travel can be largely restricted and we can accomplish much through on-line meetings. Organisations saved money that they would have spent on their travel and on holding in-person meetings. But as far as online classes are concerned the jury is still out on what the impact on students is and the social rupture that the pandemic has caused. Families with small spaces found that they ran into each other to the point of irritation. Violence against minor girls escalated and continues even today. The newspapers are replete with reports of murder and sexual assaults of school going girls. One would have thought the pandemic would change peoples' moral compasses but it hasn't

The work from home was fine for some but not so good for others. We grieved about poor internet connectivity but forgot those who lost their livelihoods while we still held a job that permitted us to work from home. We also took for granted those Municipal workers who are continually exposed because of the demands of their job. There are people who serve us by delivering food and groceries at our doorsteps wearing their PPEs. God bless their souls. Where would we be without this circle of selfless workers who don't even demand much from us and who we forget to remember once we are out of the emergency drill.

This second wave must change us for the better for, human selfishness like our selfish exploitation of nature extracts a heavy cost and the pandemic could be the price we are paying.

# US & Afghanistan India in the lurch?

By Dr. D.K. Giri

American President Joe Biden has set September 2021 as the new deadline for the US troops to leave Afghanistan. The NATO soldiers will follow suit. Afghanistan government will be left to defend itself. President Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai has reassured his country and other Afghan watchers that his government is capable of defending the country's security. This is more rhetoric than reality. His main adversary, Taliban, actively supported by Pakistan and its mentors, will prove to be stronger and savaging in revenge and retaliation, after the American withdrawal.

The grave concern haunting peace builders is where does this security vacuum leave India and Afghanistan? Contrary to some optimistic observations made by experts that India will have options in post-US security scenario in Afghanistan, India will have to address new threats emerging from Kabul and Pakistan; Islamabad uses the former as its strategic depth. Things do not look propitious for New Delhi as it had not built any bridge to Taliban, and Islamabad, despite the latest track-2 discreet negotiations, will seek to cause damage at the borders.

Afghanistan will remain highly vulnerable as America withdraws without putting any robust security alternatives in place. CIA Director William Burns, during a testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee underlined this point. He said the security threats to Kabul and beyond Afghanistan have not vanished and it would be difficult to gather intelligence without American troops on Afghan soil. Christine Fair, a scholar of South Asian political-military affairs said, "ISI wins, Afghans lose". This is a telling comment on American's decision to pull out its remaining troops from Afghanistan.

Reportedly, there are deep differences of opinion in the US about Biden's decision to withdraw by September. He announced that he no longer wishes to continue America's longest war and that the terrorist attack on twin towers in 2001 necessitated sending troops to Afghanistan. Since, those conditions no longer exist, there was no need to continue to station US troops. His supporters would contend that it was time to focus on China and Russia instead of Afghanistan.

Biden may be recalling George Marshall, Army Chief of Staff, who had suggested the swift defeat of Nazism was essential because, "a democracy cannot fight a seven year war." The war in Afghanistan is three times longer than that. Biden asserted, "Four American presidents have shouldered the responsibility of American troops in Afghanistan, I do not wish to pass this burden to a Fifth president." In US's military engagement with Afghanistan, it has spent USD 2 trillion, losing 2300 of its troops. Also 1,57,000 Afghans died fighting the Taliban militants and other mercenaries. America had deployed upto 100,000 troops, of which 3500 remain. Supporters of Biden argue that US has done enough to secure Afghanistan and the peace process set in motion should materialise in the interest of all stakeholders. However, there is no discussion whatsoever about what would happen to India in security terms in post-bellum Afghanistan. Critics of the Biden decision express deep worries. Republican Senator Lindsay Graham called it a disaster in the making. He warns that Biden may be paving the way for the repeat of 9/11 attack. Pakistan will have a field day in using its strategic depth in Afghanistan disrupting peace and security in the region. Beijing may use the situation to its advantage.

The wheels of history moved a full circle, when Pakistan, patronised by China and Russia, is using Taliban to fight the Americans through the government in Kabul. The US used Pakistan to fight the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; propped up the Mujahideen with help from Islamabad. The US erred by militarily feeding Pakistan as its frontline state against its arch rival Soviet Union. Now Pakistan is in another camp, that of China, which has replaced former Soviet Union as a challenger to American supremacy. The other mistake US made is not to have punished Pakistan severely for supporting Taliban and harbouring terrorists.

Since America is not factoring the possible sufferance New Delhi would face, observers suggest that India should get its ducks in a row. What are India's options? One school of thought says New Delhi has spent about USD 1 billion on development projects in Afghanistan, and thereby has earned goodwill of Afghan government, public and the moderates among Taliban. New Delhi could harness that positivism for neutralising any anti-India action from Afghan soil.

Second, if India can bolster good relations with Iran, it can still influence the developments to a considerable extent in Afghanistan. Recall, New Delhi was developing Chabahar Port in Iran and the railway line onward to Afghanistan. That would give India access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Third, if New Delhi could keep Russia in good humour with its defense deals, the latter may continue to support New Delhi in the region. Apparently, Russia brings in New Delhi in its equation with China, be it BRICS or SCO, as counter-weight to Beijing. So New Delhi should have some room for manoeuvre.

One finds the foregoing forecast of India's diplomatic in Afghanistan quite optimistic. It is in fact unrealistic strategic thinking. India has no more options than the QUAD plus the support of other friendly countries like Israel, France and Britain. Amongst these countries, US is critical to New Delhi's security and prosperity. But intriguingly, both US and India are faltering in cementing a robust partnership. If US is determined to build New Delhi as a countervailing power to Beijing in the region, it should fully nudge and support India. It should give space to New Delhi to have a political and security toe-hold in Afghanistan, that includes New Delhi building up friendly relations with Iran. Washington should also have special economic and trade relations with New Delhi. Despite Beijing's border aggression, New Delhi does more trade with China than with US. Washington should not demand reciprocity on trade from India as both countries are not at parity of growth or near enough to treat each other as equals. Washington is also perhaps exasperated with India's polity of non-alignment, neutrality and multipolarity etc.

Likewise, New Delhi has to make its strategies clearer than they are now. Non-alignment is dead. Multipolarity in world politics is impractical. The current rivalry is between democracy, human rights, rule-based order on the one hand and authoritarianism, irredentism, revanchism represented by China and Russia, and terrorism propped up by their side-kick Pakistan. What is New Delhi's choice? What are the different poles of power to advocate for a multipolar world?

History is repeating without a bloody confrontation between the Allied and Axis powers, the latter being China, Russia and Pakistan. New Delhi should read the writing on the wall. *INFA*

Letters to the Editor

## Semi-lockdown good but vaccination overdrive needed

Editor, It is troubling to read newspaper reports of the unpreparedness of our state to meet the looming health-care crisis of the Covid second wave. The director of NEIGRIHMS has forewarned the state authorities of its fund crunch and manpower shortage, and its inability to cope with the impending upsurge of patients. According to a report in the Shillong Times, Apr 22, 2021, this premier institute of the region has not received funds to meet this contingency, either from the central or state governments. The hapless director of NEIGRIHMS has been bluntly told to, "not lose hope because the central and state governments are with them." This is a meaningless reassurance because government hospitals do not earn revenue and are dependent on the exchequer.

The Director of Health Services has admitted that the state cannot handle 100 critical cases at the same time, and that only 111 ventilators are available. Quite apparently, the nation and the state has failed to adequately use the window of Covid decline to prepare for the second wave, which had already overtaken many other countries. No doubt sections of the irresponsible public are also to blame, but overall we have seen a stumbling performance from the

authorities, not even sufficient oxygen manufacturing capacity, except for Kerala. For a poor state and a developing country, tertiary health care is too expensive, so the emphasis must be on vaccination. As per the CoWin portal, 1.69 lakh persons have been vaccinated till date in Meghalaya. The eligible population as of now is about 6.5 lakhs, which means that only 25% have been vaccinated in the last almost two months.

From May 1, all those above 18 years will be eligible for vaccination. The adult population in the state is about 20 lakhs. At the present rate of vaccination, a rough projection for this exercise would be around one and a half years. The Government has indicated that "The target is to vaccinate all 6.5 lakh eligible beneficiaries within a week or ten days" as reported in the Shillong Times, Apr 22, 2021. It is good to read that more vaccination centres will be opened. The State must declare a time-bound plan for vaccination of all eligible adults. If twenty thousand a day can be vaccinated, all adults will be vaccinated in three months.

The State Government may have challenges of manpower and logistics. In the medium term, the training of more health professionals is imperative. The two promised medical colleges for the state are yet to start. The State also needs to quickly set up more institutions for the training of public health and paramedical professionals.

Rather than bits and pieces planning and pronoun-

ments, a cohesive plan is needed.

Yours etc.,  
Glenn C. Kharkongor  
Via email

## Let's fight Covid unitedly

Editor, As the second Covid 19 wave hits our state again, it has sent the government and the administration into a tizzy. The medical infrastructure which was already overstretched is now once again spread thin and the Government is all out to tackle it head-on even though the funds are barely available. The citizens who were slowly getting back into a semblance of normalcy are now again left staring at uncertainty and fear of the unknown. The enemy is invisible and one doesn't know who or what to fight or protect ourselves against. However this time let us rally together and take precautions. Let us follow all the necessary protocols and do our bit. For, it is in doing so that we will survive this worldwide pandemic. Let us be Covid heroes not Covidiot and in the process help ourselves to come out victorious.

Yours etc.,  
Angela Lyngdoh,  
Shillong -14

## No lockdowns please!

Editor, Lockdowns invariably stifle our lives. Of course, in exceptional cases lock-

downs may be imposed - as a "necessary evil". So, we had better explore other available options to fight Covid-19 before clamping complete lockdown. To our great relief, even Prime Minister Narendra Modi has now echoed similar opinions and seems regretful of last year's blanket lockdowns.

The continuous lockdowns last year left millions of households in wretched conditions. Innumerable poor people died/ suffered not because of COVID but for various other reasons including starvation. Sadly there is no end to their woes and trauma till the date. The massive loss of employments had badly hit millions of citizens. Was it not a nightmare to have to undertake the strenuous journey on foot from metro cities to their homes? Some even traveled the distance of 1500 Kms without food. Each poverty-stricken migrant worker has his/her own tragic story of suffering which we people living in luxury will never be able to imagine.

Frankly speaking, when such an uncontrollable and sudden mass exodus occurs in major cities, no one ever cares to follow the rules and regulations, let alone the COVID-19 precautions. The frantic crowds usually have no time to listen to words of wisdom. If we objectively analyze the resultant outcome of the lockdown, it was a total failure with unprecedented economic loss. To save some we had put the whole fortune of civilization at risk. How could we think of saving lives when our economic resources drain away? I believe we should not call

for such situations that might lead to another bout of mass exodus of migrant workers and students. Let's oppose the lockdown with "sensitivity and prudence". More than anything, the lockdown isolation unarguably contributes to weakening our immunity to fight the Covid virus. Let's not waste our breath on such measures that finally render us weaker and reduces our immunity.

Yours etc.,  
Salil Gewali,  
Shillong

## Schools violating Govt guidelines

Editor, Apropos the letter, "School violating Govt guidelines", as a parent-teacher myself I agree with Patrick Kurbah's submission. A school is an educational institution which comprises the management, teaching and non-teaching staff, students and parents. When the Government has declared that all schools within East Khasi Hills District are to close down for 14 days, it includes teachers as well. But some schools are exempting teachers from this order on the plea that they have to take online classes from the school. Teachers gave their best in the first year of the pandemic and we are doing it well till date. In many schools teachers did not compromise the quality of education despite working from home so why are schools treating teachers as if they are the frontline warriors? In your esteemed newspa-

per dated April 21, 2021, the bold headline says, "Is State Prepared Enough?" But my question is - "Are the School Managements prepared to risk the valuable lives of their teachers who leave their families and children at home everyday to take care of other people's children? Are teachers not human? Is risking our lives worth it? Schools which have asked the teachers to attend to their duties after the order was given also know that teachers cannot say 'NO' despite the alarming Covid cases as we have to feed our families. Will the school managements take the fall if teachers are sick? Many teachers in our state don't have the luxury of coming to school in their own vehicles or to reserve a taxi. Hence they have to reach school via public transport which makes them vulnerable. It is not surprising that schools decided to ask the teachers to attend school after the said order but what is appalling is that the school notifies the teachers to attend school every day from 8:15 AM to 3:30 PM when online classes start from 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM. Teachers teach children to be disciplined and follow classroom rules and yet the school itself cannot follow a simple guideline which can save many lives.

Yours etc.,  
Lamphang Sohkhlet,  
(a parent-teacher)  
Via email

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"Progress imposes not only new possibilities for the future but new restrictions."

--- Norbert Wiener

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### Lockdown a last resort

GOVERNMENTS across states are caught in a bind over whether to announce a lockdown or to resort to containing the virus wherever it has struck. In Meghalaya, the Opposition Congress has rightly expressed its concerns over a second lockdown even as memories of the first one in March last year continue to haunt the poor and destitute daily wage earners and all those engaged in sectors outside of the government. Most businesses have sunk and yet many who run hotels and guest houses have been paying their staff despite the loss of income from the sector. Tourism and its ancillary services are the most badly hit of all the businesses, more so because Meghalaya has a plethora of home-stay facilities created over the last ten years and which have remained unoccupied since March 2020. It was only in November-December 2020 that tourists trickled in. Now with the outbreak of the new mutant strain across the country it is prudent to stop the movement of tourists from outside the state for they could be asymptomatic carriers. But there is also the question of sustaining those home-stay owners and hoteliers who through no fault of theirs have had to suffer a huge income loss and also loss of livelihoods for those employed by such hotels/home-stays. Policy intervention in this sector and funds infusion is imperative.

Interestingly as soon as the District Administration announced a partial lockdown beginning Sunday, people have begun to argue that some of the services listed as non-essentials are actually not so. It is instructive that in the age of digital technology, computer stores and their backroom repair sections would top the list of non-essential services. This, when education is now conducted on the digital mode and important meetings and conferences are being organised online. Clearly there is a need for more discernment before pulling down the shutters of any business. While clothes, shoes, garments, jewelry et al are dispensable at this juncture, there will be no dearth of people who would need to ramp up their computers and mobile phones. Generally computer outlets also store mobile phones and a repair section. The week-long shutdown is likely to play havoc with those who might require the services of computer stores. They include the lakhs of students communicating with their teachers on the computer screen or on mobile phones.

That the second Covid wave is more virulent cannot be overstated and it is incumbent on the Government to contain the infection so that the health delivery system does not collapse as it has done elsewhere. Above all, this is a time for collaboration, not confrontation. Government needs to consult better with responsible members of the public. Participatory decision-making is what drives democracy. Besides, not all wisdom resides within the government system.

## Dissecting Meghalaya's Education Department

By Mayborn Lyngdoh R

Meghalaya was known as the educational hub of the entire North-east, if not the entire country. Students all corners of the seven states would throng to Shillong, in particular for higher education, over the decades. The minute hand of the clock is now forced backwards. The once vigorous and passionate Education System of Meghalaya first lost its fluffy feathers, then its strength, and lastly the significance of its existence. To amalgamate the flawed roots, would take a dissertation of half a lifetime. Hence I will only touch on the core of the system as stated in Meghalaya School Service Rules, 2012 and Meghalaya School Education Service Rules, 2012.

At one time the education system of Meghalaya rested gleefully on the shoulders of the able bureaucrat(s) while they relied on the technocrats. For the administration to run smoothly, it has to fall in line with the service rules, and the merit of their criteria to run the administrative framework without hassles. Let us take a look at the etymological and chronological ladder of the employees under the Meghalaya School Service Rules, 2012 and Meghalaya School Education Service Rules, 2012.

The Meghalaya School Service Rules, 2012 divides the service into two groups that is, Senior School Service and Junior School Service. Senior School Service: Grade I: Vice-Principal (HSS), Assistant Headmaster/Headmistress, Assistant Lecturer (HSS), Assistant D.I. of Schools (to be re-designated as Additional SDSEO), and Assistant DAEO/Assistant DSEO.

Grade II: Sub-Inspector of Schools, Assistant Teacher (SS) (Graduate with B.Ed), District Science Supervisor, Technical Assistant Science Education, Drill/Drawing Teacher (Graduate), SEO/LSEO (Graduate), Assistant Teacher (Graduate with B. Ed/without B. Ed) teaching in both UPS and SS of amalgamated schools, and Head Teacher of UPS (Graduate). Junior School Service: Grade I: Head Teacher of UPS/Sr. Basic Schools (Under graduate/PUC), Assistant Teachers UPS/Sr. Basic Schools (Graduate), Drill-cum-Drawing Master in UPS/Sr. Basic Schools, and Hindi Teacher, UPS/Sr. Basic Schools (Graduate).

Grade II: Assistant Teacher, UPS/Sr. Basic Schools (Under Graduate/PUC) SEO/LSEO (P.U. Passed), Hindi Teacher, UPS/Sr. Basic Schools (PUC), Craft Teacher (PUC), Craft Instructor (Matriculate with Diploma Certificate in Craft from recognised Technical Institution/National Trade Certificate, and Drill/Drawing Teacher (PUC). Grade III: Head Teacher, LPS/Jr. Basic Schools, Assistant Teacher (Matriculate/

HSLC Passed) Craft Teacher (Matriculate/HSLC Passed) Craft Instructor (Non-Matriculate with Diploma/Certificate in Craft from recognised Technical Institution), and SEO/LSEO (Matriculate/HSLC passed).

The first cracks in the Meghalaya School Service Rules, 2012 appeared with the inclusion of the Higher Secondary Section with the Secondary Section set-up. It has been argued that since the proportion of the service staff of Secondary Sections is overlapping with the Higher Secondary, therefore, 75% promotion is for the Grade II Senior School Service including the Asst. Teachers, while 25% is for the Asst. Lecturers. Let us pay a little attention to the first ascending promotional flow.

Grade III of the Junior School Service can climb up to Grade I provided they fit the criteria. Then, Grade I (Head) can upgrade to Grade II of Senior School Service and

Grade II to Grade I (Head) while just being graduates. Owing to the defects in the rule book, most by-pass the promotional process from Grade II to Grade I of Senior School Service. Logically and morally, the ones being promoted from the lower ranks should have first held the office of the Asst. Head, however they are propelled to the position of Vice Principal by default. With time, all the Grade I of the Senior School Service will again be promoted to Junior Grade II post of School Education Service (i.e. SDSEO/Headmaster/Headmistress of the Secondary School/Special officer. This further allows them the privilege to be promoted to Junior Grade I, and the process continues until they reach the position of the Additional Director of School Education Services.

The ladder of promotion at the lowest level in the Junior School Service in the Meghalaya School Service is transparent, precise and well drafted. However, when we move to the Senior School Service, there seems to be a purposeful disinterestedness on the part of the bureaucrats and the framers of the rule-book. Qualifications and Service Record - It is baffling as to why there are no set rules for Asst. Teachers to upgrade to Vice Principal as the required qualification for Asst. Lecturer is higher. In the same school, an Asst. Lecturer with a higher qualification and a longer service record is serving under a person who had initially joined under Grade II with a fresher service record because they enjoy the 75% quota whereas the latter enjoy 25%. What is more baffling is that Grade II of the Senior School Service continues to enjoy the 75% while holding the office equivalent to the

Asst. Lecturer via promotion. This allows them to be eligible for quick successive promotions moving higher up the ladder as stated below according to the Meghalaya School Education Service rule, 2012-

Selection Grade: Director (Cadre post of IAS/MCS) Senior Grade I: Additional Director, Senior Grade II: Joint Director, Senior Grade III: Deputy Director/District School Education Officer, Junior Grade I: Additional District School Education Officer/Special Officer (Sc./Principal (Higher Secondary Schools, Junior Grade II: Sub-Divisional School Education Officer/Headmaster/Headmistress/Special Officer Apart from the post of the Selection Grade: Director (Cadre post of IAS/MCS), all the criteria for all other positions are not specified. Moreover they can be attained through promotion or direct appointment by the MPSC. The dilemma here is that it has bred many immoral practices by opportunistic people in power to turn the law in their favour. On April 15, 2021, the Education Dept released the promotion list of the different posts as recommended by Departmental Promotion Committee -

Going through the list, I found that two persons (whose names I will not mention) who had been recently promoted in the month of June, 2020 to the position of the Vice Principal have again been promoted to Sub-Divisional School Education Officer (SDSEO) in April, 2021, while Asst. Lecturers who are due for the position of the SDSEO/Headmaster/Special Officer, continue to fall back in line.

Rule 19 Confirmation (a) of the Meghalaya School Education Service Rule, 2012 clearly states that "he/she has served not less than one year in the post in which he/she is to be confirmed".

Further, in Rule 17 seniority (b) of the Meghalaya School Service Rules, 2012, says "Provided in any cadre a member appointed by promotion shall be senior to a member appointed by direct recruitment, where such appointment falls under the same year".

The discrimination of the Asst. Lecturers under the Senior Service Grade I under the direct recruitment of the MPSC with a Post Graduate Degree is notorious. With a service record of over two decades or more, the Asst. Lecturers are neglected while others enjoy double promotion. Furthermore, the Entry Point - When Junior School Service Asst. Teachers from Upper Primary Level are upgraded to Grade II Senior, their entry date is counted from the time of joining office from Grade II of the

Senior School Service, while the service of the teachers who start from the Grade II Senior School Service remains unclear.

Asst. Lecturers entry point is Master's with B.Ed. while that of the Asst. Teachers is B.A. B.Ed. How can the Asst. Lecturers be clubbed into the same category with Grade II with lesser qualifications, while some of the Grade II of the Senior School Service can take the role of Grade I (Vice Principal), a designation higher than the more qualified Asst. Lecturers? There are no prerequisite qualifications for Grade II, Senior School Service to go to the Senior School Service Grade II (as mentioned above).

They can even appoint as Vice Principal a person without a B.Ed. while only being a graduate as mentioned above in the Senior School Service Grade II. All promotions under the Meghalaya School Service Rules, 2012 are given by the DSEL (Directorate of School Education and Literacy) while promotion from Senior Grade I of Meghalaya School Service Rules, 2012 to Junior Grade II of the Meghalaya School Education Service Rules, 2012 is done by the Education Department.

It can be concluded therefore that the genesis of the flaws, the confusion and chaos in the system are partially because of the DSEL. Hence most technocrats holding the post in Meghalaya School Education Service right from Junior Grade II up to senior Grade I come from Grade II of the Meghalaya School Service Rule, 2012 without a formidable and formal criterion for promotion. This is a major loophole!

Though the Selection Grade post is held by the IAS/MCS most subordinate officers and technocrats are originally from Grade II of the Meghalaya School Service. Therefore, to protect their positions, the requisite qualifications have been intentionally neglected. The question we would like to ask now is, why can't the Selection Grade officer not overlook even these simple Service Rules which are in shambles? Are the bureaucrats so blinded by favouritism and partiality that they can even forego the dignity of their position? Or is it that they only enjoy the position, and salary without having the decency to work respectfully? Or are they left helpless without an ounce of fight in their veins over a graduate(s) way below par of their intellectual pinnacle. Education has been revered, respected and loved. Great men have lost and sacrificed their lives for knowledge and education. Alas! the education of today is politicised and DISGRACEFULLY gambled by learned men and women. What a Shame!

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## He will be transparent and driver of digital technology in courts Expectations from CJI-designate, Justice NV Ramana

By Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr

There is speculation about what sort of Chief Justice of India Justice NV Ramana would make. "He is not the kind of judge who will clash with the executive. Nor is he likely to cause ripples through his legal pronouncements. His will be a quiet term," said a lawyer who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Justice Ramana will be sworn in as the 48th CJI on 24 April. He was appointed as judge of the Supreme Court on 17 February 2014 and will retire on August 26, 2022. He had a brief stint as a journalist with a leading Telugu newspaper and enrolled at the Andhra Pradesh High Court bar in 1983.

He was additional standing counsel for the central government and the Indian Railways at the Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT).

He then became the Additional Advocate General of Andhra Pradesh and subsequently a permanent judge of the Andhra Pradesh High Court in 2000. It can be called a quiet journey, during which he honed his knowledge and skills without drawing the limelight. He was at the Andhra Pradesh High Court for 13 years and Acting Chief Justice of the High Court for two months.

He became Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court in September 2013 and got elevated to a judge of the Supreme Court in February 2014.

The CJI is also a Master of the Roster who decides the lists of cases and their assignment among Supreme Court judges. The institution of the Master of the Roster often gets criticised for opacity and lack of objectivity. One particular criticism is that it does not list 'contentious' matters at all. Whether the CJI-designate changes this during his term is yet to be revealed.

For instance, petitions that challenge the abrogation of Article 370, the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019, and the electoral bond scheme did not get a hearing during the tenure of Justice Ramana's predecessor. These petitions are pending despite constitutional importance. Justice Ramana's legacy will depend upon whether he will take up "contentious" cases such as these three.

As the head of the Collegium, his immediate task would be to fill the vacancies in the Supreme Court. Will he bring the other four judges of the Collegium on the same page to break the impasse in the Collegium will be something to watch out for.

CJI-designate Ramana does not seem to generate high expectations that he will be a judge in shining armour. He is not your high-profile judge who will stride like a colossus.

CJI Koka Subba Rao made a name for himself when he pronounced in the famous Golaknath case that Article 368 (which lays down the procedure to amend the Constitution) does not empower the Parliament to amend Fundamental Rights. But Justice Ramana is expected to be a low-key CJI. According to observers in the legal fraternity, he is not the kind of person who would create constitutional storms through his judgments. Perhaps that is an impertinent view, for he may surprise all, as Justice Subba Rao did in the Golaknath case. The one case that seems to be on every mind is the Jammu and Kashmir internet connection case. In it, Justice Ramana ruled that freedom of speech and expression and the freedom to practice any trade, business or occupation over the internet is protected by Articles 19(1) (a) and 19(1)(g).

A senior counsel speaking on condition of anonymity says, "He [Justice Ramana] does not believe only in abstract and theoretical interpretation of law. He is aware that the law has to deal with people's problems. And he sees the function of law as a means to help people."

The senior counsel further explains: "He does not belong to the elite group of judges. He comes from a different background with an experiential touch of life. He understands people, and he can sense who is genuine and who is not. He Andhra sympathises with the plight of the people who knock on the doors of the Supreme Court and seek justice."

Says a journalist who has reported from the Delhi High Court as well as the Supreme Court, and who has observed the ways of Justice Ramana: "He has sympathy for the poor and he has always tried to help them. He has created a fund from which to help the families of people who had been languishing in prisons when he was executive chairman of the National Legal Services Authority. He is not the kind of judge who would deliver brilliant judgments replete with wit and wisdom, knowledge of law and literature. His term would be a quiet one. He will not take up cudgels on behalf of the judiciary against the executive."

However, he also praises Justice Ramana as one of the few judges who are at home with technology. "He is at home with technology compared to many of his fellow judges in the Delhi High Court as well as in the Supreme Court. He is an efficient administrator," he says.

Justice Ramana also won the hearts of the members of the Delhi High Court Bar Association through his administrative abilities. He is considered a master court administrator. Says a lawyer who had argued many a case before Justice Ramana at the Delhi High Court, "He is a superb administrator, and he has proved his credentials on this point when he was the chief justice of the Delhi High Court. That is why, the Delhi High Bar Council Association had passed a resolution condemning Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Jagannathan Reddy's letter to Chief Justice Bobde against Justice Ramana. The Delhi High Court lawyers valued Justice Ramana."

During his time as chairman of the judicial academy, he organised a conference, for the first time in India, of judicial officers of all ranks, police officers, correctional services authorities, juvenile justice boards, advocates, prosecutors, womens' organisations, social groups and media representatives for a dialogue on the menace of sexual assault on women.

His recommendations based on the dialogue in the conference made it to the Justice Verma Commission, thus helped reshape the administration of criminal justice. He had also organised the first Public Prosecutors Conference while at the Andhra Pradesh High Court. He has authored many papers, including one on global legal education, which got much attention.

He is keen on judicial reform and favours Alternate Dispute Redressal mechanisms. He is all for regional languages as a means of justice delivery.

He is a staunch advocate of personal freedoms and liberties. He was on the Supreme Court bench that ruled that even under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), it is possible to consider a bail plea if a trial was not proceeding. The bench observed that an accused could spend more time as an undertrial than even the likely sentence. (IPA Service)

### Letters to the Editor

#### Information technology an essential service

Editor, Information technology (IT) has played a huge part in our lives over the past 30 years and its role rising exponentially every year to the level we are at today. This is especially true today as we live through a global pandemic that is ravishing our country with the second wave. It can be easily argued that IT is one of the major tools we have in our fight against Covid19, having shown to effectively help in breaking the chain of virus transmission by letting us work remotely.

Yes, today from schools to colleges to offices, IT is indispensable, especially in our current situation, which is why it was a surprise to see the Government listing computer and repair services at the very top of its list of non-essential services that would be closed from April 26 to 2 May, 2021.

Where are people to go if their devices have to be replaced or repaired? Are their children to miss online classes in that case? How will businesses function or submit taxes in case of a failure? Even government offices need technical support in that sense. What if one has to attend a meeting,

and their camera konks off? We need our devices working more than ever today, and it makes no sense to mark IT services as a non-essential commodity. Instead, I request the Government to reconsider its decision and instead ensure that SOPs are adhered to strictly and diligently, and allow these services to function.

Yours etc.,  
V Khongwir,  
Via email

#### Tackling the Pandemic

Editor, The war to fight the second wave of COVID-19 has just begun and we as responsible citizens must create our protective shield against the virus by wearing masks, using hand sanitizers and maintaining social distancing. Creating awareness among the masses about the adverse effects of the virus and how to combat it is the need of the hour. Apart from the COVID vaccine, we can self-administer the vaccination of "immunity" by eating healthy and hygienic food and doing regular exercise. Though tourism and public transportation faces a tough challenge at present, it is expected that tourists and the commuters follow the guidelines necessary to combat the deadly virus. Moreover, artists can enact plays to show the adverse effects of the viral strain and the

emotional pain it causes our near and dear ones. UNITED WE STAND, so in these tough times we must support, care and cooperate with each other for a better world in the future. Through the columns of your esteemed daily, I request the citizens to follow COVID appropriate behaviour.

Yours etc.,  
Partha Pratim Duarah  
Nazira (Assam)

#### TMC has delivered good governance

Editor, No praise is enough for Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen for boldly affirming the quality of governance under Mamata Banerjee, especially in an environment where belittling her has turned into a national "obsession". Indeed, on the welfare front, with special emphasis on rural infrastructure, food security, health of children and girls, the TMC government has worked wonders despite financial constraints. Looking after the basic interests of the common people especially the weaker section is the first duty of a welfare state and on this yardstick the TMC government deserves high-esteem marks. No wonder why despite zealous projection of "Gujarat model of development", the much-maligned Bengal fares much better in social index of development,

children's health being just an example, than that much-hyped Western state where "Vikas" needs to be hidden behind the "Trump Wall".

It is also a feather on the cap of Banerjee whose great humanity-driven governance has been appreciated by humanitarian economists like Amartya Sen! No wonder the United Nations honoured Banerjee for highest public service while the US and Netherlands saluted her for initiating various social schemes beneficial to the common people! Surely those international organisations and Western countries are controlled neither by Banerjee nor TMC!

How can the merchants of hatred, who no nothing better than mosque-breaking or communal slogan-chanting, even think of appreciating people who are sane, good and the epitome of humanity! So both Sen and Banerjee are equal "enemies" in their poisonous eyes and mind which can't see anything beyond temples, statues, luxury trains and the "Holy Cow." And they can't think of a better label than anti-national for anyone who differs with them.

Sen has accurately portrayed that since 1946, Bengal has not seen such a strong fanning of the dangerous flames of communal divisions as is being witnessed today. Could it be envisaged even a few months ago also that the sons of the soil Ben-

galis would be "demonised" as "Pakistani" just because of their Islamic credentials with none other than the Chief Minister of the state being addressed as "Begum" for her "sin" of treating all communities on an equal footing? It seems Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh have been implanted in Bengal! So a Muslim muezzin to a Hindu boy can now be beaten up in Bengal for not chanting "Jai Shri Ram"! If this is the picture even before their assumption of power in the state, then what horror would be inflicted upon Bengal if they gain power can well be imagined.

Bengal is today at a very crucial crossroad of history and if the Bengalis adhere to the noble words of Sen then Bengal should never be a party to such a degeneration where human beings are being judged by their religion, caste or nationality only!

Yours etc.,  
Kajal Chatterjee,  
Kolkata -114

#### Of insidious ideologies

Editor I am writing to express my deep appreciation and gratitude to Kajal Chatterjee for the spirited letter (ST, Apr 14, 2021), critiquing BJP and its hypocritical pseudo-feminism, especially on the question of an abomination like the practice of Sati. I am grateful too for the defense

of Raja Ram Mohon Roy. Morally questionable forms of anti-colonialism have led to an equally dubious search for authenticity. In response to westernization, morally repugnant desires to return to roots are plaguing India in the form of insidious ideologies. That people succumb to these ideologies, regardless of the putrid quality of the roots sought, is deeply troubling.

Yours, etc.,  
Deepa Majumdar,  
Via email

#### Justice served for Floyd

Editor, Justice is served for George Floyd. The jury's decision to unanimously convict Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd who pressed his knee into the neck of George Floyd, an unarmed black man for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. This deadly use of force has reinvigorated a huge public debate about police brutality and racism. When it comes to policing in the United States it is far from living in a just society that is free from systemic and structural racism. US police reforms are urgently needed.

The conviction is a monumental victory in the fight for racial justice and human rights in the United States.

Yours etc.,  
M Haque (Advocate)  
Shillong -6

# 1971 War through the Camera Lens

By Vishnu Makhijani

Acce photographer Raghu Rai was only five years into the profession when the Bangladesh liberation struggle erupted in March 1971. He was dispatched post-haste by The Statesman newspaper to record the exodus of refugees, they would eventually number some 10 million, as they streamed into West Bengal and neighbouring states to escape the atrocities being committed by the Pakistani Army.

He could immediately empathise with the refugees being a child of Partition himself when he and his family were uprooted from their Jhang hometown in what is now Pakistan.

Rai worked at a furious pace sending back images after images which the newspaper faithfully carried, making him a household name in India and unfolding the horrors that marked the liberation struggle.

But then, tragically, his entire body of negatives was lost, till they were recovered, quite by accident.

The outcome is "Bangladesh: The Price of Freedom", published by Niyogi Books to mark the 50th anniversary of the creation of Bangladesh as an independent nation.

"I got involved myself in the sense that in 1947, when my family and I were uprooted from Pakistan, we came to India as refugees."

"Because the newspaper needs one or two pictures every day, my own environment and being a refugee myself, I got involved watching the plight of the refugees from East Bengal and their sufferings."

"And then these negatives were lost. They were put into some big bundle somewhere and never saw the light of the day," Rai told IANS in an interview.

"Then suddenly one day my assistant, who was scanning my important photos, said, 'Here is this packet of photos of Bangladesh refugees'. And I said, 'Really?' This was after 40 long years that we discovered it."

"Meanwhile, you know, many photographers from around the world had come and take pictures of Bangladesh refugees, like Don McCullin from the Sunday Times



had done a feature, a very good feature."

"And I thought, 'What a great job he's done!' And then he had done a quick book and I said, 'Very good!' And I had forgotten about my own work. And then I see my work after 40 long years, and I said, 'My God, it has its own intensity and message that needs to be shared.'"

So then, I spoke to the relevant people and that's how the book came about," Rai explained.

What were his thoughts as he once again studied the images and made the selections for the book?

"You see, there were two really important points, one is that in 1971, I was just five-years-old as a photographer. I was madly, deeply involved."

"But I was so young as a photographer and then I had seen the work of Don McCullin and, you know, he was 11 years senior to me. And then I discovered my photos and compared my work."

"And I thought, 'Let me put it out in the public domain because I have done it'."

"So, I discovered that even if I was only five-years-old as a photographer, the intensity and the suffering that I had managed to cover was so powerful and moving that I thought I must share this," Rai elaborated.

And what an era this recreates! The stories are perhaps not unknown, but are retold by a master storyteller- the refugee camps, the exodus, the never-ending journey, a whirlwind of poignant, tormented history.

And finally, a new nation, a new tomorrow. "Bangladesh: The Price of Freedom" contains never before seen photographs which comprise a

significant body of work documenting a turning point in the history of South Asia by someone who was there from the beginning to the end.

In the final denouement, after General Sam Manekshaw, ordered the army to move into action on December 4, 1971, Rai drove with the first column that headed the attack, towards Khulna through Jessore Road, which the Pakistan Army had already abandoned.

"The first 40/45 kilometers were easy but then, as we got closer to the Khulna sector, we were greeted by artillery fire with airburst their artillery was locating the enemy with the help of informers on wireless and closing in on targets."

"We were located and ambushed the airburst caused casualties, as we were moving in the open," Rai writes in the book.

"I photographed some of the wounded soldiers being taken away. But the question was how many such photographs could I possibly take? The next set of victims could be us."

"The major who was conducting me wanted me to move to safety. We ran for half a kilometre in a safe direction. I saw a chai shop and relieved, ordered tea and biscuits, pleased that I had a close encounter of an actual war, had taken action photos and escaped!"

"I was stretching myself on the road when one bullet flew past me. The major shouted for me to lie down. I did and another bullet went past me."

"I crawled back to the shop and was told by the shopkeeper that the Pakistan Army was on the other side

of the rail track, just half a kilometre away."

"This was probably the shortest war fought and won by any nation."

This was also due to the fact that the local population in Bangladesh had become hostile to the Pakistan Army. The Indian Air Force did the rest. By day 12 of the war, on December 16, 1971, 93,000 Pakistani soldiers had surrendered to the Indian Army."

"I flew into Dhaka in an army helicopter to witness scenes of jubilation and humiliation of victory and surrender. Indra Gandhi's bold decision, General Manekshaw's masterstroke and General Jacob's strategic planning had brought an end to nine nightmarish months of brutality and terror rapes, torture and dehumanisation of Bangladeshis, the price they had to pay for their freedom," Rai writes.

This book is one of four being published by Niyogi Books to mark the 50th anniversary of the Bangladesh war.

"The liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 was like a geo-political earthquake. No sensitive person in publishing or in any other profession could avoid its huge ramifications. As a publisher, we thought of documenting this event through different books because of an inner urge. There was no grandstanding or expectation of a future commemorative event. This is how the books, 'Bangladesh: The Price of Freedom', 'Sheikh Mujibur Rahman' and 'Blossoms in the Graveyard' came about," Trisha De Niyogi, COO and Director, Niyogi Books, told IANS.

"Simultaneously we are bringing out a unique book to commemorate the celebration. This is a first-hand report by a rookie Calcutta journalist from The Statesman, who accompanied the Mukti Bahini fighters at different places in the then East-Bengal. Later on, he also trailed the Indian Army when the latter got seriously involved in the liberation war. The book is titled as 'Bangladesh Liberation War: Report from Ground Year' and the writer is Manas Ghosh," Niyogi added. (IANS)

# International Art Exhibition in Milan



Madhuri Srikanth, an Indian-origin artist with roots in Telangana, has received a special invite to showcase her works at 'Romantica', an international art exhibition, to be held at Italy's Milan between April 23 and May 2.

Madhuri is the lone Indian artist to be invited to showcase her works at the exhibition organized by M.A.D.S., a contemporary art gallery, located in one of the main Milan districts.

A resident of Cary town in North Carolina (USA), Madhuri has been invited to showcase three of her works at the exhibition.

These include "Benevolent Buddha" (Acrylic painting on a clay board), "Golden Geisha" (Tanjore painting with .22 carat gold, semi-precious stones accompanying with poster colors on wooden panel) and "Shadow Sway" (Tanjore painting with .22 carat gold, semi-precious stones, and Swarovski crystals accompanying with poster colors on wooden panel).

The three works have a sale price of \$2,000 each. "I consider this has a great opportunity for me to showcase the traditions and culture of India on an international

platform. This festival opens doors to possibilities of showcasing art in a different light, with colours becoming the messengers of thought and memory."

By setting an example, I would also like to encourage more girls of Indian origin born or living in the US to make painting their manner of expression," said Madhuri on getting this invitation.

Born in Nalgonda, Madhuri is a self-taught painter, and believes canvas is her medium to express her dreams. Inspired from her mother's Rangoli as a kid, Madhuri started dealing with colors from a young age.

The innate talent in Madhuri was recognised during her days in school, when she received accolades at the national level, and ever since there has been no looking back.

A mother of two, and Vice President, at the prestigious Truist Bank (USA), Madhuri has developed strong command over various forms of paintings, without any formal training.

From color portraits, to murals, from sand art to Tanjore paintings, Madhuri has done some exceptionally great works in at least six forms of paintings. (IANS)

# Eudaimonia: Ana Romero on fighting stereotypes through Art

By S. Ravi

The ongoing Ana Romero solo virtual show on India International Centres website in collaboration with the Portuguese Embassy Cultural Centre, goes



beyond aesthetics requiring reflection and deliberation. The Portugal-based artist is a teacher whose passion is painting and has been exhibiting her

artworks since 2003.

The exhibition is titled "Eudaimonia" and will be on till April 25.

"Eudaimonia", stands for happiness for the Greeks or the good performance of their demon and this is achieved by

self-realisation, doing what one likes."

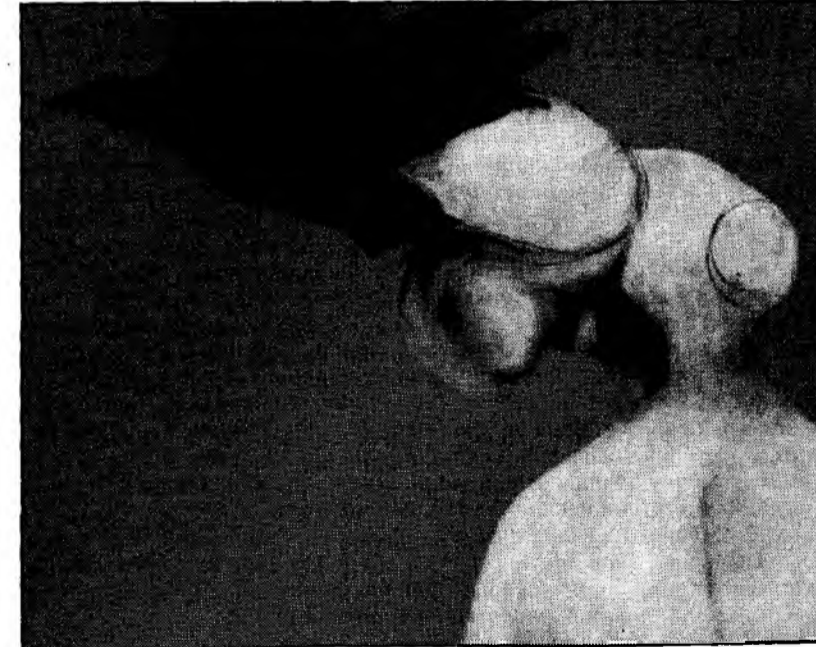
Elaborating this point, she says, "I am lucky to be a teacher and I like to teach. And that is to look at the world and interpret it through techniques that can be taught, such as painting."

One can also observe and assimilate the world in another way, through drawing, the primordial form of communication."

The 13 works on display mirror varied and conflicting emotions of life including joy and sorrow. The oil on canvas "Hope" is a positive painting depicting longing and expectation, "Je Suis Ton" is sad and bloody. Likewise, "Hate Me, Hate Me Not" draws attention to conventional norms of beauty, "After the Party" takes the viewer to a different plane as it brings to the fore emotions of a young girl. "In my works there is always contradiction and these help in highlighting emotions," remarks Romero.

Talking about her creative act of painting, Romero says, "the creative act serves as catharsis for the broken dreams, sadness, happiness, inner growth, the ugliness of the world. By portraying the worst, I let the best grow in me. Unlike Oscar Wilde's 'The Picture of Dorian Gray', I am the one who will get old and not my works as they will remain contextual for all times!"

One is simply struck by the repeated use of animals and birds in the paintings. While



"Bacon's Orange 1", "Dog" and "Amorperro" show a dog, "Bacon's Orange 2" portrays cats and "Bird" and "Red Alarm" depict avians. "Animals, like dogs and cats are of special significance to the humankind. Even though they have lived next to humans for centuries, yet they are often mistreated."

When asked if these works are symbolic, Romero says yes. "The dog is a symbol of fidelity, something I cherish."

Birds represent freedom and their depiction in 'Red Alarm' and 'Bird' is juxtaposed with a human figure to show dichotomy in our life."

Romero is also keen to highlight self through her works. Both "Ana Romero" and "Alice

In Wonderland" in the show are examples of this. The former shows her face partially as the innocent eye looks through you, the latter shows the artist, again with only one eye visible as the other is covered by tumbling figures.

"It is not just in these paintings but in others too I am there, if not totally then at least part of me."

The reason why only one eye is visible is because I don't want to reveal everything about myself," she explains. Elaborating on "Alice In Wonderland" she discloses, "Well, Alice is the exact description of me: I live in my own bubble and create my own people, in my paintings."

Even though her artworks

deal with human emotions, Romero wants her creations to draw viewers' attention and make them introspect about different issues. Her "Hate Me, Hate Me Not" showing a fat person wearing black gloves, precisely does that.

"I grew up in the nineties when models with hourglass figures were considered perfect. Even in 2021, they are still considered perfect, ideal and supreme. Women can't be perceived as fat and hence they are not allowed to be one, and those who were, were looked down upon," she remarks.

She says reading Islamist feminist writer Fatema Mernissi changed her insight about gender issue.

Romero believes that her works are universal in nature and will strike a chord with viewers all over the world. "I truly believe that an 'artist' has to 'add' something in his/her works, not just imitate reality, because for that camera and mobiles phones are there."

There is more to art than just aesthetics. "I believe in conveying ideas, concepts, fighting stereotypes, defending values, justice. From an early age I felt that being a woman I had to behave in a certain way in society. I'm not a feminist, I'm a person who happened to be born a woman and who always refused to iron a man's clothes. I've never done it! And I portrait what I know the best: the female universe."

Well look at her works, you agree with her! (IANS)

# Unique art show to boost Kerala Tourism

Lokame Tharavadu, a major contemporary art show featuring 267 artists and over 3,000 art works including assemblages and installations that began last week in Alappuzha, has the potential to transform the dynamics of cultural tourism, according to tourism stakeholders and planners.

The show, curated by artist Bose Krishnamachari and organised by the

of Alappuzha as a destination. "For the tourism industry, it spotlights the destination in an entirely different perspective.

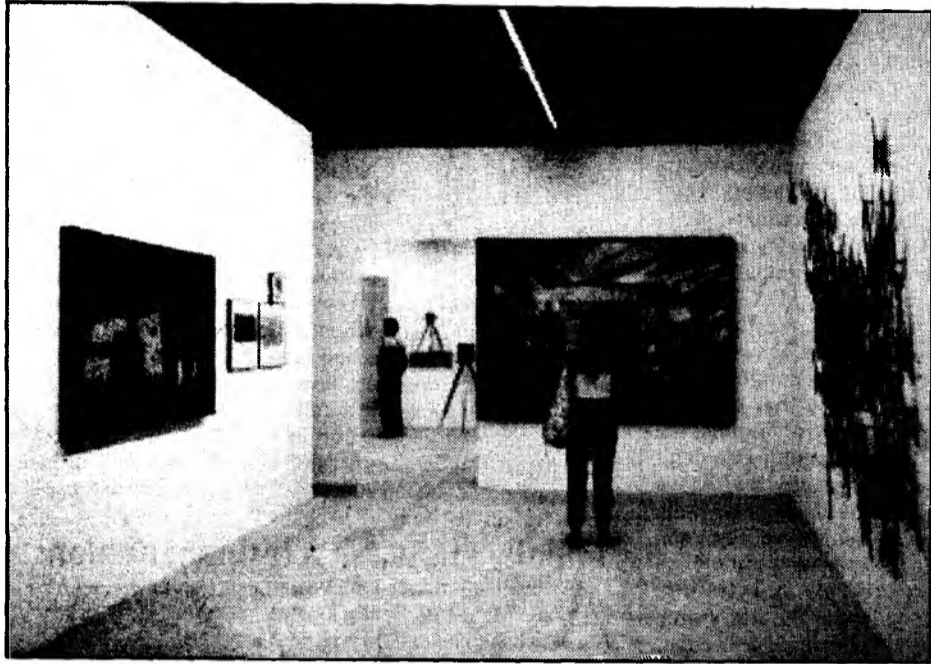
For the tourists, Alappuzha was always a boarding point, a backwater destination, houseboat destination and most importantly, an excursion destination.

This event makes a very compelling pitch to use Alappuzha as a destination not merely for a houseboat

From a cultural point of view, this is a great example of adaptive re-use. We are only starting to do this," added Venu.

Conservation architect Benny Kuriakose said that they embarked on the ambitious project to conserve the built heritage of Alappuzha for the future generations.

"We also thought there is great educational value in these spaces which served as coir factories and warehouses.



Kochi Biennale Foundation, which also organises the Kochi-Muziris Biennale.

It is also a celebration of the heritage of Alappuzha, where a string of museums have been planned by Alappuzha Heritage Projects under the guidance of Muziris Heritage and funded by Kerala Tourism.

The event is being held at five different venues and from Saturday, will now open for the public, but under very strict Covid protocols.

Additional Chief Secretary, Cultural Affairs, Planning and Economic Affairs, V. Venu, said for a variety of reasons this project is a game changer as it extends the footprint

cruise, but to stay back to spend a night or two at the destination absorbing its culture and history," said Venu.

Alappuzha is often referred to as the Venice of the East.

"The event also puts the spotlight on the built heritage of the city, on its by lanes and many bridges and the quaint precincts where the event is being held, revealing the many layers of Alappuzha's history and its rich cultural interface.

I believe that the event would become a catalyst through which we will see Alappuzha re-branding itself and re-positioning itself as a destination worth more than a cruise.

These are nothing but attempts to tell stories from our past and the linkages of the place with the maritime trade," said Kuriakose.

Tomy Pulickattil, Managing Director of Pulickattil Houseboats and a stakeholder in tourism industry, said that it is not just the tourism industry that is looking at the show with great hopes.

"The people here have also great aspirations regarding the project. The benefits brought in by the Biennale in Kochi are known to everyone.

I am certain that this would lift Alappuzha as a destination and provide it a new orientation," said Pulickattil whose company owns a dozen houseboats.

Venu also feels that from an art point of view, the event is a godsend for young artists.

"To get this kind of exposure, to get this kind of platform for exhibiting their works and to be seen and commented and reviewed by the best in the art world, like a never-before, never-again kind of chance.

This event plucks brilliant young people just out of wilderness and places them squarely before the world.

That is an amazing effort because it is transformational in many ways and is going to change a lot of people's lives," added Venu.

The event ends on June 30. (IANS)

# Help at hand for AIS aspirants

Renowned Indian mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik has now turned his attention to aspirants for the Indian civil service with his new book "Indian Culture, Art and Heritage" to show how the amalgamation of the three elements have created, built and resurrected Indian society from its inception.

"Art and Culture as a subject is a very significant aspect for the UPSC Examination. Apart from its value in attempting objective questions in Prelims, it also acts as a reflection of how well students understand the world, economics, politics, civilization and so on through the lens of time and space," Pattanaik said at the launch of the book here on Tuesday.

"I am proud to have launched this new book on Art and Culture with Pearson India, which is a carefully designed text that is classified by themes, geography, history and helps students understand the logic behind culture and what all it encompasses.

I hope that it will prove to be enjoyable & entertaining for readers, enable students to be winners at the competitive exams, and help shape the future bureaucrats of our country," he added.

"Indian Polity", another book aimed at civil service aspirants, was also launched on the occasion. Authored by Sriram Srirangam and Rohit Deo Jha, it covers important chapters on the Indian Constitution, its sources and Amendments, Directive Principles of State Policy, Fundamental Rights and Duties and Acts related to it, Election Commission and Schedules.

Rajesh Pankajashan, Director - Products & Portfolio, Pearson India, said: "Millions of aspirants

across the country prepare for civil services every year.

As per the data from CSE, as many as eight lakh students appeared for the civil services exam in 2019, which is considered the

dent that the aspirants would have a one stop solution for their exam preparation and achieve the winning edge."

Along with the new titles, Pearson India is offering an app (an-



most widely taken exam in the country. "Therefore, it becomes immensely important for students to have access to top quality resources and technique to ace the exam.

Pearson India's content in Civil Services is known for being the world class and now with the launch of new blended bite-sized learning resources with renowned authors Devdutt Pattanaik and Sriram Srirangam, we are confi-

droid and iOS) which will provide a blended learning experience to students and brings the learning content in an innovative bite size format which will be made available to the aspirants on the daily basis.

Pearson India is partnering with eminent content creators for this app and will be offering the resources free to the aspirants, the publisher said. (IANS)

## 'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, APRIL 25, 2021

Venus square Saturn on your solar return chart and it will give you mixed results for the whole year. You will be tested and will be putting in your efforts to get the things moving. You will be under stress and at times lose patience also. But don't try to be over ambitious with your plans otherwise they may prove counterproductive. New job offers will come but they will not be to your expectations. You need also to be wise in your business dealings otherwise you may be betrayed and will face financial losses. It will be difficult for you to get back your money. However your superiors in the office would be understandable and would support you fully. You will also get unexpected support from friends and family members. This will keep you going.

**Aries: (March 21 - April 20)**  
You will enjoy mental peace and bliss. New sources of income will get explored. You will also get money from somewhere. You will work with dedication and sincerity. And new job offers will come to you. The matters relating to your family will get resolved. You will also meet old friends and it will make you feel relaxed and happy. Your business will flourish. You will also make changes in your lifestyle. You will also recover money that was struck somewhere. All the judicious investments made during this period will prove to be profitable. You will also make friends with people in authority. You can also enter into new love relations leading to marriage.

**Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)**  
Your time is very favorable. You will have good relations with your bosses. Your ideas and plans will get implemented. You will also be given additional responsibility. Some change in job profile is indicated. Your colleagues will work with you in team spirit. However, due to your strict attitude some may not like you. Change your attitude there is still time or else you will be left alone. You will also develop religious inclinations and feeling of spirituality will grab you. You will use everything from letters to internet with them. Your health will remain perfect. You will also enjoy better financial position. Those who are single will get marriage proposals. You will crave for love and affection from your loved ones.

**Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)**  
The time is result oriented. You will be getting good job offers and business proposals. People related to print, electronic media, advertisement and international business will be successful. You will be completely relaxed during this time. The time will be spent peacefully with your closest ones. You will pay attention to your investments. Good business prospects are in store for you. Your spouse will be a source of inspiration and keep guiding you. You will understand the value of time. You will also continue facing the reality of this world. A huge change will happen in your life. Your worries and tension will get removed. You will also make new friends who will prove to be an asset in hour of need.

**Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)**  
It is a very promising week for you. You will achieve your targets. Your popularity at workplace will increase. You could be promoted in your job. You will also have financial stability and strength. Your self respect and dignity will increase. Your colleagues will perform every task in office after consulting you. There will be stability in your career. Your efforts for acquiring money will be successful. You will also get benefits due to the change in your life. This will ensure that you have a happy and secure future ahead. You will also enter new romantic ties leading to marriage. You will keep your relatives happy. You will also participate in fun activities. You will strike a balance between work and happiness.

**Leo: (July 23 - August 23)**  
Time will be highly beneficial for you. Some auspicious function will take place and you will enjoy your time with your family. Due to your busy schedule in your work you will be a bit tired. But yet you will complete your task. You will take proper care of your health. You will also be enthusiastic about something which will make you happy. You will achieve your targets. Do not engage yourself in any kind of extra work at this time, otherwise you may get nothing except trouble. All work will get completed as per your plan. You will also win an award. You will take part in a special event. Your efforts will bring good results. Marital life will be cheerful. You may also plan for an outing altogether. Time is very favorable.

**Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)**  
It is an official victory day. You will get an important post. All your held up work will get completed. Your financial condition will also improve. There is a promotion in your job. Time is very favorable. Senior officers will be very supportive. You will begin a new work. Days will bring joy and wealth. You will get success

in every work. People associated with technical jobs will reap more benefits. You will get benefit from your inheritance. You will be able to focus on your work. Yourself confidence will be high. You will meet new people with the help of your friends. Your messed up tasks will improve. There are chances of you going on trips. You will spend your time having fun with your friends and close people. Politics may attract you. You will also get success in business.

**Libra: (September 23 - October 23)**  
Some very positive developments will take place. You will get a work order from abroad. Those who are in business may enter into new partnership or association which will be beneficial. Your importance at your work will increase. Your work condition will be better and you will spend your time enjoying yourself. At your workplace keep your important documents ready. You may clinch a favorable business deal. You need to limit your expenses. You will also get good support from your spouse. You will spend some quality time with him/her. You will get blessings of your elders. Students will keep performing well. You will also receive the full support of your parents and in-laws.

**Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)**  
The start of the week will be pleasant. These are good days in terms of money. You will be happy. You will also hear a pleasant news. It will cheer you up. You will also do all your official work seriously. You will also be able to create harmony among the people around you. Your home atmosphere will be peaceful. You will also search for new options in your business. These are important days in terms of your reputation. You will set an example for society by your worthy and noble deeds. Your financial position will keep on improving.

**Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)**  
The whole week is going to be pleasant. Your financial position is going to be strong and stable. These are money acquiring days. You will be busy in doing some adventurous work. You will also show your potential through your work. This is the time to get recognized for your efforts. You will also fulfill new planning and hobbies. You will give importance to everything. This is an important time from the point of view of worldly and spiritual perspective. You will also receive profits in your investments and there are also chances of promotion in your job. You will achieve good results and the condition of studies for students will be favorable.

**Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)**  
Time is in your favor and you need to make best use out of it. You will enjoy with your family and friends. You will do lot of shopping for yourself and your closed ones. You will also receive an expensive gift. Your seniors will be impressed by you. You will experience positive changes in your life. Take utmost care in legal matters. Work will dominate your mind but you will complete it. You can also enter into new romantic relationship. You will also make great efforts to revive relations. You will remain at the top in matters of love. Keeping aside your ego will enhance your work, name and fame. Take adequate care of your health. There is possibility of growth in personal and professional life.

**Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)**  
You will peacefully complete your tasks. Your family will support you and your children will care about your feelings. It is time to gain victory in your work. Your financial condition will improve. During this time all your incomplete tasks will be completed. You will get good job/business offer. The balance between your work and family life will be improvement in your health. You will also meet old friends and will be lost in your memories. You will also respect will be high. You will get success in politics and legal matters. You could get involved in charitable activities. You will also get new job opportunities; you will be victorious over new plans.

**Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)**  
You will change decisions that you took in haste and will have no regrets in doing it. Work that was stalled will get completed with the help of dear ones. Your respect in the social sphere will increase. Love mates will enjoy each other's company. You will discuss something vital with your mate. You will also respect feelings of others. There will be an improvement in your financial condition. You will also understand the feelings of your colleagues, otherwise you will regret later. Your strong personality will leave a mark on officials. There will be an increase in your business. Meetings with people will be beneficial. You will be connected to the internet. Your efficiency will be commendable. New contacts will be beneficial. You will get the desired success. You could plan a short journey with partner.

# Social activism through art

By Sakant Deepak

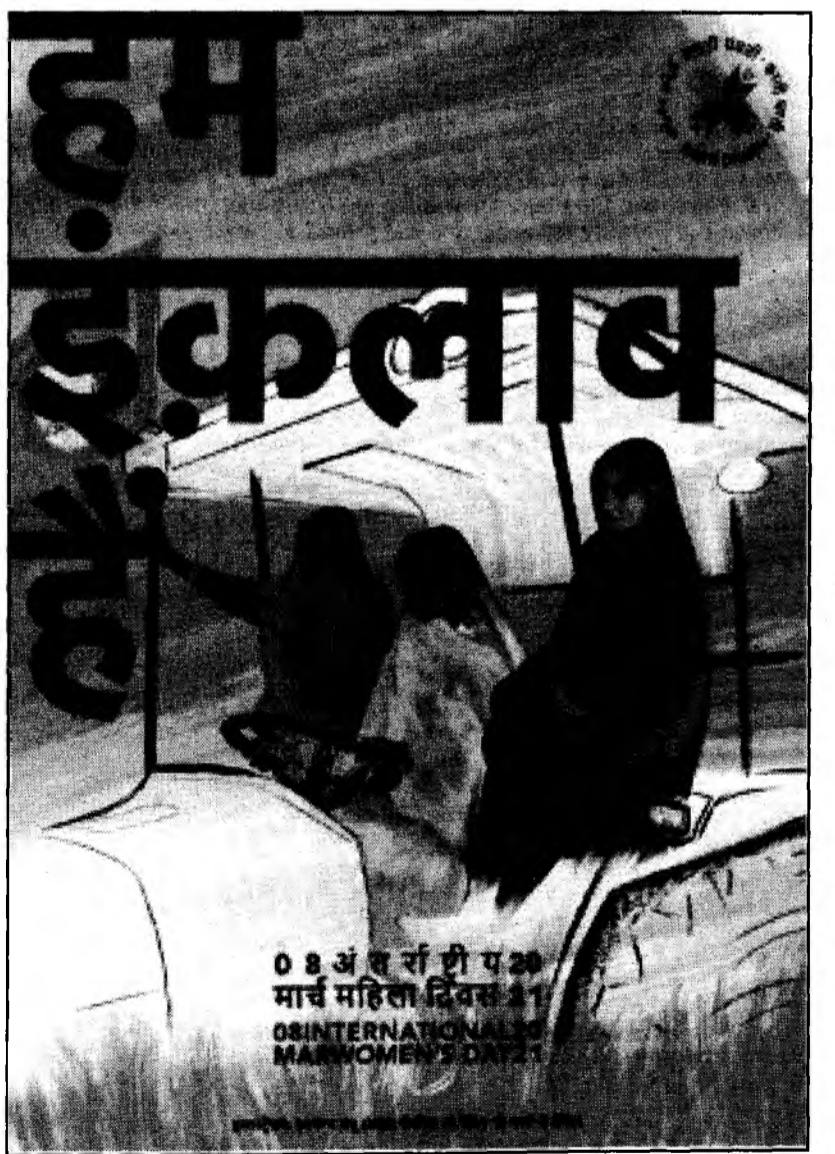
"It's important for me as a person to comment on social and political issues. Social media is a powerful tool to project my opinions into the world. It is also a great place to find alternate points of view and to engage with people outside of our echo chambers. My tool is drawing, so that is what I use to express myself," says artist Ikroop Sandhu, whose illustration, re-imagining painter Amrita Shergill's famous 'Three Girls' to mark Woman's Day during the ongoing farmers' agitation went viral.

This BA (Philosophy) graduate from LSR in New Delhi, who later did a course in animation from Vancouver has been following the farmers' protest ever since BKU (Ugrahan) set up a morcha.

"Initially I was an observer, but as things progressed, a friend of mine - Sangeet Toor set up a women led publication called 'Karti-Dhatiri'. She asked if I could make an illustration for their first issue. That got the wheels of my mind turning. I had been thinking about the contrasting images of women farmers astride tractors from this protest versus their docile depiction in paintings, films and literature. In fact, women farmers are largely invisible and categorised as rural women while their active role as farmers is overlooked even today.

"Amrita Shergill's beautiful and melancholic painting of three women came to mind, and I wondered if I could use them as a visual quote in the current dialogue around representation of women farmers. That is how the illustration came about. It was printed for the Women's Day celebration instead, and filmmaker Gurvinder Singh designed the poster. It was a spontaneous collaboration," she remembers.

Talking about artists' relationships with protest sites, especially as seen during the CAA-NRC protests and the ongoing farmers' agitation, Sandhu feels



that art is an exercise in observation whether one is painting a landscape, drawing a political cartoon or making a film. That this keenness to observe emerges from curiosity.

"It could be that artists are curious people or that curious people become artists. Protest sites with their continual improvisations and diversity of engagement is like a Petri dish for a curious mind. So it makes sense as to why young and old creative people would want to participate and study this human experiment."

The artist, who moved to Dharamshala from Delhi just before the lockdown is quite optimistic about the future of graphic novels in the country.

"We are seeing a plethora of independent publishers who are putting out high quality visual work. As comics go digital, more experimental and interactive work from Indian creators will emerge. I am optimistic about this ever growing readership and the shifts in visual mediums," she says. (IANS)

*"Books have a unique way of stopping time in a particular moment and saying: Let's not forget this."*

— Dave Eggers

**The Shillong Times**

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**Failing to lead**

THE worst was only to be expected. The Indian governance system is found sorely wanting in handling of the Covid19 pandemic in its second wave that is killing many due also to lack of oxygen supply in capital Delhi and elsewhere. A "doctor" himself is at the head of the health ministry and yet no precautionary steps have been taken in respect of oxygen availability both in the capital and across states to cope with emerging situations. Industrialist Naveen Jindal is dispatching tankers to some states from his plant in Odisha, while other industrialists too are doing their best. The Centre rolled out Oxygen Express trains to states to replenish stocks and IAF planes fetched oxygen from Singapore and other locations. Yet, even a few days' lag at this critical juncture proved to be disastrous, and more would die on this count. Clearly, the government at the Centre took things easy and its attention got diverted from the central issue at hand, as is also evident from the way the health ministry web sites are mismanaged even at this crucial hour, with visuals of the minister and top officials occupying much of its space.

There were clear warnings since last year at the initial stage of the Covid19 spread that the second wave of the pandemic was due to happen. China guarded its lives well; India failed. A year after the pandemic's eruption, safety drills went haywire and politicians with their indulgences did more to spread the virus. Some 50 per cent of those being tested in Kolkata now are confirmed covid positive. Kerala, another state where election campaigns lasted nearly a month turned into a jamboree with all caution and covid protocols thrown to the winds. Both PM Modi and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, as also wheel-chair-bound Mamata Banerjee, are tongue-tied about their own huge indulgences in the poll arena. Why such a huge show for polls in these critical times is a question begging a clear answer. Capital Delhi is on a prolonged lockdown, Mumbai is in a similar plight for a year, Bengaluru is gasping for breath, BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat are badly hit. These are also the economic nerve-centres. Short of a nation-wide lockdown, region specific restrictions are in place. Their impact on the national economy will be worse than last year's. India, clearly, bargained for this. Most flights have stopped and India remains cut off. The railways too are down in the dumps. The nation is paying a huge price for the indulgences of those who failed to lead.

# When the virus is smarter than humans

By HH Mohrmen

Hundreds of people across the nation are literally gasping for breath for the lack of oxygen supply and lost their lives due to fresh attack of COVID-19. People have also suffered because of the shortage of hospital beds and non-availability of ventilators and life-saving drugs. The numbers of people who suffered and died has increased many fold than in the last year and the question in the minds of those who in the process lost their loved ones and the general public too, is, 'why is this happening?'

When the country is said to be progressing in leaps and bounds in all spheres of life, we have not only failed to handle the pandemic but we have sadly surrendered our fates to the disease. The situation in the state is no better. Last year in this column just at the beginning of the pandemic, this scribe had questioned the preparedness of the State for any kind of pandemic attack. Sadly this time too the same question arises. After the last year's COVID-19 attack and the kind of experiences we had, the question again is, how prepared is the government for a situation like this. The answer to this question has come from the head of Health Department in the state, who recently confirmed that the health facilities available in the state will not be able to handle even a hundred serious COVID-19 cases.

Despite the available scientific evidence predicting the inevitable second wave attack of a mutated form of Covid the fact remains that even after the lapse of one year we have not been able to improve our health care system in the state. Of course it is not possible to improve the entire health systems at one go, but is the government prepared for the second virus attack. With scientific evidence predicting the second wave of COVID-19 attack, we could have at least prepared for this imminent threat. Unfortunately in spite of the experiences and the learnings from last year, the government is obviously not prepared for the second wave. The question then is if we are prepared for (god forbid) the attack like the other states in the country are experiencing now?

The question that begs the answer is whether the government has increased the number of hospital beds or at least made arrangements for temporary hospitals in the eventuality of the second wave. How many ventilators

has the government procured since last year? How many government (Civil) hospitals have ventilators? Or to be precise do we even have ventilators in the different CHCs? How many ambulances do we have in the entire state and do we have at least one ambulance at every CHC? Do we have every oxygen supply or do we even have a plan of how we will acquire oxygen if the attack hits the state hard? These are all basic requirements which the health department should have thought through of and prepare itself for and the state for the eventuality.

Since this scribe's area of interest is indigenous culture, the other pertinent question is with regards to the preparedness of the traditional institutions in the eventuality of the second wave of COVID-19

the unseen enemy. The document would have been a learning for other indigenous people around the world and an opportunity for the state and its people to showcase to the world the relevance of our traditional institutions in combating modern diseases. Unfortunately after the peak of the corona virus attack last year, our Government was busy in facilitating illegal transport of coal which only helps fill the pockets of few individuals. In one of our zoom meetings, Phrang Roy of the Indigenous Peoples' Partnership Movement in Rome said that government and people in other countries have learned from the first attack and they were prepared for the expected second wave, but the central and the state government of our country were caught in an



attack. The traditional institutions particularly the offices of the different dorbar (c) shnong at least in the Khasi Jaintia hills region of the state, deserve a pat on the back for their responses to the pandemic attack last year. Yet it is only organisations like the Unitarian Church, Jowai which during its anniversary celebration last year honoured the President of the Synjuk ki Wahah Chnong, Jowai on behalf of the entire conglomeration for their stellar service supporting the Government in its fight against the pandemic. The Government on the other hand has done precious little to recognise the contributions that the institutions have made last year.

Leave the gesture aside, the government has not even documented the different contributions that the dorbar shnong has made to support the state in its battle against

embarrassing situation. One is busy winning states and the other winning the Garo Hills District Council election and turning a blind eye to the looting of the state's treasury in broad daylight. The State Government is also busy building and repairing a ten ton capacity bridge which obviously cannot stand the weight of overloaded trucks which pass through the highway every day. Yet the different weighbridges and the police personnel manning the highways allow overloaded trucks to pass through the highways and obviously after their palms have been greased. The illegal act was possible because of the unholy nexus between the police, some pressure groups (fada jaid-byriew), and the different government agencies. It is ironic that while the countries of the world were collectively fighting the pandemic, those

in the nexus in the state had of course taken the phrase 'we are all in this together' in a totally new direction.

Phrang Roy also reminded the audience in the web meeting that this is the time to learn and relearn how community solidarity has been the bedrock which has stood the test of time for the Jaid-byriew especially in trying times like this. We have seen how the office of the dorbar (c)shnongs effectively supported the Government during the last pandemic attack and it is time to look and study how other institutions and different aspects of the society face the different modern problems. We need to understand which part of our tribal culture, principle or way of life of the Khasi Pnar helped us tide through these difficult times.

With regards to food the pandemic attack and the subsequent lockdown has taught the people one simple but important lesson, that kitchen gardens which every household in the rural areas had maintained had stood them in good stead. The simple kitchen garden in which they grow almost everything they need has helped them sail through the lockdown because of last year's pandemic. Add to that the wild edibles they forage from the nearby forests and the two had supplemented the vegetable and fruit needs of the people particularly those in the rural areas. The simple rural way of life with multiple livelihood practices has helped the rural folks see through this difficult time. If the coronavirus pandemic has anything to teach the indigenous people, it is to rely on our traditional practices. If people are smarter, they should take the opportunity to improve these institutions and the indigenous way of life which has helped them face the challenges last year.

W.H.O. reported that corona virus has mutated and the virus in India now is different from the virus which attacked the world last year. It is also reported that we now have at least two new virus strains in India and the dreaded one is the variant which has double mutation. The question is while the virus mutated and changed itself, the country and the State remained static in this front. Both the states and the country were complacent and caught unprepared for the second attack. The virus is obviously much smarter than all of us including the state and the country as a whole.

Email: hhmohrmen67@gmail.com

**Media management strategy goes for a toss**

## Global media blames Modi for pandemic second wave

By Arun Srivastava

It has been an act of careful carelessness. Narendra Modi knew that the second wave of corona would hit the Indian soil hard, but he pretended to be unaware of the impending threat; poor innocent guy. An insight into his conduct would make it clear that his pretention has wider ominous implication.

Not taking seriously the threat perception of the second wave of corona, having higher intensity than the first attack, has been a deliberate design to help his corporate and capitalist friends. These are the times when the business people make a fast buck. While the threat of corona which was acquiring the dimensions of a tsunami was looming large, the business community was busy minting money by exporting the vaccine and medicines to foreign countries. Modi refused to intervene and stop the export as the people desperately needed the medicines and vaccine.

It cannot be denied that India's corona crisis is a product of the paranoid governance that has marked the seven year rule of Modi, who has formed the habit of refusing to take responsibility for his failures and also the toxic combination of incompetence and authoritarianism that marks his government's actions.

It is really surprising to watch that the middle class and neo middle class have been the worst sufferers of the corona, bodies of their relatives are piling up at the crematoriums, but they continue to support and applaud Modi as the saviour! What makes them not to find fault with his policies, priorities and style of functioning is really intriguing.

India and its people have become victims of the callousness displayed by Modi and his lieutenant Amit Shah. Even while the country was facing the threat they continued to hold rallies unmasked. They did not make any serious attempt to stop Kumbh Mela. Their politics and functioning reflect their concern for the country.

It is not that the second wave descended without any warning. The scientists and researchers had warned in September 2020 that the risk of a second wave was very real. While all other countries went into war mode, evolved strategy to combat the epidemic, Modi used the occasion to hold the elections and have his governments in the five states.

His obsession to win the West Bengal assembly election was so acute that during the last two months he addressed not less than 20 rallies. Amit Shah addressed not less than 30 rallies and held nearly two dozens of road shows. Both continued with their programmes in spite of the fact that corona had already started ravaging the state and the country.

It is worth mentioning that in March the European countries began implementing non-pharmaceutical interventions to control the covid-19 epidemic. Most interventions were implemented in rapid succession in many countries. The researchers urged the governments across the globe not to relax lockdown too soon and to conduct an urgent inquiry. Scientists issued two desperate pleas to government to prevent a second wave of coronavirus in the UK.

They cautioned against "substantial relaxation of the social-distancing measures that have been in place", including the partial reopening of schools and the retail sectors. There is no denying the fact that the ill-conceived idea of massive election campaigning has been primarily responsible for the resurgence of Covid 19. It is a fact that relaxation of

lockdown, coupled with a potential breakdown in public trust, has brought us back into a situation where the outbreak is once again out of control.

There is no denying the fact that Modi failed to tackle second wave. This also symbolised his lack of concern for the poor, labourers, small roadside businessmen and daily workers. Out of 132 crore of population only a minuscule per cent, around 5 crore people have been vaccinated. String of missteps, air of complacency and denial dogged government's response to pandemic.

Though Modi-Shah duo have succeeded in managing the Indian media, the global media has turned severe critic and has put the blame on Modi for being complacent and not being prepared for the second wave. No doubt this is the worst that could have happened to image-conscious Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Modi known for playing gimmicks has christened the vaccination drive as "Tika Utsav" (vaccination festival). But what was really shocking was the so called celebration did not have sufficient number of vaccinations. The "Utsav" in fact saw a reduction in vaccines administered. While the second wave has spread to the rural areas, it is unfortunate the vaccine drive is yet to take off in these areas.

Modi who tried to project himself as the darling of the global media, suddenly finds himself as minnow. The person who strived to use the export of medicine to refurbish his image as the world-guru, has lost his charm. While The Times, London, carried the headline "Modi flounders in India's gigantic second wave," it has blasted the government for "the air of complacency and denial that have dogged his government's response to the crisis." The Guardian said "The system has collapsed: India's descent into Covid hell!" The newspaper added: "Many falsely believed that the country had defeated Covid. Now, hospitals are running out of oxygen and bodies are stacking up in morgues." India reported 314,644 of the new cases that were reported Thursday morning, nearly half of the total worldwide tally. International coverage has now zeroed in on India.

The global press has castigated holding mass election rallies in West Bengal that may have worsened the situation. The decision to allow the Kumbh Mela has also been denounced as reckless. The media accused the Indian government of lacking the courage to call the gathering off for fear of alienating their Hindu supporters.

It also talks about Modi, mask-less, at a West Bengal election rally. The Financial Times mentioned about oxygen shortage and funeral pyres on the banks of the Ganges. FT blamed: "The devastation has sparked outrage at the lack of preparation among officials who believed the worst of the pandemic was over." The Washington Post carried pictures of Muslim graveyard in Uttar Pradesh saying: "In some cities, crematoriums are running their furnaces round the clock."

The Wall Street Journal expresses skepticism and quotes researchers: "With its population of more than 1.3 billion people and skyrocketing infections, India has a higher chance of developing variants, which may take root and spread beyond its borders." The image of Modi stands impaired with the perception that he has failed to tame the second wave. (IPA Service)

**Letters to the Editor**

**Addendum to 'A space to express'**

Editor,  
Northeast Edit wishes to issue a clarification to the article "A Space to Express" that was published in the Shillong Times on 25th April 2021 [Online edition 24th April 2021] Northeast Edit is a part gallery, a part journal, and a part creative collective situated in Shillong, but with a global reach and outlook. It exists to present artists from the Northeast to the world.

Our focus is primarily contemporary art and design from the Northeast, and stories connected to the same. We do not have plans to document folklore. Others are already working in this space.

It has two Co-Founders, namely Priti Rao and Samya Deb who both come from creative backgrounds and have previously worked together on community-driven initiatives across India and the world.

Aaron Ian Lyngdoh is a part-time employee of the gallery working in the capacity of a host, stylist and gallery manager.

The group 'Khasi Bloodz'

has been erroneously misspelt in the article as 'Khasi Bloodz'.

Yours etc.,  
Dr. Priti Rao  
Co-Founder, Northeast Edit  
Via email

**Price rise of essential commodities**

Editor,  
The pandemic health crisis should not push the prices of essential commodities sky high but this unethical trend usually happens when misfortune strikes. Soon after the emergency alarm button of the second Covid wave was set off certain traders dealing in essential commodities in the state have started raising the prices of essential grocery items. A local resident complained that he was charged Rs 22 for a kg of potato on Friday for which he had paid Rs 15 just five days ago. Why is there so much price escalation suddenly? How will the poor people feed manage their households? Another person said his son working in Bangalore has returned home and is without a job for the last seven months. While this virulent Covid-

**Efficiency and productivity**

Editor,

The sudden rise of Covid cases in the state and in particular Shillong is major cause of worry even while many are predicting a worse case scenario. In spite of the hurdles and the difficulties being experienced it is noteworthy that a section of officers and mid-level staff are doing their best behind the scenes which only few know. God alone sees their good work in this time of human crisis. It is also worth mentioning that the proactive approach of the Deputy Commissioner of East Khasi Hills who has been coordinating all along with her team to understand, resolve and find solutions to the problems faced by daily wagers, shop keepers, transporters etc., and sometimes up to the last mile, is commendable. If the State Government authorities in the CMO and various other heads of departments are proactive we can all overcome the hurdles and this is where we need to appreciate their efforts irrespective of their rank and position.

Yours etc.,  
Salil Gwali,  
Shillong

**'Writing on the Wall': When will India learn?**

Editor

Steering the ship does not come easily when the alarm bells start ringing all around. Four months ago the success story of India's COVID management baffled experts and statisticians but here we are back to square one and we have ignored the 'Writing on the Wall' (the second wave). From super-spreader events such as the farmer's protests to election rallies and now the oxygen crisis the top rung of the BJP and their cohorts have failed miserably. Nations such as the UK under the leadership of Boris Johnson and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro and our Prime Minister Narendra Modi are power hungry and self-centred in promoting their own agenda.

Where does the public run to then when the kitchen is on fire? In 2005, Dr Michael Osterholm, a prominent American epidemiologist, alerted Congress to the real danger of a pandemic that would stress health care systems, kill millions and devastate the global economy. But Cassandras are always ignored!

The Meghalaya government is sailing in a different direction and the lessons last year are long forgotten. When the caseload was minimal the screws should have been tightened but the party leadership (ADC) considered the elections in Garo Hills to be more important than public health safety or adhering to SOPs.

The underlying issue is the lack of concern in areas of education and health care for the last two decades and successive governments have simply played the blame game but have not shouldered the responsibility for their failures. The book 'Highest Duty: My Search for What Really Matters' by Chesley B. Sullenberger is what policymakers should delve into and learn how an effective team with dedication towards safety can create miracles.

The lessons of this pandemic can be traced to smaller nations such as Australia and New Zealand who carefully executed tactics to not only flatten the curve but prevent more waves, the answer lies in an open, mature society which elects robust leaders who will understand the pulse of the people.

Yours etc.,  
Christopher Gathphoh,  
Shillong-10

Yours etc.,  
Dominic Stadlin  
Wankhar  
Shillong

*"It is better to err on the side of daring  
than the side of caution."*

--- Alvin Toffler

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 249 SHILLONG, TUESDAY, APRIL 27, 2021

### Madras HC to the fore

ELECTIONS in this country are a akin to a circus. But considering that Covid 19 had hardly exited the country and that a more virulent and mutative form of Covid had begun its insidious appearance it would have been prudent to make the elections low key and without much fanfare and to appeal to people over television. But political parties would have none of that. No less than the Prime Minister and Home Minister criss-crossed the country throwing all Covid protocols aside. The hoi-polloi of this country love to mimic the high and mighty, so when the Prime Minister and his second in command did not need masks while addressing election rallies it was considered kosher for ordinary citizens too to dunk the masks and walk around as if there was no Covid. But states that went to elections, namely Kerala, Tamilnadu, West Bengal and Assam will now be paying a heavy price for believing that Covid had indeed been defeated as proclaimed by the Union Health Minister some weeks ago.

In such extenuating circumstances it was expected that the Election Commission of India (ECI) would stand its ground as an independent institution and stop the public rallies. But as has been amply demonstrated the ECI too is no longer as independent as Mr TN Seshan, it's chief architect would have wanted it to be. All institutions today have been compromised with those leading them waiting for sinecure post retirement appointments. In such situations, it is the judiciary alone that can bring order and sanity to a system gone horribly wrong.

The observation by the Madras High Court on Monday, castigating the ECI and holding it singularly responsible for the second wave of Covid 19 is salutary. Chief Justice Sanjib Banerjee, in fact, made a stinging oral remark, "Your officers should be booked on murder charges probably." His second remark asking the ECI if it was living in another planet, is a strong stricture on the functioning of the Commission which seems to be guided not by wisdom but by the desire to appease the ruling Party and Government.

The staggering of the Bengal elections for over a month was also unnecessary. The Bengal CM had on April 15 last, called for completing the process for the remaining 159 (out of 294) seats at one go due to the rise in Covid cases. The BJP turned it into a political joke and claimed that Mamata Banerjee knows she is losing hence the call for completing the poll process early. Indeed, the safety of citizens of this country has become less important than elections. Thankfully the Madras High Court has stood by the citizens of this country.

The Madras High Court has also asked the ECI to come up with a blueprint of action for the counting day on May 2 and present it to the Court on April 30. Other High Courts need to follow suit.

# A high price for callous attitude

By Albert Thyrniang

So now all eyes are on India. The country is battling the 'tsunami' of the highly contagious and deadly COVID-19 second wave. The "double mutant" virus has made many countries ban flights from India. International televisions and news agencies are reporting on patients gasping for breath in front of overwhelmed hospitals due to acute shortage of oxygen. Relatives are shown rushing their COVID affected relatives from hospital to hospital only to fail to find a space. The casualties in trolleys and wooden rickshaws; the mass cremation; the doctors and health workers who weep and cry at their helplessness are such a sad commentary on the current situation in India. The humongous surge of cases, the daily exponential rise of new cases, the accounted and unaccounted deaths, are now seen across continents. The grim reality is beyond description. The health system is crumbling before our eyes. There has been nothing like this before, elderly persons testify.

The centre of one of the world's super powers, Delhi has no more bed in hospitals. What a shameful irony! There is no more oxygen. The Chief Minister, Arvind Kejriwal had to beg all Chief Ministers for spare oxygen. There is vaccine shortage in the 'pharmacy of the world'. Vaccination is the best bet to beat the virus but only 10% of the Indian population received the jab. The desired destination of 60% - 70% is a distant dream. The condition will continue to be dire even as we pride ourselves as vaccine 'supplier' to the world. Who is responsible for this scary second wave? The other day a caption in Facebook read, "You are responsible for the second wave... NOT China!" We could point fingers at China for the source of the Novel Coronavirus, later named COVID-19 by WHO. We may blame the communist country for the delayed alert. We may even entertain the conspiracy theory that Chinese scientists manufactured the 'Wuhan' virus. The disease originated in China and spread the world over in months. But the second wave is partly due to callousness.

India knew that the second wave would arrive. We saw the UK battling the worst coronavirus pandemic with the second wave wreaking more havoc than the first. We fail to learn lessons. We have failed to prevent the disaster of 2021. We have failed because the country's political leadership was in euphoria when cases started dropping. We recall how since late last

year, politicians, policy makers and the 'paid' media were in jubilation at beating the virus. Only in early March India's health minister Harsh Vardhan declared that the country had seen the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. He and others sang praises of the Prime Minister for leading the way to beat the virus. They thought India is no UK.

In less than a month we see visuals of hospitals overflowing with two patients sharing beds in corridors and lobbies. We hear reports of frantic calls for beds, medicines, oxygen, essential drugs and tests. The devastating second wave has forced badly hit cities into fresh lockdowns. The daily fresh cases and deaths continue to break their own records. The country is in the grips of a public health emergency.

How do we prevent COVID when election rallies and road shows with lakhs of attendees were organised in West Bengal, Assam, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Pondicherry? We know very well that no physical distancing is possible in such mass gatherings. How do we stop the virus when the top leadership flouts basic medical protocols? The Prime Minister himself addressed mammoth crowds. Amit Shah, Rahul Gandhi, Mamata Banerjee, and all political leaders campaigned via huge assemblies. Seeing these huge congregations it is natural for the rest of us to discard social distancing and wearing of masks. The Prime Minister was seen without a mask in election rallies but wearing it neatly in online meetings. The credibility to exhort the public to observe COVID protocols is weakened. No wonder the ravage surge in the country. When the Assam minister Himanta Biswa Sarma remarked that masks are no longer needed, there is no more authority left. The election rallies were the super spreaders. The political leadership is responsible. Winning election is more valuable than preventing the fatal pandemic.

After the election gatherings came the festivals! In festivities too social distancing is easily violated. But these celebrations had to be given permission because election campaigns of huge crowds were allowed. We even saw the world's biggest human assembly, the Kumbh Mela. The 55 day, once in 12 year event that would witness 100 million people taking a dip at the Ganges and Yamuna rivers, was subsequently called off but the damage had been done. The first day itself

attracted 10 million devotees. Surely the Kumbh was a far superior spreader than the Tablighi Jamaat!

There are also allegations that the central government acted too little and too late on the vaccine front. The US, UK and the European Union booked vaccines much ahead of India. The Indian government did not fund vaccine producing institutes unlike the countries mentioned above. UK spent £12 billion, the US\$ 1.95 billion on Pfizer alone while India earmarked only Rs 35,000 crore for vaccine production in the budget. Just to put things in perspective the 36 Rafale fighter jets cost Rs. 59,000 crore. The government did not hesitate to pay Rs 4,632 crore for the Prime Minister's state-of-the-art Boeing aircraft.

The central government ordered vaccines from manufacturers only in January this year and in insufficient numbers. The decision to allow manufacturers to fix the price of vaccines instead of the government subsidising or giving it for free, the initial central government's decision to acquire the vaccines and now the U turn permitting state governments to order directly from vaccine manufacturers has caused the country dearly.

In October last year, already late, the PM Cares funded 162 units of oxygen plants across India but only 33 were actually set up. State after state, including Delhi, failed to establish even a single unit. Only the other day the Modi government cleared the allocation of funds for installation of 551 oxygen generation plants across the country. Till the oxygen cylinders come to hospitals many more will have died. Three days ago the Centre exempted duty on import of COVID-19 vaccine, medical-grade oxygen and related equipment. But why only now? India is paying a high price for the Centre's unpreparedness, lackadaisical attitude, laxity, failed policy and decision paralysis.

In Meghalaya too the infection rate is quite alarming. We are also awake to this second attack only after the GHADC elections. It is true that the red zone is Shillong, the capital city. The location of the hotspots does not matter. What we are arriving at is to pin-point the callous attitude and behaviours of responsible people which are also contagious like the virus.

We also saw political rallies, road shows and concerts during the elections in Garo

Hills. The Chief Minister, Conrad Sangma himself is accused of violating COVID 19 protocols. In his posts on social media one could see crowds with no mask and social distancing. Seeing their Chief Minister the people in Shillong might have been influenced to excuse themselves from preventive measures. Our Chief Minister too is now seen with a mask in official functions. But his alleged violations have had negative impacts on his 'subjects'. The authorities started imposing fines from people without masks in Police Bazaar. But why not on the Chief Minister?

During election campaigns magistrates and law enforcing personnel were present. Were they not instructed to keep a watch on COVID-19 protocols? Why did these officials not take action? Or why did they not report to the Chief Returning Officer? That is why someone queried, "Are there different COVID-19 rules for ordinary citizens and politicians?" Hope our ministers and politicians have read how the Prime Minister of Norway, Erna Solberg was fined \$2,352 (approximately Rs 1.75 lakh) for breaking social distancing rules while organising her birthday.

In the first spell of COVID-19 the sufferers were largely the poor. The sights of migrant workers walking hundreds of miles home are still fresh in our minds. This time too the critical patients in ambulances in long queues at hospitals; those who make frantic calls for a bed, medicines and oxygen; those who fill the hospital's corridors and lobbies; the dead at overflowing mortuaries; the wailing relatives of the dead outside hospitals and Covid funerals at crowded cemeteries are the less privileged in this highly unequal country. The Prime Minister in his speech on April 20 disappointingly had nothing of substance to say to alleviate the sufferings of India's poor. No announcement was made except informing that lockdowns would be the last resort. Other than exhorting migrant workers to stay put and not to return to their villages, there was no assurance. His suggestion to the youth to form mohalla committees to educate people sounded hollow. It looks as if the Prime Minister is resigned to the fact that people have to fight the virus on their own as they have done so in the last fifteen months. In our backyard the common people pay fines while the rulers flout the rules.

What a point in history we have arrived at!  
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## Government should fund vaccines for all

By Ajit Ranade

The worldometer shows real-time data of Covid-19 infections around the world. Most recently it is showing India as the country with the highest infections. Our daily infections are more than the cumulative total of the next eleven countries, including large countries like Turkey, USA and Brazil. The daily number is racing toward half a million and the daily death count too is above a thousand. The public health system around the country is struggling to meet the deluge of demands for oxygen, Remdesivir, hospital beds. Of course, simultaneously we are trying to get as many people vaccinated as fast as possible. It is ironic that the world's biggest manufacturer of vaccines is running severely short of doses.

We could have avoided

oculation clinics across the State. From May 1 it is all being opened up.

This leads us to the important question of pricing! For some reason the Centre has seen it fit to fix multiple prices for the same vaccine, depending on where you get it. The States will be charged Rs.400 per dose of Covishield, and the private buyers will be charged Rs.600. The Central government paid Rs 150 per dose for both Covishield and Covaxin. The pricing on Sputnik is not known. The price of Covaxin for private buyers is supposed to be Rs. 1200 per dose, which translates toRs.2400 per person. In a family of four, that is 9600 rupees, close to the full monthly per capita income of India! With a high proportion of the population living



being in this situation if the vaccine makers had been given large and confirmed orders from the Central government in January itself if not much earlier. At a time when the domestic vaccine makers like the Serum Institute of India had export obligations since its vaccine is made by Astra Zeneca and Oxford University, it was imperative to lock up its production capacity well in advance for domestic use. Remember last year, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) had asked Bharat Biotech to be ready for the launch of the vaccine by Independence day - August 15? What happened after that ambitious early target date? The Drug Controller General of India had also fast-tracked approval for phase 1 and 2 trials and wanted Bharat Biotech to speed up phase 3 trials and be ready for an early launch. In fact, BB's vaccine called Covaxin seems to be the joint intellectual property of the government of India and BB, so the government could indeed have a greater say in the speed of deployment.

The faster we get the population immunised the earlier we can contain the pandemic. This is a race. For otherwise it can spread unchecked, with new variants forming, and mutations running wild. The new mutations can also spread to the world. That is why India's covid-19 challenge has become a global challenge. That is why many countries on their own have come forward with offers of help in vaccines (Sputnik of Russia), or cryogenic tanks for oxygen (China) or other kinds of assistance.

Some countries have achieved very high proportions of the fully vaccinated. Leading this pack is Israel, which celebrated freedom from masks this week. But even the USA is closing toward one third of the population in vaccination coverage, and the UK is not far behind. In India, 10 percent of the population has got the first dose and 1.5 percent have been fully vaccinated. The strategy was to cover the frontline people like healthcare workers and government servants, and then the elderly and then others. Because of the shortage of vaccines, the government prohibited private companies from bidding and buying (and possibly cornering the supply) of vaccines. But as of 1 May, both public and private sector companies as well as State governments and other organisations are going to be allowed. So far this vaccine allotment was done Centrally to the States, which in turn organised in-

just above the poverty line, and at a time of pandemic induced recession and joblessness it is astonishing that one of the vaccines to immunise against Covid-19 is priced at close to the full monthly per capita income.

But the larger issue is this. The control of the pandemic is a public good. Meaning it will benefit both those who fell sick and recovered and those who did not fall sick. It will protect a much larger share of the population by sharply reducing future infection rates and fatalities. It will reduce the need for harsh lockdowns, which can reduce GDP sharply. Last year's nationwide lockdown starting in March, caused GDP during that quarter to fall by 25 percent. And nearly 12 crore people lost their jobs. Later in the year the economy began to recover, but this second wave is threatening that recovery. So, the immunisation drive will prevent a fall in GDP and rise in unemployment. It is for this reason that the government should not act penny wise and pound foolish. The universal vaccine rollout must be funded from Central fiscal funds.

In her Union Budget speech the Finance Minister had said that she was allocating 35,000 crores for this purpose, and would stand by to add more budgetary allocation as needed. That need has come now, and the Centre must be willing to spend fully. At a cost of 150 rupees times 2, for 1.3 billion people it comes to 39,000 crore which is near the FM's estimate. But even if it is double this amount it is necessary given that this vaccination drive is for the public good. Making it available for free also removes the hassles of payment and collection or any possible vaccine hesitancy. Also remember that vaccine research gets huge public funding anyway, so zero pricing makes sense. Of course, adequate returns i.e. not super-normal profits to vaccine manufacturers have to be ensured, but that is still not inconsistent with a publicly-funded vaccine rollout. And lastly, this must not be left as a burden on State budgets since they are already reeling, and do not have the fiscal muscle to increase their borrowing. It is the Centre alone which can and must fund this drive at the lowest cost of borrowing.

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### Letters to the Editor

#### Enough of UDP bashing

Editor,  
The UDP bashing that has been going on in the recent past is an eye opener, a welcome critique and a deliberate attempt to shift focus from the situation at hand to a view that has been fixed on false premises. It is packed with insinuations and allegations that throw very poor light on the image of the Party. One thing that has been established is that the UDP is still relevant. The first article written by Albert Thyrniang was more or less a figment of his potent imagination or maybe an assumption based on theoretical deductions laced with pointers that have no semblance of the actuals, leading one to believe that the writer is only attempting to shield the obvious by casting aspersions on UDP.

The removal of the Home portfolio from James Sangma was then a valid demand in the interest of MDA, and never did UDP demand the same portfolio for its Ministers as that was the sole prerogative of the Chief Minister. That the portfolio was handed over to a UDP Minister was a choice, the Chief Minister himself made. If under the watch of the current Home Minister,

things have not changed, everyone and anyone is free to demand his removal. After all, at the end of the day, it is the Chief Minister's sole prerogative.

To my mind, this entire exercise of leveling accusations and allegations is an attempt to divert the public mind from what is currently at hand. It was not because of the load shedding that all of this has come to be, but there are far more serious happenings within the energy Corporation that warrants immediate attention and action, lest our collective resolve is 'let the coming generations be doomed.'

The chronology of decisions taken by those at the helm of affairs within the Corporation is resplendent with designs to cripple the Corporation to a point where the only option left, would be to privatize it. In that scenario, you can very well imagine the plight of the State. Power being a driving component of the State's growth engine, it is incumbent upon each and every right-thinking citizen to not only dwell upon this but act as well. We were only doing our duty and if in the process we may have stepped on anyone's comfort, we sincerely apologize for that. It's time to keep aside party politics but in unison cry out for our coming generation's better

and secure future.

Yours etc.,  
W J Dkhar,  
Via email

#### Clandestine affair between COMSO & Govt

Editor,  
CoMSo is a conglomeration of various fringe NGOs led by a small but publicity driven crazy pressure group-the HYC. Others are HANM, CORP and much smaller groups with about 10-15 members only. HYC was formed in 2014 to counter the KSU & FKJGP and to become the only champion in fighting for the ILP in Meghalaya. They audaciously claimed that they will bring ILP in Meghalaya in 2015. Their leadership in 2014 was composed of expelled KSU members who sought personal gratification through media, power, money and absolute/autocratic control over the KSU (by vying and lobbying for top posts though they were unworthy of the positions)

Although HYC claimed and still claims that other NGOs are reneging on the issue of ILP yet they themselves have not shown any traction as far as the ILP demand is concerned. HYC

is not known for aggressive agitations, or their members being arrested or blood being spilled; in short they have no courage to carry out their threats. In fact, during the anti CAA movement in 2019, the President who was scared out of his wits even demanded that all those involved in the scuffle with the police should be arrested. He did this to save his own skin. Such a cowardly attitude is not expected from someone who calls himself a leader.

Some of the HYC leaders are also very keen to contest the upcoming elections whether as MLA or MDC. All this might be possible because they are mere puppets of the Government. At first, they aligned themselves with the Mukul-led Congress Government. The Government provides plum facilities to them with the agenda of pitting them against KSU and other pressure groups. They HYC therefore tries to fool the public by championing the issues plaguing the Jaidbyriew. This is a deliberate attempt to isolate the KSU and other pressure groups and emerge as the voice of the people. When the NPP led Government took over the governance of the State in 2018 the HYC showed their true colour and aligned with it to become the turncoats of the 21st

century.

Who remembers the news report that appeared in a section of the vernacular media that mentioned some HYC members demanding money from the operators of the coke plants in and around West Khasi Hills district? Though they denied outright the allegations yet that news set the cat among the pigeons. The clamour for ILP is now gaining momentum with the undisguised blessings of the MDA coalition partners.

It is now known that they hold secret meetings with the top brass of the current Government regarding their agitations. In fact, a day prior to their protest in front of the Secretariat some days ago, they had a long meeting with the Deputy CM to chalk out the next strategies of hoodwinking the public. Prior to the protest meeting in 2019 in which a large but unaware public attended, the HYC and the Government had a meeting to organise the next phase of action in order to counter the anti-CAA and pro-ILP movements organised by the NESO, KSU, FKJGP, HNYF and RBYF. After much deliberation they decided to protest outside the Raj Bhavan using social media as a crowd sourcing strategy. The methods adopted are such that the public were unaware of who

the real organizers were. However, the Government apprehending a law and order fall-out decided to shift the venue earlier granted, to the premises of the State Central Library at the last moment.

On D-day, HYC leaders asked the public to move from Raj Bhavan to State Central Library. This announcement angered the public and pandemonium broke out. As a result, stones were pelted and clashes broke out between the public and the police. During the melee the Vice President of HYC went to the side of the police barricade and stood beside the high ranking police officers to save himself from the ongoing turmoil and from any legal hassles which might later arise. The President himself ran away to the High Court premises and quickly changed from his civil dress to the lawyer's dress code. Only a few lower rung members of CoMSo were present at that protest till the end.

Whether the other CoMSo associates are aware of the HYC affair with the Government is not known but what is known is that the lower rung cadres of the HYC are unaware of their leader's double standards.

Yours etc.,  
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar  
Shillong-3

"Freedom is the oxygen of the soul."

--- Moshe Dayan

## The Shillong Times

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### Freedom of speech & democracy

FREEDOM of speech is a fundamental right here but speaking out the truth itself could often land one in trouble, be it from the establishment or from the judiciary or even the local thugs. Both individuals and the media are at the receiving end of such aggressive responses. This is not peculiar to the present scene but has been the case in the past too. The result is a pliant media, often not having the courage to rub the establishment the wrong way. The foreign media is different as is proven again now via the Rupert Murdoch establishment, which said the "Modi government led India into a viral apocalypse".

With muscle-flexing by those in power, on the one side, and allurements too in the form mostly of crumbs, on the other, the fourth estate here is increasingly avoiding any sharp criticism of the establishment. The present Covid19 scenario is the latest instance even as a critical situation is staring the nation in the face. Starting with Bihar and later with a set of five assemblies up for polls, the election campaigns were conducted like a jamboree and everyone including the media enjoyed the high spirits around. It was clear to the eye that the social distancing norm was flouted with gay abandon, apart from the failure of many at such events to even wear the face mask. Top guns like Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home minister Amit Shah led such mega shows and the local administrations meekly looked the other way in these Covid-times. So too with the Kumbh Mela in Uttarakhand!

It was precisely these instances that The Australian — a newspaper stated openly. Truth must be stated and stated loudly. That this did not happen from the side of the Indian media is what had encouraged those in power to take liberties and stretch things to ludicrous and dangerous limits during the course of the election campaign. This is not to ignore the fact that the BJP-led Government did impose one of the biggest lockdowns in the world in the first phase of Covid. This had severe repercussions but that's another story. The lockdown was followed by several tough measures that helped control the spread. But with the coming of the second, more virulent wave things have gone horribly wrong. The nation is gasping for oxygen even as India reaches a critical stage requiring urgent replenishment from different friendly countries. Had there been adequate preparations based on lessons from the UK and elsewhere, several deaths that took place in recent days could have been avoided. The global media acts as a mirror to what is happening in India and what is being missed by the media here. They cannot be told to mind their own business.

# Covid 2.0: The buck stops at the top

By Rajdeep Sardesai

blame on the Modi government for being seemingly ill-prepared to combat the second Covid wave. Hasn't Congress leader, Rahul Gandhi after all been forewarning the Centre of the pitfalls in its Covid management, warnings that have been met with typically dismissive reactions? And yet, can one really say that the Congress or opposition ruled states are in a better shape to combat Covid than BJP-governed states? The virus doesn't know of political boundaries and there isn't a magic mantra to tackle a pandemic. But the first step towards finding a solution is to accept the problem, acknowledge mistakes and then course correct.

Which is why the recent changes in the vaccine policy are a step in the right direction. However, the Modi government cannot pass the buck now to state governments for Covid management. If the Centre takes credit for anything positive that happens in 'new' India, then it must accept its share of blame for missteps. When it centralizes power and micro-manages decision-making but refuses to share even basic information on monies spent through Prime Minister's Care Fund on fighting Covid 19, then it must also be held accountable when things don't go to plan. The buck this time stops at the top.



of battles, each of which exhausted political capital and mindspace at the wrong time. Be it the border tangle with China, the attempt to topple opposition governments at home, the tug of war with state governments over resources, and now the do or die 'war' in Bengal, far too many bruising fronts have been opened. The China conflict can be blamed on an expansionist and untrustworthy neighbor but what of the farmers struggle that sparked off a winter of discontent? Was it really necessary to push through a contentious farm bill in parliament at a time when there was an urgent need to build greater consensus on how to fight a public health emergency?

Far too many political distractions, marked by a sense of infallibility, meant that the eye was lifted from the Covid gaze. Having won the November Bihar election in particular, it seems as if an all powerful Modi government felt that its political agenda would trump all else. If citizens were guilty of letting their guard down because of Covid fatigue, the Centre too seemed caught in Covid

week of March, India had exported more vaccines than it had administered to its own citizens? (60 million doses dispatched to 76 countries while 52 million Indians were vaccinated). The desire to use vaccine 'soft power' for diplomatic mileage and personal 'Vishwa-guru' image building could easily have been put off till the situation on the domestic front was fully in control. By restricting the number of vaccine options, not placing enough firm vaccine supply orders in advance, adopting a rigid 'quota-permit' raj for vaccine distribution in each state, not doing enough to incentivize private sector manufacturers and not offering flexibility in vaccinating people across age groups, a bureaucratic maze was created that prevented fast tracking the vaccine rollout at a crucial time. That the world's leading vaccine manufacturer is now desperately rushing to import vaccines to meet shortages reflects how the battle to contain the pandemic is a long and complicated one.

The opposition would of course like to pin the entire

blame on the Modi government for being seemingly ill-prepared to combat the second Covid wave. Hasn't Congress leader, Rahul Gandhi after all been forewarning the Centre of the pitfalls in its Covid management, warnings that have been met with typically dismissive reactions? And yet, can one really say that the Congress or opposition ruled states are in a better shape to combat Covid than BJP-governed states? The virus doesn't know of political boundaries and there isn't a magic mantra to tackle a pandemic. But the first step towards finding a solution is to accept the problem, acknowledge mistakes and then course correct.

Just wonder: couldn't there be a hotline between Delhi and Mumbai for Covid control, or will every issue become a political slanging match on twitter? (The writer is senior journalist and author. Mail: rajdeepsardesai52@gmail.com)

## Covid: Modi govt's criminal abdication of responsibility Lack of preparations squarely to blame for new wave

By Prabir Purkayastha

India's Covid numbers have far outstripped countries like the US and Brazil, which have been the poor performers till now. More worryingly, the number of positives to tests are now more than one out of five, more than four times what it was a few months back, indicating that the actual numbers of infected could be even higher.

What went wrong with the central government's handling of the epidemic? The government was unprepared for the second wave which started its steep climb about a month back. The central government and its experts believed that the Covid-19 pandemic would be over by February 2021, and the country would go back to normal after that. The Modi government truly believed its propaganda of the so-called Department of Science and Technology supermodel and was busy chest-thumping on its great success in fighting the pandemic. It was preparing to convert its "success" into electoral victory in the next set of state elections when the second wave struck.

As the numbers started rising, instead of trying to work out a cooperative plan on a countrywide basis to combat the epidemic, the BJP went on an offensive. The central ministers blamed the state governments for not doing enough and the people for having abandoned the safety norms of masks and social distancing. This, notwithstanding that the central government had itself signalled a return to normal with public rallies, election campaigns and huge religious gatherings such as the Kumbh Mela. If people did relax the Covid-19 norms, they were only following what the leaders on the dais during rallies—Narendra Modi and Amit Shah included—were doing.

The first Covid-19 wave had peaked around mid-September, touching nearly 100,000 new infections. It had gone down to half of that in one month, and from mid-October onwards, the numbers dropped even further till February end. This nearly four months of respite should have been used to strengthen the public health system in the country: increasing hospital beds, ICU facilities, building a supply chain for oxygen, and preparing protocols on how to handle the next wave. Strengthening the public health system, introducing clear guidelines, getting the state and local governments to function together is the first line of defence in handling the pandemic. The tragedy is that the central government, which has centralised all powers under the Disaster Management Act, refused to prepare either itself or the states for this second wave in the belief that the pandemic was over.

The worst failing in the current crisis is the lack of oxygen in the hospitals. When the lungs of patients are affected due to Covid-19, the most important 'medicine' is oxygen. News reports tell us of patients dying as hospitals run out of oxygen. Many hospitals in the capital are reporting that they have only a few hours of oxygen remaining. If this is the situation in the nation's capital, that too in the elite hospitals, imagine the plight of hospitals elsewhere.

In the first wave, the spread was limited to a few states, and even there, in certain densely populated areas. This time, it is spread across almost all states and a much larger cross-section of people. It is the outstripping of the hospital capacities across the country that is the core of the current crisis. The major reason for deaths during an epidemic is when the number of serious patients outstrips the availability of hospital beds and the supply of oxygen. That is when fatalities start mounting.

Why did we not prepare for this eventuality even three weeks back? When the speed of the rise of cases should have warned the central government of an impending crisis. With the alarm signals available three weeks back, at least arranging increased oxygen production and its logistics—reaching it to states and hospitals—should have been planned from that time. And giving priority to medical oxygen over its industrial use, as we are doing belatedly now.

Why did the government not take urgent steps and prepare for a rise of this magnitude? This government is unfortunately completely centralised, only the prime minister and the home minister have the ability to act. The other ministers are harnessed only to dismiss any criticism, even constructive ones like Mammoohan Singh's. It appears both Modi and Amit Shah's sights were set on winning the elections in the east, particularly West Bengal. It is only after all other political parties stopped their rallies, the BJP realised the poor optics of the PM still in electioneering mode in the middle of a major pandemic. By then it was too late landing us in dire straits.

The government's continuous announcements about vaccinations are claiming much more than what we have achieved. First, the claim that we have vaccinated 12.7 crores. We have not. While 12.7 crore vaccine doses have been injected, not even 2 crore people have received the two doses required.

At the beginning of April, states such as Maharashtra, Delhi and Punjab were complaining about oxygen supplies running low. Health minister Harsh Vardhan Singh dismissed their complaints as politicising their 'failure to control the Covid-19 pandemic'. Unfortunately for the minister's claims, figures for vaccination show that the number of vaccine doses injected per day has indeed come down to half what they were in early April, confirming what these states were saying then.

In his letter, the health minister had also said, "So long as the supply of vaccines remains limited, there is no option but to prioritise (who gets the vaccines). This is also the established practice around the world, and is well known to all state governments." If this was the correct policy two weeks back, can the Modi government explain why they are now proposing all people above 18 be vaccinated? No explanation has been offered on such a change considering that vaccine supplies are not only still limited, but half of what they were two-three weeks back.

No plan has also been announced for how the country will ramp up its production and delivery to meet the expanded target of vaccinating everybody above 18. Instead, the central government has abandoned the responsibility for either acquiring or delivering the vaccines except to health workers and people above 45 years. It will supply this requirement from 50 per cent of the country's vaccine production. The rest 50 per cent will be for the state governments and the open market. The state governments are now directly responsible for their vaccine procurement without any mechanism in their hands to do so. The centre has also removed all price controls on vaccines, allowing vaccine makers to sell them in the open market.

The Modi government believes in centralising all political power in its hands and letting the "free market" led by big monopoly houses solve the problems of the country. And if such a policy fails, blame the state governments, the anti-national forces and finally the opposition. (IPA Service)

Courtesy: People's Democracy

### Letters to the Editor

#### Intrigues in MeECL

Editor, The report in your esteemed newspaper "Intrigues scuttled renovation of MeECL project at Mawlai" dated 20.04.2021 was conspicuous by the absence of a name. I assume it was about me, since I was the only lady director on the Board of MeECL who also happened to resign some time ago. Here therefore, is my rebuttal.

With regards to overhauling of the Mawlai Substation, I was accused of "opposing the new tendering process...instead batted for the local contractors and suppliers saying that their bills had to be cleared first". The minutes of the Board meeting dated December 17, 2020 mentioned Clause 5.5.3 of the Draft Bidding Document, which says, "In case of already completed works, the erection and supply invoice amount have to be reimbursed to the Owner". The point raised by me was that in order to avoid unnecessary legal claim on the Corporation the issue of existing contractor needs to be settled before giving the same work to another Turn-key operator. Your report added, "she wanted the local suppliers to be paid for illegal orders". Calling it "illegal" contradicts the very incorporating of Clause 5.5.3 in the Bid Document itself. Moreover, the argument of fund lapse becomes untenable in the face of possible time-consuming litigation.

It is a fact that I was part of the Board decision held on January 31, 2020

for cancelling of all LOA/Tenders made. The objection made against the proposed Bid Documents which were presented to the Board on December 17, 2020 was that they were half-baked documents, which is not uncommon given the professionalism of those who had prepared the Bid Documents.

The newspaper report says, "It is learnt that one of the reasons for the resignation of the Independent Director was also because of this attempt by the Corporation to stake legal claim over its land." The fact was that the agenda placed before the Board meeting on February 1, 2021 was about "Engagement of M/S NITCON Ltd. as Project Management Unit (PMU) for Monetization of Land Assets of MeECL and its Subsidiaries. I had said on record "that the issue is very sensitive and the same needs to be examined thoroughly based on the provisions of land laws applicable in Meghalaya." I made this point since the agenda item was circulated at the meeting itself without any time to study the papers.

It is also important to ask the following questions: Why it was offered to M/S NITCON without any prior discussion in the Board and without calling for any EoL or Tender?

Whether the firm is conversant with the nuances of land laws of the State of Meghalaya?

Whether the firm has the manpower to carry out the work without assigning to other private agencies?

It would also have been in order to take up such encroachment by the staff, with

the respective Deputy Commissioners for eviction under the law. The need to engage a firm for this purpose is not tenable.

The report further mentioned, "The Power Minister called the said independent director and asked her many uncomfortable questions including failure of the management...". Yes, the Minister had called me for a meeting on December 14, 2020. It was a meeting between the Minister and myself and no other person was present. The meeting was cordial and matters like the failure of the management was not discussed at all. The Independent Directors have no executive functions. Specific issues, be they power theft or salary delay are discussed only when the Management places them as items in the agenda for Board meetings.

Your report says, "The Director didn't like being grilled and within a week tendered her resignation citing flimsy reasons." I affirm that no one grilled me. Please note that my resignation took place on February 3, 2021 which is more than a month after the meeting with the Minister. I resigned as I was not happy with the manner in which the Board meetings were conducted. On the spot circulation of agenda and insufficient time given to study the papers is not how a professional organisation operates. Exceptions had become a rule. This was also contrary to laid down norms and practices under Company Law. My role as an Independent Director was in accordance with Schedule IV [Section 149(8)] Code for Independent Directors

of the Ministry of Company Affairs, Government of India. One cannot give in to pressures when one knows that something is grossly wrong.

I suggest that you exercise circumspection with your sources whose game is to malign, be malicious and fabricate facts to defuse the crisis. You will instead serve public interest better and prevent future load shedding by focussing on the popular demand for an independent inquiry into the functioning of MeECL and its subsidiaries. Do not let the debate and narrative be twisted and diverted from the real spotlight on the whole mess relating to MeECL and its subsidiaries and the whole power sector in Meghalaya.

Yours etc., Lumlanglin Kharkongor, Ex-Independent Director, MeECL and subsidiaries

#### India's self inflicted tragedy

Editor, The Prime Minister has really a thick neck to speak now on the second wave ravaging India on his latest Mann ki Baat radio talk. The state elections could have been deferred and the Kumbh mela could have been a symbolic one. All the positive results of combating the first wave have been lost. When there are restrictions on places of worship, why was the Kumbh mela given the all-clear signal? When the Tokyo Olympics 2020 could be put off by a year, why was common sense not applied?

This 'insatiable hunger'

to rule and not govern every state in the country has placed India in an unenviable position today. The Union Cabinet and the Chief Election Commissioner are chiefly responsible for this appalling mess we find ourselves in and they should be held accountable.

The new variant that's affecting us now was known to the Government of India late last year and yet no preparations were made to combat it. The Union Health Minister went on to boast that India had tamed the virus. Such hollow talk!

No concrete measures were taken to address the pathetic government health sector and Indians are paying a huge price for lack of foresight and poor leadership. And here in Meghalaya NEIGHRIMS is crying hoarse for all it cries have fallen on deaf ears. Furthermore there were no preparations whatsoever to galvanise the country to fight the second wave.

This is not leadership, but a megalomaniac government at work.

It's unfortunate that the medical fraternity now needs to pick up the threads from scratch and to watch helplessly the terrible loss of lives due to the pandemic. Thousands of Indian citizens' lives have been shattered and millions are in grief. It's unfortunate that 'India' has squandered a huge opportunity in curtailing the damage for which we are now paying heavily.

The mainstream media has proved that it's a bunch of limpets. What is the role of the media but to expose the failures of the powers that be! Dear God, now it's

only You who can deliver us from this terrible self inflicted tragedy.

Yours etc., Tyrone D'Brass Tura

#### A thank you note!

Editor, Through your esteemed daily I would like to share my experiences with State Bank of India, Kenches Trace branch. We often raise complaints if things do not go our way and assume that it is the duty of the bank staff to promptly respond to our queries but we fail to appreciate them when things go well. As a client of the above bank I wish to congratulate them for being helpful towards their clients and would especially like to mention one staff in particular. Mr Sanjay, the cashier is cordial and polite with every client. In fact, I would like to place on record that Mr Sanjay has been very helpful and not only efficiently handles his share of duties but does not shy away from going beyond the call of duty to meet the needs of his clients. There has never been a time when I had to face agony and irritation from the staff. They have always tried their best to provide excellent service to their clients. I wish to thank all the staff but especially Mr Sanjay for his efficiency and above all his eagerness to provide the best of service. We need more efficient staff like him for an easy and smooth transaction every time we visit the bank.

Yours etc., Lucky Star Shangliang, Shillong -4

"A poet must leave traces  
of his passage, not proof."

— Rene Char

## The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No.251 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, APRIL 29, 2021

### Breaking the Covid chain

THE Government of Meghalaya has taken a prudent decision in announcing a 10-day lockdown in certain vulnerable districts, beginning May 1. Covid numbers in the State are rapidly rising and Government can no longer take a chance and allow a 'business as usual' atmosphere to continue. The fact is that even today people move around without masks and for some reasons are not convinced that social distancing is imperative to defeat the Covid virus. In this situation only a compulsory lockdown and staggered attendance at government and other important establishments can break the cycle of infection.

Medical experts opine that in case of COVID-19, each person with the virus can go on to infect around 2.5 people. If each of those people go about their day as normal, and infect another 2.5 people, within a month, 406 people would be infected just from that first infection. The biggest challenge as far as Covid19 is concerned is that individuals who are asymptomatic or have mild symptoms can still spread the disease. Hence the need for social distancing and limiting contact with others in addition to other Covid protocols such as hand-washing and not touching the face, is so critical. In recent times the World Health Organization has changed the term social distancing to 'physical distancing' in order to emphasise the importance of being far away enough to avoid infection from respiratory droplets that transmit the virus. It is important that every single person adheres to this, whether or not they think they are sick. But this demands public responsibility and cooperation which is difficult to come by. Call it ignorance or foolhardiness but effecting behavioural change (masking and distancing) are both a monumental challenge for governments in India. Unfortunately, social influencers like politicians themselves break this important protocol.

India's confirmed cases of Covid-19 had reached its peak on September 16, 2020, at 97,860 cases confirmed in a single day. From this high point, India's Covid-19 numbers came down to a low of just 8,579 cases by February 1, 2021. Hence in early 2021, India's Covid curve had begun to flatten, making it appear like the pandemic was being beaten down. Testing too reached its high point in September but fell in February from 1.49 million tests done on a single day on September 24, 2020, to a low of just 486,122 tests on February 14, 2021. But cases have been rising since then. By March 21, 2021, the central government reported about 47,000 cases. In other words, India's confirmed cases had risen 4.5 times since the low point of February 1, 2021 but vaccination had not picked up pace. This slackening of guard by the government at the centre and the states has brought India back to a gasping point where oxygen is the only saving grace but which is fast depleting. In such a situation a lockdown alone can slow the infection rate and hopefully give the healthcare system a breather. It's Hobson's choice for the government.

# Covid-19 vaccination: Necessary but not forced

By Bhogtoram Mawroh

A few days ago I came to know that my friend's mother had contracted the Covid-19 virus. She has been admitted in a hospital and is currently stable. Following protocols, he and his family are under isolation. I called him to ask about his mother and in the course of the discussion my friend narrated an incident which happened right after his mother got the virus. A neighbour visited the family without the mask. He declared to my friend that he does not believe in the authenticity of the disease and declared that all of it was a hoax. My friend was annoyed and asked him to leave. What infuriated my friend was the completely insensitive attitude of the neighbour who tried to downplay the grave concerns that the family were having. Someone my friend knew very well had recently passed away from Covid-19. Setting aside the obnoxious behaviour, the neighbour is not alone in harbouring such opinions.

Although the vaccination drive has been going on for some time, there are many who are not yet convinced by the safety of the vaccine. I know close friends who are unwilling to take the vaccine. There are many reasons for it which range from the implausible to the genuine. Some of the most improbable claims come from conspiracy theorist and anti-vaxxers who are spreading misinformation about the vaccines. The one about how the vaccine contained microchips was quite persistent in 2020. One would be surprised as to how many people actually believe in conspiracy theories about covid-19 being a hoax. Then there are genuine fears about the safety of the vaccine and its effectiveness in preventing the current strain of infection. With people who have been vaccinated being infected, such fears have only been reinforced. I was myself very concerned about the efficacy of the vaccine during the early part of the year.

With India trying to outdo/emulate other nations, it announced the administration of Covaxin even before the third phase, which is the testing of the efficacy phase was completed. While the vaccine had been demonstrated to be safe, the tests to determine whether it can prevent Covid-19 had not been completed. This is something I came to know from Karan Thapar's interview with the former Director of AIIMS (All India

Institute of Medical Science) MC Mishra. In the interview Mishra vouched for the safety of the vaccine but was not very convincing about its efficacy. In fact, he admitted the data for efficacy were not available. Basically the argument that Karan Thapar made was that the Indian public was being used as guinea pigs to test the vaccine. India could have waited for at least a month till all the trials were complete. But the rush to be among the first was too strong for a government which believes in

blamed for the rise in cases and not the State machinery which was complicit in flouting protocols. There was also a picture of the sitting Chief Minister Conrad Sangma without his mask standing with a large group of people during the campaign. If the highest officials of the State through their actions demonstrate that Covid-19 is benign does it not give credibility to the claims that the disease is actually not serious? How can the State then blame those who make the same argument?



headlines management rather than governance. For those who would like to watch the interview they can go to the following link. <https://www.youtube.com/watch>

Recently massive election rallies were being held in Bengal, Assam, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry. In Meghalaya we had campaigns for our own District Council elections in Garo Hills. The aggressive campaigning gave the impression that Covid-19 had been defeated and social distancing and protocols be damned. Cases unsurprisingly started rising and prominent leaders like Rahul Gandhi contracted the virus. He cancelled his campaigning and exhorted others to do the same. Then there was the news that CPI-M General Secretary Sitaram Yechury's son had died of Covid-19. Recently a friend whom I had met during a workshop requested for an oxygen cylinder for her brother on Facebook. It was heart-wrenching to listen to her pleas. All this in many ways was brought about the apathetic attitude of our elected officials who flouted the protocols when it suited them. Our own Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong did not consider the election rallies as 'super spreader events'. What this effectively means is that it is the public who is to be

Now the campaigning is over everyone is being asked to follow protocols. The drive for vaccination has been intensified. However, because of the apprehensions created by conspiracy theorist, anti-vaxxers and government actions many are still unwilling to take the vaccine. The state has therefore decided to come hard on such groups with the Deputy Commissioner of West Khasi Hills, Tableland Lyngwa bringing out the notification that all the taxi drivers and shop keepers in the district will have to go for vaccination. Failure to comply with the order will result in revocation of the licences and permits. After ineptitude comes totalitarianism. This move has the potential to backfire spectacularly.

Suppose the administration is somehow able to force people to take the vaccine, what happens when some of the unwilling recipients were to fall severely ill or worse not because of the vaccine but because of other ailments? There will be those who will make the point out that it proved that the vaccine is dangerous. In many cases, rumours don't even need to be true but the repercussions are going to be very real. Even those who may be willing to go for the shots may start having second thoughts. The pushback

against the vaccine will get intensified and then whatever gains that could have been achieved would be lost. Since it is an intrusive directive and ignores consent I am not sure about the legal implications of such an order. Maybe some legal experts can shed more light on this. Whatever the legality of such an order, this echoes of the forced sterilisation that happened during the Indian Emergency. I am not sure many people fondly remember that period of Indian history.

There is no denying that Covid-19 is real and vaccination is one of the ways to stop it. This is something that was known a year ago when the virus first appeared. That there will be people who will be reluctant to accept vaccination was also well known. One has only to look at other immunisation programs in the State to understand that. What was the State machinery doing all this time? Sitting around a table, having tea/lunch and gossiping? They should have gone into an overdrive to make sure that when the vaccines are ready people's fears would have been quelled. As always we are playing catch up and many will suffer because of it.

Another friend called me and told me that he heard that teachers (he is one) will be forced to go for vaccinations. If they refuse they will face punishment. Is that a rumour or a fact? Notwithstanding, he is adamant that he will not comply with it. In my family my father has taken the vaccine and I am arranging one for my mother. Once vaccination is open for all I will take one myself. But for those who are unconvinced, force is not going to help. Instead efforts must be made to reach out to them. This is not to be done only by making some posters or videos. There has to be a physical visit (with social distancing) where they are made aware of the safety of the vaccine. The religious bodies could be recruited which will be very helpful in convincing the reluctant. Maybe the order in West Khasi Hills is a trial by the Government to see if anyone opposes the move? If no objections are raised they will force it on others as well. This could have devastating repercussions and it will only add to the problems. We need to defeat Covid-19 and we have to do it together. Arrogance has already brought us to this stage. It will not help us get out of it.

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## Healthcare professionals need greater protection

# ILO report highlights new workplace dangers

By Gyan Pathak

The world has already lost 7,000 health workers since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and about 136 million health and social care workers are at great risk of contracting the infection while braving the disease to help others survive. However, the tremendous pressure of handling patients day and night has adversely affected their mental health. One in five healthcare workers globally has reported depression and anxiety symptoms.

The issue has been highlighted in a new report released by the International Labour Organization (ILO) while highlighting the workplace dangers faced by key workers who need greater protection to do their jobs safely. The devastating COVID-19 has underlined the need to minimize the risks for everyone in the workplace and put strong and resilient safety systems in place in the event of future health emergencies.

The document "Anticipate, prepare, and respond to crises: Invest now in resilient (OSH) Occupational Safety and Health systems" has said that it is not only a health emergency but has also profoundly impacted nearly every aspect of the world of work - from the immediate threat of acquiring the virus to lockdowns, the closure of businesses, school closures, widespread job losses in key sectors, global supply chain disruption and restrictions on mobility.

In some cases, COVID-19 infections may be attributed to workplace exposure, and certain workplace settings - such as healthcare and social care - which have been particularly affected. It is worth mentioning that 14 percent of all global infections occurred in healthcare workers. In European countries 25 percent of cases have occurred among healthcare workers. In the Americas, COVID-19 has infected over 570,000 health workers and killed 2,500. In African countries, health workers constitute more than 5 percent of cases with some countries accounting for more than 10 percent.

In addition to the risk of the contagion, workers in all sectors have faced other hazards that have emerged due to new work practices and procedures adopted to mitigate the spread of the virus. Mitigation strategies have rapidly been adopted, including administrative and engineering controls, working from home arrangements, increased use of PPE and disinfection, etc. These measures might help slow the spread of the virus, but they can create new OSH risks, including chemical, ergonomic and psychosocial hazards.

Healthcare and emergency workers - and also essential workers - have faced many stressful situations at work as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Increased workloads, longer working hours and reduced rest periods have become the norm during the crisis. The risk of violence and harassment at work has also risen, with consequences for both physical and mental well-being. Many healthcare workers have had to confront difficult decisions resulting in moral fatigue, such as choosing how to allocate limited resources when faced with many serious cases in intensive care. Teleworking has been widely implemented in many settings - and while this is often essential to limit the spread of the virus and maintain jobs and business continuity, it has led to certain OSH concerns including ergonomic and psychosocial risks. It might provide workers with increased flexibility but many of them also struggle with "presenteeism", ie the blurring of lines between work

and private life, musculoskeletal disorders caused by stationary work in front of a computer, the responsibility of caring for children or parents while working, and the social isolation that may come from not being in the office - which affects professional development.

The pandemic has also witnessed an increase in the number of cases of domestic violence, including for workers confined to the home due to lockdowns; with up to five times more calls globally to domestic violence helplines.

The report highlighted the crucial role of international labour standards (ILS) in responding to the COVID-19 crisis while urging the countries to implement the same, which includes promoting, respecting and implementing ILS provisions on occupational safety and health, working arrangements, protection of specific categories of workers, non-discrimination, social and employment security while adjusting to the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. A wide range of ILO labour standards on employment, social protection, wage protection, promotion of MSMEs or workplace cooperation can also be taken when tackling the crisis and promoting economic recovery.

National public health and OSH system needs to be strengthened along with a sound national policy and regulatory framework which is essential for the protection and promotion of physical and mental health at work. Such a system is required to ensure that working environments are safe and healthy, and that there is a clear and well-known established set of rights and duties. The report calls for recognition of COVID-19 as an occupational disease in all countries. Presently, only a few countries have this provision, and workers are compensated for any infection at work or the consequences of working under stressful conditions due to COVID-19.

There are also new legal requirements to prevent the spread of the virus in the workplace to adapt proactively to new contexts and to allow for rapid and appropriate emergency responses. Enterprises need to identify potential sources of exposure, taking into account all work areas and tasks performed by workers. Almost all countries have issued guidelines, but there is still much to be done. Even in G20 countries, ventilation and air filters are available for 73 per cent, physical barriers 64 per cent, and using marker tape on the floor, one-way systems etc 64 per cent. Organizational and administrative measures included teleworking 82 per cent, holding meetings virtually 80 per cent, physical distancing 73 per cent, involving workers in reviewing and updating risk assessments 64 per cent, measures to control other risks related to the crisis and the changes put in place to deal with it 64 per cent, training of workers 64 per cent, working time shifts to reduce onsite presence 63 per cent, and discontinuing non-essential travel 73 per cent. Other measures such as use of PPE is 82 per cent, monitoring and supervision 73 per cent, cleaning and ensuring hygiene 73 per cent, and procedures dealing with workers with symptoms or tested positive only 64 per cent. Non-G20 countries are far behind in implementing such measures.

ILO has called for stronger mechanisms in every country to ensure compliance with national laws and regulations, including system inspection, to protect health and key workers to save life and economic resources to sustain it. (IPA Service)

### Letters to the Editor

## On the two UDP stalwarts

Editor,  
Initially I had ignored to go howling over Albert Thymiang's article, but under pressure from peers and since his last article also directly invites mine and my colleague's attention, I would like to draw the writers attention to his article, "To the two UDP stalwarts" (ST April 20, 2021). Regarding Thymiang's article, "UDP's Blatant Hypocrisy," (ST April 6, 2021), the title of the article itself was conspicuous in establishing his motive against those in the UDP. Does he mean to say that a non-living organization can be a hypocrite since he is now trying to wriggle out by saying, "I did not lambast anyone as criminal nor used abusive language nor called anyone a hypocrite."

The writer can also come out with distortions, when he instead interprets that I admit being a hypocrite politician, which however I quoted his allegation used against us. And now he has brought up many new and irrelevant issues to which I will react only on two most important ones - on being together in MDA with BJP and on women's participation in traditional institutions.

What will the UDP do with 7 MLAs only in the House of 60? In any coalition government, a number of

parties may form a government. So does MDA, where we are together with the NPP, PDF, HSPDP and BJP. It's like being a member in a society, where one can't run away, only because there are criminal elements in it. But if the author dares to leave India ruled by BJP, I assure him we will get out of the MDA within moments, or BJP would be sacked from MDA.

On women's participation in local Dorbars, we have women members in many Dorbar Shnong and I want women to participate in our village Dorbars. There is no law to bar them, nor, should there be anything as such. There is no law either to bar a woman from being a local Dorbar Chief, but women themselves in general shy away voluntarily for many personal and domestic reasons.

As for women occupying post in Traditional institutions as Syiem and Sirdar, the author should better learn the local administrative laws of the traditional dorbars, rather than trying to question the accepted tenets.

Finally, I welcome Thymiang to join active politics, to better understand the intrinsic values of practical politics and local administrative systems, since it is easier said than done. In the UDP we have a system of screening all applicants.

Yours etc.,  
BM Lanong,  
Via email

## MCS results should not be delayed

Editor,  
Since this daily has been pursuing the cause of the MCS aspirants and the hurdles that the Commission had to pass through, it is fair to inform the readers of your esteemed daily that on April 22, 2021, the Meghalaya Public Service Commission (MPSC) finally completed the process of conducting the personal interviews of 76 candidates who had qualified for the Main Examination for recruitment to the posts of Meghalaya Civil Services (MCS) - Junior Grade. The MCS personal interview spanned a total of six days with about 12 candidates or so for each day. According to the feedback received from several candidates, the MPSC Chairperson and Members, as well as the direct regular recruit IAS expert member(s) were highly professional in their conduct during all the days of the personal interview. The questions asked of the candidate were of a high standard, befitting the stature of a State Civil Service exam. For this reason alone the MPSC must be commended for living up to the expectations of the candidates.

While some candidates said they performed well in their respective interviews;

others were unsure and felt demotivated by their unsatisfactory performance. Regardless of the outcome, all 76 candidates should feel proud that they have reached this final stage of the recruitment examination. Now that all stages of the recruitment process is finally over, we request the MPSC to please declare the final results at the earliest to avoid unnecessary speculations. At this juncture, the Commission's onus is only to tabulate the marks of the Mains Exam and the Personal Interview and place the names of future civil servants in order of merit. We sincerely hope MPSC will not let us down in this regard, now that the candidates are all so close to their goal. Any delay in the declaration of results will give rise to unhealthy maneuverings. If only to redeem its image which in the past has been sullied due to various reasons, this is the time for the MPSC to demonstrate that the new leadership is determined to get the Commission back on the rails.

Yours etc.,  
Jeremiah S.  
Via email

## Precautionary measures for bankers

Editor,  
Apropos of the letter by Lucky Star Shangpliang

captioned, "Thank you note" (ST April, 28, 2021), I concur with Mr. Shangpliang on the efficiency and promptness of the employees of State Bank of India, Kenches Trace Branch. Private Banks are assumed to provide the best of services to clients, however, it is a proven fact that it is not the sectors of business that provides the best or worst services, it is the employee/team that can actually make a difference. As an account holder, I have actually never encountered any challenges or delays with any form of banking related work with SBI Kenches Trace Branch. Consequently as a delighted client, I would also like to highlight that the health and safety of these employees is of utmost importance and in fact the need of the hour in these Covid times.

Considering the current scenario, many sectors are resorting to 'work from home' schedules to avoid personal contact with people which is the mode of infection of the new Covid strain. However, I understand that some sectors like banks have no options but to keep themselves and their team as frontline workers. Therefore, the minimum we can hope for it that they are provided with all the equipment and necessary precautions to be able to work in a safe working environment.

I suggest that there should be a fibre glass divider between the clients and every

counter or employee, including at the cabins so that he/she does not endanger his/her life on the line of duty. I urge the concerned authorities of the bank to consider my plea so that the team will be able to perform to the best of their abilities and keep on serving their customers with dedication.

Yours etc.,  
Leezandra Dkhar,  
Via email

## Commendable service

Editor,  
I wish to convey my appreciation to Lucky Star Shangpliang for the letter to the editor, captioned, "A thank you note," (ST April 28, 2021). Mr. Shangpliang mentioned the cashier Sanjoy Choudhury as being helpful and courteous. Indeed he is an extraordinary bank employee of the State Bank of India (SBI) who is deserving of a thank you note. He is extremely hard working and looks after the matters of the customers dispassionately. SBI Kenches Trace Branch is probably one of the best branches of the SBI.

Yours etc.,  
Dr S K Chattopadhyay  
Via email

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

*"Beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty."*

--- Edmund Burke

**The Shillong Times**

Vol No: LXIII No. 252 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, APRIL 30, 2021

**Judiciary and politics**

IN a curious instance, the Karnataka high court has expressed dismay after it was found out that a retired judge had paid over Rs 8 crore to a middle-man to secure a governor's post. This case in question is that of a retired lady judge who came up with a petition that she was "cheated" in this respect by an astrologer well-connected with top political brass. The high court has rightly pointed out that such an act by a retired judge lowered the prestige of judges and the judiciary and also affected the image of the governor's post. More importantly, the relevant question is how a retired judge had such easy money to spare for realizing her dream of becoming a high-flying governor.

Clearly, the judiciary is taking quite a few hits of late, and all of a similar kind. The quality of those manning the judiciary was of a high order when India started off as a Republic with its own Constitution and legal system in 1950. But over the years the cracks have shown when retired judges have accepted posts retirement jobs including a Rajya Sabha seat. This damages the credibility of the judiciary. Political interferences in the justice dispensation system that had started with Indira Gandhi began to vitiate the system. Over the years, the scenario progressively worsened. The 'crores for bail' scam involving a mining baron exposed the underbelly of India's justice delivery system. There were huge embarrassments in relation to the Supreme Court too. All of these hurt the image of Indian judicial system in no small measure.

The attempt by a retired judge to bribe her way into a Raj Bhavan cannot be seen in isolation. The political process has become so corrupt in this country that all these are in the realm of possibility. Crores of rupees are paid by aspirants to top political leaders in order to get a candidature or nomination to Parliament for the same reason that these offices like the governor's post, have an aura around them. But, such indulgences only hurt the fair image of democracy further. The problem starts with those at the helm. A leader of high integrity at the top position is normally a guarantee that systems are not tampered with for individual gains. Today, every system in this country is in for a shock, having been undercut by wayward politicians at the helm of affairs and they using every means to attain their goals and satisfying their greed and whims. Political dynasties have cropped up across states, all of them being epitomes of corruption where the public exchequer is being raided in multiple ways. This has got to stop and some whistle blowing is due by public spirited individuals!

**Letters to the Editor**

**Load shedding distress**

Editor,  
Through the columns of your newspaper, I wish to draw attention to the problems encountered by students like myself because of the ongoing unscheduled load shedding.

The notice on load shedding has caused anxiety and stress in students like me who are preparing for the final semester exams. Electricity is unquestionably needed, since we have to rely on online reading materials for our preparation as it is impossible to have physical, access to libraries. Adding to our stress is the frequent unscheduled power cuts during the day without notice. With the exams being held online, electricity would be one of the essential elements needed to successfully complete the exams.

The load shedding had already in the past months affected students badly when it disrupted our online classes. As we have all witnessed the stark digital divide being exposed like it's never been before, having power cuts only aggravated our pain and suffering. The problems faced concern not only students in East Khasi Hills District but span across other districts of the state. In fact they must be facing more severe power cuts than East Khasi Hills or Shillong in particular.

While we are aiming for the stars and climbing mountains to reach the top, the load shedding we experience during exams and especially when the world is going digital is a huge dampener. This is no way to treat students who are most affected by the disruption of regular classes and who are compelled to attend online classes. I request the MeECL to lift the load shedding completely during exams. However, if there is dire need to go for load shedding then MeECL should give 10-days advanced notice so that we can make alternative arrangements and do not miss out on the exams.

Yours etc.,  
Phindakershisha R Syiem Lady Shri Ram College For Women, New Delhi.

**Defaulting Returnees**

Editor,  
There is a belief, with ample circumstantial evidence to back up such a conviction, that the spike of Covid cases that Shillong City is currently facing is mainly due to defaulting returnees. These are residents of Meghalaya who have returned from Covid infected areas but who for reasons best known to themselves, think it is smart and cool to hoodwink the administration in its effort to confirm

**Traditional institutions in a modern democracy**

By Patricia Mukhim

Much has been written about the traditional institutions in Meghalaya and many paens sung about the ability of the Dorbar Shnong in particular to render service to their respective constituencies especially during the pandemic. However, the fact remains that the relationship between the Dorbar Shnong and the government is at best tenuous. It is as if the Dorbar Shnong are doing the Government a favour whenever the latter is in trouble. There is no synergy and no seamless working relationship because there is nothing written anywhere in any book defining that working relationship between the two authorities. The Dorbar Shnong draw their strength from the faith that people have on them in resolving petty disputes, addressing their immediate needs pertaining to buying and selling of land within their respective localities and helping to settle discords amicably.

In recent times the Dorbar Shnong beyond municipal limits also shoulder the responsibility of managing civic services such as garbage collection and disposal and managing the water supply system which is financed and installed by the Public Health Department of the Government, amongst others. After the implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA) the Dorbar Shnong in the rural areas and suburbs have played a key role in identifying the beneficiaries for the job cards. The Dorbar Shnong also supervises over the public distribution system and they also implement the MLA schemes in their respective areas. In a sense they are the local governance bodies but without clearly demarcated responsibilities and an accountability system. Since their terms of reference are not clearly mentioned in the Constitution and the office bearers of the Dorbar render voluntary service (without any salary or honorarium), their relationship vis-à-vis the government is also largely informal. Their roles too are what is called in Khasi "treimon gwengwha" (rendering voluntary service).

Since most of the Rangbah Shnong in the urban centres are also government employees, they may not be in need of remuneration for services rendered but not all

have that privilege. Some hold that office because of the faith that the residents have in them and when the MLA scheme comes by, it is usually the Rangbah Shnong or some members of the executive committee or their family members that carry out the work as contractors. And no one actually minds that as long as the work is properly executed. In fact if a member of the Shnong is executing a piece of work such as constructing a footpath or black-topping a road within the locality, it is expected that the work would be of a better quality than if it were to be executed by some contractor from outside who cannot be held accountable. Above all, Dorbar Shnong cannot access any government funds as the panchayats do. So they are hamstrung by lack of funds in carrying out any development work within their localities. Naturally, they have to keep plying the MLA for road/bridge repairs, water supply, and other developmental matters. The MLA puts across to the Government those requirements. Dorbars are therefore obliged to the MLA and are not free agents.

If and when a Dorbar Shnong writes to any Government department for any assistance in any area requiring intervention, they will also approach the MLA to ensure that the application is favourably considered. Rangbah Shnong rarely approach the departments on their own, perhaps because they don't feel confident that those in the department will give heed to their request. And that is because Rangbah Shnong are unsure about their own status in the government scheme of things. If an MLA writes to the Government about some development work in the constituency which falls under a particular Dorbar, he/she does not have to 'request' because the MLA is a constitutional authority. Is the Rangbah Shnong a constitutional authority? That is a matter that is left wide open to interpretation. That is why in 2014 the High Court of Meghalaya had pointed out the arbitrary role of the Dorbar Shnong in issuing certificates of all kinds. Unfortunately the task of defining the role of the

Dorbar Shnong fell on the autonomous councils. The Village Administration Bill is still hanging fire, thereby leaving the Dorbar Shnong a largely undefined institution in the modern governance system.

To be fair, there is nothing traditional in the architecture of the Dorbar Shnong other than the fact that women are still not allowed to assume headship of the Dorbar. The very word "Rangbah" without the prefix 'U' (male) or 'Ka' (female) is assumed to mean an adult male and as Mr BM Lanong in his letter to the editor in this paper (April 29) stated, women shy away from that post/responsibility for reasons best known to them. That's an astute way of saying that women don't want to head a Dorbar Shnong because they are either incapable of doing so or because they believe it is the last male bastion in Khasi society and they are apologetic of already having taken away so much from the male because of the very fact that women bequeath their lineage to their children - something that a certain section of Khasi male nurse a grouse against. But let's keep this discussion for another day. Today the discourse is about the tenuous relationship between the Dorbar Shnong and Government and I shall stick to that.

As an institution the Dorbar Shnong is accountable to no one; not the District Council or the Syiem of Mylliem. If the Dorbars were functioning under the mandate laid out by any of the two authorities above then they would have had very clear terms of reference about what their duties and responsibilities are and when those duties would step into the realm of overreach such as in excommunicating a member of the Shnong for some act committed which the Dorbar has reason to believe is a breach of the law of that particular Shnong. We have examples of villagers being excommunicated for blowing the whistle on the corruption indulged in by members of the Dorbar Shnong in distribution of foodgrains etc., vide the public distribution system or for some malfeasance in the distribution of job cards for the NREGA. Under what law does the Dorbar Shnong

derive its mandate to excommunicate anyone? This is a hugely grey area.

Let's talk about the present pandemic and the role played by the Dorbar Shnong. Unlike other organs of the state that come into play once the pandemic has been declared a natural disaster, the Dorbar Shnong had to be invited by the respective Deputy Commissioners to discuss what role they should play in tackling the pandemic in their Shnong. The Deputy Commissioners too are well aware that they can at best 'request' the Shnong to assist them because there is no laid down administrative mandate where Dorbar Shnong can be told they have to 'carry out certain tasks' since they don't fall within the purview of Government by virtue of being 'traditional institutions.' Since the District Councils have been tasked with framing the Village Administration Bill it would appear that the Councils have some authority over the Dorbars. In that case it would have been practical for the Deputy Commissioners to activate the Councils who will in turn activate the Dorbars. But that has never happened. In a crisis the Government has relied on the Dorbar Shnong to come to its assistance. But this undefined relationship cannot carry on forever even as we realise and admit that the Dorbar Shnong are more grounded and committed to the task at hand in their respective localities than the elected Councillors. It is this gap which is showing when it comes to maintenance of cleanliness of localities and above all the task of cleaning the rivers flowing through Shillong city. The District Councils have failed miserably. If at all anything can happen it will be through the synergy between the Dorbar Shnong and Government.

In this pandemic too the synergy has worked to the benefit of the public. It is high time to think of an enduring relationship between the Dorbar Shnong and Government. Perhaps the District Council Affairs Department of the Government should come up with a pragmatic Village Administration Bill. Only then can we have a robust local governance system which will be able to access development funds without being subservient to the MLA.

their Covid status. They give false information relating to their personal data at the Umpling Covid check point; false phone numbers, false addresses or simply by-pass the check point. They manage to do this because of the huge work pressure faced by the registering officials at the check point. They think it is chic to hoodwink the authorities little realising it is the most stupid and dangerous thing they could ever do in their miserable lives. By this act the dimwits become super spreaders placing the lives of their own family members, friends and society at large in uncalculated danger.

It is clear that the workload at Umpling Covid check point has made the registration of new arrivals into Meghalaya unsound and untenable. Persons with dubious intent safely slip through the cracks. The system has become unsustainable. We need to adopt a second fall back system that should make the checking process foolproof and in the process safeguard ourselves and society from the fear of Covid spread. I believe this can be done.

All returnees return to a permanent address located somewhere in some shnong or the other in Shillong or Meghalaya. Their absence or arrival at the shnong is known to the Dorbar and the Rangbah Shnong. Dorbars should once again be re-activated to report to the au-

thorities the fresh arrival of any returnee to the shnong. District officials together with Dorbar authorities can then verify the Covid documentation of each returnee and find out if proper registration has been complied with or not. Defaulters can easily be identified, caught and accordingly dealt with, which I sincerely hope will be severe and befitting their crime.

Yours etc.,  
Toki Blah,  
Via email

**Mass vaccination the need of the hour**

Editor,  
Looking at the appalling situation where thousands of people are gasping for oxygen in Delhi, an effective and safe vaccination campaign is urgently needed to halt the rapid spread of Covid19 in our state. We should take the example of Israel which as early as in December 2020 launched a national Covid19 vaccination campaign in which BNT162b2 (developed by the BioNTech in cooperation with Pfizer) were administered. This national vaccine campaign has led Israel to having one of the highest rates of vaccinated individuals per capita, with 48.8%, 34% and 7.5% of the population having received the first or the second

vaccine dose and having recovered from COVID-19, respectively, as of 24 February 2021, or 68.7%, 48% and 8% respectively, taking into account population older than 16 years - the population currently eligible for vaccination. The study reported an efficacy of 51% for the first dose after 13-24 days, whereas the second reported an efficacy of 46% and 92% after 14-24 days from first dose and 7 or more days from the second dose of the vaccine, respectively. This study reported that vaccine effectiveness is above 95% after the second dose.

Hence Covid19 vaccinations alone are the most promising preventive measure to mitigate the spread of the devastating pandemic. We should not pay heed to hearsay doing the rounds on social media which says that Covid vaccine does not protect us from the new Covid variant. These are just conspiracy theories which try to induce mass paranoia. Let's fight this battle together by getting ourselves and our loved ones vaccinated.

Yours etc.,  
Lurshai Kharbani,  
Via email

**On acquiring birth/death certificate**

Editor,  
When a birth or death

takes place in Shillong, the family member is required to obtain the signature of the Rangbah Shnong (headman) in order to get the certificate issued by a government agency including NEIGHRIMS. As has been experienced by many, harassment is meted out while trying to obtain the signature of the Rangbah Shnong, especially if one is a non-tribal resident of Shillong. An incidence of birth or death in a family may not be known even to the Rangbah Dong, who stays within the locality, leave aside the Rangbah Shnong, who generally resides in another locality. When a birth or death happens it is already certified by the hospital authorities hence the additional requirement of obtaining the signature of Rangbah Shnong needs to be done away with to simplify the process. The records are in any case kept by the issuing authority. I request the Government to kindly review the system and simplify the process to avoid undue harassment to the non-tribal residents of Meghalaya.

Yours etc.,  
Tamal Bhattacharjee  
Shillong-4

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**The scandal that is the Modi government  
New equitable vaccination policy needed**

By Prakash Karat

The Covid-19 tragedy that is unfolding in India is of truly epic proportions. There is the scandal of people dying because of lack of oxygen in hospitals; there is the scandal of lack of hospital beds and medicines; there is the scandal of deaths due to Covid being covered up and there is the scandal of the vaccine shortage and profiteering sanctioned by the government. But the biggest scandal of all is the Modi government itself.

India is witnessing the biggest human catastrophe since independence. It is the worst calamity in terms of human lives lost since the Bengal famine of 1943 when around three million people died due to hunger, malnutrition and disease. The culprits for this holocaust were British imperialism and the colonial policies pursued by the British raj. The large scale deaths during 'partition' are not comparable as it was due to mutual slaughter and communal killings.

In the current pandemic, disregarding the grossly underestimated official tally, at least a million have died and the toll continues to mount. This figure, however, is a conservative estimate, multiplying by five, the two lakh dead officially declared.

It will not require any historical research to pin the responsibility for this catastrophe on Narendra Modi and his government. Nothing exemplifies the culpability of the Modi government more than the newly-announced vaccine policy of the government on April 19.

At present, the country and the world are gripped by the horrific scenes of gasping patients deprived of oxygen dying inside and outside hospitals. In the coming days, transporting liquid oxygen, ensuring their supply to hospitals and urgent measures to increase oxygen production capacities will be in focus.

However, in the immediate future, it is the vaccination drive to cover all adult citizens which should engage our attention. The government's vaccination programme is the most callous, discriminatory and iniquitous policy designed.

The Centre has abdicated its responsibility and pushed the entire burden of procuring vaccines for the 18 to 45 age group wholly on to the states who do not have the resources to do so. By declaring that 50 per cent of the vaccine production will have to be directly procured by the state governments and private hospitals, the way has been opened for a debilitating competition among states to get hold of the limited production of vaccines.

Firstly, under the prime minister's direct approval, the duopoly of the Serum Institute of India and Bharat Biotech companies have got the licence to profiteer and earn super profits at the expense of the people. Secondly, the government cynically announced that from May 1, all those above 18 years are entitled to be vaccinated knowing fully well that the Centre has failed to scale up vaccine production in the country, or procure adequate vaccine stocks from abroad. By asking states to procure vaccines for this at higher prices, it seeks to deflect the blame for not getting enough vaccines.

Thirdly, two private vaccine companies will determine which states get how much vaccine and at what time. At one stroke, state governments have been made supplicants of a duopoly. Not only that, the state governments have to compete with private hos-

pitals and corporates to get vaccines.

The result can be seen in the way vaccination for those 45 years and above has slowed down in all states; Reports show that compared to the beginning of April, vaccinations have come down by half in the states due to the non-availability of vaccines. The central government and the health ministry continues to deny this reality and maintain that there is no vaccine shortage. The health minister has attacked the states complaining of vaccine shortage as those trying to cover-up their own failure to tackle the Covid epidemic effectively.

The Serum Institute of India announced the price of Covishield as Rs 400 per dose for state governments and Rs 600 for private hospitals. The Bharat Biotech has gone further and fixed Rs 600 per dose for state governments and Rs 1,200 for the private sector. This is nothing but rank profiteering.

The Modi government's next step has been predictable. It has appealed to vaccine companies to reduce the price. A token reduction has been announced and the Centre will take credit for this. But the inequity and rapacity of the vaccine policy will remain.

This is unacceptable on all counts. The government has to immediately scrap its policy and announce a new one that is based on free and universal vaccination.

The central government has already got Rs 35,000 crores through budgetary allocation for vaccines. The finance minister had stated while presenting the budget that more will be provided when required. But now the Centre, which has spent just Rs 10,000 crore for vaccines for people above 45 years, is denying the states' funds for vaccines. The Centre can easily augment the Rs 25,000 crore left from the budgetary allocation to ensure that free vaccination is done through the states.

There is widespread anger among the people about the way the Modi-Shah duo have gone about dealing with this health emergency. While this is totally justified and there has to be a political reckoning, the paramount task right now is to ensure the protection of people's lives by rolling out a comprehensive vaccination programme.

For this, the government has to take the following steps: It must, using the wide powers it has under the Disaster Management Act and the Drug (Prices Control) Order, fix the price for procuring vaccines in bulk by the Centre. The Centre has to supply vaccines to the states as per a transparent formula. States should be allowed to decide the priorities for rolling out the vaccination programme.

To accelerate vaccine production, compulsory licensing must be invoked and the production of Bharat Biotech's Covaxin (research for which was publicly funded) be assigned to the six public sector drug companies and other private concerns. This is apart from speeding up the production of the Sputnik V vaccine in India by the various companies, which have applied for its production. These efforts are to be supplemented by the urgent imports of vaccines from wherever they can be acquired.

The least that the Modi government can do to salvage the ruinous situation is to announce an equitable and comprehensive policy which ensures free and universal vaccination. (IPA Service)